

Rezension zu

Kosmina Brydie: Feminist Afterlives of the Witch: Popular Culture, Memory, Activism.

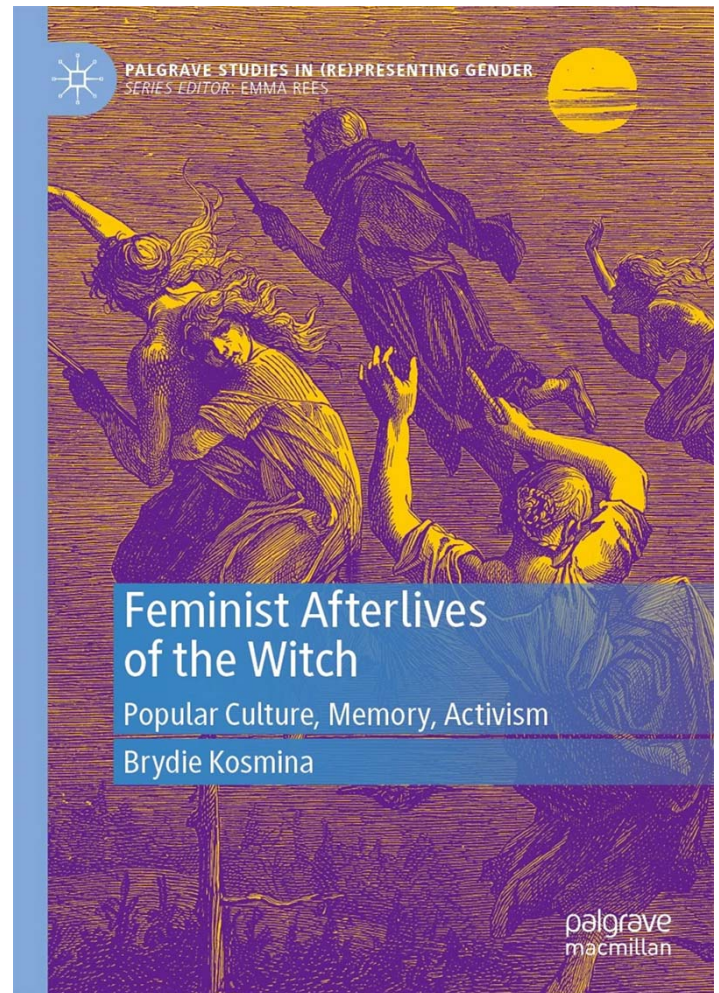
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von **Jana Christin Lammerding**

Considering her ubiquitous presence in modern-day political discourse and activism, in popular (media) culture and recent scholarly work, it's fair to say that the witch is having a moment. An almost-archetypical yet deeply ambigüe figure, the witch contains "multitudes" (p. 23) that are just as conflicting and diverse as their appropriation across the political and even feminist spectrum. How can one even begin to evaluate her cultural significance or to trace the many ways in which her history and memory contribute to her political vitality and her overall potential? What shapes and what are the witch's afterlives?

In *Feminist Afterlives of the Witch*, Australia based feminist and literary memory studies researcher Brydie Kosmina undertakes the endeavor of addressing these questions by offering a genealogically informed study of the witch that reflects on the proliferating discourse from which she emerged through the lens of feminist memory practices and theory. In doing so, she discusses the political implications of the witch's memory in correlation to popular culture and political/activist agenda. Kosmina specifically traces the figure's response to feminist activism and scholarship, not only finding that the witch functions as an "engine for activism" (p. 112), but furthermore providing an intriguing investigation into how history, memory culture, and feminist politics are intertwined by discovering their intersections *through* the figure of the witch.

In undertaking a form of conjunctural analysis, the study's methodical approach demonstrates a form of the very feminist activist memory practices and methodologies (cf. p. 80) it aims to explore. This "act of weaving" (p. xiii), as Kosmina calls it, functions as a tool for understanding the dynamic historical processes and crises that brought forth the witch and echoes the author's consideration of the witch not only as a *figure of (social) crisis* but as a "figure woven together from



the threads of any number of discourses, ideologies, and stories" (p. 4). The conjunctural analysis of these combined threads follows the temporalities of the witch's afterlife in (pop)cultural memory, beginning with the theorization, writing and imagination of the witch's history.

The second chapter "Witches and the Past" (pp. 35-74) roughly outlines the last two centuries' historical and feminist scholarship on the (Western) witch's past, starting in early-modern Europe. It offers an insight into her figure's academic exploration and the milestones made in theorizing and historicizing her. It becomes evident, that there is no singular history of the witch, but rather *histories* that have been written by scholars and media cultures alike. However, this chapter's foremost concern is to outline how early feminist writing outside the discipline of history imagined and produced histories of the witch, the witch craze and the witch hunts, that served feminist agendas at the time and though 'proven' or deemed historically inaccurate, astonishingly remained in our conception and memory of them today (cf. p. 61). Margaret Murray's *fertility cult thesis*, originating from her 1921 book *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, as well as Matilda Joselyn Gage's famous referral to nine million

witch deaths in her 1893 feminist classic *Woman, Church, and State* (pp. 58-60) - only to name two of the examples provided in the chapter -, substantiate this argument.

Following a leap from history to memory, the next chapter introduces its readers to the heart of the study (cf. p. 25), namely an interrogation of how individuals and collectives - writers, scholars, audiences, activists - utilize "memories of the witch in service of ongoing feminist activism" (p. 81) and how the witch functions as a feminist symbol or icon that is being called upon in moments of crisis or patriarchal violence (cf. p. 75). This third chapter "Witches and the Present" (pp. 75-104) reflects on the potential and productivity that today's *remembering* of the witch holds, therefore elaborating on the "mechanics and intentions of feminist memory practices more broadly" (p. 61). Here, the book explicitly charts the reciprocal interactions between collective memory, storytelling, and gendered power dynamics for the first time, stating that activism/resistance, and memory practices "operate within a cultural milieu of commodified, nostalgic, and ideological recreations or simulations of the past" (p. 76).

These representations, as well as the everyday memory practices they embody or inspire, are situated in popular culture, especially in popular and mass media (cf. p. 82), and therefore must be addressed as media phenomenon. The study does exactly that by identifying four particularly significantly performed and represented 'identities' who accumulate one of the witch's many afterlives under their names. Drawing on the *spectral turn* and Jacques Derrida's notion of *Hauntology*, Kosmina conceptualizes these four afterlives of the witch in popular culture - a monster, a lover, a mother, and a girl - as "afterimages" (p. 25) that *haunt* the witch and equally *are haunted by* her. The very first afterimage, discussed in the chapter "Witches as Monsters" (pp. 105-142), proclaims the witch as a violent, disgusting, horrifying, yet powerful creature that demands to be feared and destroyed (cf. p. 106). Her overall monstrosity, which the chapter discusses with a focus on the monstrous-feminine body on the one hand, drawing from Julia Kristeva's work on the abject, and on queer monstrosity on the other, embodies the inevitable deviance from what is considered to be 'normal' - or in some cases, even human. Monstrosity is thus to be understood here explicitly as an articulation of discourses surrounding sexuality, gender(ed) identity/expression and the body. Monstrous is what supposedly does not 'belong'.

Similarly, the second afterimage, as explored in the fifth chapter "Witches as Lovers" (pp. 143-182), associates the witch with a "diabolical sexual promiscuity" (p. 170) that refers to an insatiable lust and to sexual practices or desires deemed perverse, mythologically originating in the witch's pact with the devil, entered through sexual consort. In addition to the most apparent connotation of this afterimage, the stigmatization and pathologization of female* and queer sexualities and bodies, the chapter's deeper exploration of the coven, soulmates, and 'chosen families' clearly demonstrate how practices of romance, love, and community/solidarity that do not align with patriarchal heteronormativity and the idea of the nuclear family are demonized in this image. Building on these insights, the following chapter, "Witches as Mothers" (pp. 183-212), investigates the witch in the context of reproduction, maternity*, and parent-child-relations by identifying three main themes constituting this afterimage, the first two being the Anti-Mother and the Deadly Mother. Decisively linked to infertility, abortion (cf. p. 184) or infanticide - and often visualized in the 'evil stepmom' - these witches embody the antithesis of the mother* yet seem to be "defined by their maternity precisely because they cannot be maternal" (p. 192), as Kosmina points out. Her paradoxically coexisting representation as an all-powerful Mother-Goddess, though, only substantiates the inconsistencies and contradictions in the afterlives of the witch, that actually echo "the many images and self-images of feminism itself" (p. 7). The last afterimage discussed by Kosmina, is concerned with the identity of the witch that arguably mediates feminism in mainstream media most strikingly (cf. p. 232), holding great potential for the visibility of feminism yet being utilized in neoliberal and anti-feminist rhetorics and narratives. The seventh chapter "Witches as Girls" (pp. 213-242) explores how the "futurity and openness of girlhood is wound up in feminist memories of witches" (p. 213), finding that girl witches demonstrate a shift in the cultural presentability of feminism by proudly and openly declaring themselves feminists. However, these presentations fall victim to and are imbedded in capitalist and neoliberal agendas, that (re)produce them under the banner of 'cool feminism' or 'girl power'. But because the girl itself is an emblem of transformation and transition, of becoming and unbecoming - adult, woman*, feminist -, it's the girl witch's indeterminacy or even vulnerability that holds her greatest feminist potentials and powers. Accordingly, especially "imagining the future subject" (p. 218) through the figure of the girl or teen witch functions as an engine

of feminist activism that calls upon feminist 'tradition' and memory culture yet invites new thoughts and perspectives into their practices.

Concluding the book but staying with the future, the final chapter interrogates the feminist memory practices of remembering the witch displayed in the book as companions or cornerstones in search of "open utopianism" (p. 246), referring to utopian theory such as Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope*. The remaining pages in the last chapter "Witches and the Future" (pp. 243-258) also briefly return to the events that inspired Kosmina to call upon the witch in her doctoral thesis and the book from which it emerged, as well as the crises that accompanied her while completing them. In the wake of Donald Trump's second election and with *Roe v. Wade* overturned, the author herself powerfully remembers "as a feminist, with feminisms, and in a feminist way" (p. 248), thus explicitly placing her study in the cultural practices it aims to unravel.

Feminist Afterlives of the Witch is not only an interdisciplinary exploration of the witch's figure in her own right, but also a profound meditation on the mechanics of feminist memory practices, how they are

embedded and performed in popular (media) culture, and on the opportunities they create for "imagining more just futures" (p. 5). Kosmina therefore carefully attends to representations of witches in Hollywood movies and Netflix series, not to characterize how the witch is merely *shown* in popular media, but to observe how she embodies a way in which feminism and resistance are mediated, circulated, and reimagined across screen cultures and digital platforms. What makes this approach particularly powerful is how it allows a legendary figure to emerge not merely as a metaphor or a distant memory that is called upon, but as a dynamic site of cultural negotiation and political possibility. Here, the witch is given the space to reflect on the afterlives that haunt and have haunted her across centuries, and across generations of feminists and scholars to whom she owes her unique potential and her ever-lasting presence in *our* lives.

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