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Performing the Salem Witch Trials:

firstness, secondness, and thirdness

in touristic experiences of history

Paul Molamphy
Department of Anthropology
Reed College
Portland, OR 97202

Abstract

This paper approaches the long-embattled notion of 'authenticity' in the study of tourism through a deployment of Peircean semiotic analysis to tourist attractions in Salem, Massachusetts. After presenting a sketch of different approaches to authenticity that have persisted in the anthropological study of tourism, the paper lays out the necessary sociohistorical context for understanding the development of Salem's bustling tourist industry. It then presents the semiotic tools that will be deployed in analyzing the presentations and performances of the selected Salem tourist sites: namely, the distinction between Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness proposed by C.S. Peirce and the semiotic creation of space and time captured by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope. The paper shifts to a close semiotic analysis of three tourist destinations, each of which embodies a different type of signification in its portrayal of the Trials. Ultimately, this diversity in approaches to generating touristic authenticity demands that anthropologists of tourism pay more heed to the creative aspects of constructing authenticity, rather than evaluating attempts at authenticity by how closely a performance resembles an underlying 'true' culture.

Keywords   tourism, authenticity, chronotopes, museum studies, Salem Witchcraft Trials

As throngs of visitors step off the commuter rail station in Salem, Massachusetts each October, their senses are bombarded by attention-grabbing signs, street vendors, and storefront

ushers who are all vying for as many passing tourist dollars as possible. Many of these tourists have been drawn to Salem for one reason: the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. From store windows to billboards, insignias on cop cars to tourists dressed in pointy hats and green makeup, witches swarm every corner of Salem in the lead-up to Halloween. Despite attempts by Salem's tourist board to emphasize the city's rich nautical and mercantile history (DeRosa 2009, 155–56), it is the town's connection to the Salem Witch Trials, during which nineteen people were hanged after being accused of practicing witchcraft, that still serves as the primary draw for tourists. Tourists arriving in Salem encounter a vast array of museums, shops, live performances, and historical markers that provide varied and occasionally conflicting narratives of the Trials and their significance. The historical event that they are hoping to engage with is being retold in myriad ways, often through staged performances that dramatize the events — performances that encapsulate performance theorist Richard Schechner's definition of history as "not what happened… but what is encoded and performed" (Schechner 2017, 5). Competing to corner their share of the tourist market and differentiate themselves from their competitors, the Witch Trial museums of Salem each encode and perform the same historical event to lay claim to some form of historical authenticity.

The notion of 'authenticity' has a long and contested history in the study of tourism. In seminal tourism theorist Dean MacCannell's formulation, most western tourists are generally searching for some form of 'authentic' culture when they arrive at their destinations. MacCannell's analysis focuses on western tourists in non-western contexts, who, as supposedly "modern" subjects concerned with the shallow nature of their everyday lives, visit these exotic locales to gain some form of 'authentic' cultural experience. This authenticity is generated by movement between 'back' and 'front' regions, a notion that MacCannell derived from Erving Goffman. Goffman defined the "front region" as "the place where the performance is given," dominated by rules of decorum. The "back region," on the other hand, is "where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted" (Goffman 1959, 107–12). His classic example of the front / back dichotomy is in the restaurant: The dining area is the 'front' area set up for guests to eat their food, and the kitchen is the 'back' area in which food is prepared and staff are able to relax and even let down their guard away from the prying eyes of guests. MacCannell mobilizes the notion of 'front' and 'back' to explain what the tourist is looking for in their quest for authenticity. He argues that the tourist understands the typical cultural performance as an inauthentic 'front.' Rather than settling for the performances of culture that they encounter at typical tourist attractions, the astute tourist will search for 'back' areas, where they find moments of 'authentic' culture. This desire for authenticity is not universal among tourists, but for some, especially the discerning tourist, authenticity is a prime motivator (MacCannell 1973).

While this notion of authenticity is useful as a framework to understand the desires of tourists, tourism as it is practiced in Salem revolves around several competing accounts of authenticity. Rather than all striving to represent the same singular authentic version of the Salem Witch Trials, museums and stores present competing versions of the authentic history of the trials to their tourist customers. This model of authenticity better fits with Erik Cohen's interpretation of touristic authenticity as that which is both negotiated by various different actors and emerges through processes of encoding and performance (Cohen 2004). Since the 'back area' that tourists are hoping to find in Salem took place over four centuries ago, Salem Witch Trials attractions are left

to creatively generate their own forms of historical authenticity. Based on fieldwork done in downtown Salem during the 2019 Halloween season, I argue that three of the most prominent Salem Witch Trials attractions each deploy a different semiotic framework of Peircean Firstness, Secondness, or Thirdness (Peirce 1894) in their mobilizations of the same historical event, generating their own negotiated forms of historical authenticity as each attempts to corner the lucrative Salem tourist market.

While each of these attractions reconstructs Salem's history in its own way, they all draw from a shared set of basic facts about Salem's past. Salem was settled in 1626. It soon grew to be a thriving seaport, allowing many residents to build considerable fortunes. The Witch Trials of 1692 began in January, when two girls, the daughter and the niece of Salem Village's minister, began to experience unexplained fits of hysteria. Witchcraft and witch-hysteria were frequent phenomena in 17th-century colonial America, and the two girls' symptoms soon spread to other young women in the community, leading to a witch craze that ended with hundreds of local residents being accused of practicing witchcraft (Ray 2015). By the time this witch craze wore off, nineteen people had been hanged and one had been pressed to death with stones.

After the Trials concluded, Salem remained an important seaport and launching-off point for the U.S. navy ("Salem, MA Military History" 2018). Wealth continued to flow into the city through maritime trade, and interest in the history of the Trials was mostly limited to local historians until the mid 19th-century, when Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 and *The House of the Seven Gables* in 1851, both of which discussed witchcraft and Salem. These two books brought the Salem Witch Trials to the attention of the broader U.S. public. After the 1850s, tourism in Salem grew consistently (with a small dip during the 1930s and 40s due to the Great Depression and World War II). Interest in the Trials was propelled further by the historical episode's bicentennial in 1892 and the publication of *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller in 1953. But tourism really exploded in the 1970s, due to two main factors: one, a broader interest in witchcraft in the U.S., thanks to the popularity of movies with occult themes alongside the widespread distribution of Parker Brothers' newly trademarked Ouija board; and two, the arrival of paranormal television shows and movies set in Salem (with the television show *Bewitched*'s 1970 "Salem Saga" episodes having an especially large impact) (Gencarella 2007, 273–79). The tourist influx that followed led to the opening of two of the attractions examined in this article — the Salem Witch Museum and Salem Witch Dungeon — both of which continue to draw in large crowds today. With hordes of witch-hungry tourists pouring into the city by car, train, and ferry each October, tourist attractions had to fight tooth-and-nail for tourists' attention and money.

This dramatic uptick in tourist visitors since the 1970s has not been welcomed by all the residents of Salem. Local historians, who were once the only people interested in the Trials, quickly began to fight against Salem's sole reputation as the location of the Witch Trials. They frequently chose instead to emphasize Salem's role in the U.S. Revolution, its status as a major shipping port in the 18th- and 19th-centuries, and the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne as the important aspects of the city's long history. Salem's guidebooks have often been a battleground for questions about what is most historically relevant. These publications have acted as an overview of the city for tourists since the 1880s, and as interest in the Trials has increased over time, the Trials have occupied more and

more space in these books. Since 1982, seasonal "Visitor's Guides" have been shaped around the theme "Salem: Haunted Happenings," with an almost complete focus on the Trials and various Trials-related tourist attractions (Gencarella 2007).

One key difference between Salem as a tourist site and the tourist sites commonly described by anthropologists of tourism like MacCannell and Cohen is that most tourists who come to Salem are looking for a cultural experience of an event that has already happened. The tourist industry of Salem attends to this desire by supporting "a dynamic system in which 'facts' are created by the interaction between site, viewer, and a nebulous character called 'the past'" (DeRosa 2009, 153). In retelling and recontextualizing the past, each tourist attraction must construct its own chronotope. Mikhail Bakhtin developed the concept of the chronotope while examining literary genres, using the term to explain how texts "create temporal and spatial motifs within themselves that permit differing kinds of subjectivities to be conveyed" (Wirtz 2014, 18). Salem Witch Trials attractions construct their chronotopes in various ways, including in the use of figurines, live performances, and the presentation of historical artifacts.

These different methods of historical retelling can be understood through Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite notion of semiotic logic. Peirce's system of logic has three 'levels': Firstness, which is associated with the 'feeling' state of mind and signs that appear like what they signify (icons), Secondness, associated with 'reaction' and signs that point towards what they signify (indeces), and Thirdness, associated with 'reasoning' and signs that have come to be associated with what they represent through custom (symbols) (Peirce 1894). In their representations of the Trials, every attraction in Salem draws on at least one of these kinds of signs, often combining multiple kinds. However, three attractions in particular serve as compelling examples of the differing subjective relationships to the past — chronotopes — that can be constructed through these three kinds of signs. The Witch House, a museum set within a historic house down the road from Salem's bustling main street, presents the past as a set of artifacts accompanied by a sensory experience of 1600s Salem, deploying a chronotopic mode of 'Firstness' that evokes visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory encounters similar to the actual historical time and place. At the Witch Dungeon, on the other hand, actors take the stage and assume the roles of two participants in the Trials, acting out lines of dialogue that were recorded during the judicial proceedings in an example of chronotopic 'Secondness' that deftly applies indices to pull the audience into the action. The Witch Museum again takes a different approach, moralizing the trials and abstracting them through the mode of 'Thirdness' into a lesson that visitors can learn from. Each museum's chronotope generates a different relationship between the audience and the past, and each results in a different type of claim to historical authenticity.

Throughout Salem's recent history, the Witch Museum has been at the forefront of the tourism boom, pushing the city and its tourism board to emphasize witches as Salem's main attraction. The Witch Museum's efforts paid off: Sporting a bold gothic exterior and a line that sometimes warps around the block, it is now the most visited museum in Salem ("Salem Witch Museum" n.d.). The museum is divided into two parts. When visitors enter, they first sit in the center of a large, darkened room as a voiceover retells the events of the Salem Witch Trials. Above the seating area, surrounding the audience, are twelve scenes of the Trials featuring life-sized

figurines. Each scene lights up in turn as the voiceover proceeds through the story of the Trials. The presentation dramatizes the Trials, but it also moralizes them. It begins with the figure of Satan himself, to whom the Puritans attributed the witchcraft they found in their community. Next, in conveying the origins of the trials, a voiceover describes how Doctor Griggs attributed the erratic behaviors of the minister's niece and child to witchcraft. Rebecca Nurse, the first victim of the Trials introduced in the presentation, is depicted as a pious, helpless old woman — the narrator calls her trial "farcical," full of "fear and slander." John Proctor, another person who died in the Trials, is hailed as a martyr for reason and justice. Those sentenced to death in the Trials are depicted as innocent victims, while those who sentenced them are irrational religious fanatics under the sway of witch hysteria. After the audience witnesses the end of the Trials, the presentation turns back to the figure of Satan that began the presentation, asking "Who is the devil? On whose side was he fighting? On whose side is he fighting now?" In the final scene, Ann Putnam, one of the original witchcraft accusers, repents for what she has done.

The chronotope of this section of the Witch Museum is one that removes the audience from the past, rather than immersing them within it. Sitting in a darkened auditorium, the audience looks up and around at dioramas that are physically separated from them by height. The third-person narrator acts as an omniscient storyteller. There is no attempt to bring the audience into the time and space of the Trials; rather, the Trials are kept spatially and temporally distant from the audience, who are no more than outside spectators to the accusations and hangings happening around them. This has the effect of turning the Trials into a visual and auditory narrative.

The second section of the museum uses the Salem Witch Trials as a means to understand other moments of persecution and paranoia in U.S. history. A large mural spells out the formula: "Fear + trigger = scapegoat." The premise is that the events of the Witch Trials are emblematic of a familiar pattern of social persecution, in which a common fear, like "God/Devil," combined with a triggering event or person, like "Dr. Griggs," leads to the creation of a scapegoat. In Salem's case, that scapegoat was "150 accused townspeople." The concept of a witch-hunt is then applied to Japanese Internment, the Red Scare, and the HIV/AIDS Crisis, each of which is fitted into the fear + trigger = scapegoat formula.

The combination of the distant chronotopic register of the first half of the Witch Museum with the creation of a witch-hunt formula in the second section leads the visitor to remove the Salem Witch Trials from the specific, situated history of 1692 Salem and apply the Trials as a lens to understand various other historical moments, as well as the visitor's own. Rather than focusing on the Trials themselves as an event that one can experience, the Trials become something 'good to think with,' in Lévi-Strauss's (1963) classic formulation. In Peirce's semiotic logic, the Witch Museum reinterprets the Salem Witch Trials through Thirdness, in which "a phenomenon is found to be governed by a rule, or has a general knowable way of behaving" (Peirce 1894, 2). By making the Trials symbolic, the Witch Museum is able to transpose the Salem Witch Trials across different historical and cultural contexts — the 'rule' of the witch-hunt can be brought out of 1692 Salem and applied to other places and times. Visitors are encouraged to apply the "fear + trigger = scapegoat" formula to other scenarios than those listed in the mural. While the museum's decision to mold the

Trials into a schematic narrative might leave some visitors feeling like they never experienced the 'real' Trials, it is clearly an approach that resonates with many of the city's tourists.

This experience of the Trials is very different from the one presented by the Witch Dungeon, which revolves around a staged courtroom reenactment. After purchasing a ticket at the front counter, visitors enter into an auditorium that looks like an old church and take a seat in a pew. On stage at the front of the room, mannequins pose as the judge and jury of the Trials. Eventually, a woman in period clothing takes the stage. After listing the rules for photography and recording, she transitions to the performance with the words "now, the year is 1692." Abruptly asserting the temporal frame of the performance's chronotope, she goes on to contextualize the Salem Witch Trials, declaring that in 1692 "science itself was still being discovered all over the world." Like the Witch Museum, the Witch Dungeon is quick to chastise the residents of 17th-century Salem for succumbing to the irrationality of witch-hysteria rather than relying on the cool, calm rationality of science. This dichotomy is mapped onto the distinction between "visible" and "invisible" crimes and evidence. The problem with the Trials, the presenter explains, is that the court was dealing with invisible crimes and invisible evidence, rather than focusing on visible crimes and visible evidence. As a result, the court was not able to make a rational judgement based on material facts, and instead had to make a judgement based on emotions and feelings.

This interpretation of the trial is emphasized in the performance. Two actors take the stage, one playing the accuser, Mary Walcott, and the other playing the accused, Elizabeth Proctor. Throughout the performance they fling accusations of lies and slander at one another. They speak directly to each other yet they frequently face the audience as they say their lines, giving the impression that their performance is more of a staged play than an direct re-enactment of the 1692 Salem courtroom. Just as the woman who introduced the actors did when she declared, "the year is 1692," the actors on the stage play with the indexicality of identity and space as they establish a certain chronotope in their performance. While rallying against the injustice of the trial, Proctor turns to the audience and says "yet you all sit in silence and listen and believe!" In this moment, the audience is thrust into the space and time of the trial, and suddenly their polite silence during the performance becomes a sign of their tacit acceptance of Walcott's claims. Later, resigning herself to her fate, she asks "is there no one here who will speak on my behalf?" The word 'here' pulls the audience into the space and time of the performance, and while the actors do not necessarily expect audience members to answer this rhetorical question, a lingering, uncomfortable silence is left in its wake.

In the two lines of dialogue highlighted above, the words 'you all' and 'here' function as indices. The index, in Peirce's framework, is a sign that "focuses the attention" on the object it denotes and the context in which it exists (Peirce 1894, 6). In other words, it 'points to' that object. Indices are dynamic — they develop their meanings contextually. The 'you all' that Proctor utters gains its meaning from the assembled audience that she speaks towards. By incorporating this audience as part of the context of her speech, she brings the audience with her into the 1692 Salem courtroom that she, as an actor, is performing within. This effect is reinforced with 'here' in the second quote. 'Here,' as it was spoken in the original trial proceedings that the performance draws from, meant both the space and time of the 1692 Salem courtroom that Proctor's trial occurred

within. As it is repeated by the actor playing Proctor, 'here' draws the contemporary Witch Dungeon and its gathered visitors back more than 300 years into this distant time and space.

The index falls under the rubric of Peircean 'Secondness,' which is marked by the "sense of acting and being acted upon... the sense of Reaction" (Peirce 1894, 2). The whole performance at the Witch Dungeon takes place in the mode of reaction, as the entire show is built around Proctor's and Walcott's direct reactions and responses to each other. The duality implied by Peirce in his definition of Secondness even permeates the structure of the performance itself: Though the performance draws its script from transcripts of the actual Trials, it is actually a stitching together of two different transcripts. Proctor and Walcott would have never spoken directly to each other in the real trial — instead they would have mediated their dialogue between the judge and the magistrate, figures reduced to motionless mannequins in the Witch Dungeon performance (DeRosa 2009, 166).

After the scene ends, the woman who introduced the performance closes with a deft indexical shift of both place and time: "*That was* Sarah and Candy playing Elizabeth and Mary" [emphasis added]. The audience, after their brief foray into 1692 Salem, is jerked back to the present place and moment. The experience becomes authentic because the audience is left feeling like they were actually there, like the performance they just witnessed was something pulled out of another time. The shifting indices employed by the actors in their performance do the work of moving the audience back and forth between their present moment and the past that they wish to experience.

This indexicality is maintained in the Witch Dungeon's second half, which takes visitors on a guided tour through a replica of the titular 'witch dungeon.' The real dungeon, visitors are told, was actually located in another part of Salem, until it was destroyed in the construction of a building that now houses a telephone company. What the visitor is standing in is a model of that dungeon based on historians' measurements. As opposed to the indexicality of the live performance, this part of the Witch Dungeon generates much of its historical authenticity by looking like a real historical object, which is an example of iconicity and chronotopic Firstness. However, in the center of the dungeon is a large wooden beam — one of the original beams from the old dungeon. By removing the beam from its original location and placing it within the replica dungeon, the beam imbues the new location with a sort of indexical authenticity. Its value derives from its physical connection to the 'authentic' dungeon, and, in that sense, it physically indexes a historical authenticity that the recreated dungeon itself lacks.

The Witch House, on the other hand, approaches history in an entirely different register than either of the previously discussed museums. This is unsurprising, given that The Witch House gained its museum status in 1948, more than twenty years prior to the Witch Museum and Witch Dungeon (Gencarella 2007, 278–79). The Witch House differentiates itself from these newer attractions by emphasizing its large collection of objects and artifacts from 17th-century Salem. When a visitor first walks up to the museum, they are greeted with a sign that proudly proclaims, "We are the only historic site you can visit in Salem that is directly tied to the trials." That 'direct' link to the Trials arises from the fact that the home was once owned by Jonathan Corwin, a magistrate and judge during the Trials. This type of 'direct' link is something that few other

museums and attractions lay claim to, save for the Witch Dungeon's conspicuous wooden beam. This feeling is emphasized by the House's location, which is a few blocks away from the crowded downtown throughway where most of the tourist attractions are situated. Throughout the house, visitors can view artifacts accompanied by placards that explain when the object was made and what it was used for. Rather than standing in as a sign for something related to the Trials, such as a wax figurine of Elizabeth Proctor or a recreation of a dungeon, these objects are imbued with their own sense of historical authenticity, since, despite being radically decontextualized from that place and time, they were physically in existence during the Salem Witch Trials.

However, the notion of a 'direct' connection with the past goes further than the building's previous occupant and his furniture. The Witch House offers a bona fide sensory experience of the era of the Trials. Walking around, visitors who have been spending any considerable amount of time in Salem quickly notice the absolute absence of background music — a staple of most Trials-related attractions in the city. In its place, floorboards and wooden stairs creak as people pass over them. The air has a distinctly musty smell, and the second floor is drafty enough to warrant a coat even in mild weather. These sensory details form a chronotope that subtly immerses the visitor within the past.

In this sense, the Witch House reinforces its historical authenticity through a specific deployment of Peircean Firstness. In Peirce's formulation, "the First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything" (Peirce 1887). Rather than mediating the visitor's understanding of historical Salem through figures or performances, the Witch House does so by immersing the visitor within a sensory landscape of that very place and time. Without necessarily being aware of why, the visitor feels as though they have stepped into a genuine representation of colonial-era Salem during the Salem Witch Trials.

Here, MacCannell's conception of 'back' and 'front' as key to understanding touristic notions of authenticity is particularly relevant. Within the context of Salem as a tourist city, with other museums featuring live performances of the Trials, wax figures of witches, and extensive gift shops, the Witch House presents itself as the 'back' setting to Salem's 'front' of tourist attractions. Here, mood-setting background music and wax figurines of witches are replaced with creaking floorboards and genuine 17th-century furniture. The discerning tourist, the tourist who views shows like the Witch Museum and the Witch Dungeon as tacky and inauthentic — the tourist primarily motivated by a drive for authenticity — may finally believe that they have found the true history of Salem in the dusty artifacts, creaky floors, and drafty rooms of the Witch House.

However, as MacCannell emphasizes, this supposed back region is merely another front. Objects have been moved into the house and arranged in neat displays, the original wood flooring is kept behind a rope to protect it from the trampling of tourists, and the house has been wired up with electricity and modern plumbing to accommodate the needs of staff and visitors alike. The house was even repainted to its current color, black, drawing on the color's symbolic meanings and associations in order to seem more ominous. Where MacCannell's analysis falls short in the case of Salem is that the true 'back region,' the region of pure authenticity that "motivates touristic consciousness" (MacCannell 1973, 598) is known to be unobtainable. Salem's tourists know that they

cannot travel through time to the 1692 Trials, and their knowledge of this fact impacts how they conceive of 'authenticity.' To the discerning tourist, the Witch House may be the closest thing to historical authenticity one can find in Salem. But, ultimately, the spatiotemporal inaccessibility of the Salem Witch Trials is what creates space for tourist attractions in Salem to negotiate their own varied forms of authenticity. Because there is no accessible 'authentic' version of the Trials for tourists to discover in Salem, tourist attractions are able to reinterpret the Trials in myriad and creative ways, producing a broad variety of understandings of the Trials for tourists to interact with, evaluate, and patronize.

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