

## *Archival, Testimony: Poetry and the Salem Witch Trials*

NICOLE COOLEY

**T**ODAY, as we enter the twenty-first century, an archive holds the history of the Salem witch trials safe. Follow me inside. Enter the lit-up reading room, walled-in by glass. Take your place at the long pine table.

Recover the voices. A four-year-old girl condemned for witchcraft because her mother is called a witch. A servant girl beaten by her master until she accuses him. A slave indicted for her alleged occult practices and forced to confess. A man pressed to death with heavy stones because he refused to speak. Most of the afflicted and the accused could not write their names. In the published transcripts of the trials, a signature is usually an unsteady X.

On the bookstand, turn the pages slowly. Sermon. Jeremiad. Catechism. Primer. Death Warrant.

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My book of poetry, *The Afflicted Girls*, re-imagines the events in seventeenth-century Salem and raises questions about the role of history, identity, and community in both colonial and contemporary American culture. The book is composed of four different kinds of poems: poems that narrate the experience of the trials from the viewpoints of specific people (for example, a man who helped his wife escape from prison, a four-year-old girl accused of

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being a witch); poems that make reference to and incorporate colonial American verse and prose forms (including the sermon and the jeremiad); poems that pay tribute to the archival experience and explore the conception of the poet as archivist; and poems that investigate the lasting effects of the Salem witch trials on present-day America. Thus, the poems examine both the social structures contributing to the accusations as well as the relationships between people that were wounded or destroyed by the suspicions, convictions and executions.

As I write, I am considering questions raised by the recent excellent historical studies that focus on the trials. The questions examine the level of individual-level response such as: Why were certain women and men accused and not others? Why were certain women and men willing to confess to save themselves while others were not? The questions also involve broader, state- and city-level response, including: What might the role of the opposition between Salem Village and Salem Town take in the trials? What effect did the revoking of the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter and King Philip's War have on the events in Salem?

Poetry is a genre highly dependent on voice; my archival research at the American Antiquarian Society has shown me that the event has a complicated relation to human voices and the drama of human relationships. I want to examine the historical events in Salem from a range of positions; the ability to reveal complexity through the voice of a subject or subjects is one of the most important achievements of a poetic work.

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So, know this: it's the voices that are most important. Call back Dorcas Good, the four-year-old girl who accused her mother, Sarah Good, of witchcraft, and then because her mother was accused, was considered suspect and sent to jail. Her mother was executed, and her sister, born in jail, died there. Imprisoned for eleven months herself, she never recovered. Write her testimony. Give her speech; grant her a body. Make us remember.

In real-life, present-day Salem, a stone memorial was erected. Ride the Rockport/Ipswich line from Boston into Salem. Walk from the station by the water to the other end of town to find it. Circle the stone benches, inscribed with dates and names marking the deaths of those men and women accused.

Or, return to the archive. Wait here to resurrect the voices from the end of that other century. Listen. The book of the past is waiting, spread open on the table.

*Archival: Error, Imprint, Tear*

The book gives back more than the story  
Words crossed-out      sentences cross-hatched like stitches  
end-papers ripped      name carefully erased  
\_\_\_\_      \_\_\_\_ Her Book      a girl's curving signature  
I want to carry this world with me  
but the story keeps dissolving in my hands      and the book  
is no open road to let me travel back  
The book is a voice trying to speak  
The book is a gash of light

*The Salem Witch Trials Memorial*

The memorial is a small plot of land.  
Locust trees shade the benches built with broken stone.  
The threshold reads: *My life lies in your hands.*  
*Bridget Bishop Hanged June 10, 1692*  
Each bench conceals a body that's not there, an absence  
*I am wholly innocent of such wickedness.*  
once memorialized in a hole on Gallows Hill, the land  
*Sarah Good Hanged July 19, 1692*  
you're told is now a playground. Look: understand  
*I can deny it to my dying day*  
you must read the threshold, touch each stone with your hands.  
*Rebecca Nurse Hanged July 19, 1692*  
You're a trespasser into someone else's past and,  
*I am no witch*

still, memory is nothing but this cold dirt, a plot of land.

*George Burroughs Hanged August 19, 1692*

The voices are interrupted by the rock wall circling the sand.

*Oh Lord Help me—*

Listen: wait on the threshold. In your hands

*John Proctor Hanged August 19, 1692*

you hold your notebook, your camera, to record history.

Later at home you can fast-forward to the past,

and you'll remember nothing but the story's plot, no land

where the threshold reads: the past is all lies written in your hand.

*Testimony: Talk Through Her Body*

*Dorcas Good*

Ice etches the river like a stick on a broken slate.

My mother's body does not belong

to me. In jail, a yellow bird

sleeps in her arms,

sucks her milk as I once did. Her nipple is a finger  
where the Devil holds on.

The Reverend says the way to the soul

is a woman's body: if you are willing Satan just slips in.

Now at home alone

I sketch the moment she became a witch.

The Reverend says the Devil claimed my mother  
because she opened herself to him.

I rub her out with my fist.

My mother is a clapboard house,  
cold splitting planks. Or she's a field the Devil  
cuts a clean road through.

My mother's body does not belong to me.

The afflicted girls own it. They crowd  
around her. They are a wall, a fence circling  
a small, empty plot of dirt.

Now I erase the slate. My mother is

a candle on the table

beside me, flame guttering out.

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