American Witches

When you imagine a witch, is she green and stockinged like the Wicked Witch of the West? Or surprised by her own power like lovable nerd Willow Rosenberg from Buffy the Vampire Slayer? Have you wondered if boredom, vengeance, or rye tainted with hallucinogens motivated the accusers of the 1692 Salem Witch trials? “American Witches” uses texts from American history, literature, popular culture, and law to explore the many ways in which witchcraft is depicted and understood in the United States from the 17th century to today. This interdisciplinary course examines how different representations of witches engage issues of sexuality, race, and gender at specific points in American history. Assignments for the course will give students structured opportunities to develop their skills leading discussion, conducting research, and providing constructive feedback.

Schedule of Meetings

First Meeting: Who and What is a Witch?
Discuss short articles and video clips (no preparation required on students’ part)

Week 2 Contemporary Curiosity
The Witches, Stacy Schiff Chapters 1-7

Week 3 Contemporary Curiosity Continued
The Witches Chapters 7-12

Week 4 Witchcraft and the History of American Slavery
I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem Maryse Conde (1986/92)
“Belinda’s Petition” (1783)

Week 5 African traditions on American Soil
Of Mules and Men, Zora Neale Hurston
excerpts from Church of the Lukumi-Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah (1993)

Week 6 Salem on Display: History, Memory and Entertainment in Today’s Museum
Guest Speaker from Tufts Museum Studies


Week 7 Salem on Display, part 2: Field Trip to Salem, MA (details TBD)
Visit Salem Witch Museum, Salem MA

Week 8 Witches on Stage Part 2: New England Postbellum Identity
*Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1868)
*Giles Corey, Yeoman* Mary Wilkins Freeman (1893)

Week 9 Witches in Technicolor
*The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

Week 10 Witches on Stage Part 3: McCarthyism and the political “Witch Hunt”
*The Crucible* Arthur Miller (1955)

Week 11 The Mixed Marriage and Mid-Century American Society
*Bewitched!* Episodes 1-3 (1964)

Week 12 Indigenous Religion and Witchcraft
*Tracks*, Louise Erdrich (1988)

Week 13 Witchcraft, Coming of Age, and Women’s Sexuality
*Sabrina the Teenage Witch* pilot episode (1996)
*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* season 5 episode 6 “Family” (2000)

**Materials:**

*The Witches*, Stacy Schiff
*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, Maryse Conde
The Crucible, Arthur Miller (any edition will do)
*Of Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston
*Tracks*, Louise Erdrich

All other materials, including article, films, and television episodes, will be available via our class website.

Note on Buying Books: With the exception of the first text, which I have ordered at the on-campus bookstore, the books required for this course are available used for less than $5 each including shipping (check out abebooks.com), and the Minuteman Library Network has multiple copies of each. As a Somerville or Medford resident you are
eligible for a library card, and they can send requested books to any branch for you to pick up. I find the West Somerville branch on College Ave to be quite convenient.

Other Expense: Our field trip to the American Witch Museum will include costs for transportation and museum admission. The museum is accessible via public transportation (MBTA commuter rail). The total cost will not exceed $25.

Assignments

This course depends on active participation in every meeting. As a class we will construct guidelines and expectations defining constructive, active participation. Participation will determine 20% of each member’s final grade for the course.

Weekly Analysis Post (20% of final grade)

In preparation for each class meeting, post a 250 word analysis of that week’s reading material to our class website no later than 10pm on the day before our class meets. At least part of each analysis must respond to one of the prompt questions posted. I will provide feedback on your first three posts.

Leading Class Discussion (10% of final grade)

In teams of two, all class members will lead the first hour of in-class discussion once during the semester. Preparation for this task includes posting two questions to our site for everyone to consider as they write their weekly analyses.

Book Review (5% of final grade)

Following our discussion of The Witches, write a 750-1,000 word review targeted to a specific publication. We will discuss published reviews in class, as well as the audiences of publications to consider writing your review for.

Research Conference (45% of grade, in total)

Sharing your research with others means more than just talking at them for 15 minutes (though I have endured conference papers delivered that way). The largest graded component of this course will be a conference at which each member of the class will share their research project with us and guests invited by members of the class. Each project must focus on a specific text, event, or phenomenon related to our theme of American Witches and use an appropriate analytical frame for its argument. This conference offers a way to transition between the ‘book report’ style presentations most high school students are assigned to the professional presentations to colleagues that students will make later in their careers. Practicing those skills in a supportive academic environment with built-in steps for feedback and revision can make those later presentations both more successful and less nerve-wracking.
Project Proposal: Due in week 8, (10% of final grade)  
Proposal includes an abstract and an annotated bibliography. 
I will use the abstracts to create conference panels of 3-4 presenters each.

Rehearsal and Revision: Due in week 11 (10% of final grade)  
Members of each panel will exchange drafts of their research presentations and hold a rehearsal together in order to provide specific feedback to support one another’s revisions.

Conference Presentation: Date and Location TBD  
Each class member will present their research project, after which they will turn in a portfolio of their materials to me.

Grading:

20% weekly online analysis posts  
20% active participation  
10% leading class discussion  
5% book review  
10% research project proposal  
10% research project draft  
25% complete research project portfolio, including presentation

Miscellany

If you have a documented disability, please meet with me as soon as possible to discuss ways we can make this class work for you. If you have had documentation for a disability in the past but have yet to register here at Tufts, I encourage you to contact Student Accessibility Services and talk with someone about whether you wish to proceed with getting appropriate documentation on file. You may never wind up needing accommodations during your time here at Tufts, but it can be nice to know you have support ready and available if you do decide that you need it.

The Academic Resource Center employs a number of Graduate Writing Consultants from across disciplines, who I heartily encourage you to work with on your research project for this course and any other writing project. They also offer consultants to help with public speaking and with time management and study strategies. These folks are experts who you have already hired!