TikTok Cultures in the United States

Edited by
Trevor Boffone

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8 Hocus-Pocus

WitchTok Education for Baby Witches

Jane Barnette

Can magical spells be taught through the medium of video? If WitchTok is any indication, millions of users believe they can learn witchcraft through TikTok, a realization that dawned on the wider public after reports circulated in July 2020 that "baby witches" wanted to hex the moon. Aside from the fact that cursing an entire natural satellite is absurd, within most witch belief systems, it would also be extremely dangerous. Responses to poorly planned or executed magical attempts like these quickly followed, with more experienced witches offering advice as well as warnings to assert community norms, all under the hashtag #WitchTok.

A year later, there are numerous subcultures within WitchTok, ranging from BabyWitchTok to CrystalTok to BlackWitchTok, allowing users to curate their viewing and posting even further, while highlighting the variety of methods for practicing witchcraft. While several posts include "witch" in their hashtag with the goal of undermining or spoofing witchy behavior, at least as many appear to be made earnestly, by creators who already identify as witches.

That said, personal curation is designed to be increasingly satisfying the more users interact with TikTok: the app defaults to their "For You Page" (FYP), based on their proprietary algorithm, which is part of its "addictive" appeal.[1] They find themselves transfixed, scrolling through the default FYP, a distraction that was especially welcome during quarantine or lockdown due to the pandemic. The fact that the rationale behind the FYP curation is unknown to users—we don't know why the app suggests the videos it does, although we can determine (much of) the data it uses to determine the curation—means that the user experience of the app mirrors that of witchcraft, in that it's occult (hidden). The portmanteau for this phenomenon—technomancy—is itself a subculture of occult interest. Related to other forms of divination and occult practice (cartomancy, necromancy), technomancy

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refers to the magical use of technology, whether to achieve a particular goal (that is, using technology to cast a spell or perform apparently supernatural acts) or to create a digital interface that is so unexpected and intense as an experience for users that the technology behind the effects is considered to be magic.[2]

Before the internet, knowledge about witchcraft was shared either in person or via specialized research, but since its early days, the internet has offered the tantalizing promise of finding and revealing secret knowledge. Not surprisingly, as public interest in witchcraft has skyrocketed in the twenty-first century, retailers and professional practitioners (who teach classes or offer readings, for example) have embraced the internet for making witchy products and services more widely available to the average American consumer.[3] On Instagram especially, accounts with witchy aesthetics attract followers who are also consumers of the products that either the creators themselves sell or are suggested and featured by these creators, some of whom are influencers. On Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube, most witch-related content is informational or instructive, although many YouTubers will monetize their videos and provide affiliate (commission-earning) links in the description box. While several WitchTok creators also offer occult services, generally speaking, the purpose of the witch subculture on this platform is both aesthetic and educational—a digital update to the oral tradition of sharing knowledge about witchcraft. Like other queer subcultures with which it frequently overlaps, WitchTok contributes to identity formation, allowing users to perform (and try on) their witchy selves.[4]

As "a cultural force that defines Gen Z," with half of TikTok's viewership estimated to be in their mid-twenties or younger, it is not surprising that self-identified "baby witches" are the primary audience for the educational videos found on WitchTok.[5] Several of these lessons mirror cooking video lessons by sharing recipes while demonstrating methods for casting spells, but the call-and-response format of TikTok and its citational critique options also provide opportunities for purportedly more experienced witches to dispel or challenge rumors and myths about witchcraft. These last two categories of video—the stitch/duet option that has been described as a kind of call-and-response conversation, and the citational critique format, in which creators re-contextualize lyrics or memes as a means of performed analysis—both fall into the category of adaptation dramaturgy, or *adapturgy*.[6] A vital part of collaborating to make theater, dramaturgy is the art of listening and asking questions about all stages of performance, from inception to reception by audiences.[7] As a dramaturg who specializes

in adaptation, I appreciate WitchTok videos that foreground processes of adaptation: the call-and-response and the citational critique. In both cases, creators are taking a digital artifact (a meme, another TikTok video, or a screen shot, for example) and adapting it based on research (of a wide and frustratingly opaque variety, most of it based in personal experience or popular culture), before offering it to the public as a new performance. Thus, although all of TikTok's offerings can be seen as performance adaptations, with varying levels of visible dramaturgy undergirding them, the duets/stitches and citational critiques are most transparently adaptations. As such, the tools of adapturgy can be used to unpack and better understand the subculture of these types of WitchTok videos, led by the guiding dramaturgical question for theatrical adaptations: *Why this lesson as WitchTok now*?[8] In what follows, I briefly outline the scope of these call-and-response and citational critique educational offerings within the WitchTok subculture, with this question guiding my review.

Magic Mirror

From its origins as a means of "remixing and repurposing music," TikTok has accumulated a staggering array of posts that continue to remix, often without a focus on music or dance.[9] Duets and stitches encourage "creators to capitalize on a sound's success to gain views while also providing opportunity for alternative interpretation," by featuring the post they remix either side-by-side with the creator's commentary (duets) or allowing them to insert snippets interspersed with their response (stitches).[10] On my FYP in August 2021 for example, many duets/stitches mirrored contentious and life-threatening debates in the wider American culture about the COVID-19 vaccine, masking mandates, and their efficacy or perceived danger. Because many of these are made by scientists, medical professionals, or other credentialed creators, responding to calls or posts made by largely non-credentialed creators, the responses are based in facts that can be verified like most other public claims. Within the WitchTok community, however, the basis for legitimacy is more slippery, especially when the calls and/or responses originate from a previously unknown account. Because there is no singular path for witchcraft (much less a universally shared text), specious-sounding claims may in fact have value when seen through the lens of a different system. More problematic still is the fact that by definition occult knowledge is meant to be hidden and that many (but not all) witches' rituals are part of a closed practice.

The recognition of closed practices itself has become a trend within WitchTok duets and stitches, typically featuring a response that calls out creators whose posts reveal their ignorance about cultural appropriation. White baby witches are reprimanded for appropriating aspects of Voodoo, Hoodoo, Brujería, or indigenous magic, as one might expect, since these practices involve not only initiation and apprenticeship, but carry culturally specific histories of calling upon supernatural forces as part of their larger resistance to white supremacy and colonizing violence. What is perhaps less expected is the debate over who should have access to witchcraft linked to faery magic and the use of tarot cards. These last two examples—the fae and tarot reading—are extremely popular within WitchTok, but apparently attempts have been made by white users of the platform to suggest that faeries only work with witches who have Celtic or Welsh ancestry, and that only those of Roma descent can practice divination using the tarot. But neither claim holds water, a point that WitchTok has taken up using the dialogue function of duets and stitches—one user who claims to be a "fairy folklorist," named Druid Emo Boy (@dust_hallow), for example, addressed these claims in a December 2020 post. While not a traditional duet or stitch, @dust_hallow begins his video by impersonating those who believe "the fae/good neighbors only exist on celtic lands you can't work with them in america [*sic*]," by teaching viewers that fairies (especially the Sídhe) are believed to be seafaring beings (with possible origins in what we now call India) who should never be considered landlocked.[11] Another user from Ireland (Teagan) notes the hypocrisy with which the primarily white viewership of TikTok treated the notion of closed practice, depending on who was gatekeeping whom. In her March 2021 post, @anirishpagan asks "Why were we [Celtic pagans] treated with reverence (for 'protecting' our culture) and why are POC practitioners still treated like dirt for wanting to do the exact same thing?"[12]

Questions about cultural appropriation for tarot card use are more complex, however. In March 2021, Esme (@weatherwax_80) stitched the claim (made by @skankx) that tarot is closed and that the cards are not for divination but "a way for Romani to connect with their ancestors," responding that, while Esme (who is Romani) understands the "well intentioned" attempt to guard tarot, "this is not the advocacy you think it is." Other commenters on @skankx's original claim pointed out the influence of the Kabbalah on tarot decks, going so far as to suggest that the claim was "really antisemitic."[13] While these snapshots of the debate hardly capture the breadth of conversation about practices being closed or open, they do highlight the racial and

ethnic dimensions of TikTok's proprietary algorithm, by demonstrating the frequency of questionable gatekeeping by white creators on the platform compared to legitimate critiques made by creators from the global majority about white practitioners who co-opt closed practices.

While the open/closed practice debates are ongoing, there is another trending use of WitchTok's call-and-response potential that does not use the duets or stitch option: conversations between self-identified witches and the deities with whom they claim to work. Many of these posts use a filter option to entirely whiten (or blacken) the creator's eyes for the responses from the deities they perform, but otherwise enact both themselves as witches and their deities in casual dress, looking otherwise the way they typically look on their profiles. One of the most popular creators within WitchTok, Frankie Anne (@chaoticwitchaunt), has several deity conversation posts using this filter. In one post, Frankie begins to shuffle a deck of tarot cards, followed by a jump cut to Frankie using the "white pupils" filter, with a caption stating that this is Freyja, who promptly claims the tarot deck as her own, instructing Frankie to place the deck on their altar to Freyja, specifying that Frankie should "put it under my nice big amber chunk."[14] Frankie enacts both themselves Freyja in this video, with both characters' speech spoken aloud as well as captioned. The fact that creators who thrive in this subculture of witch practice online would enact (what they consider to be) the deities they worship and follow is itself remarkable, but however unexpected it is to view (and perhaps *because* it is startling to see casual performances of gods), staging the self-as-deity occurs throughout WitchTok.

This preference for deities over the Wiccan practice of worshipping a duo of a god and goddess to represent the pantheon suggests just how influential WitchTok is to the witch-curious members of Gen Z.[15] In previous generations, and certainly for my own Gen X folks, searches for American witchcraft educational materials defaulted to Wiccan practice, with rare exceptions.

The familiarity and casualness with which WitchTokers stage conversations with gods can be charming but it can also be taken to extremes: in August 2021, as US forces began to withdraw from Afghanistan, rumors spread about a group of Reddit-based witches attempting to bind or otherwise quell the Taliban's power. The notion that witches would conjure for political gain is itself not remarkable, but because some of these witches claimed to confront Allah directly, the anti-Taliban Redditors went viral. "You can't hex god—the fuck?!" was a typical response among experienced witches on several platforms, many of whom questioned whether the entire event was meant

as a publicity stunt or elaborate spoof.[16] While the Reddit group where this originated has now become an extended joke, the larger phenomenon of new-to-witchcraft practitioners perceiving themselves as capable of "slaying" or otherwise being equal to deities continues unabated.[17]

Dramaturgically speaking, these trends point to a general desire among young adults to feel powerful and capable of using witchcraft to solve problems their elders cannot or will not resolve. From global warming to the "endless wars" to racial injustice and misogyny, the problems of the twenty-first century appear insurmountable without divine intervention.[18] As "digital natives," Zoomers primarily find community and research online, a trait that became exacerbated during US lockdowns due to the pandemic.[19] Their curated online selves, documented through "selfies" they post, encourage young adults to become adepts at seeing themselves differently through various filters—for Gen Z, transforming oneself digitally is commonplace. In witch parlance, what a filter achieves digitally is called *glamour*, an enchantment or manifestation spell that is cast by witches to change how they are seen.[20] Is it any wonder that this generation would flock to the WitchTok subculture, given the ways that social media have encouraged Zoomers to ask themselves "who is the fairest of them all?"[21]

Witch, Please

The "selfie" is a cornerstone of social media, but the practice of sharing (spoken and musical) sound is part of TikTok's appeal: it can be social, like sharing a trending dance or "get to know you" questionnaire, but it can also function as critique, either obliquely or directly. Whereas the duet/stitch option relies upon integrating and answering another creator's post, either partially or fully, what distinguishes the citational critique is its recontextualization, explanation, or deconstruction of sound and image. In the context of WitchTok, this category of videos typically includes reorienting a mundane or profane trend from popular culture within a witch-relevant milieu. For example, a June 29, 2021 post by Lexi (@lightwands), "tarot cards as lyrics from bo burnham's inside [*sic*]" begins with a shot of the creator holding a fanned-out deck of Tarot with the card details facing the camera, behind the title. The video then moves to several overhead shots of individual cards, while Burnham's lyrics play, accompanied by modified captioning: the first shot is of The Devil card, with the caption "f*ck their wives drink their blood," while the audio of this line (uncensored) is heard. We then see

11 tarot cards matched with lyrics from corresponding songs in the same manner.[22]

The effect of this offering is compelling—first, it builds on knowledge that TikTok viewership would almost certainly have: *Inside*, the Netflix special made by Burnham alone in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and released in May 2021 to widespread acclaim, especially among Zoomers. This one-man show resonated with audiences, as one of the first full-length performances to address the strange circumstances of 2020 with an unflinching vulnerability couched in dark comedy. Called a "musical fantasy about terrible realities" by NPR critic Linda Holmes, *Inside* "slam cuts between footage of [Burnham] sitting at a keyboard singing … and footage of himself in a near-catatonic state, as his hair and beard get longer and scragglier."[23] Given that the audience for TikTok itself grew exponentially during lockdowns imposed during 2020 due to the pandemic, the subject matter of *Inside* directly relates to the ennui felt by TikTok users and creators. Indeed, since its release, *Inside* sound bites have been frequently incorporated into the platform, establishing Burnham's lyrics and commentary within TikToker's lexicon.

Within the educational scope of WitchTok, relying upon *Inside* as a shared cultural reference allows creators to provide a mnemonic device for learning witchcraft. In the example cited above, Lexi (@lightwands) uses it as short-hand for Tarot card meanings—The Devil card, for example, signifies the "shadow side" of humanity, or "our internal struggles with external temptations, and the choices we have in the matter."[24] To link this card with a line from Burnham's "Bezos I" tracks for progressive-minded users who consider Jeff Bezos to exemplify the 1% of extremely wealthy Americans whose advantage over the working class grew exponentially during lockdown, as consumers relied upon Amazon for reliable delivery. The connection of The Sun card with the upbeat percussive lyrics from "Unpaid Intern" also tracks, as this "is a joyous card: good things are coming or have already arrived."[25] While the melody of "Unpaid Intern" suggests joy, the lyrics themselves stand in sharp contrast ("Barely people, somehow legal")—this irony is key to Burnham's appeal to Gen Z audiences, whose preference for bitter and self-deprecating humor was itself heightened during the isolation (and in many cases, return home from college) experienced in spring 2020 through summer 2021.

Comments made on Lexi's Burnham/Tarot citational critique affirm this familiarity and the effectiveness of the lesson: as @atarii_ states in the top comment, "this has taught me more than all of my guidebooks." Another user, @lunarlu adds, "I hate that this makes

sense," a comment that is liked and responded to by @lightwands herself: "honestly me too a little." Other commenters take the idea and run with it, suggesting (for example) that "I feel like 'well, well, look who's inside again' would've been a PERFECT opportunity for the hermit" (@hihijinks).[26] And, in true TikTok fashion, other creators take inspiration from Lexi, posting their own take on the concept, many of whom use Lexi's mix of Burnham's lyrics verbatim, connecting them with Tarot cards of their choice. Sometimes, they choose the same cards, but other times, they modify Lexi's curation—one creator (@bystephkirsten) took the advice offered by @hihijinks above, matching The Hermit card to the lyrics about being inside again from "Goodbye," rather than the Four of Swords that Lexi chose.[27] Another user (@rosebirdwitch), also citing Lexi and using her mash-up of Burnham's lyrics, assigned The Hermit card to "there it is again, that funny feeling" ("Welcome to the Internet").[28] The variety here is especially useful for those learning the Tarot, as it reinforces one of the most challenging aspects of the deck: the cards themselves may have canonical readings that students can learn from guidebooks, but in practical usage, the interpretation of any single card is never made in isolation. Like all divination methods, practitioners of Tarot are expected to read the cards in context. Depending on the situation, that context could be a question asked, or the role a particular card plays in relationship to other cards drawn (and when/how, based on the "spread," if multiple cards are pulled), but it also always relies on what the Tarot user's intuition or clairvoyance suggests.

TikTok encourages such heterogenous multiplicity throughout the platform, but within the WitchTok subculture, it is particularly significant that the method mirrors the content. When exploring witchcraft, baby witches usually conduct their research alone, through a combination of online resources and publications. Whether seekers are still "in the broom closet" or not, unless they have close friends or family members who identify as witches, within monotheistic cultures, there is likely an element of shame or a thrill of danger associated with their curiosity about witchcraft, making it more likely that they seek answers in solitude. With WitchTok, not only do they have a thriving online community of other baby (and elder) witches, but they are also constantly reminded that the "lack of dogmatism" central to occultism means that witches must always resist what William James (and Margot Adler) recognize as "contentment with the finite."[29] Far from finite, TikTok is notorious for its seemingly endless feed of videos offered on the default FYP, a feature that itself has been framed as a kind of magical spell to entrance users, allowing them to lose track of

time and distract themselves from their surroundings.[30] To return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay, then, it appears that spells can certainly be taught digitally, but by whom (or what)? And to what end?

The meta-magic of WitchTok has not gone unnoticed: as one creator (@aspiring_alchemist) noted, "the same way TikTok and YouTube and all these platforms have an algorithm that can detect the kind of content they think you'd like…, the universe has an algorithm for you as well, and it's pretty much the exact same thing."[31] He goes on to suggest that this larger, cosmic algorithm responds based on where we put our energies, but it is "indifferent to what it serves you." In the same vein as technomancy (or any other divination tool), though, he reassures viewers that we still have control over our destiny: we can "train the algorithm" by directing our attention and engagement (with digital media as well as face-to-face interactions) according to our true preferences.[32] And those preferences appear to skew toward learning about witchcraft for a significant portion of TikTok's users, with 22 billion views (as of this writing) for the WitchTok hashtag alone, many of which originate from self-identified baby witches. May they wield their power—in both the material and the metaphysical world—wisely.

Notes

1 Regarding the addictive nature of TikTok and the way usage curates the FYP, see Melissa Blanco Borelli and Madison Moore [*sic*], "TikTok, Friendship, and Sipping Tea, or How to Endure a Pandemic," *The International Journal of Screendance* 12 (2021), accessed September 17, 2021, https://screendancejournal.org/article/view/8238/6120.

2 Joshua Madara, "What Is Technomancy?" *Technomancy 101: Advanced Cybermagic for Beginners* (2018), accessed September 5, 2021, https://technomancy101.com/technomancy/.

3 As one example of how contemporary witches monetize their internet presence, Chaotic Witch Aunt has platforms on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as a website that sells "merch," referring not to material items in this case but to various interactive Tarot readings they offer, ranging from "3 card reading" (20 USD) to "Deity Identification Reading" (60 USD), accessed September 22, 2021, https://chaoticwitchaunt.com.

4 Luis Loya and Elaine Almeida, "Things that shouldn't have Gay Energy but Do Anyways: CTI, Remixes and TikTok Duets." *Flow*, September 29, 2020, accessed September 22, 2021 https://www.flowjournal.org/2020/09/cti-remixes-tiktok-duets/.

5 Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27.

6 Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017).

7 For more about the capacious art of dramaturgy, see Michael Mark Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010) and Magda Romanska, editor, *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (London: Routledge, 2015).
8 The question for theatrical adaptations is "Why This Source as Theatre Now?" See Barnette, *Adapturgy*: 36.
9 Ethan Bresnick, "Intensified Play: Cinematic Study of TikTok Mobile App," *ResearchGate*, April 2019, accessed September 22, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335570557_Intensified_Play_Cinematic_study_of_TikTok_mobile_app: 6.
10 Loya and Almeida, "Gay Energy."
11 @dust_hallow, December 7, 2020. TikTok.
12 @anirishpagan, "Either Keep the Energy for POC or Fuck Right Off," March 11, 2021. TikTok.
13 Comment by @continuousd3ath, March 11, 2021, on @skankx post of the same date. TikTok.
14 @chaoticwitchaunt, "Who Wants to See the Tarot Deck That Freyja Has Literally CLAIMED as Hers," March 17, 2021. TikTok.
15 "Wicca," March 23, 2018, *History.com*, accessed September 7, 2021, https://www.history.com/topics/religion/wicca. The popularity of deity worship can also be traced to other online communities like Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest.
16 @afro_spiritual, "Most Ridiculous Thing I've Heard since Hexing the fae or the moon…," August 20, 2021. TikTok.
17 This reference to "slaying" comes from one of the Reddit posts from the anti-Taliban hexing attempts, where the user's final sentence reads, "Allah is much stronger than I first imagined and we will have to do this together if we want to slay a god." From @dumbest_bitch, posted August 19, 2021 in "Bewitch the Taliban" on Reddit.
18 The term "endless war" has been used to describe several different conflicts, but in a US contemporary context, typically refers to the war on terrorism waged primarily in the Middle East. For more on this concept, see "Endless War: A Term with a History and Definition," *New America*, accessed September 7, 2021, https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/defining-endless-wars/endless-war-a-term-with-a-history-and-a-definition/.
19 Anthony Turner, "Generation Z: Technology and Social Interest," *The Journal of Individual Psychology* 71, no. 2 (2015):103–113, 104.
20 As Pam Grossman notes, "The words 'glamour' and 'grimoire' and 'grammar' all come from the same root, so you can really see this idea of creativity and magic being interlinked." Jenni Miller, "Meet Pam Grossman, the Terry Gross of Witches." *Vulture*, June 4, 2019, accessed September 7, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/pam-grossman-witch-interview.html.
21 The quotation from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) is often misremembered as "Mirror, mirror on the wall…" when in fact it begins, "Magic mirror on the wall." Janaki Jitchotvisut, "10 Popular Movie Quotes You've Probably Been Saying Wrong All Along," *Insider*, November 28, 2018, accessed September 7, 2021, https://www.insider.com/movie-quotes-youre-getting-wrong-2018-11.

22 @lightwands, "Tarot Cards as Lyrics from Bo Burnham's Inside," June 29, 2021. TikTok. These lyrics come from (in order of appearance) "Bezos I," "Shit," "Welcome to the Internet," "That Funny Feeling," "Content," "Content" (again), "Don't Wanna Know," "Sexting," "Unpaid Intern," "Bezos I," "Goodbye," and "All Time Low," all songs from Bo Burnham, *Inside (The Songs)*, Republic Records (June 2021).
23 Linda Holmes, "Bo Burnham's 'Inside' is a Musical Fantasy about Terrible Realities," *NPR*, June 4, 2021, accessed September 7, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2021/06/04/1002491153/bo-burnhams-inside-is-a-musical-fantasy-about-terrible-realities.
24 Rachel True, *True Heart Intuitive Tarot Guidebook* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2020), "The Devil," 117.
25 Ibid., "The Sun," 137.
26 @lightwands, comments on "Tarot Cards as Lyrics from Bo Burnham's Inside," June 29, 2021. TikTok.
27 @bystephkirsten, "The Tarot as Lyrics from Bo Burnham's 'Inside'," July 14, 2021. TikTok.
28 @rosebirdwitch, "Major Arcana Tarot Cards as Lyrics from Bo Burnham's Inside," June 30, 2021. TikTok.
29 Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America*, Completely Revised and Updated (New York: Penguin, 2006), 12.
30 The FYP has been called "one of the most addictive scrolling experiences on the Internet." Jing Zeng, Crystal Abidin, and Mike S. Schäfer, "Research Perspectives on TikTok and Its Legacy Apps," *International Journal of Communication* 15 (2021): 3161–3172, 3163.
31 @aspiring_alchemist, "THE UNIVERSE HAS AN ALGORITHM!!" September 1, 2021. TikTok.
32 Ibid.