"A KINDRED BETWEEN THE HUMAN BEING AND THE LOCALITY": ANCESTRY AND PLACE IN 'SALEM LITERATURE'

"PARENTESCO ENTRE SER HUMANO E LOCALIDADE": ANCESTRALIDADE E LUGAR NA LITERATURA DE SALEM

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ABSTRACT
Salem, location of the only organized witch trials in the United States, is one of the most frequently used settings in American literature. This paper discusses the motif of genealogical connections to people involved in the witch trials in works from Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) to contemporary works such as Katherine Howe's *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* (2009).
Keywords: Hawthorne; Salem; Ancestry and Place; Salem literature, Katherine Howe

RESUMO
Salem, localização dos únicos julgamentos de bruxaria organizados nos Estados Unidos, é um dos espaços mais recorrentes no âmbito da literatura americana. Este artigo discute a temática das conexões genealógicas existentes entre os autores-narradores e pessoas envolvidas nos julgamentos de bruxas em obras que vão desde *The House of the Seven Gables* de Hawthorne (1851) até obras contemporâneas como o livro de *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane,* de Katherine Howe (2009).
Palavras-chave: Hawthorne; Salem; Ancestralidade e Lugar; Literatura de Salem; Katherine Howe

> *consanguinity* ('blood') is the functional equivalent of geographical proximity ('place') in the way we mentally construct 'natural' connectedness. (Zerubavel, 2003, 56)

Few places in the United States are as synonymous with a certain historical event as Salem, Massachusetts, location of the only organized witch trials in American history. In this paper I look at the interconnections of ancestry and place in three works of what I term 'Salem literature', a corpus of more than 50 works of fiction discussing Salem's history and spatiality.

Already the first chapters of the Old Testament are full of the genealogies of the Biblical forefathers, highlighting the importance of ancestral connections over numerous generations. In recent decades, genealogy research has

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become a particularly American phenomenon, historically motivated by the United States' unique population history. Genetic ancestry tracing "is being used to decide claims about ethnic, political, familial, and religious identity" (Elliott and Brodwin, 1469).

Being descended from one of the people involved in the Salem Witch Trials is thus a particularly interesting finding in one's genealogy line, and a prominent motif in literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's relation to John Hathorne, the notorious judge of the witch trials, and the author's consequential name altering (from Hathorne to Ha***w***thorne) and lifelong obsession with his Puritan ancestry is common knowledge for anyone concerned with his life and works. In "The Custom House", Hawthorne addresses the inescapability of his forefathers' contested past and its relation to *place*. Despite him being "happiest elsewhere" (*The Scarlet Letter*, 8) and his wish to see his children settle in other places, "this long connection of a family with one spot […] creates a kindred between the human being and the locality", for "the spell survives" and he feels that it was his "destiny to make Salem [his] home". (11) And in his only 'Salem novel', *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), the whole action of the 19th century present is based on an ancestral feud dating back to Salem in 1692.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the genealogy of the Pyncheon and Maule families, starting with the land fight of Colonel Pyncheon and Matthew Maule, which results in Pyncheon accusing Maule of witchcraft in 1692 and Maule's consequential execution right after his curse that "God will give [Pyncheon] blood to drink!" (8) – the first of many fictionalizations of Sarah Good's utterance at her execution. Pyncheon then builds his house on Maule's "unquiet grave", (9) the architect ironically being Maule's son Thomas. However, Pyncheon is found dead on the day of the opening celebration, allegedly having died from a stroke, but calling to mind Maule's curse.

The reader then learns that to the present day, "an absurd delusion of family importance" has characterized the Pyncheons, (19) while the Maules were "a quiet, honest, well-meaning race of people", (25) but poor and unfortunate despite their hard work, and believed to still have supernatural powers. The old curse has become "part of the Pyncheon inheritance", (21) and

there have been mysterious deaths in the family. Furthermore, the Pyncheon descendants of the 19th century present are estranged from each other. Unlike her cousin Jaffrey, Hepzibah lives secluded from the town community in "wounded pride", (245) and is forced to open a cent-shop due to her poverty. She suffers from the family history which lies heavy on the house, particularly symbolized through the big portrait of Colonel Pyncheon, yet she feels unable to take it down and to leave the doomed past behind. Her brother Clifford has been unjustly framed by Jaffrey and consequently imprisoned. He returns home from his 30-year-sentence during the narrated time, broken by his experience.

The family history is inseparable not only from Salem, but from the spatiality of the House of the Seven Gables itself which, building upon a long tradition of the motif of the *haunted house* in Gothic literature, has been tainted by its ugly building history. Even the originally Edenic nature has been destroyed by the absorbed ancestral guilt and gloom. And while Hepzibah's young plebian cousin Phoebe revives the space and its inhabitants – and thus acts according to her telling name which translates into *shining* – two steps need to happen before the family can leave the cursed spatiality.

The first one is the death of Jaffrey Pyncheon who serves as a double/reincarnation of the Colonel due to their uncanny physical resemblance, their good societal status and reputation, and their greedy and evil nature on the other hand. Just as the Colonel had Maule killed out of greed, so did Jaffrey frame Clifford for murder of his father out of the same intention: He has illegitimately inherited his uncle's money before he could give the House of the Seven Gables to a Maule descendant as reparation. In the present, he presses Clifford for the knowledge about the family's mysterious land claim, threatening to otherwise pronounce him insane and send him to an asylum. Yet before his plan can be finalized, Jaffrey suddenly dies the same way his ancestor did: in the old armchair, with blood on his collar, once more emphasizing the almost supernatural ancestral connection.

Although the siblings then abandon the house temporarily, it is only after Phoebe and Holgrave get engaged that they can leave Salem for good. The mysterious lodger Holgrave with his adventurous lifestyle and revolutionary

philosophy – he opts for a detachment of humans and place – stands in sharp contrast to Hepzibah and Clifford, which comes as little surprise when he turns out to be the long-lost descendant of Matthew Maule. Through his marriage to Phoebe, the old feud is overcome and the Pyncheons “bade a final farewell to the abode of their forefathers” (318) – Holgrave even agrees to become settled in the new place with the Pyncheons. Adequately, the imagery of garden Eden is here taken up again: the couple “transfigured the earth, and made it Eden again, and themselves the two first dwellers in it.” (307) As foreshadowed at the beginning of the novel, the portrait of the old Pyncheon comes down when they retrace the land claim behind it, symbolic of the end of the evil side of the family. Redemption of the past thus seems at hand.

Although Adriana Mather’s young adult novel *How to Hang a Witch* (2016) is not critically acclaimed as it lacks rhetorical and narratological depth, and its characters show many clichés of the young adult fiction genre, it serves as an interesting comparison to Hawthorne’s novel: While discussing the similarities between a historical witch hunt and modern bullying, the novel also focuses on ancestral guilt – the author as well as the protagonist are ancestors of Cotton Mather whose publications on witchcraft and advocacy of ‘spectral evidence’ helped the establish the court at Salem and influenced their judgements.

The reader shares the view of Samantha ‘Sam’ Mather, who moves to Salem to live in her late grandmother’s inherited house. She has not been to Salem before, but is aware of her genealogical ties to Cotton Mather which in connection to the spatiality set the focus of action. In fact, most of Sam’s fellow students and even her teacher dislike her from her first day at school due to her ancestry. Like Hepzibah, she is established as a social outcast. The main conflict happens between Sam and “the Descendants”, fellow students of hers whose ancestors were hanged for witchcraft in 1692 and who take the blame for the crimes committed against their forefathers out on Sam as she is on “the wrong effing side of history” (137). They bully her relentlessly to make her leave town and even try to employ their ‘ancestral’ magic powers to do so. Moreover, mysterious deaths happen in town. Sam then starts research (which aptly

happens in her grandmother's old, large house) on her family history and the development of the Mathers from highly respected members of the colonial society to Cotton Mather's infamy.

She finds out that her own life and those of her fellow students (and their families) are endangered by an old curse: When at least one descendant from each major family involved in the trials is present in Salem, deaths start occurring in the families. Together with the Descendants, Sam discovers her own magic powers as they conjure up their ancestors. They ask them for guidance in a ritual in the woods near Proctor's Ledge, the location of the executions. The right spatiality is therefore necessary for the genealogical invocation. Eventually, Sam finds out that the initiator of the curse was Ann Putnam, one of the leading 'afflicted girls' who after the trials wanted to take revenge for the unfortunate turn her later life had taken and to kill all the descendants of the involved families. Yet Sam decides, "not going to be like Cotton, sit back and watch it unfold", (291) i.e. to let innocent people die, and *together* with the Descendants – a parallel to Hawthorne's novel – she manages to reverse the curse and to overcome the circle of destruction and death. In fact, in the last scene Cotton Mather comes back to life and finally apologizes for his actions in the 17th century:

> For centuries we have been making the same choices we did during the trials, hurting and blaming each other. There is not real power gained by harming others. […] All these many years, I thought I knew witches better than anyone. You can imagine my surprise to find one in my own family. Not the wretched being I once studied in my books, but a lovely young woman. (342)

Like *The House of the Seven Gables*, the novel ends with a positive outlook onto the future and shows characters who act strikingly different from their infamous ancestors. However, it should be noted that, unlike Hawthorne's characters, Sam does not leave Salem, but manages to redeem the spatiality. Adriana Mather uses literature to compose the apology of her ancestor which – unlike in the case of Ann Putnam[2] – never happened in real life, bringing

[2] In 1706, Ann Putnam publicly apologized for her actions in 1692. Mather takes drastic liberties with her biography.

closure to this difficult chapter of family history, but also warning of similar events in the present.

Contemporary Salem literature is however dominated by descendants of Salem's victims: Katherine Howe, Brunonia Barry, Kathleen Kent, and Kathleen Benner Duble all discuss their genealogical connections in their fiction. Due to the brevity of this paper, I will limit myself to Katherine Howe, who is descended from Elizabeth Howe, hanged on July 19th, 1692. I quote Zerubavel once more:

> Culture, too, plays a critical role in the way we theorize as well as measure genealogical relatedness. Not only is the unmistakably social logic of reckoning such relatedness quite distinct from the biological reality it supposedly reflects, it often overrides it, as when certain ancestors obviously count more than others in the way we determine kinship and ethnicity. Relatedness, therefore, is not a biological given but a social construct. (2012, 9)

Howe's debut novel, *The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane* (2009), is set in 1991 and tells the story of Constance 'Connie' Goodwin who has recently passed her doctoral qualifying exam in colonial history at Harvard and is searching for a dissertation topic with the advice to "look vigorously for new source base". (21) Yet over the summer, Connie's mother Grace also asks her to clean and sell her late grandmother's house in Marblehead due to legal issues. The house has been abandoned for over 20 years and when she goes there, it "felt private – secret" (39). Once more, an old house serves as the main location,[3] and it turns out to reveal to Connie not only the source for her dissertation, but a stunning family history. Connie finds a key with the name Deliverance Dane on an enfolded parchment in her grandmother's old Bible and she discovers that Dane was an accused 'witch' who was excommunicated and hanged in 1692, but afterward was "almost completely purged from the historical record". (92)

Dane's family history forms the parallel narrative to Connie's story. While the historical Deliverance Dane was indeed arrested and imprisoned in 1692, she was eventually released on bail. Howe takes some liberties with her biography: She is known in Salem as a 'cunning woman' due to her healing

[3] With regard to parallels between Howe's and Mather's novels, the publication dates (2009, 2016) should be considered.

powers, the spells for which she has collected in her ‘physick book’. The novel opens in 1681 with her being brought to a local resident to cure his daughter from an unknown illness, but the girl dies and so Dane is found guilty of killing the child and consequently largely ostracized in town. Moreover, she loses her husband Nathaniel in an accident, making her a single parent and thus an exception to the societal norms. In 1692, her name is then suggested in the accusations, and she is arrested and later hanged. The novel puts forth the idea that particularly women who were “trying to take too much power into their own hands” (84) were likely victims of the patriarchal Puritan society.

The reader then follows the next three generations of women, all of whom have inherited the healing powers and make use of Deliverance’s book. Yet all of them also lose their husbands early, and so in 1760 Dane’s granddaughter sells the book, believing it to bring bad luck. While the book’s current location is unknown, Connie discovers her own powers in the form of visions and healing abilities despite initially being firmly rooted in academic thinking and being highly skeptical of the possibility of actual magic. Soon, the finding of the book becomes inevitable when her boyfriend, Sam, is in danger for his life after an accident.

It is at this point, too, that she realizes that Deliverance Dane is not only a historical person she researches, but also her own ancestor, and she becomes part of “a genealogy that was undeniable.” (292) Everything falls into place: the jars full of herbs, syrups and powders in her grandmother’s house, and her own mother’s ‘New Age’ practicing of energetic healings and aura cleansings. Yet, Connie also realizes that Sam’s dangerous situation falls into a long tradition – both her father and grandfather died young. Eventually, Connie tracks down the book and finds a spell for the reversal of fits which involves revealing the source of the harming agency. She manages to save Sam and thus breaks the curse of lost love over the centuries of ‘cunning women’, a parallel to Hawthorne’s and Mather’s novels where the protagonists also need to overcome a curse dating back to colonial Salem to free their families.

The whole experience makes her reconsider the witch trials of 1692 and the existence of magic practices in colonial New England which, however, is

portrayed as decidedly positive. While it is never questioned that the executed people were victims of a dangerous brew of unlucky circumstances, the finding of the book therefore enables Connie as an academic of colonial history a "feminist re-conception of vernacular magic" (356). Most importantly, however, Connie herself transforms into a stronger woman. She improves her relationship with her mother through realizing their shared gifts, she also has the first happy relationship in her life and even manages to – quite unlike in traditional quests – save her boyfriend's life. In addition, contrary to the beginning of the novel where she is eager to get her advisor's approval, she becomes an independent and successful scholar on her own.

In the afterword of the novel, Howe explains that she, too was "moved by how fully the past in New England still haunts the present" (367). And while she also aims to refocus the view on Salem's women in the American legacy and on the actual use of divination techniques through her novel, in the first place she was triggered to study Salem's history by her own genealogy as she clarifies that the "knowledge of her "ancestors' unconventional pasts helped steer [her] toward graduate work in American culture" and that "their witchiness, however we understand it, contributed to [her] being the kind of person [she is]." (368) Howe further explains:

> Genealogy serves a paradoxical purpose: […] It is a powerful way to feel personally connected to a time period that might otherwise seem hopelessly remote. But […] by the time we start looking at ten generations back, what we mean when we say "family" is actually several thousand people. At that point, the connection becomes less about "family," I think, and more about humankind. Everyone has a right to feel connected to the women (and men) caught up in the Salem Panic, for the story touches deep reservoirs of feeling about community, religion, relationships, and spirituality still at work in American culture today. (376)

What she addresses is therefore the need for understanding one's roots on an individual level (as reflected in Connie) as well as on a national level. In the American's collective memory, 'Salem' is, as Katherine Howe points out in an interview with Caitlin White, "a pebble in our shoe," for it is "such a corrective to those kinds of myths that we hold so dear". She elaborates further: "Part of our

ideology is that we are tolerant and that we embrace differences, we are religious, we are rational. Salem really forces us to grapple with the fact that that is a fragile set of ideals." By using literature to redeem the past and to make the victims of history the heroes of fiction, 'Salem literature', I argue, thus helps coping with the 'national genealogy'.

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