

Somersaults in Time—Feminist Temporality and Doris Stauffer’s Witch Courses

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“We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn,” could be read on the banners and signs of the 2017 Women’s Marches; “we are the successors of the wise women, midwives and witches,” wrote Doris Stauffer in her notes on the witch course 40 years earlier.¹ Referring to the witch as a resistant and knowing yet equally oppressed and persecuted female figure is a recurring element in feminist debates. In *Caliban and the Witch* Silvia Federici explains that the witch is also a key figure for understanding the role of patriarchal oppression and the persecution of (resistant) women in the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe.

In her introduction to the book Federici writes: “Saving [this] historical memory is crucial if we are to find an alternative to capitalism. For this possibility will depend on our capacity to hear the voices of those who have walked similar paths.”² This concern is shared by feminist historiographies, which also encompass the research of feminist genealogies. In this context terms like *granddaughters* and *sisterhood* are often used as generational reference points that try to establish a non-biological, matrilinear connection amongst feminist and resistant women. The formulation of a bond across time and against biological and social rules underpins the attempt to develop solidarity and continuity and to counter the disappearance of feminist histories.

However, these self-descriptions and classifications are criticised from the feminist perspective as well. As Victoria Browne describes in *Feminism, Time and Nonlinear History*, the reference to mother-daughter relations or sisterhood not only advances tropes of equality but also those of the authoritarian mother or the indecent daughter, thereby creating intergenerational conflicts, which could also be defined as contentual “inter-feminist” conflicts.³ Likewise, Browne sees a problem in the narration of “feminist history” as a singular, progressive trajectory divided into waves or phases, as this understanding of historical time constrains the polytemporal histo-

1 Doris Stauffer, “Notizen zum Hexenkurs,” in *Doris Stauffer – A Monograph*, eds. Simone Koller and Mara Züst (Zurich: Scheidegger and Spiess, 2015), 135; quoted from: Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (eds.), *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1973).

2 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and The Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 10.

3 Victoria Browne, *Feminism, Time and Nonlinear History* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 122.

ries of feminism in a “hegemonic” model of time.⁴ Reversing the assumption that “being ‘in’ a homogenous historical time”⁵ would enable the sharing of time, Browne writes: “there would be no historical time without temporal relations, without the practice of sharing time, even indirectly, or diachronically, ‘through’ or ‘across’ time. [...] Instead, sharing time, or forging temporal connections, is what makes the idea of historical time itself possible.”⁶

She emphasises the importance of investigating feminist histories because, seen in this way, we construct a present solely in relation to the past and the future. This reference, this sharing, is neither innocent nor a choice. As Karen Barad formulates it: “To address the past (and future), to speak with ghosts, is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit (from the past and the future).”⁷ The slogan “We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn” can thus be read in connection with the responsibility we bear for “what was/is/to-come”.⁸ In this light, the inheritance is not to be understood as a generational one, and the granddaughters not as heirs in the sense of a matriarchal genealogy, rather as those who respond to their involvements and the “enfolded materialisations”—“we are the successors”.

“The witch courses are actually the essence of my nine years at school.”⁹

Between 1977 and 1980 Doris Stauffer organised so-called witch courses at the *F+F Schule für experimentelle Gestaltung* (F+F School for Experimental Design) and then at her *Frauenwerkstatt* (women’s workshop) in Zurich. “Witch is a good word. We like it because today it could mean: I am strong, I have courage, I have become disobedient and bold. What I do and what not is my decision!” she wrote in a 1979 article for *Emma*.¹⁰ Doris Stauffer’s courses were characterised by experimental explorations of role models, analysing the histories of women and witches, and developed from the idea that “the need for self-expression” underlies “all creative activity”.¹¹ But they explicitly were not “handicraft courses, coffee klatch, just feel good courses, yammer courses, self-awareness courses, therapy in the narrow sense, dance, body, music courses, theater courses, art technique, magic courses, etc.”¹² Exercises like the “fictional biographies” the participants wrote for each other should encourage them to question the writing of history and biographies in an artistic and experimental manner.



Hexenkurs, Thema „Gruppenaktionen“, Foto, Graphische Sammlung der Schweizerischen Nationalbibliothek (SNB), Archiv Doris Stauffer. Witch course, topic “group actions”, photo, Prints and Drawings Department of the Swiss National Library (SNB), Doris Stauffer Archive.

“If you turn around time, you can do somersaults in it.”¹³

As Doris Stauffer dealt with issues of temporality, narration, and historiography in her own practice, her archive is particularly well-suited for a discussion about feminist temporality. Departing from the artistic practice, feminist historicities can be further investigated by linking the histories of the witch hunt and feminist appropriations of the figure of the witch in the 1970s with the renewed interest in witchcraft in contemporary feminist and artistic movements. Such contextualisations, as Kate Eichhorn notes in *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, can manifest in a confrontation with the archive material and challenge own assumptions regarding feminist histories: “in my case, the archive offered a context in which to reinterpret my own generation’s history in relation to a much longer history of feminist thought and activism.”¹⁴ Eichhorn also formulates the possibility to create a connection “through and across time”, even from the perspective of feminist archive work itself: “Indeed, [...] it [the archive] may produce the conditions for dialogues between different generations of feminists and even the possibility for alliances that defy generational and temporal logics.”¹⁵ And precisely these alliances can take shape in activations of Doris Stauffer’s archive.



Hexenkurs, Thema „Hexenflug“, Foto, Graphische Sammlung der Schweizerischen Nationalbibliothek (SNB), Archiv Doris Stauffer. Witch course, topic “flying witch”, photo, Prints and Drawings Department of the Swiss National Library (SNB), Doris Stauffer Archive.

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4 Ibid., 25.

5 Ibid., 40.

6 Ibid.

7 Karen Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” *Derrida Today* 32 (2010): 264.

8 Ibid. “The trace of all reconfigurings are written into the enfolded materialisations of what was/is/to-come.”

9 Doris Stauffer in an interview with Chantal Küng, Feb. 21, 2017.

10 “Zurich Witch Courses”: Doris Stauffer, “Züricher Hexenkurse,” *Emma* 6 (June 1979): 25.

11 Simone Koller and Mara Züst (eds.), *Doris Stauffer – A Monograph* (Zurich: Scheidegger and Spiess, 2015), 122.

12 Ibid.

13 Quote from a letter by Doris Stauffer, 1968. Prints and Drawings Department of the Swiss National Library (SNB), Doris Stauffer Archive.

14 Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism. Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 79.

15 Ibid.