MEDICINE IN THE METAPHYSICAL: WITCHCRAFT AS A FORM OF HEALING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The use of ritual for an intended purpose, or witchcraft, is a practice that is so deeply ingrained in the Human Experience there is no known date of origination. Yet, for a practice as universally acknowledged as witchcraft, not much is known about the way spells or metaphysical objects are utilized to heal the human mind and body. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, neo-paganism and New Age witchcraft became notably used as a form of Alternative and Complementary Medicine due to the increased spread of relevant information on social media platforms and increasing stress surrounding medical care. While there are many reasons one might turn to forms of witchcraft for healing, both emotionally and physically, it is different for everyone. Using an in-depth case study interview and participant observations, I discuss the importance of individual identity and information equity in the context of the current global pandemic. Additionally, I assert that healing, much like social media engagement, is a form of self-expression that can adapt to stress or pressure. My findings through these discussions reveal the intersections between paganism, race, and queerness in terms of community healing from oppressive systems that have been highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Witchcraft and healing behave in similar ways, interacting with each other and larger social concepts. By emphasizing these interactions and their effects on practitioners, I suggest alternative treatments of spirituality in the public sphere to cultivate an inclusive environment of self-expression.

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INTRODUCTION

To this day, there is no known date of origin for the practice of witchcraft. There are documentations of alleged magic use as far back as historians can peer into time, though the number of recorded instances only expands as the definition of witchcraft adapts to the historian doing the investigating. Some may base their understanding of what witchcraft is on the context of a historical time period or on personal experience, but in order to provide context for the following study, I will begin with a baseline definition of what witchcraft is and an explanation of what witchcraft is not. Witchcraft, for the purposes of this research, can be understood as a spiritual practice with the intention to reach a desired outcome. For example, a witchcraft practice could be a ritual-based spell with the intention to generate wealth or meditation with the intention of contacting a spirit guide. More specifically, in the recent movement called "New Age" witchcraft, practices can be as simple as wearing a necklace composed of a certain crystal to invoke the desired outcome. Most witchcraft practices, contrary to much of western media, do not include summoning demons, blood sacrifices, or satanic rituals. While there are witches who self-identify as Satanists or utilize animal matter, many of the images associated with modern witchcraft are invented for the sake of spectacle. I would also like to note that this explanation of the word "witchcraft" is not the most commonly accepted definition throughout history. Witchcraft was often used as an umbrella term for anything beyond current comprehension and has been used to describe a multitude of mundane practices from science to cooking. It is only recently (in the 1960s and 1970s) that the words witchcraft and paganism have been commonly accepted in the West, referring particularly to spiritual practices. As an additional note, the form of witchcraft being utilized in the application I will discuss is referred to by many as "white magic," however, due to its racially charged alternative meaning, I will not use this term to describe the healing practices I describe throughout this work.

Next, I would like to discuss the words "metaphysical," "occult," "pagan," and "neo-pagan" as they will appear quite often. Concepts that are metaphysical in nature can be loosely described as abstract and may even exist beyond the scope of human understanding, this is not a very concise definition of the term but that is the core of the metaphysical: abstractness. Paganism can be used to illustrate any religious belief or practice that pre-dates and is an alternative to Christianity. Paganism is also largely related to the human relationship with nature and many pagan belief systems have been called "earth-based religions." Within paganism, neo-paganism refers to the combining of traditional earth-based pagan practices with each other or with those of larger religions. For example, one who identifies as a neo-pagan might use Elder Futhark rune stones (Old Norse in origin) to divine the future then go on to use crystals with the goal of healing a specific chakra (Hindu and Tantric Buddhist in origin). Neo-paganism is largely responsible, due to its fluidity, for the cultural appropriation present in the witchcraft community but I will expand upon this in the conclusion of this research. The occult exists within a space that is all-encompassing of the previously defined ideas. Occult, very basically, means a belief in the supernatural or metaphysical, thus witchcraft and paganism fall into this category. Yet, paganism does not have an inherent connection to witchcraft. There are pagan identities that construct themselves around the use of witchcraft, such as Wicca, but the two are not universally equivocal. There is no one way to be a pagan or a neo-pagan, it is fully up to the individual employing the identity to define who they are. Therefore, public speech platforms like social media have become common places for pagan information dissemination: every person in the practice has something new to share.

The best explanation for what a modern witch's life entails is provided by prominent YouTube creator and practicing Wiccan Harmony Nice, "Anybody who practices a form of

magickal workings, such as divination and future prediction, healing using the natural world, ritual work, spells, potions, alchemy, herbalism, etc., can be considered a witch" (Nice 2019). While it should be noted that not all those who practice forms of witchcraft identify as witches, I will be mostly generalizing my main demographic of interest as witches following this definition as a guide. My interest lies specifically in the witches who employ witchcraft as a form of alternative or complementary medicine, using herbs, crystals, spells or rituals to heal their own minds and bodies. The difficulty in this is each witch approaches healing in a different manner, for example in her book *The Green Witch,* Arin Murphy-Hiscock describes herbal healing as simply "another form of balancing energies that have become disturbed" (Murphy-Hiscock 2017), whereas in her manual *A Little Bit of Crystals,* Cassandra Eason details that crystals with metaphysical properties are "not intended as a substitute for conventional medicine" and are meant to "boost the positive effects of conventional treatments" (Eason 2015). One implies an alternative form of medicine, the other complementary.

Recently the use of witchcraft as a form of alternative or complementary medicine has skyrocketed, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and an increase in social media platform usage. In 2020, social media usage increased in North America by 6.96 percent, or approximately 25 million people ("Social Media Statistics Details - Undiscovered Maine - University of Maine" n.d.). Globally, the increase in social media platform usage is estimated to be 9 percent or around 700 million people (Koetsier n.d.). This is very general as there are no specific figures on the increase in witchcraft or pagan content on social media platforms, but the linear trend did not go unnoticed by those outside of the community. In November of 2020, culture journalist Josh Walker of *Wired* asserted that the increase in witchcraft material online was due to "an age of uncertainty, dislocation and environmental turmoil…" (Walker 2020)

which does not seem unreasonable. Unregulated forms of communication and witchcraft are two phenomena that tend to rear their heads in times of distress. For example, think of the most notorious occurrence of mass "witchcraft" in history: the Salem witch trials. I say witchcraft with a notable reluctance here as there is no evidence to suggest any of the people accused of being witches were actually practitioners of anything metaphysical other than a confession made for the sole purpose of ensuring survival (Rosenthal 1993). These trials occurred during a time of international conflict around colonization, specifically during "King William's War to colonists" (Blumberg 2007). This was a time of financial pressure and religious fervor that happened to also coincide with the first decades of the newspaper. There was conflict, easily spread information, and a need for escape from daily life. Thus, the claim of witchcraft.

While I will note that the Salem witch trials and "Witchtok" are not fully comparable responses to extreme stress, I would like to take a moment to examine them in similar ways to introduce my line of thinking in this research. Once a universal problem in introduced on a global scale and communication across wide distances is viable, alternative ways of coping will be thrust into the spotlight. In Salem this new method of coping was merely the idea of witchcraft rather than the actual practice, but it still demonstrates a leaning towards the unknown. Perhaps the reasoning behind the recent spike in witchcraft interest is due to an overwhelming sense of the unknown. When one does not know if they will have a job in the next week or if their loved ones will stay healthy, perhaps the metaphysical begins to seem more familiar. In Salem, maybe the overwhelming state of their surroundings made the puritans begin to investigate supernatural causes because of the sudden shift in the nature of their lives.

In addition to laying the groundwork for what witchcraft is and why its use has become increasingly apparent in the past few years, I would like to explain what I mean by "healing."

Healing, in the context of my study, is not only physiological. While I am interested in the manifestations of the metaphysical in the human body, I am also interested in how witchcraft can assist in mental or emotional healing. Many of the most common witchcraft practices are those intended to affect the mind and spirit rather than the body itself, meditation and intentional breathing for example. As previously discussed, times of immense stress like the current pandemic can induce more consideration of ideas previously taboo. These times also create declines in mental health and emotional distress, so one can assume these occurrences will intersect heavily. Additionally, I would like to assert a treatment of healing as a form of self-expression. Due to the pandemic, the phrase "self-care" has become an umbrella term for activities or tasks that are healing in nature, but mostly on a more mundane plane. Self-care reframes healing as almost a hobby, a way to express yourself while simultaneously improving your mood or being attentive to your body. This is how I will address healing generally: a personalized way to seek an improvement in your mind and body.

I would like to clarify that the medical field is absent in this definition because it is a difficult item to label as self-expression due to the lack of accessibility and systemic refusal to serve all communities (the state of California has noted that in 2018, "44.8% of Californians had insufficient access to a primary care provider" (Slone 2018)). Additionally, within the medical field, not much is known about the way spells or metaphysical objects manifest their consequences within the human mind and body. Most medical professionals or scientists who have spoken on this topic have figuratively shrugged and claimed the 'placebo effect', but as Daniel E. Moerman has researched there is far more to it than that. Dr. Moerman, in his published research entitled *Meaning, Medicine and the 'Placebo Effect',* details something called the 'meaning response' that is present both in holistic or witchcraft-based healing and traditional

pharmaceuticals (Moerman 2002). Applying the ‘meaning response’ dictates when medicine can break the intensely complicated barriers of the human psyche and make a genuine physiological change: the color of the medication you are taking can determine if it has the desired effect, the size of the needle used for a vaccine can quicken a body’s immune response, and quite possibly the addition of crystals or spells to a person's routine can determine if their body begins to heal itself.

With the appropriate background now supplied, I will introduce my research goal: to understand the intricacies of the occult community and how it intersects with healing and the ongoing pandemic. I both want to examine witchcraft in the context of healing practices and in its application during the time of COVID-19. This research, much like witchcraft, is a process with intent. At the end of this paper, I intend for any reader to leave knowing more about what it means to be human. The occult has lived in the social underground for centuries and now there is enough breathing room for an open examination of how and why human beings turn to the metaphysical. There have been previous research inquiries into witchcraft and ritual as a form of healing (the works of Claudia Müller-Ebeling and Daniel E. Moerman as examples) but I could find no anthropological work regarding the occult during the current global pandemic, likely due to the short time frame. Academic discussion around these practices that are commonly discredited in the public social environment is essential for achieving inclusivity. By rewriting the narrative around witchcraft, I hope to contribute to the unraveling of the prejudices held against occult communities in these spaces that largely interconnect with marginalized identities.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the goal of fully comprehending witchcraft as a form of healing and its relationship with the social and medical climate of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have decided to utilize two methods of Anthropological research: interviewing an individual with experience on the topic and observing the online witchcraft community as a participant. For my interview, I spoke with a current practitioner of the occult and discussed the following questions:

How would you define witchcraft personally?

What was your first introduction to witchcraft?

Was it a book, movie, show, etc.?

When did you begin practicing?

What was the catalyst for the beginning of your practice?

Where did you get your information from when you started?

Why did you begin practicing?

Separate from the previous question, what was the personal reason behind your use of witchcraft in general?

If used only for healing, what was the specific ailment (if comfortable sharing)?

How would you verbally define your practice?

What does a daily routine look like?

What is a typical spell or ritual for you?

Is there a specific type of witchcraft you identify with and use regularly?

If so, what is your personal identity as a witch, if you feel comfortable sharing?

What does the use of witchcraft feel like to you?

What are the sights, sounds, smells that accompany your spell work or rituals if any?

What are the immediate affects you notice?

What are the delayed effects?

When used as a form of healing, how long does it take approximately to feel relief or improvement?

Would you say you use witchcraft as an alternative to modern medicine or as a compliment?

In other words: do you exclusively use witchcraft and associated holistic healing methods, or do you seek traditional treatment as well?

Are you active on social media in ways that involve witchcraft?

If so, can you describe your overall experience participating in the witchcraft communities online?

If not, is there any specific reason you have abstained from doing so?

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your personal practice?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

I wrote these interview questions with the purpose of seeking a subjective perspective on how witchcraft is experienced and utilized both in and out of the context of the global pandemic.

Through the actual interview, I did ask some clarifying questions that were not planned in this scripting process and those questions will be discussed in the observations section of this paper. Additionally, I wrote these questions with the knowledge that my interview subject could add information I did not inquire about or decide not to share information that I did. The subject of this interview was provided with a consent form detailing what this paper would discuss, from the interview questions to the academic purpose of this study. They decided, upon an overview of the consent form and interview goals, to be referred to using an initial and this decision will be respected through the duration of this work.

For the participant observation portion of my approach, I decided to watch and engage with three YouTube videos created by witchcraft content creators. These online subcommunities tend to be places of intense diversity as YouTube is a public platform with the main goal of getting new eyes on video content. Thus, the comment sections on videos with the intent to educate their audiences on healing witchcraft are places for witches and non-witches to discuss the video with each other. Further, I limited the videos I engaged with to those produced within 2020 and 2021 as this is the period when the worst of the social and medical effects of the pandemic were felt.

I would like to specify what I mean by engagement in the terms of this participant observation for the purposes of interpreting my observations. I did not ask questions to those commenting, nor will I name any of the commenters on these videos. YouTube is a public platform, but there is an ethical grey area in questioning the practices of those on this platform without informing them of my intent to use their response as evidence in an academic study. Instead, I traced chains of comments to observe the general response to the video in question and participated via employing the practices detailed by the videos. By utilizing, or at the very least

attempting, the rituals in these videos, I have gained first-hand experience in healing witchcraft and now share an experience with anyone else in the comment section who used them as well. Thus, my observations will detail my opinions on the practices after having completed them myself and an explanation of what other interested parties expressed in the public comments.

OBSERVATIONS

To grasp the use of witchcraft during the COVID-19 pandemic, I spoke at length with an active practitioner of witchcraft. I will refer to the subject of this case study as their initial, "M." To begin my inquiry into their experiences with witchcraft and the COVID-19 pandemic, I asked M to share any beginning information that they felt I should know. In response, they detailed that their involvement in the witchcraft community first began in high school when they wanted to find an accepting environment. The main sources of information they name as being utilized at this time were bookstores, the internet, and LimeWire sourced eBooks. Additionally mentioned was the tendency for mainstream media pieces to portray witchcraft and paganism in a manner that leads to misinformation, referencing a niche online creator who was featured in, what were intended to be educational, YouTube videos by news outlet Buzzfeed and promptly lost credibility within the occult community. M also shared that their focus within paganism is ancestral in nature, so their practice orients around their indigenous identity in this way. Their first introduction to witchcraft, M identified, was an online download of *The Witches' Bible* by Janet and Stewart Farrar.

To the question regarding if they integrate witchcraft into their daily life, M indicated that they mostly use consecrated pendants and intentional meditation or breath control regularly. M also detailed that much of their interactions with the witchcraft community were online due to their mother's religious convictions. This online interaction specifically included forums, Facebook groups, and online stores. When asked to verbalize what the use of witchcraft feels like, M uses the phrase "an internal hug," illustrating a process of leading oneself into a headspace that is both grounded and separated from the everyday. Further, they specified that they use witchcraft as a complementary form of healing rather than an alternative.

Then, I began to ask questions regarding the pandemic specifically. When asked if they used witchcraft during the COVID-19 pandemic, M did state that they practiced in a specific context, explaining that they use witchcraft more so as a form of mental healing to release some of the pressures of living during a pandemic. M went on to describe the period when they contracted the COVID-19 virus, naming "chaos magic" as the main form of practice used to cope with the stress of being sick. They did not name any forms of witchcraft used for the physical body, only spoke about the mental or emotional forms of healing they engaged with. Out of curiosity for possible systematic interactions, I asked M to describe what their experience with the healthcare system was at the time of their sickness. Their strongest observation was that of disorganization in terms of testing and appointment scheduling, all testing that was accessible was through a drive-thru format and directions were not easily understandable.

Finally, I began an inquiry into the use of social media for witchcraft information spread. I asked M if they ever engaged with the community in this way and they stated that their formats of involvement include witchcraft subreddits, discord servers for witches of color, and Facebook groups for queer witches. They also mentioned the large number of witchcraft podcasts now available. I then asked about their relationship with TikTok's "Witch Tok," to which they explained that they mostly saw this material as reposts on other forms of social media like Twitter or Tumblr. Now, they explained in reference to "Witch Tok," more people feel comfortable with being formally involved in the witchcraft community either through community organization or through publishing written work on related topics.

In addition to this interview, I conducted participant observations in online occult communities. By online communities, I refer specifically to the large groups of individuals who exist in the witchcraft space through YouTube videos and comment sections. There are more

ways the witchcraft practitioners engage with the internet, but I decided to narrow my focus to YouTube content in order to make my observations more concise across one platform. The first video I interacted with was titled "Magical Self Care," posted on August 19th, 2020, by previously mentioned YouTube creator and Wiccan, Harmony Nice. As of me writing this paper in 2022, the video has 144,782 views in total and 362 comments. In the video, Nice walks her audience through a four-step process of meditation, spell work, intentional cooking, and a bath ritual in order to engage in both pleasing and "unpleasant but necessary" self-care. Her tone and the way in which the video is edited speak to the energy she wished to impose on her viewers: vulnerability.

The meditation Nice details is as follows: find a location in which you feel safe, play music or burn incense to clear the space if you wish, then close your eyes and picture a warm light that then turns into a quiet lake where you can visualize a goal you want to meet. This meditation is like rituals I have used in the past and was calming and clarifying in the same way those have been. I was excited by the idea of a goal-oriented mediation, especially with the context of this being necessary self-care as the goals that came to mind were those smaller in scale that I had not considered with much weight. The spell Harmony Nice explains was also like spells I have engaged with in the past, though far more simplified and easier to engage with as one who is not greatly familiar with spell work. All one would need to do to perform this spell is gather whole, dry herbs and write the goal or energy you are interested in manifesting, then burn the herbs with the paper attached while holding this intent in your mind. This is a common concept in witchcraft as many spells or mediations with ask for an intentional burning of specific herbs and is a great starting place to include for those new to the occult. The intentional baking task set forth by Nice was another simple and easily practiced ritual. The main idea is to light a

candle with a color corresponding to your intent and recite a centering set of phrases while mixing batter for a muffin or cupcake of your choice. The bath ritual was a bit harder to execute for me as I do not have a bathtub, so I did my best and attempted to recreate the core ideas of this practice using my shower. Essentially, you enter your bath, introduce charged water and herbs into the preexisting water (charged water refers to water that has been treated with the energy of either a full moon or cleansing crystals), light candles of your choice, and write three things that "align you with your higher self" onto a piece of paper. I appreciated the goal behind this ritual and enjoyed attempting it despite my obvious roadblock.

The response to the healing energy Harmony Nice is achieving through these rituals is visible in the public comments that include lines like "extremely timely and useful," "… even though I am not a pagan or a witch… it's so inspiring and I love to hear a new perspective on self-care," and "couldn't have come at a better time." This video exists as a testament to the timeliness of witchcraft practices in a global pandemic. With external stress and physical ailments experiencing a dramatic increase due to the worldwide spread of COVID-19, it makes sense that the reception of digital content on witchcraft healing is overwhelmingly positive. It also makes sense that many of those reacting to Nice's tutorial detail that they have no previous affiliation with witchcraft, this with the previously discussed rush of introductory practitioners at the beginning of the pandemic.

The next YouTube content that I engaged with was a video titled "Calm and Clear Healing Spell | Homemade Salve Recipe," uploaded by The Green Witch on January 23, 2021. The video currently has 50,108 views and 287 comments. The video, in a similar manner to Harmony Nice's, is formatted in an intentionally calming manner. The music is low in tempo and the transition shots include rain on a well-decorated windowsill or a fireplace. The Green

Witch, who goes by Annie, uses this tone to share a recipe for a salve meant for both physical and mental healing. The process to create this salve is to combine oils, beeswax, lavender, lemon, and plantain leaves in a double boiler and mix until smooth. Annie details that they typically use their own infused oil, but their process of infusion takes 6 weeks so I did not attempt this part of the practice. I also could not find plantain leaves, so I used bay leaves that are typically understood to represent wisdom and intuition as an alternative. This salve was calming in both a process sense and an aromatic sense. The act of taking the time to follow this recipe is reminiscent of the previously discussed "unpleasant but necessary self-care" and the product itself is a gentle lavender and citrus scented balm that can be easily used without witchcraft intention as a form of aromatherapy. The reception of this video in the comment section was along the same lines as the previous video and my personal thoughts. Comments include phrases like "calming and inspiring," "I really needed this," and "I absolutely cannot wait to try this." The audience of Annie's video, in opposition to Harmony Nice, appeared to be mostly those with previous witchcraft experience looking for new additions to their current practices rather than those new to the community.

The last video I used in my participant observation was "SPELL JARS FOR BEGINNER WITCHES * MONEY, HAPPINESS, HEALING, SLEEP" (the asterisk present is a replacement for an emoticon in the original title that was removed for formatting purposes) posted by Natalia Anio on February 12, 2021. As of writing this paper, the video has 132,057 views and 611 comments. The video has a broad nature not specified to healing, so I focused my engagement on the segment explaining how to craft a healing spell jar and will not speak much on the instructions for the other spell jars Natalia details. The process for all the jars is very similar: cleanse a small glass jar with incense, then place rock salt, rosemary, peppermint, and a

small blue lace agate crystal inside of the jar. Once the stopper or lid is closed you then seal the jar closed by melting white candle wax over the seam between the jar and lid. Completing this ritual was straightforward, though I did not have any specific healing to focus my intentions on, so I cannot accurately speak to the aftereffects of the spell. This is another witchcraft practice that I have seen before as spell jars are a highly customizable process in which any ingredient can be replaced for another that the user sees as more suitable to their intention. Natalia's video is visibly aimed at the newer witchcraft audience, specifically those who are younger in age and were exposed to the occult through TikTok. This conclusion comes from the simplicity of the ritual explained, the detailed explanations of what the named ingredients represent, and the number of emoticons used in the title and description of the video. The comment section of the video also supports the idea that the audience for Natalia's channel is largely children and teenagers. Most of the phrases seen are what one would expect from a young person living with their parents or new to the practice: "I'm not allowed to burn candles," "I'm a baby witch," and "I used a different crystal from the purple rock you used." The most notable comment for me on this video though, that I would like to leave for the reader to digest, was one stating "I gave one to my mom and she is no longer sick."

CONCLUSION

I have discussed the context for modern witchcraft, the connection between COVID-19 and interest in the occult, the importance of social media platforms in the witchcraft community, and provided personal accounts of witchcraft healing. Now, I will take this collective information and propose a new outlook on how humans heal themselves. In the introduction, I mentioned the concept of viewing healing as a form of self-expression. In application to the rituals I spoke to M about, and participated in myself, this is wildly apparent. The amount of free interpretation that occurs in the practice of witchcraft and healing allows the user to fully adapt any preexisting recipes or spells to express their own needs. M described how they utilize the occult to express their indigenous identity, and how they expressed their stress during the pandemic through mental healing practices. The videos I engaged with illustrated the flexibility of witchcraft in any healing situation from meditation to spell work, to salves. Self-expression has no limit due to the concept of "self "having no limit on its own, and witchcraft healing serves as an amplifier for this idea. Every human body is going to have different mental and medical concerns, just as every human person is going to have a different approach to addressing these concerns. Witchcraft healing lives as an approach to medicine that expresses spirituality, emotionality, and physicality.

Something I did not enter this project with the intention of addressing is an expansion of healing in the context of social healing. During my conversation with M, I was reminded of the complex relationship paganism and New Age witchcraft have with marginalized communities. Much of what is understood as New Age witchcraft are rituals and spiritual concepts derived or simply appropriated from Indigenous, African, and South Asian traditional practices. However, the use of these practices is not a positive concept, and in most cases serves to further oppress the

communities who have used them for centuries. White sage, a sacred herb used in rituals that were banned for use by native peoples in the United States until 1978, is commonly burned by non-native witches and pagans. Voodoo is used as a shocking term pasted on published witchcraft spell books despite the classification of voodoo religious practices as witchcraft being rooted in racist fearmongering. These discrepancies in occult practices are made even more apparent in the connections of many white pagans to white supremacist organizations and the recent "re-claiming" of the Norse pagan title of "heathen" by alt-right extremist groups. In spite of these constant occurrences, as spoken on in the previously detailed interview, communities for witches and pagans of color still thrive. For the very identities that have been appropriated by white paganism, witchcraft can serve as a healing from the very systems that have allowed their spiritual practices to be stripped from them. By re-appropriating their own culture, witchcraft becomes an expression of resilience and healing from a long and bloody history of colonialism for people of color.

There also exists an intersection between witchcraft and queerness that my conversation with M inspired me to speak on. Both M and I are highly involved with the LGBTQ+ community and are aware of the tendency for queer individuals to gravitate toward the metaphysical. In my opinion, this is largely due to the often-abusive relationship that exists between Christianity and LGBTQ+ identities. Paganism and witchcraft provide queer people an outlet for spirituality that does not require Christianity, as well as to express resistance against the systems that have failed them. When one is already seen as "other," what is the harm in adding a taboo identity such as witch or pagan to the mix? The practice of something that adds to the otherness of one's life becomes empowering in this way. Queer communities gravitate

toward witchcraft because it grants them the ability to express their healing from an oppressive system that is deeply interwoven with religion.

Healing can be applied to anything that ails the human experience. This includes mental health, physiological health, and social health. Witchcraft provides an alternative and complementary outlet for this healing that opens the door to communities left behind by the discriminatory medical systems in place. Unfortunately, discrimination in medicine only increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, as with impacted hospitals comes greater stress placed on medical professionals with bigoted ideologies. Transgender individuals, people of color, and women are most denied healthcare services through either legislation or individual discrimination by healthcare providers. These are also the demographics of much of the modern witchcraft community. The occult gives expression the space to breathe in an environment that has long deprived marginalized communities of oxygen. If healing and thus witchcraft healing is viewed as a form of self-expression as I have proposed throughout this study, perhaps we can provide humanity with enough support so that no communities will be starved of air in the pursuit of healthcare.

I began this project with the intent to shed light on the medical uses of witchcraft in responses to COVID-19, but as I explored the inherently abstract or, as one could say, metaphysical nature of healing practices, I began to see the occult as more than just a necessary alternative. Witchcraft exists in a strange middle ground between the spiritual and the expressive. Many witches do not identify as religious, just as many religious practitioners of occult rituals do not express an identity of being a witch. However, healing is universal and bridges this gap. There is a reason the most popular occult practices being spread in 2020 and 2021 were healing-oriented: the stress of the pandemic has been felt by all and the human response has been a desire

to heal. I encourage anyone who has an intent to heal their mind, body, or social relationships to express that intent however they see fit. I also encourage anyone who is curious about witchcraft to seek out information and express themselves in the same way that so many others have in the past two years.

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