

# Witchcraft: Religion, Law and Crime in the Atlantic World

HIST 3020

Mon/Weds 1pm-2:15pm



Professor Katharine Gerbner

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## Teaching Context

The University of Minnesota is a R1 university located in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. It is a large urban campus with a diverse student population, the majority of whom hail from the upper Midwest. This course, HIST 3020, is part of the History curriculum and it is required for all new History majors. As part of the History major, it needs to cover basic historical methodology, including primary source analysis, secondary source reading, and research design. It is capped at 20 students, and it is intended to prepare students for writing a History thesis during their Senior Year. Most students who take this course are either sophomores or juniors.

HIST 3020 courses all have different themes, which are chosen by the professor. For my HIST 3020 course, I decided to focus on Witchcraft. Studying the History of Witchcraft provides an opportunity for me to unite historical methods with a basic introduction to Religious Studies. I chose to break the course into four sections: The Introduction provides background in basic approaches to History as a field. In this part, students think about the difference between “history” and “the past,” and I introduce them to current debates about public history & historical memory. Part 1, “Defining and Historicizing Witchcraft,” introduces students to critical terms in Religious studies, and provides a foundation for critical analysis that we build on throughout the semester. I also teach students about the historical setting of the early modern Witch trials in Europe, Africa, and America.

Part 2 zooms in on the Salem witch trials as a way to teach both historical methods and primary source analysis. During each class period, we read different sources from Salem, including court records, probate

records, maps, and quantitative data. We pair those primary sources with secondary source interpretations of the witch trials. By doing so, I aim to show students the differences between Social History, Gender History, Indigenous History, and Quantitative History, among others. Students conclude this section with a paper where they develop their own arguments about the witch trials based on primary source analysis.

The final section of the course connects the history of early modern witchcraft with more recent legislation on fraud and vagrancy. It aims to show the persistent connections between the past and the present. During this section, students will also be developing their own research project ideas, and the course will culminate with a “Seed Research Project Presentation,” which is intended to help students prepare for writing a Senior Thesis as part of the History major.

Since the course is small, I require written reflections on the readings in preparation for each class. In class, I have chosen to divide our time between discussion of the readings, and a variety of practica that focus on basic skills, such as online searches, using Zotero, note-taking, and other research skills. I also introduce students to the resources at the University of Minnesota, especially our libraries and archives. We have several trips planned to UMN archives, as well as meetings with librarians. The objective is to familiarize students with the numerous opportunities available on campus, and to prepare them to execute their own research projects.

### **Course Description:**

This course poses a series of questions. What is the historian’s task? How do historians know what they know? What methods and skills do historians use? This course introduces history majors (and non-majors) to the methods and practices of historical knowledge production *and* to the philosophy/theory of history. Put slightly differently, the course will introduce students to the work/craft of history as thought and methodology. It will also encourage students to think about history (as discipline, method) critically, to address questions such as: What is history *for* and what does the student of history/the historian *do* in research (as the detective and the archivist), in writing (as the storyteller and the analyst), and in (critical) thought (as the teacher and the philosopher)? What does it mean to teach/study history in a time of struggle? What are the possibilities and limits of history?

### **Theme Description:**

This course examines the history of witchcraft and its relationship to religion, crime, and law. Who was deemed a “witch” in different historical contexts, and why? How did perceptions about witchcraft change over time? We will begin our inquiry in the early modern period, with the “witch crisis” in early modern Europe and the rise of European colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade. We will then do a close analysis of the Salem witch trials, reading original documents and examining the role of law, colonialism, slavery, and capitalism in the witch “outbreak” of 1692. The final section of the course will think about religion, law, and crime comparatively, examining concepts such as “voodoo” and “obeah.” Throughout the course, we will focus on how history is done – including close readings of primary documents, synthesis of historiographical arguments, and theorization of important concepts, such as “superstition,” “religion,” “magic,” and “law.”

### **Required Texts:**

Alison Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010.

Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*. University of Chicago Press, 2015.

### **Writing in History:**

Writing is at the very heart of the historical tradition. Historians write their way towards deciphering the past. Words are central to our ability to craft and answer questions, to frame and reframe arguments, and to participate in and generate new debates about the past and, at times, about the past’s implications on the

present and the future. Writing (and reading, understanding, and analyzing good writing) is comprehensively integrated throughout this course. Students completing this course will have a clearer understanding about the value of writing in the historical tradition. You will leave with a set of reading and writing skills that will serve you well as you move through the major and out into the wider world.

These skills will not come easily. Writing, in particular, is hard, messy, tedious, exhausting, exhilarating, profound, creative work. Writing is among the most challenging and rewarding endeavors. There will be moments where the challenges will appear to far outweigh the rewards, and you are likely to experience growth in fits and starts. This is normal. Luckily you have joined the ranks of the historians so you are less prone to let today's challenges obscure what you will come to see as the long-term benefits and deep value of this work to your academic, personal, and professional development.

This course takes special care to introduce students to a range of history writing and encourages students to practice historical thinking through a series of structured writing activities and assignments. Over the course of the semester, we will work closely to identify, define, and explore best practices in writing history. Revision, and learning through revision, is an important component of this process. Specifically, students will have opportunities to engage with the historiography and explore primary sources through their writing. Students will also write a series of reflection papers to better understand themselves as learners, writers, thinkers, and historians.

### **Reading in History:**

Equally important to the work of history is reading, the reading of 'primary documents,' of other historians' writings, of textbooks, books, articles, images, films, photographs, objects, letters, novels, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, travelogues – of texts.

Most likely, you think of the reading you associate with the University, your courses, requirements and your academic career as work, hard work, as a duty. Most of that kind of reading is 'instrumental': reading is necessary to the acquisition of a specific kind of knowledge in which the gesture of reading vanishes beneath the act of learning. And there is certainly some pleasure and accomplishment in that.

"Has it never happened," though, Roland Barthes asks, that "as you were reading a book, [...] you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened to read while looking up from your book? ... such reading [is] at once insolent in that it interrupts the text, and smitten in that it keeps returning to it and feeding on it ..." We are used to the task of criticism "either by microscope (patiently illuminating the work's philological, autobiographical, or psychological details) or by telescope (scrutinizing the great historical space surrounding the author)."

... for centuries we have been overly interested in the author and insufficiently in the reader; most critical theories try to explain why the author has written his work, according to which [com]pulsions, which constraints, which limits . . . This exorbitant privilege granted to the site the work comes from (person or Story), this censorship applied to the site it seeks and where it is dispersed (reading) determine a very special (though an old) economy: the author is regarded as the eternal owner of his work, and the rest of us, his readers, as simple usufructuaries. This economy obviously implies a theme of authority: the author, it is believed, has certain rights over the reader, he constrains him to a certain meaning of the work, and this meaning is of course the right one, the real meaning: whence a critical morality of the right meaning (and of its defect, "misreading"): we try to establish what the author meant, and not at all what the reader understands.

In keeping with a cautious critical approach to the claims to authority and foundational fictions of History and historical writing (above), we are going to try to be attentive to what you, the reader, understands, to Barthes' question: What is the text we write in our head when we look up (that text we write in ourselves when we read)? We are going to try to return to that sense of being smitten that Barthes invokes, to the idea of desire and pleasure in reading: the pleasure in words and in concepts; the draw of narration fueled by suspense and discovery; and, hopefully, to the power of reading to compel a desire to write. We will thus read – and establish a practice of reading closely – for content and for form and composition, for context and for what makes a text legible, for the discovery of new thought both in the author and in ourselves, for new concepts and words ... and for the writing reading might prompt.

### **Format, Expectations, & Attendance Policy:**

This course will introduce you to a range of critical issues and skills foundational to a historical methodology:

1. The Library
2. The Archive
3. The Primary Source
4. The Secondary Source
5. The Research Proposal
6. The Work of History: Reading/Interpretation/Analysis
7. Critical Issues in the Philosophy of History & Public Memory
8. Writing History

**There is no midterm and no final** in this course. In place of these, there will be several formal and in-class writing assignments. In addition to these, your active participation in this class will determine your grade.

### **Approximate Grade Breakdown (percentages subject to change):**

**Weekly Reflections (30%):** Weekly Reflections (30%): Write 200-300 words about the readings based on the prompt for the day. You can also include any thoughts/questions you have about readings or class. Reflections are due Sunday evening and Tuesday evening and should address the readings for the *following day*.

#### **Writing assignments (50%):**

- Essay on the Salem Witch Trials: 20%
- Book review: 15%
- Seed Idea for a Research Project: 15%

#### **Participation (20%)**

- In-class participation: 10%
- Seed research project presentation: 10%

Active participation is essential. Your first responsibility in this class is to engage the readings and actively participate in all discussions. You are expected to complete all of the course readings and assignments (before each class) as indicated on the syllabus. Engaged and consistent class participation is essential to your grade and to the success of this seminar. I expect you to be respectful and courteous to your fellow students. This includes arriving to class on time and prepared to discuss the readings, remaining attentive (not checking email, reading the newspaper, etc.), and turning off your cell phone. Class participation—*defined as a serious engagement with the readings, thoughtful reflection papers, and active participation by voicing your critical*

*thoughts and listening attentively to and responding respectfully to the ideas of your classmates*—accounts for 40 percent of your course grade.

Explanation of Class Participation Grades:

	<b>Strong Work (A work)</b>	<b>Needs Development (B to C work)</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory (D and lower)</b>
<b>Listening</b>	Actively and respectfully listens to peers and instructor	Sometimes displays lack of interest in comments of others	Projects lack of interest or disrespect for others
<b>Preparation</b>	Arrives fully prepared with all assignments completed, and notes on reading, critical observations, discussion questions	Sometimes arrives unprepared or with only superficial preparation	Exhibits little evidence of having read or thought about assigned material
<b>Quality of contributions</b>	Comments are relevant and reflect understanding of: assigned text(s); previous remarks of other students; and insights about assigned material	Comments sometimes irrelevant, betray lack of preparation, or indicate lack of attention to previous remarks of other students	Comments reflect little understanding of either the assignment or previous remarks in seminar
<b>Impact on seminar</b>	Comments frequently help move seminar conversation forward	Comments sometimes advance the conversation, but sometimes do little to move it forward	Comments do not advance the conversation or are actively harmful to it
<b>Frequency of participation</b>	Actively participates at appropriate times	Sometimes participates but at other times is “tuned out”	Seldom participates and is generally not engaged

Source: <http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/artsci/acsp/resources/rubric.html>

<b>Introduction: The Question of History</b>			
9/4	<b>Introduction</b>	Syllabus Review Introductions	
9/9	<b>The Past/History Distinction</b>  Practicum: Introduction to Online Research (visit with Kim Clarke, UMN Librarian)	<a href="#">William Kittredge, “Doing Good Work Together”</a>  <a href="#">Peter Stearns, “Why Study History?” (1998)</a>	Reflection #1 <b>due 9/8:</b> What is the difference between the “past” and “history”? What should be the purpose of historical inquiry?

9/11	<b>Public History &amp; Historical Memory</b>	<p>Choose one article in the <a href="#">“Made By History” column at the Washington Post</a>.</p> <p>Peruse the <a href="#">Campus Divided online exhibit</a> &amp; read <a href="#">Dr. John Wright’s speech at the April 26, 2019 Board of Regents meeting</a></p>	<p>Reflection #2 <b>due 9/10:</b> Write about the Made By History column you chose: how did the author use historical research to reframe current events? What did you think about their argument?</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Choose an essay and/or document from the Campus Divided online exhibit. What does this history mean for our perception of the University campus? How should we integrate/reckon with this history?</p>
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**Part 1: Defining & Historicizing Witchcraft**

Many people think they know what witchcraft is. We will begin this course by re-thinking the history of witchcraft and showing how it has been deployed in various times and places. We will also look at terms that are often associated with witchcraft, such as “superstition,” “magic,” “hag,” and “fetish,” and examine these terms closely. This exercise will help us to think more critically about the meaning of “witchcraft” and its’ associated behaviors/materials. Throughout, we will consider witchcraft in the context of the politics of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, and governance.

9/16	<p><b>Defining Witchcraft</b></p> <p>Critical Term: Witch Resources: OED, Zotero Practicum: Note-taking</p>	<p>Keith Thomas, <i>Religion and the Decline of Magic</i>, pp. 551-554</p> <p>Hutton, <i>The Witch</i>, pp. ix-xii</p> <p><a href="#">Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on “Witchcraft”</a></p>	<p>Reflection #3 <b>due 9/15:</b> Turn in your notes from the readings</p>
9/18	<p><b>The Witch Crisis in Early Modern Europe</b></p> <p>Critical Term: Maleficium Practicum: Image analysis</p>	<p>Keith Thomas, <i>Religion and the Decline of Magic</i>, pp. 517-534, 554-558</p> <p>Games, <i>Witchcraft</i>, pp. 1-18</p>	<p>Reflection #4 <b>due 9/17:</b> Provide a basic chronology of witch-beliefs &amp; witch trials in Europe. Choose three major events/publications and describe their significance.</p>
9/23	<p><b>Colonialism, Religion &amp; Witchcraft in the Atlantic World</b></p> <p>Critical Term: Religion</p>	<p>Games, <i>Witchcraft</i>, pp. 18-25</p> <p><a href="#">J.Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious”</a></p>	<p>Reflection #5 <b>due 9/22:</b> How did the meaning of “religion” change as a result of colonization? How did the definition of “witchcraft” shift?</p>

	Practicum: Tracking down citations I (primary), JSTOR		
9/25	<p><b>Witches, Slavery and Resistance</b></p> <p>Critical Terms: Fetish Practicum: Tracking down citations II (secondary)</p>	<p><u>Primary Source:</u> Documents 4-5 &amp; 13 in Games, <i>Witchcraft</i>, pp. 120-6, 152-3</p> <p><u>Secondary Sources:</u> Games, <i>Witchcraft</i>, pp. 25-39</p> <p>John Thornton, “Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World.” <i>William and Mary Quarterly</i>, 3d ser., 60.2 (April 2003): 273–294.</p>	Reflection #6 <b>due 9/25:</b> What role did witchcraft play in African perspectives on slavery and Native American resistance toward colonization?
<b>Part 2: The Salem Witch Trials</b>			
<p>In this section, we will read the records from Salem, one of the most infamous witch trials. We will focus on <b>primary source analysis</b>, a key historical methodology based on close reading. As we do so, we will compare primary sources to <b>secondary sources</b> – the arguments that modern historians have made about Salem.</p>			
9/30	<p><b>Situating Salem: Witchcraft in Early America</b></p> <p>Critical Terms: Possession, Medicine Practicum: Breaking down an argument</p>	<p>Games, <i>Witchcraft</i>, 39-48</p> <p><a href="#">Demos, “A Diabolical Distemper,” 97-131</a></p>	Reflection #7 due 9/29: Evaluate Demos’ argument in “A Diabolical Distemper.” What types of sources & methods does he use? What role do medical professionals play in this story?
10/2	<b>No class</b>		
10/7	<p><b>Tituba</b></p> <p>Historical approach: Cultural History Practicum: Primary Source analysis</p>	<p><u>Primary Source:</u> Document 19 in Games, <i>Witchcraft</i> AND <a href="#">online version of Tituba’s confession</a></p> <p><u>Secondary Source:</u> <a href="#">Breslaw, “Tituba’s Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-hunt,” pp. 535-556</a></p>	Reflection #8: Underline & mark up Document 19 in preparation for class discussion; answer the first <b>six</b> questions in the <a href="#">primary source analysis worksheet</a> .

10/9	<p><b>Gender, Age &amp; Witchcraft</b></p> <p>Method: Gender Studies, Quantitative History Practicum: Checking footnotes</p>	<p><u>Primary Source</u>: Documents 21-22 &amp; 24 in Games, <i>Witchcraft</i></p> <p><u>Secondary Sources</u>: <a href="#">Elizabeth Reis, “Gender and the Meanings of Confession”</a></p> <p><a href="#">Demos, “Witches: A Collective Portrait”</a></p>	<p>Reflection #9: What role did gender &amp; age play in the witch trials? Compare Reis’s argument with Demos.</p>
10/14	<p><b>Capitalism &amp; Economy</b></p> <p>Method: Social History Practicum: Evaluating Maps &amp; mapping</p>	<p><u>Primary Source</u>: Document 20 in Games, <i>Witchcraft</i></p> <p><u>Secondary Source</u>: <a href="#">Boyer &amp; Nissenbaum, <i>Salem Possessed</i>, pp. 1-21, 30-36, 80-109</a></p>	<p>Reflection #10: What sources did Boyer &amp; Nissenbaum use to develop their argument? How did they create their maps?</p>
10/16	<p><b><i>Salem Possessed Revisited</i></b></p> <p>Practicum: Historiography; Writing for audience</p>	<p>Read the <a href="#">forum on <i>Salem Possessed</i> in the William &amp; Mary Quarterly</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <a href="#">Introduction</a> by Jane Kamensky</li> <li>- 3 articles in the forum</li> <li>- <a href="#">Response</a> by Boyer &amp; Nissenbaum</li> </ul>	<p>Reflection #11: How have historians critiqued <i>Salem Possessed</i>? Describe the critiques in the three articles you read, and comment on Boyer &amp; Nissenbaum’s response. How has the conversation about Salem changed over time?</p>
10/21	<p><b>Indian War &amp; Colonial Politics</b></p> <p>Method: Political &amp; Indigenous History</p>	<p><u>Primary Source</u>: Document 23 in Games, <i>Witchcraft</i></p> <p><u>Secondary Source</u>: <a href="#">Mary Beth Norton, <i>In the Devil’s Snare</i>, pp. 1-13, 44-81, 295-308</a></p>	<p>Reflection #12: How does Mary Toothaker’s examination relate to Mary Beth Norton’s argument in <i>In the Devil’s Snare</i>? How does it support or complicate it?</p>
10/23	<p><b>Witchcraft &amp; the Law</b></p> <p>Method: Legal History</p>	<p><u>Primary Source</u>: Documents 25 &amp; 26 in Games, <i>Witchcraft</i></p> <p><u>Readings</u>: Games, <i>Witchcraft</i>, pp. 83-92</p>	<p>Reflection #13: Examine Thomas Brattle’s letter. What does he write about the legal process at Salem? What aspects of the law does he criticize? What does he think about belief in witchcraft?</p>
10/28	<p><b>Salem in Popular Memory</b></p> <p>Practicum: Peer response Film: The Crucible</p>		<p>Submit a draft of your Salem paper online AND <b>bring 2 paper copies of your short paper for peer response.</b></p>



10/30	<b>Salem Today</b>  Film: The Crucible		<b>Short paper (3-4 pages):</b> Choose two secondary sources that both use the same primary source to build their argument. Evaluate how each historian used the primary source.  OR  Critique one secondary source based on your interpretation of a primary source. How does the primary source challenge or complicate the historical argument?
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**Part 3: Religion, Law and Crime**

For the final section of this course, we will look at witchcraft, law, and colonialism/imperialism in a comparative perspective. We will examine witchcraft laws as a tool of colonial governance, and look at the ways in which witchcraft legislation was transformed into laws about “fraud” or “superstition.” We will also be expanding our examination of primary sources by visiting **libraries** and **archives**. You should use these experiences to start thinking about what *you* might be interested in researching in the future. Our final assignment will be a research proposal that you could potentially use for your senior thesis.

11/4	<b>Skepticism and the Law</b>  Critical Terms: Law Practicum: Research Proposal - Defining feasible research questions	<u>Primary Source:</u> <a href="#">The Witchcraft Act of 1735</a>  <u>Secondary Source:</u> Thomas, <i>Religion and the Decline of Magic</i> , pp. 681-698	Reflection #14: Read the Witchcraft Act carefully: what does it repeal and what does it criminalize? How should we understand this act within the broad narrative of “the decline of witchcraft”?
11/6	<b>Libraries</b>  *Meet at Wilson Library Collaboration Studio with Kim Clarke*	Ramsey, <i>The Spirits and the Law</i> pp. 1-53	Reflection #15: Submit your reading notes for Ramsey, pp. 1-53  Assignment: <a href="#">Fill out the Google form</a> about your research project.
11/11	<b>Voodoo, “Superstition” and Crime</b>  Practicum: Finding & reading book reviews; Searching for archival documents	<u>Primary Source:</u> <a href="#">“An Act against the irregular Assemblies of slaves...” (Selections)</a>  <u>Secondary Source:</u> Diana Paton, <a href="#">“Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery,”</a>	Reflection #16: Compare legislation related to obeah in Jamaica with vodou in Haiti. How is obeah defined in comparison to vodou? How are obeah and vodou connected to ideas about “witchcraft”?

	*Lois Hendrickson (Wangensteen curator) will visit to do a tutorial on search the archival collections*	<a href="#"><i>William &amp; Mary Quarterly</i> 69:2 (2012), 235-264</a> Kate Ramsey, <i>The Spirits and the Law</i> , pp. 54-117	
11/13	<b>Archives</b> *Meet at the Wangensteen*  Practicum: Examining archival materials	Kate Ramsey, <i>The Spirits and the Law</i> , pp. 118-176	<u>Assignment</u> : Go through the online catalog at the Wangensteen and choose one primary source you'd like to see during class. <b>Email Lois Hendrickson [l-hend@umn.edu]</b> , the archivist, by Nov. 12 <sup>th</sup> to request the source.  Reflection #17: Explain why you requested your source. Why are you interested in it? Does it connect with your seed research project proposal?
11/18	<b>Designing a Research Proposal &amp; Presentation</b>	Keep reading Ramsey, <i>The Spirits and the Law</i>	Reflection #18: Submit a draft of your seed research proposal. <b>Bring 2 paper copies of your draft for peer review workshop.</b>
11/20	<b>Individual meetings</b>	Kate Ramsey, <i>The Spirits and the Law</i> , finish	Reflection #19: Write an informal reflection about how you're feeling about your research proposal and presentation. What are you excited about? What have you found to be frustrating? What kind of guidance do you need?
11/25 & 11/27	No class – Thanksgiving Break		<b>Book review due 11/25</b> of Ramsey, <i>The Spirits and the Law</i>  Book review resources: <a href="#">“Word to the Whys: Crafting Critical Book Review”</a>  <a href="#">“How to Write a Critical Book Review”</a>

12/2	Seed Research Project Presentations		
12/4	Seed Research Project Presentations		
12/9	Seed Research Project Presentations		
12/11	Seed Research Project Presentations		<b>Seed Research Project proposal due 12/13:</b> 3-4 pages, including a research question, historical background on your project, a description of your proposed method, and a list of primary & secondary sources