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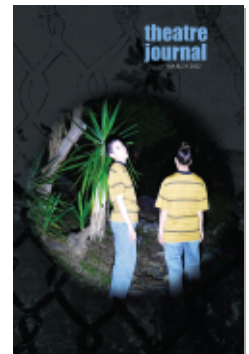
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Theatre Journal, Volume 74, Number 1, March 2022, pp. 41-57 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2022.0003>



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What Is Wanda but Witches Persevering? Palimpsests of American Witches in *WandaVision*

Jane Barnette

The Scarlet Witch is not born; she is forged. She has no coven or need
for incantation. Your power exceeds that of the Sorcerer Supreme.
It is your destiny to destroy the world.

—Agatha Harkness (Kathryn Hahn) to Wanda Maximoff, in *WandaVision*

When *WandaVision* was released in early 2021 as part of the Disney+ service, the producers did the unthinkable: they dropped only the first two episodes, choosing to premiere the remaining episodes each Friday thereafter. Of course, this approach was only unusual because home-entertainment practices have changed, especially following the pandemic and stay-at-home orders: viewers typically binge their favorite television shows, consuming as many episodes in a row as they can. The weekly release schedule forced fans to experience *WandaVision* the way that classic episodic television used to be consumed, allowing for “water-cooler conversations” to occur with coworkers (or anonymous fans online) between episodes, a practice that encourages predictions and detailed analysis rather than the “hot take” summaries or “tweet along” binge-fests viewers expect with streaming services like Netflix, HBO, and the like. This slower consumption model not only drew attention to the series, by drawing out the discovery process and encouraging fan conversation, but it also mirrored the premise of the series itself: “a TV show about some TV shows . . . that is a TV show, watched by characters inside a TV show.”¹

To call *WandaVision* “meta” underestimates the levels of self-conscious reflexivity that abound within the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), where referentiality and citation form the very foundation upon which stories are told. Not only do the films pick up on storylines from one another, but they exist within a universe—a multiverse—that includes decades of comic-book iterations of these characters and

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With gratitude to E.J. Westlake, Sean Metzger, Vabianna Santos, and the two anonymous reviewers for their encouragement and keen insights regarding this essay. I also thank the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas for its support of faculty research, and Henry Bial for brainstorming with me.

¹ Screen Junkies, “Honest Trailers | WandaVision,” YouTube, March 16, 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVnHisJl7Uc>.

their backstories (and retcons).² Marvel fans study their favorite characters in every format they take, and online forums like Reddit provide opportunities for them to share theories about these characters' motivations and flaws, and to learn from other fans who insist on details they may have missed or who emphasize storylines they would prefer to overlook.³ In short, the fanbase for the Avengers and the X-Men—the two groups of superheroes to which Wanda is tied—is both broad and deep. And while they are superficially dedicated to the characters and the stories they create, Marvel fans (and comic-book fans in general) revel in the complex palimpsestuous pleasure that adaptation affords.⁴

In my case, as an adaptation scholar conducting research on the representation of witches onstage, it was precisely this reliance upon intertextual citation—the palimpsests of comic books and the multiple histories of individual characters—that first drew me to *WandaVision*.⁵ The series begins with Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) appearing to have just married a synthezoid named Vision (Paul Bettany), and they are moving into a quaint suburban town to start their newlywed lives together.⁶ The first episode is in black and white and set in the 1950s, in the light-hearted sitcom style of the *Dick van Dyke* (and *I Love Lucy*) series, complete with a live studio audience (fig. 1). Right away, we notice that Vision can walk through walls and Wanda can make objects move without touching them, in the housewife/witch mode of Samantha Stevens from *Bewitched*. We meet a nosy neighbor named Agnes (Kathryn Hahn), who befriends Wanda, and we see Vision at his workplace, where he realizes that his boss and the missus will be coming for dinner that evening. Antics ensue, and the rest of the series continues in this traditional sit-com mode for a few episodes, each of which is based on a different television era and sitcom style (*Bewitched*, *Growing Pains*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Modern Family*). In episode 4 (“We Interrupt This Program”) the façade is revealed and we realize that what we have been watching is part of a spell that Wanda has cast on this small town, outside of which she and all those inside this Hex are being watched by a shadowy government organization known as SWORD.⁷

² The word *retcon* is a shortened version of “retroactive continuity,” a technique used in literature and especially popular-culture storytelling that adapts previously established narratives in such a way that it breaks continuity.

³ For insight about fandom and the participatory pleasure it affords, see Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Kristin M. Barton and Jonathan Malcolm Lampley, eds., *Fan CULTure: Essays on Participatory Fandom in the 21st Century* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014); and Lisa A. Lewis, ed., *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁴ For more on “palimpsestuous pleasures,” see Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017).

⁵ In preparation for a “witchface” booth for Halloween a few years ago, when I painted children's faces to resemble famous witches, I recognized the Scarlet Witch as one of the most popular costumes, but never connected the comic-book character with the role that Elizabeth Olsen played in the MCU Avenger films, since she had not yet appeared in full Scarlet Witch regalia.

⁶ A “synthezoid” (sometimes “synthozoid”) is an advanced android—a synthetic humanoid—that is sentient. Within the MCU, these robots are composed of Horton Cells, synthetic replicas of human cells created by Professor Phineas Horton. The Vision and Wondervision are the primary synthezoids in the MCU, but the character Roy Batty in *Blade Runner* is often considered another example of a synthezoid or bioroid. See David Lawrence, “More Human than Human,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 26 (2017): 476–90.

⁷ SWORD is an acronym for Sentient Weapon Observation and Response Division, considered a similar organization to SHIELD (Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division) within the MCU; see Nicholas Raymond, “MCU SWORD & SHIELD Differences & Similarities Explained,” January 31, 2021, *Screen Rant*, available at <https://screenrant.com/wandavision-mcu-sword-shields-agencies-differences-similarities/>.



Figure 1. Elizabeth Olsen as Wanda Maximoff and Paul Bettany as Vision in the closing credits for Episode 1, “Filmed Before a Live Studio Audience.” (Source: Courtesy of Marvel Studios, © 2021.) 2021

Since the finale (aptly titled “The Series Finale”) aired on March 5th, 2021, discussion about *WandaVision* has continued, although the focus shifted from conspiratorial predictions regarding how it ties into the larger MCU to debates about the choices Wanda made and the power she wields and what the consequences of it all might be. That same day, popular essayist Tressie McMillan Cottom tweeted “Wanda is a slave-master,” summarizing the discomfort that many viewers had with the manipulation of the townspeople of Westview, whose minds were under Wanda’s control. “When that man said, ‘please let us sleep?’” she continued, “I felt that. Whole thing turned on that one dime. I know a [sic] ol’ Thomas Jefferson looking headass when I see one.”⁸ Others summarized the show by linking it to the stages of grief, arguing that the appeal of the show was aligned to our collective and individual grief endured in recent years in the United States and our national struggles with political discord, mass shootings, early (and continuing, as of this writing) disavowals of the pandemic, and the economic effects wrought by all of the above.⁹

While these critiques have merit and inform my analysis, what is largely missing from the conversation following *WandaVision* is a dramaturgically informed discussion of her “witchiness.” Beyond the (not-wrong) observation that “Wanda is a witch, and witchcraft seems fun as hell,”¹⁰ how does her identity as a superhero-protagonist *who is also a witch* reflect or refract our reception of her actions as villainous or heroic? What does grief have to do with witchcraft and its perceived (and actual) power? And

⁸ Tressie McMillan Cottom (@tressiemcphd), “Wanda Is a Slavemaster,” Twitter, March 5, 2021.

⁹ For a summary of some interpretations of the finale, see: David Betancourt, “The ‘WandaVision’ Finale Did What It Had to Do—Not What We Wanted it to Do,” March 6, 2021, The Washington Post, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2021/03/06/wandavision-finale-agatha/>.

¹⁰ Alison Herman, “‘WandaVision’ is Superhero Content Finally Centered on Womanhood, Not Girl Power,” March 8, 2021, *The Ringer*, available at <https://www.theringer.com/marvel-cinematic-universe/2021/3/8/22319937/wandavision-wanda-maximoff-womanhood-feminism>.

why this witch now? What, for example, can popular representations of witches reveal about the role of the individual versus that of the community in the wake of current social unrest? In what follows, I answer these questions with particular attention to the way *WandaVision* leverages specifically US-based tropes of witches, revealing some of the reasons why the series resonated with viewers who had so recently witnessed the insurrection of January 6, 2021.¹¹ By contextualizing Wanda in relation to American examples of the larger witch character type, I demonstrate how her particular status as the Scarlet Witch contributes to (and draws from) both the ethos of the MCU and these contemporary cultural debates.

“Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?”

Contemporary considerations of witches in American popular culture typically have two common reference points: the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, and the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century. In keeping with *WandaVision*'s use of different eras of television to conjure cultural history, I too call upon several historical touchstones of witch representations in popular culture, but unlike Wanda, I explore these in reverse chronological order. Wanda turns to pastiches of historical sitcoms for comfort and predictability, but her fictional security, like that offered by sitcoms themselves, becomes increasingly unsustainable as she moves forward through television history.¹² Conversely, the history of witchy representation may seem comfortingly familiar in its more recent guises, but stranger and more foreboding the further back viewers go through the centuries of anti-witch persecution.

From *The Wizard of Oz*, viewers of film and television received the indelible impression of discerning whether the witch in question was a good witch or a wicked one, along with expectations of how both should look. The Wicked Witch of the West, played by Margaret Hamilton, is especially entrenched in our memories, as she inspired subsequent adaptations based on her story with *Wicked* the novel (Maguire, 1995) and musical (Schwartz and Holzman, 2003). We expect her to have green skin, to wear all black, and to sport a pointed black hat, whether we sympathize with her as Elphaba or delight in her evil laughter in the film. For a witch to be a villain was the default expectation that L. Frank Baum confronted in his children's novel, written in 1900. While fears of witches living among the population had largely abated in American society by the dawn of the twentieth century, most readers would nonetheless presume a fictional witch to be in league with the devil, and therefore evil. Baum's innovation was his creation of her counterpart—the Good Witch of the North, who in the iconic film arrives to the scene in a transparent bubble, softly hovering with care to assess the damage Dorothy has done, thanks to the tornado that brought her house to Oz, killing the Wicked Witch of the East.¹³ Nurturing and cherubic, Glinda the Good Witch has strawberry blonde hair and carries a sparkly wand; when she kisses Dorothy on the forehead it gives her protection, showing viewers the possibility that spells are not always harmful after all.

¹¹ *WandaVision* premiered on January 15, 2021.

¹² As Charles Pulliam-Moore notes, however, “the show missed a choice opportunity to point out how Black sitcoms were huge for a hot second before disappearing almost entirely from network television.” See his “Monica Rambeau Was *WandaVision*'s Real Hero, and the Show Did Her Dirty,” *Gizmodo*, March 9, 2021, available at <https://gizmodo.com/monica-rambeau-was-wandavisions-real-hero-and-the-show-1846433688>.

¹³ In Baum's 1900 book, there were two good witches.

Although both Glinda and Elphaba can fly, their modes of flight reflect their status on the binary of good and evil: Glinda floats, while Elphaba darts. Glinda's vessel is like an oversized soap bubble: it can catch light and create prismatic rainbows, while keeping her protected (not to mention clean!). Played by Billie Burke, a fair-skinned 54-year-old white woman with piercing blue eyes, Glinda epitomizes heightened femininity, clad in a frothy pink gown with exaggerated tulle shoulders trimmed with sparkles aplenty. In lieu of the stereotypically pointed black hat, the good witch has a cylindrical tall silvery-pink crown atop her wavy coif, punctuated by jewels that extend beyond the crown's base onto her forehead, extending nearly to her manicured eyebrows. She wears a bright cherry-red lipstick, pinkish-red rouge, and carries a staff-length wand topped by a glittery five-pointed star. Her silhouette itself is a caricature of the female form, with an obscenely wide skirt attached to a fitted bodice. Importantly, the width of the skirt is most visible when she faces viewers head-on—its width is horizontal, but not spherical. Glinda is dressed to be seen and to address her observers directly; her outfit is for arrivals and proclamations but not for movement. The exaggeration of the hips is the kind of amplified femininity we recognize as hyper-maternal, the default expectation for an older woman character whom the audience should trust implicitly.

In contrast to Glinda's sparkly wand, the wicked witch holds her ragged broom, a vehicle of flight that harkens back to the earliest witch images printed in books.¹⁴ Set against the solid black of her costume, the wicked witch's green skin and sharp angular features are exaggerated, and there is no attempt to feminize her face with lipstick or rouge. To the contrary, Hamilton's eyebrows are emphasized and overdrawn, enhancing her wicked facial expressions, while making her more masculine. To her already angular jawline the film's makeup artist Jack Dawn adds length and sharpness to her chin, creating the illusion of age, as well as playing into images of the witch made popular in previous media.

Not only does *WandaVision* offer a direct nod to the 1939 film when it features a shot of the bad witch's legs and feet trapped under the car that Wanda has hurled at her, but the series offers other more subtle references to the visuals we associate with Baum's Oz as well. While it would be a stretch to suggest that Wanda is akin to Glinda entirely, Olsen's light auburn hair, fair skin, and delicate features provide a similar contrast to Hahn's brunette hair color and relatively sharp countenance.¹⁵ Like the wicked witch, Agatha Harkness wears a floor-length heavy gown when she manifests her full power.¹⁶ In contrast to Hahn's costumes as Agnes-the-neighbor, as Agatha-the-witch she is covered from her neck down, similarly drawing focus to her face and hands, as the 1939 film did with Hamilton's witch. Rather than green makeup to cover her face and hands, by the finale Agatha signals her witchiness through dark purple coloring on her fingertips (akin to Wanda's hand-makeup) and purple eyeshadow in her inner corners. The effect of this eyeshadow is aging to Hahn, making her eyes look deeper set while also sharpening the bridge of her nose. Additional

¹⁴ Martin Lefranc's *Champion des Dames* (circa 1451) included images of witches on brooms in the margins, and is considered to be the earliest example of such imagery in Europe. See Jeffrey B. Russell, *A History of Witchcraft* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 8.

¹⁵ In episode 5, it is revealed that Hahn's nosy neighbor Agnes is actually Agatha Harkness, a legendary witch from the Marvel Comics who has protected and challenged the Scarlet Witch as her mentor.

¹⁶ Hahn's final costume features purple accents in addition to the heavy black layers in keeping with how Agatha's magic is made visible in the Marvel comics and the series.

contour is added to her cheekbones and face perimeter, creating hollowness in a nod to the elderly, frail Agatha depicted in the comics. Whereas in the early sitcom-era episodes Hahn's costumes drew attention to her waist, much like Olsen's, the layers of fabric for the finale costume were so dense and heavy that Hahn wore a cooling base beneath the costume, to keep her from fainting from the heat.¹⁷ As a result, in the final scenes Agatha appears boxy and shapeless, concealing her feminine shape much like Hamilton's petite frame is concealed in her costumes, both as the spinster Miss Gulch and the Wicked Witch of the West.

In contrast, Wanda's witch-power costume for the finale accentuates her femininity without sexualizing her. It is a deep red color, as expected given her moniker, and offers clear referents to her comic-book garb, complete with the pointed scarlet headdress her character wears. Rather than the comic-book bodice that emphasizes (by barely covering) her bosom, however, this costume features a halter-neck bodice with long, above-the-elbow gloves, drawing attention to her upper arms and shoulders (fig. 2). The form-fitting bodice has vertical lines that taper closer together at her waist and expand at her bust, with cut-outs at the neckline that resemble a graphic necklace. Even sharper lines are evident in her crown, which includes a flattering extension that curves along her cheekbone, as well as two small sharp points that look a bit like horns. Crucially, the finale of *WandaVision* marked the first time that fans got to see Olsen in a fully developed Scarlet Witch costume, since her earlier appearances in the Marvel films had only hints of the iconic comic-book costume, and never featured her headdress at all.¹⁸

While the color and design pattern itself does not conjure the saccharine pastel iridescence of Glinda's aesthetic, evoking the Scarlet Witch's classic image through Olsen's costume triggers fans' recognition that, however ethically complicated her choices have been, she is a superhero and, within the context of the MCU, an Avenger. Moreover, Wanda is the mother of magical twin boys who are just learning their own powers, as Dorothy must learn hers, under Glinda's protective guidance. Agatha, on the other hand, threatens the twins' safety (as well as that of their pet dog, Sparky), a reminder of the Wicked Witch's intention to hurt Dorothy and Toto: "I'll get you, my pretty, and your little dog, too!" Like Hamilton, Hahn punctuates her evil proclamations with cackling laughter, itself a trope of wicked witches in the public imagination. While Hamilton emphasizes the witch's plan with laughter, Hahn uses it to heighten her confession, as the last line of her bop theme song ("Agatha All Along"): "and I killed Sparky, too!" Social signals emitted in these instances align with research on the functions of laughter: "Laughter that anticipates or follows seemingly inexplicable acts of cruelty speaks to this bias. It is suggestive of devilish evil because it signifies the taking of pleasure in the evil act itself."¹⁹ The delight that Agatha takes in revealing her role in Sparky's death and in disrupting Wanda's plans "all along" reinforces her

¹⁷ By "early sitcom-era episodes," I am referring to the first two episodes ("Filmed Before a Live Studio Audience" and "Don't Touch that Dial") of the series, which are in black and white and set in the 1950s and '60s.

¹⁸ Series viewers did get a sneak peak of Wanda in full Scarlet Witch regalia, however, in episode 6, when she dressed as a Sokavian fortune-teller for Halloween, in a costume that directly referenced the early appearances of her character in the comics. The Vision, likewise, wore a costume reminiscent of his earliest appearance in the comics.

¹⁹ Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, "Social Signals and Antisocial Essences: The Function of Evil Laughter in Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 5 (2018): 1221.



Figure 2. The Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) in full regalia in Episode 9, “The Series Finale.”
(Source: Courtesy of Marvel Studios, © 2021.)

immorality to viewers, in keeping with the “in league with the devil” rhetoric that made witch-hunting possible for centuries.²⁰

Although the witches’ roles in the story of *The Wizard of Oz* are designated by their character names—one is Good and the other is Wicked—Glinda’s pure beneficence, like Wanda’s, has also been questioned. Arguably, Glinda could have her own “all along” theme song revelation, since we learn that Dorothy’s quest was never necessary in order for her to get home to Kansas: she has been wearing the magical shoes since “Glinda poof[ed] them onto Dorothy’s feet” to spite the Wicked Witch.²¹ But Glinda has goals of her own, some fans argue, and she sets Dorothy off to find the Wizard because she wants to expose him and stop the Wicked Witch of the West, feats that will solidify her power over Oz. Other critics see Glinda as “a generous guide and a firm teacher,” because “she doesn’t let the young heroine take the easy way out.”²² However complicated Glinda’s “goodness” may be, it does not compare with the mind control that Wanda exerts over the Westview residents, including her own spouse.

Indeed, Wanda’s control over those within the Hex is more akin to the Wicked Witches’ over the flying monkeys (West) and the Munchkins (East) within Oz. While both Dorothy and Wanda ultimately free them all from this enslavement, it is clear that the witches who entranced them into servitude are evil within the *Wizard of Oz* storyline, while it is less clear that viewers are meant to blame Wanda for entrapping them in Westview. Moral choices are usually evaluated within the context of intention, and in *WandaVision*, when Agatha lifts the spell so that the residents can speak

²⁰ Months after the *WandaVision* finale, fans of Kathryn Hahn were delighted to learn of Marvel’s plans to create a spinoff “dark comedy” centered on Agatha Harkness. See Joe Otterson, “‘WandaVision’ Spinoff Starring Kathryn Hahn in the Works at Disney Plus,” *Variety*, October 7, 2021, available at <https://variety.com/2021/tv/news/wandavision-spinoff-kathryn-hahn-1235082445/>.

²¹ Sam Plank, “A Theory to Blow You Back to Kansas: 7 Reasons the TRUE Villain of ‘The Wizard of Oz’ Was Glinda the Good Witch,” *Geeks*, 2018, available at <https://vocal.media/geeks/a-theory-to-blow-you-back-to-kansas-7-reasons-the-true-villain-of-the-wizard-of-oz-was-glinda-the-good-witch-1>.

²² Pam Grossman, “The Wizard of Oz Invented the ‘Good Witch,’” August 25, 2019, *Atlantic*, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/08/80-years-ago-wizard-oz-invented-good-witch-glinda/596749/>.

and remember their minds, they beg Wanda to let them return to their worlds. She insists that they are fine (“you feel at peace”), but when they crowd around her, she panics and yells for them to stop, the force of which begins to choke them with her magic. Seeing them clutch their throats and gasp for breath, she expresses remorse, reversing the spell as she says, “Stop! Stop! I’m sorry.” However, when the Vision challenges Wanda, suggesting that she cannot control him in the way she does the others, she disagrees. “For most of *WandaVision*, all we know about Vision is that he has no memory of who he was before and that his wife keeps telling him that everything is fine when it is very clearly *not* fine.”²³ In both cases, there is an articulated lack of consent from those afflicted. Thus while Glinda’s mentorship of Dorothy is slightly questionable in terms of moral judgment, it pales in comparison with the actions taken by Wanda. Both “good witches” have used people as pawns in service of their goals, but whereas Glinda omits key information, she does not override Dorothy’s agency or will—Dorothy is manipulated, but not entirely controlled. Wanda takes over the townspeople’s agency (including Vision’s) altogether, rendering them subject to her commands without the ability to choose for themselves. To understand fully why she does so, viewers are asked to consider the power of grief to cloud one’s judgment and complicate one’s moral compass.²⁴ Moreover, to the degree that Wanda and Agatha are both “bad witches,” their origins can be traced two centuries earlier, to the germinal scene of anti-witchcraft sentiment in (what would become) the United States: the Salem witch trials.

The Stakes of Salem

The impression of the Salem witch trials, as I have noted, shares a place of prominence in American popular culture alongside *The Wizard of Oz*, and functions centrally within Agatha Harkness’s backstory. Historians have parsed the evidence from Salem county’s obsession, from 1692 to 1693, with witches to support a range of explanations: for some, the townspeople zeroed in on witchcraft because of religious zealotry; for others, there were economic inequities to blame; still others suggest that a lack of scientific knowledge regarding disease was the root of Salem’s troubles.²⁵ Today, Salem merchants embrace the “memory commerce” and “fright tourism” wrought by these mysteries, in their museums and shops peddling “witch kitsch” for tourists and students alike.²⁶ Never mind the fact that several of those who accused or indicted their peers as witches later recanted their testimony, admitting their participation in executing “innocent persons”; what matters (in terms of possible profit, at least) is how we *want* to remember Salem.²⁷ Within the popular vernacular, Salem is shorthand for witches.

²³ Kalia Hale-Stern, “Honest Trailer for *WandaVision* Has Both Hilarity and Harsh Truths,” *The Mary Sue*, March 24, 2021, avail at <https://www.themarysue.com/wandavision-honest-trailer/>.

²⁴ Within *The Wizard of Oz* story, of course, it is also worth noting that the Wicked Witch of the West loses her sister when the cyclone blows Dorothy to Oz, so arguably grief also motivates her. That said, within the narrative of this story, viewers are not expected to feel pity for the wicked witch(es), but for Dorothy and her friends.

²⁵ For an overview of the historiography of the Salem witch trials, see Jane Kamensky, “Salem Obsessed; Or, ‘Plus Ça Change’: An Introduction,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2008): 391–400.

²⁶ Robert E. Weir, “Bewitched and Bewildered: Salem Witches, Empty Factories, and Tourist Dollars,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 40, nos. 1–2 (2012): 201–4, 205, 181, qtd. in V. K. Preston, “Reproducing Witchcraft: Thou Shalt Not Perform a Witch to Live,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (2018): 143–59.

²⁷ Weir, “Bewitched and Bewildered,” 184.

And yet, the salience of the witch-hunt as metaphor relies upon the *non-existence* of witches. While some use the term to describe a lack of due process or an unjust persecution of an unpopular minority, the most common contemporary use of the term, especially when used defensively, denotes a false allegation. This tension—between claiming Salem as “witch city” and identifying it with the cautionary tale of the wrongly accused—produces a rich palimpsest for creators to mine, especially when raising ethical questions about social justice.²⁸ As folklorist Stephen Olbys Gencarella attests, “Witch Trials occupy a prominent niche in American—and international—public discourse concerning social justice; their remembrance impinges upon actions taken for civil rights in the present and future.”²⁹ Indeed, with echoes of “witch-hunt” defenses still audible on social media sites today, the defendant wrongly accused remains a much more compelling narrative within American culture than the defendant who is guilty but whose civil rights have been violated.

Of all those accused of witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England, however, Tituba stands apart. Whether or not she practiced (what Puritans interpreted as) witchcraft, Tituba’s marginalized status as a woman of color who was considered property made her an ideal scapegoat for the town.³⁰ Like so many in her circumstance, Tituba “confessed” to witchcraft, but historians studying these legal records recognize the context within which they occurred: under psychological and often physical duress. The “choice” to confess stemmed from survival instincts, especially when one had no legal rights to personhood, as Tituba and many others accused of and killed for witchcraft knew firsthand. This moment of an impossible choice culminating in self-sacrifice occurs frequently in superhero narratives, including Wanda’s.

The origin of Wanda’s most recent loss dramatized in *WandaVision* is the death of her beloved Vision, the result of an impossible choice she made for the survival of the human race. In *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), in order to keep the villain Thanos from completing his collection of infinity stones, the Vision asks Wanda to remove his Mind Stone from the center of his forehead. Doing so will destroy her partner, but only she has the fortitude to remove it in this moment. Thus she sacrifices her beloved for the greater good, only to have Thanos use the time stone to reverse the action and grab the mind stone from the Vision himself, effectively killing him twice. More crucial yet, as the last of the six stones Thanos sought to collect, securing the mind stone completes his magical gauntlet, allowing him to enact “the snap,” a gesture with his gloved fingers that eliminates half the earth’s population, including Wanda.

WandaVision’s plot begins a mere three weeks following the Avengers’ reversal of this blip (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019), meaning that the disappeared beings are returned to earth—an act that occurs five years after losing them for those who remained, but

²⁸ For theatre-makers, the most obvious example of using Salem as a metaphor is Arthur Miller’s 1953 play *The Crucible*. A recent adaptation, *John Proctor Is the Villain* by Kimberly Belflower, was part of the Kilroys List in 2019 and has gained widespread appeal, in part because it critiques Miller from a post-#MeToo perspective.

²⁹ Stephen Olbys Gencarella, “Touring History: Guidebooks and the Commodification of the Salem Witch Trials,” *Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 3 (2007): 273.

³⁰ For discussions about Tituba’s race and its relevance to witch history, see Elaine G. Breslaw, *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies* (New York: NYU Press, 1996); and Veta Smith Tucker, “Purloined Identity: The Racial Metamorphosis of Tituba of Salem Village,” *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 4 (2000): 624–34.

directly after the snap for those who were gone. In other words, for the residents of Westview, approximately half of them have lived with the loss of family and friends for five years, believing them to be dead, only to have them reappear just three weeks ago. The entire planet, then, suffers from a kind of grief within this narrative, and it is into this existential sadness that Wanda enacts her Hex.

After she emerges from the blip, Wanda attempts to recover the Vision's body. At a government facility presumably tied to SWORD (Sentient Weapon Observation and Response Division), she finds what is left of her partner on a table, in pieces.³¹ She touches his forehead, but without the mind stone he is no longer sentient. "I can't feel you," she says, with tears in her eyes. While this recorded moment, captured through surveillance, is offered as proof that Wanda is a "terrorist," suggesting that she interfered with the agency's goal of reconstructing the Vision and building a sentient weapon of SWORD's own, we do not see Wanda take anything from the lab. Her recreation of the Vision is not based on material, but on memory and trauma. Wanda's emotional distress deepens when she views the deed for a property lot in Westview with a handwritten note from the Vision, purchased before the snap and his death. "To grow old in, ~V," the note reads, written in red inside the border of a heart. She drives to this empty lot and collapses in its center, overwhelmed by grief. From this well of sadness and rage, viewers witness the telltale signs of her magic, a red particle smoke, emerge from her hands and engulf her body, emanating outward and creating a house on the empty lot. Then we see her in a deep backbend, willing the Vision into existence within the Hex she has unfurled (fig. 3).

This backbend, a circular backwards arch (or *arc de cercle*), has established ties to both the diagnosis of hysteria in the late nineteenth century and to witchcraft. "[Jean-Martin] Charcot himself collected artistic and historical materials on the relation between witchcraft and hysteria, which he presented under the title *Les démoniaques dans l'art*, published by the Academy of Medicine in 1887."³² Indeed, the movement patterns and gestures associated with the hysteric body "constitute . . . a performance archive" that "demonstrates how hysteriform poses and gestures initially visible within early modern demonical possession, exorcism, and religious ecstasy moved into the medical sphere," as Jonathan Marshall has suggested.³³ That Olsen enacts it as a prelude to conjuring the Hex—her strongest manifestation of magic yet seen in the MCU—may be coincidental or not consciously citational for the actor or creative team, but it nevertheless triggers recognition in those who study hysteria and witchcraft. Both seen as afflictions affecting primarily women, witchy and hysterical behaviors have noticeable overlaps as they are described in scientific studies. Even for those unfamiliar with this scholarship, however, the extreme physicality of the *arc de cercle* communicates the emotional intensity of conjuring the Hex and especially the Vision for Wanda. Their existence and the mind control of the townspeople that accompanies the pocket reality that Wanda has cast with the Hex occur due to the power of her grief. The audience is encouraged to connect this excess of emotion with Wanda's magic.

³¹ Raymond, "MCU SWORD & SHIELD Differences & Similarities Explained."

³² Richard Baxstrom and Todd Meyers, *Realizing the Witch: Science, Cinema, and the Mastery of the Invisible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 29.

³³ Jonathan W. Marshall, "Traumatic Dances of 'The Non-Self': Bodily Incoherence and the Hysterical Archive," in *Performing Hysteria*, ed. Johanna Braun (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2020), 61–83, quotes on 62–63.



Figure 3. Wanda (Elizabeth Olsen) creates Vision in Episode 8, "Previously On." (Source: Courtesy of Marvel Studios, © 2021.)

It is impossible to know the emotional toll exacted by the actual Salem witch trials, of course, but the word *hysteria* is frequently used to describe the paranoia of those involved, who were frantic to root out the causes of evil and keep otherwise good women and men from conspiring with the devil. Upon the tercentenary commemoration of the trials, Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel noted that "part of the vocabulary of the drama of tragedy is fanaticism. It is because people were fanatic that Salem was possible."³⁴ In attributing the tragedy of Salem to fanaticism, Wiesel likely meant to refer to the behavior "characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm, *esp.* in religious matters,"³⁵ but it is not coincidental that we derive the word *fan* from fanatic, as both words convey an expectation that the enthusiasm the fan(atic) experiences is excessive. Nor is it coincidental to see such displays of excess spread quickly through communities, for hysterical behavior (whether the fanatic rush to quell witchcraft or the "fits" that characterized those afflicted by or in league with purported witches) was considered contagious and recognized as "neuromimesis" by Charcot and his contemporaries.³⁶

We see an entirely different kind of excess occurring in the depiction of the Salem witch-hunt within the MCU, however. For Agatha Harkness, the connections to Salem are explicit, yet inverted: in *WandaVision*, we see two flashbacks of her within this context, as she is tied to a stake and prepared for execution by her own coven. This image of a woman tied to a stake serves as an index of witch persecution writ large, but it turns

³⁴ "Elie Wiesel's Salem Witch Trials Memorial Dedication Speech, 1992." Salem Witch Museum, available at <https://salemwitchmuseum.com/2017/07/20/elie-wiesels-salem-witch-trials-memorial-dedication-speech-1992/>.

³⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, "fanatic, adj. and n.," available at <https://www.oed-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/view/Entry/68008>.

³⁶ Marshall, "Traumatic Dances of 'The Non-Self,'" 64. For more about hysterical behavior as "contagion by example," see Jonathan W. Marshall, *Performing Neurology: The Dramaturgy of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 231.

Salem inside out in two ways: there were no witch burnings in Salem; and not only do witches exist, but (oddest of all) they are accusing one of their own, not of witchcraft but of unethical behavior.³⁷ The witches of Agatha's coven accuse her of misusing magic and working beyond her station within their code, a claim she refutes at first though ultimately confesses. As punishment, her coven members direct their magic at her, the force of which would likely kill most humans quickly. Instead, Agatha absorbs these rays of power and reverses the spell, casting her own magic in its characteristic purple haze back at the witches surrounding her. The final witch standing to face Agatha is the high priestess of the coven, Agatha's own mother, who marshals an even stronger force of magic against Agatha, resulting in a blue particulate crown appearing on her mother's head. But Agatha turns this against her too, annihilating her priestess mother while absorbing her power. "I take power from those undeserving. It's kind of my thing," Agatha has explained to Wanda.³⁸ Filled with the magic she drained from her mother and coven members, she easily breaks free and leaves them behind as mere husks of humans whose life force she has devoured. This kind of behavior, while not tied directly to Christian concepts of evil, is nevertheless precisely the type of cruel magic that Salem townspeople expected to see from witches. For Agatha, witchcraft is wielded to protect and empower oneself but not to assist others.

Not surprisingly, then, when it comes to feelings of loss, grief, and regret, Agatha is an observer but not a participant. She revels in Wanda's pain, hoping to stoke the fires of emotion high enough to trigger her to enact her extraordinary magic in her presence so that she can drain it like she did in Salem. Similarly, as instigators of the 1692 witch trials, preteens Abigail Williams and Betty Parrish discovered how powerful their testimony could be, enabling three adult women to be charged with witchcraft. As dramatized by Arthur Miller, Abigail's enthusiasm seems particularly excessive (that is, fanatical) when pointing the finger at Tituba. Indeed, "Abigail is pure evil, far more in control of the drama than any of the court's magistrates are, and yet she asserts her innocence and establishes her authority . . . by relying on her whiteness, pointing her finger at the only black stranger in Salem Village."³⁹ Miller's play has dubious reliability as a source of witch history, yet his deployment of Salem as a metaphor for the Red Scare exemplifies the ties that the phrase "witch-hunt" retains in American politics. Although Miller may not have believed in witchcraft, he clearly understood the utility of witch representation: Abigail's actions align with tropes of the evil witch insofar as she inflicts pain on others, through dishonesty. Like Agatha, Abigail pulls the strings, asserting control from the sidelines "to make it seem as though Tituba is in control, when it is clear that she has [had] all the power" all along.⁴⁰ Unlike Abigail's power over Tituba, however, Agatha does not have the power of whiteness in contrast

³⁷ Of the twenty people executed for witchcraft in Salem, nineteen were hanged and one was pressed to death.

³⁸ The way that Harkness's history in Salem was depicted in *WandaVision* differed from how this story is told in the comic books. For more about these differences, see Shawn S. Lealos, "WandaVision: How Agatha Harkness' MCU Origin Compares to the Comics," *Comic Book Resources* (CBR.com), February 27, 2021, available at <https://www.cbr.com/wandavision-agatha-harkness-mcu-origin/>.

³⁹ D. Quentin Miller, "The Signifying Poppet: Unseen Voodoo and Arthur Miller's Tituba," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 43, no. 4 (2007): 451.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

to Wanda; instead, any manipulation she enacts within the Hex relies entirely upon Wanda's lack of self-knowledge and full control of her magic.⁴¹

And this recognition that Wanda is not fully in control of her magic is crucial to the prevailing critiques and interpretations of her following the series finale. For those who claim she is in league with the worst among us (as a slave master), the ends do not justify the means. For those who focus instead on how the series dramatizes the stages of grief, however, intention and remorse are among the most important aspects of the story.

It's [Not] That Kind of Show

The series first showcases the extraordinary power of Wanda's anger (a vital stage of grief), in episode 3 ("Now in Color"). Crucially, this moment pits her against Geraldine (played by Teyonah Parris), one of the only Black residents of Westview, after she has helped Wanda give birth to her twins.⁴² Later in the episode, we learn that Geraldine is actually Monica Rambeau, initially introduced in the MCU as Maria's child in *Captain Marvel* (2019). Following in her mother's footsteps, Monica works for SWORD, now led by Tyler Hayward, Maria's successor. At the moment Thanos snapped his fingers, we learn, Monica was at her mother's bedside in the hospital, where she was gravely ill. Like Wanda, Monica was among those who disappeared, reappearing in the hospital only to discover that among the dizzying array of changes that occurred during the blip, her mother is dead. While viewers yearned for more details about Monica's state of mind as a survivor of the snap, the series offers few clues to satisfy our curiosity; in fact, after Monica muscles her way back into the Hex hoping to warn Wanda of Hayward's plans to kill her, Wanda expels her again, and Agnes (Agatha) swoops in to comfort Wanda, leaving Monica behind, sitting on the sidewalk outside of Wanda's house.

As critics have noted, "the way Monica just kind of disappears [in the storyline] after Agnes casually told her to run off while consoling a distraught Wanda makes it feel as if things were left on the cutting room floor."⁴³ This temporary disappearance allows for the conflict between Agatha (Agnes) and Wanda to percolate and boil over into their final battle scene, but it does so in a way all-too-familiar for American audiences: at the expense of expanding a primary character who represents the global majority. While Monica's future as a character in the MCU holds promise for future development, in this series her role was to support and protect Wanda, akin to the "Black Best Friend"

⁴¹ It is worth noting that within the Marvel comics canon, Wanda Maximoff was thought to have a Jewish father (Magnet) as well as a mother with Romani heritage, a factor that complicates her whiteness. However, thus far, the MCU has not referenced this part of her history, instead offering a retcon in which she and Pietro are from Sokovia, a fictional Eastern European country attacked by HYDRA, a Nazi-adjacent terrorist organization. See Emily Burack, "Is Wanda Jewish in 'WandaVision?'" *Alma.com*, February 16, 2021, available at <https://www.heyalma.com/is-wanda-jewish-in-wandavision/>.

⁴² The twins, like Vision, are conjured into existence for the series; indeed, Wanda's pregnancy is a surprise to Vision and her, given his status as (an imagined) mechanoid without reproductive equipment.

⁴³ Pulliam-Moore, "Monica Rambeau was *WandaVision's* Real Hero." On a podcast, the head writer for *WandaVision*, Jac Schaeffer, revealed that Monica "had a therapist in the [SWORD] base, the pop-up base," but this part of the story "was dropped due to time constraints"; see Sandy Schaeffer, "WandaVision Creator Reveals Major Monica Rambeau Cut Scenes," *Comic Book Resources (CBR.com)*, May 14, 2021, available at <https://www.cbr.com/wandavision-cut-scenes-monica-rambeau-therapist/>.

stereotype.⁴⁴ This tendency to undervalue the contributions of pivotal Black women in stories about witchcraft has historical precedent in Salem also: in Wikipedia, Tituba is said to have been released from jail after Samuel Parris (her slave master) paid her bail.⁴⁵ But this is not true. To the contrary, refusing to apologize for his roles in the trials, “[to] dispose of his reluctant witch, Parris simply refused to pay her jail fees. . . . An as-yet unidentified person paid those fees and took her away in April 1693. Her fate after that date is unknown. Tituba disappears from the public record.”⁴⁶ As historian Elaine Breslaw argues, “Tituba’s punishment for her benevolent act in protecting young Betty Parris was far worse than she could have predicted,” given the miserable state of her confinement and the social stigma she took on resulting from her forced (and sacrificial) confession.⁴⁷ There are echoes of this troubling piece of Salem history in *WandaVision* that emerge when Monica and Wanda reunite.

In the midst of the showdown between Agatha and Wanda, *SWORD* director Tyler Hayward enters the Hex in an armored Humvee, exits the vehicle with his gun drawn, and aims it at Wanda’s twin boys. Monica sees this and shouts “no, stand down!” to Hayward, but he pulls the trigger and Monica stands in front of the twins, arms outstretched, to shield them from the bullets (fig. 4). She absorbs all but one of the bullets using her newly discovered superpowers, and one of the twins (Billy) uses his own emerging magic powers to stop the final bullet. While this kind of act is certainly heroic, as critic Charles Pulliam-Moore acknowledges, it also resonates differently in 2021, especially in the United States: “when stories choose to center images of Black characters being shot at—especially by white authority figures—that story’s creators are tapping into a very specific set of ideas and hard truths about how Black people are brutalized both in real life and the fiction attempting to reflect it.”⁴⁸ For Black American viewers, watching this moment of sacrifice-turned-heroic-act ignites what Dorrine Kondo calls an “affective violence,”⁴⁹ especially given the words that Monica speaks at the moment of crisis: “stand down.” This phrase is used to command a temporary ceasefire, typically given to halt offense with the understanding that the conflict is not yet over. Memorably, an inverse of it was uttered by the former president during the live debate with Joe Biden, leading up to the contentious 2020 election, as a message

⁴⁴ Monica Rambeau will be a lead character in the forthcoming MCU film, *The Marvels* (previously titled *Captain Marvel 2*), expected to be released in November 2022.

⁴⁵ In the Wikipedia entry for Abigail Williams (as of July 30, 2021), it states: “Members of the Parris household all managed to survive the entire episode including Tituba, who was released from jail a year later, when the slaveowner Parris paid her prison fees and sold her.” The footnote on the page cites Alison Games’s *Witchcraft in Early North America* (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 176. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abigail_Williams. That said, the entry for Tituba on the same site acknowledges that she “was sold to an unknown person for the price of her jail fees,” citing an entry, “Tituba: The Slave of Salem,” from the *History of Massachusetts* blog, available at <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/tituba-the-slave-of-salem/>.

⁴⁶ Breslaw, *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem*, 175.

⁴⁷ Ibid. The fact that Tituba’s story remains cloaked in mystery has itself spurred fan-based intervention, however. For example, Nicole Brooks created *Obeah Opera*, an impressive a cappella musical that imagines Tituba in her years before arriving in Salem, performed by an all-female cast (see *Obeah Opera*, available at <http://obeahopera.com>). Maryese Condé’s novel *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* also offers a retelling of Tituba’s life, spanning from pre- to post-Salem years (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

⁴⁸ Pulliam-Moore, “Monica Rambeau was *WandaVision*’s Real Hero.”

⁴⁹ Dorrine Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 37.



Figure 4. Monica (Teyonah Parris) shields Billy and Tommy from bullets in Episode 9, “The Series Finale.” (Source: Courtesy of Marvel Studios, © 2021.)

to the white supremacist group Proud Boys (“stand back and stand by”). Members of this fringe-right group, along with several others of its ilk, were instrumental to the planning and execution of the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6th, during which several racial epithets were heard by officers who defended the congresspersons gathered there to certify the election.

For spectators who felt the pangs of psychic violence wrought by these moments with Monica, then, it was particularly difficult to witness the way that her character became the sole voice of forgiveness and understanding for Wanda’s grief-stricken actions. The final exchange between Wanda and Monica, after the Hex has dissolved and before Wanda leaves Westview, suggests that audiences are meant to sympathize with Wanda. Monica says, “they’ll never know what you sacrificed for them,” referring to the residents under Wanda’s mind control. “It won’t change how they see me,” Wanda says in response—a reply that has been parsed by fans who ask why she chose not to take responsibility for her actions rather than recognize how she is perceived. While salvaging one’s reputation hardly justifies mind control or slavery, it has in fact been the reason given for accusations of witchcraft. Having embraced her destiny as the Scarlet Witch, Wanda takes on a moniker (Scarlet) that itself has literary links to shame, when worn by women.⁵⁰ In this way, Wanda’s final words to Monica before she flies away do signify her guilt, but also the danger that her powers create, both to the world and to herself.

However, because *WandaVision* also relies upon American typography of witchcraft and witches as feminist icons, it must also reckon with the longstanding blind spots that feminism and witchcraft perpetuate by undervaluing (or disregarding entirely) the role, labor, and power of minoritarian subjects. Insofar as “Wanda Maximoff became the embodiment of a particular kind of besieged white womanhood that’s achieved

⁵⁰ The first witch hanged in Salem was Bridget Bishop, whose primary crime was wearing the color red—a fact that was certainly known to Nathaniel Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Letter*), whose great-great-grandfather, John Hathorne, was the only judge from the witch trials who never expressed regret for his role, having served as chief examiner for the ordeal.

mythic status," she risks characterization as a "Scarlet Karen."⁵¹ For some critics, Wanda remains the villain. Yes, she eventually freed the Westview anomaly residents, but her pattern of behavior—enslaving a town full of people so that she might process her grief—recalls deep rifts in American culture between how we recognize emotional and physical pain for white women while underplaying or ignoring altogether that of the global majority.

In addition to the final exchange between Monica and Wanda examined above, another moment that viewers quoted and discussed at length was the one upon which the title of this essay plays. One of the flashbacks in episode 8 ("Previously On") features Wanda's sitting in her bedroom within the Avengers compound, watching an episode of *Malcolm in the Middle*. The Vision enters the space, walking through the wall rather than the door, and sits beside her. When he sees the father in the sitcom (Hal) fall off the roof and appear to hurt himself, he begins to worry, but Wanda assures him that the injuries are not serious: "It's not that kind of show," she explains. And yet, behind her reassurance, currents of sadness pulse through her (she has by this point lost both her parents and brother). In turn, Vision offers his own support to her: "It can't all be sorrow, can it? I've always been alone, so I don't feel the lack. It's all I've ever known. I've never experienced loss because I've never had a loved one to lose. But what is grief, if not love persevering?"

Rarely have eight words resonated quite so profoundly for a fictional television series with its audience. It was in that moment that the layers of palimpsest revealed themselves to viewers who, like Wanda, were watching a television show as a way to "wind down" from another day in the new normal wrought by all we have endured. Within the context of this episode it was even more uncanny to recognize ourselves, since the scene between Vision and Wanda was a memory that Agatha had conjured for Wanda to watch. Thus we watched Wanda and Agatha watch Wanda and Vision watch a sitcom, all of which was being surveilled by SWORD agents outside the Hex.

Indeed, as this examination has shown, Wanda's witchiness has a complex and multilayered depth of palimpsests to cite. The creators of *WandaVision* may have written a "love letter" to (white) American television history, but they have also cited centuries of witch history along the way. The golden-age lightness of the initial episodes—made all the more nostalgic in black and white with a live studio audience—conjures cultural memories of the MGM *Wizard of Oz*, alongside the other sitcoms they mimic, but (like in *Oz*) soon enough the scene shifts to full color. With *WandaVision* in color—arriving not coincidentally alongside the groovy styles and political upheavals of the US 1970s—the tone of the series shifts and the innocence we may have presumed is harder to square. Likewise, in my examples of the American witch character type, as we move further back in history, we see witches portrayed with more sinister or complicated motivations. From the fairy tale world of *Oz*, where good and bad witches are predetermined and virtually unquestioned, to the consequences wrought by viral fear and scapegoating that mark the trials of Salem, viewers of *WandaVision* are ultimately left with an image of the witch as a woman who has been wronged, and whose methods of responding to that grief are so powerful and require such sacrifice that critics cannot agree who the hero of the story is.

⁵¹ Pulliam-Moore, "Monica Rambeau was *WandaVision*'s Real Hero."

This gray area is familiar territory indeed for witches, who are liminal creatures after all. And such moral ambiguity has long been part of the MCU's appeal, sparking debate among fans for decades. For contemporary audiences who encountered *WandaVision* in early 2021, the timing was ideal for a story of this ilk: coming out of a year's worth of ever-changing news about a deadly virus in the midst of political turmoil that virtually triggered another civil war in the United States, Americans long to agree on who the villain or hero of our national story is, and to move through our collective grief so that we might process all that we have lost along the way. Like Wanda, we might prefer to escape the harsh truths "out there" by enjoying fictional antics that we know will be set right; we may even wish to learn that our own lives are "not that kind of show" that ends in tragedy.

As a series created to stoke the fires of fandom upon which the MCU thrives, moreover, *WandaVision* amplified other tropes of fan(atic) behavior apparent both within and external to its multiverse. For every incorrect fan theory that emerged during *WandaVision*'s sequential release schedule, there were proponents who mourned it when it did not come to pass. Some of these fans became so frustrated about incorrect predictions that they all but accused *WandaVision*'s creators of willfully misdirecting them, as if they were offering false flags. At the heart of fan theories like these is the addictive quest for Easter eggs hidden within digital media such as videogames, films, and television series.⁵² This proclivity to search for occult messaging was also a motivating force behind the insurrectionists whose fanatical belief about election fraud continues to fuel the Big Lie. In their unshakable devotion to finding *the there that is not there*—a drive to consider the very absence of evidence as evidence itself—the fans of both the MCU and MAGA are surprising bedfellows of witch-hunters and witches, as well as of performance itself.⁵³

Beyond these parallels, however, there remains an appeal to *WandaVision* that is less about our contemporary moment: in its celebration of citation and potpourri of palimpsestuous pleasures, the series casts a spell on audiences that is potent indeed. By heightening the reflexivity of adaptation through calling upon a world of characters and stories that also rely upon adaptation, both in terms of content and medium (citing both cinema and comics), the MCU emerges as an ideal medium for exploring the witchy ways of Wanda. Ultimately, as the series demonstrates, Wanda is nothing if not haunted by the spirits of all the witches that came before her, persevering.

⁵² For more about Easter eggs and their origins in videogame software, see Jack Yarwood, "Easter Eggs: The Hidden Secrets of Videogames," *Paste Magazine*, March 27, 2016, available at <https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/easter-eggs-the-hidden-secrets-of-videogames/>.

⁵³ As Abigail De Kosnik notes, fandom often works to preserve archives that "constitute attempts to prove to the future that particular queer and female ways of being and making existed," a reminder that fans are often minoritarian subjects themselves. See her *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 17.