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**(Witch) Crafting Identity: An Autoethnographic Analysis of the
Dutch National Identity Through
Women in Haunted History**

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Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study analyzes the presentation of women in haunted history in order to dissect the construction of the Dutch national identity. Through a personal narrative experience, the art, museums, tourist enterprises, and physical locations that constitute the city of Amsterdam are put in conversation with one another in order to draw out the inconsistencies and hypocrisies in the Dutch narratives of progress. Firstly, the Spin Huis and the ghost story connected to it are juxtaposed to the City of Amsterdam's narrative in order to draw out themes of sexual exceptionalism at the expense of foreign bodies. Next, the Amsterdam Dungeon is situated in relation to dark tourism, dark leisure, and the Red Light District to demonstrate the inconsistency in the Dutch identity of "tolerance." Lastly, the museum of the Heksenwaag, or Witch Weigh House, is used to analyze the Netherlands' secular exceptionalism and spiritual privileging. These investigations inform my argument that the Netherlands dissociates itself from its haunted history, which is often incongruous with its self-conceptualization as a progressive country, in order to construct and maintain its tolerant, secular, and sexually liberated identity; in doing so, it illuminates the hypocrisies present in the Netherlands' dismissal of sex work and anti-religious xenophobia.

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Lastly, thank you to the city of Amsterdam for being my home for the last three months. In a short amount of time, I have learned to love the endless amounts of confusing inconsistencies that make this city so unique. Thank you for giving me one of the best adventures of my life, and thank you for inspiring my creative and intellectual passion.

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(Witch) Crafting Identity: An Autoethnographic Analysis of the Dutch National
Identity Through Women in Haunted History

INTRODUCTION

Ghosts are all around us. Every day, we are haunted by the remnants of history that have managed to follow us into modernity. From my first day in the city of Amsterdam, my eyes were stuck to the infamous canal houses that seemed to practically lean against one another with old age. My threadbare sneakers found themselves tripping over cobblestone sidewalks that had been polished to a shine with centuries of use. I was enamored with the living history that thrived before my eyes, enthralled by the proximity of what felt like ancient history in comparison to the post-modernism that dominates the streets of America back home.

In a dramatic display of this historical other-worldliness stands the Oude Kerk, or the Old Church, that looms over the thin townhouses that garnish the enclave of De Wallen. Stepping through the oak double doors, my feet again, unsurprisingly, found cobblestone. Yet, this time, the stones were a 36,000 square foot mosaic of headstones overlaying the dead buried within the floor of the Oude Kerk. The wooden vaulted ceilings stretched impossibly high above me, etched with the fading outlines of Catholic iconography. I slowly paced the gargantuan building, marveling at the strangeness of a place that had such unique circumstances surrounding it. The skeleton of the church belied its Catholic origins, yet the soberness and austerity of its interior spoke to the nature of the Protestants that currently hold ownership of it. As I meandered, I noticed under my feet the strange arcane symbols that were etched into the gravestones that looked worlds apart from any Christian symbology that I was familiar with. Stranger yet were the ornate carved sitting pieces that depicted anything from fornication to brawls to a woman defecating gold coins. The church seemed riddled with outrageous contradictions.

After making my rounds through the cavernous main room, I found my way into a small cloister littered with relics excavated from the churchyard. I peered through the glass into the white shelves, and my eye caught on a small, dirty, wooden cross decorated with a delicate gold Jesus. The sight struck a long unplucked string of reverence in me. My eyes slid to the window and glazed over as a scene played itself out in front of me. I could clearly see the 17th-century Dutch Oma, who dropped the crucifix in the muddy front courtyard of the church while she rushed to the Sunday service she was late for. I could see the masses of black and white-clad Calvinists trudging the little cross into the sodden ground as they made their way into the double doors. I felt oddly fond of the coalescent observance that had undoubtedly occurred on this spot for so many centuries—but movement across the yard broke my imaginative spell. I refocused on the hand waving at me from behind a glass pane, and my eyes belatedly slid to the sex worker waving at me from under a red light who likely thought my daydream was a tourist's unrelenting stare.

The juxtaposition of the occurrence almost made me laugh. Not twenty feet from the oldest Church in Amsterdam was the Red Light District, full of revelrous drunk tourists and scantily clad sex workers in red-framed windows. An Amsterdammer might scoff at my incredulity, but from an outsider's perspective, the contradictions and ironies of the Netherlands were on full display in this microcosm.

The Oude Kerk in the Red Light District does not stand alone in its state of incongruity. The Netherlands itself is predicated on contradiction: it's a country of progress founded on the blood money of colonization; it's a secular country borne of Calvinist fervor; and it is a haven for sex workers, yet has an endless history of punishing unruly women. These blights on Dutch history haunt the streets of Amsterdam, but they also tell a narrative of how this country came to

be what it is today. More importantly, this haunted history can illuminate the ways in which the Netherlands perceives and projects itself despite its dissonant history, especially regarding the treatment of women. In the next few pages, I will explore how the conflicting roles of women in religion, superstition, and folklore inform the Dutch national identity.

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METHODS

The Netherlands, a small and accessible country, allowed for remarkable *ease* in investigating the sometimes hidden—sometimes glaring—instances of haunted history scattered throughout it. As a student new to the country, walking around with little intention other than sightseeing reliably yielded mysteries and curiosities that I couldn't help but ponder for days after encountering them. In conceptualizing this research paper, I felt that it would be a disservice to readers to not allow a comprehensive peek into the physical nature of the Netherlands as well as the remnants of paranormal history that I was investigating. The current status of the locations of these myths is equally as worthy of analysis as the stories themselves. Moreover, drawing on my own experiences as a foreign researcher is integral to piecing together the ways in which the Netherlands situates itself in relation to its own haunted history. As such, I will explore the folkloric and paranormal history of the Netherlands using an auto-ethnographic approach.

Sociologist Sarah Wall in her meta-analysis of autoethnography, defines it as "a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding."¹ A personal

¹ Wall, Sarah. "Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2008, 39.

narrative that explores a sociological phenomenon can afford the readers tangible details that fill out the world more adequately than a typical social science paper and can provide unique personal insights while still maintaining positionality. In her paper, Wall suggests a distinct trichotomy between "auto- (self), -ethno- (the socio-cultural connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process" within this style of study.² I intend to blend and incorporate all three of these pillars into my study with an emphasis on the narrative and research components first, followed shortly after by sociocultural analysis. What this will actually look like within the paper is a series of personal narratives about my experiences exploring the history of folklore in the Netherlands, followed by an analysis of its relevance within my broader topic of gender, religion, and national identity. After these vignettes, I will weave together my findings into a conclusive argument using my personal experiences and academic research as evidence.

THESIS

In piecing together an often complicated and contradictory national narrative, I searched for women in haunted history and followed them. Some were present in the ghost stories of the Spin Huis yet pointedly absent in their state-sponsored counter materials. Others were used as props in foreign tourist enterprises, such as The Amsterdam Dungeon. Others still lead me to revered museums of Dutch history, such as the Witch Weigh House or De Heksenwaag. These investigations inform my argument that the Netherlands distances itself from its haunted history, which is often incongruous with its self-conceptualization as a progressive country, in order to construct and maintain its tolerant, secular, and sexually liberated identity; in doing so, it illuminates the hypocrisies present in the Netherlands' dismissal of sex work and anti-religious xenophobia.

² Wall, "Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography" 39.



SECTION 1: THE SPIN HUIS

Lying face up in bed, sleep refused to come to me. Knowing that any further attempt would be futile, I wrapped a blanket around myself and retreated to my desk along with my laptop. Ironically, spooky stories have always managed to relax me. It's possibly the sentimentality of watching scary movies with my father growing up or spending every Halloween in the cradle of spook-central Massachusetts. Maybe it's something about fear being so potent in media that it makes reality seem all the more safe. Either way, I embarked on my late-night voyage into the haunted history of Amsterdam.

“A FORBIDDEN LOVE STORY ... WITH NO HAPPY ENDING” began the article, superimposed on a background of night-darkened trees and a lone cabin.³ I laughed a little to myself at the endearing attempt to cultivate the atmosphere of the story. I had stumbled onto a humble blog called LittleHouseofHorrors.com. Sonja, the Dutch-born author of this website, found herself disappointed by the Dutch reputation of secularism, stating that “superstition is not something we talk about.”⁴ Despite this, she proclaims that “The Netherlands has a rich and turbulent past, and the ghosts will not stay silent.”⁵ I scrolled down past her bio and commenced reading the story of the Spin Huis until I finally found sleep.

The next morning I arrived at the SIT campus to continue my research. Refreshed from a ghost-story induced slumber, I worked diligently for most of the morning, surrounded by fellow students who were attempting to thwart the grips of procrastination. A few hours later, I began to feel the definitive gnaw of boredom. The lines on my computer looked like inconsternable

³ Sonja Koene, *Haunted Places in the Netherlands* (The Little House of Horrors, 2020).

⁴ Koene, *Haunted Places in the Netherlands*.

⁵ *ibid*

squiggles, and my eyelids were growing heavier by the second. Looking around, I could tell my peers were hitting a wall as well. I broke the silence of the room by whispering, “Do you guys want to hear a ghost story?” Immediately, laptops shut, and chairs scooted closer to me in apprehension of the tale.

I began: "In the 1500s, the Spin Huis was made as a workhouse for the female criminals of Amsterdam. Instead of being executed or tortured, women would be sent to the Spin Huis in order to be re-educated and rehabilitated through manual labor. In this instance, women were made to spin flax and wool into textiles, hence the name 'Spin Huis.' The penitentiary was built on the grounds of the Saint Ursula Monastery, and as such, it was manned by priests and monks. According to the story, a young town girl and one of the Priests who presided over the Spin Huis fell madly in love with one another. When people found out about their sinful relations, the girl was sentenced to a lifetime in the Spin Huis for seducing a holy man into breaking his vows. The priest went mad with grief and guilt and killed himself in front of the doors of the Spin Huis. His ghost wanders the alleyway, eternally searching for his lost love...."⁶

"When I search up 'Spin Huis,' Google images only shows me a picture of spiders," a classmate remarked over the brim of her computer, shattering the ambiance.

“Why didn’t the priest just bail her out if he worked there?” another friend said, looking unimpressed.

“Yeah, and why is he searching for his lost love in the afterlife if her ghost is probably ALSO at the Spin Huis?”

I was vexed but unsurprised at the group's skepticism, so I teased, “It’s just up the street. Anyone brave enough to come visit it with me?”

⁶ Alexandra Huetter, “5 of the Most Haunted Places in Amsterdam,” *The Dutch Review* (blog), October 29, 2020, <https://dutchreview.com/culture/history/5-haunted-places-amsterdam/>.

A group of four students, including myself, made our way down Vijzelstraat, chatting excitedly as the afternoon sun coaxed us into taking off our coats. As we chatted animatedly about the ghost story and lamented to each other about our research, we stumbled into an alleyway lined with books. My dark-tourist heart sang as I recognized it from the Atlas Obscura blog as a must-see place to visit in the Netherlands due to it being a location frequented by Vincent Van Gogh and it being a repurposed 1600's old-person home with a long and sordid history. The red-brick alley bustled with purveyors of books and vintage prints, and walkers and bikers alike threaded themselves through queues. As I roved over the expansive collection, I glimpsed a dirty and torn used book entitled *Verzamelde Sprookjes van Grimm*. Next to it stood an equally well-loved *Sprookjes van Anderson* and a few more paces down was *Spookverhalen van Europa* or *Ghost Tales of Europe*. The high quantity of fairy tales surprised me, considering I had trouble even finding internet sources on the subject. Even though the fairytales were all in Dutch and therefore useless to my research, I took it as an omen that I was on the right path.

We passed through the book alley and meandered down the street that was steadily being funneled into an alley. As the blue dot of our Google Maps inched closer to our pin, the busy streets bustling with tourists thinned out. Great houses sprung up along the path, with old stone and purple wisteria vines winding up their sides. The white noise of the city stilled, and only the sounds of softly chirping birds and our feet hitting the pavement followed us onto Achterburgwal street.

Looming above us stood the gates of Het Spin Huis. Two white columns lead up to a vast marble vignette. Sculpted in relief to the stark white background were three women: one grabbing the hair of another while she blankly slashes at her forearm with a tail-ended whip, a second cowering from a whip arching towards her, and a third looking on with thinned lips as

she slyly feeds a cat fish from under the table. Below sat an inscription that proclaimed: 'Don't be afraid, I don't punish what is bad, but force good, Punishment is my hand, but my love is sweet.'⁷ Above all of this perched the three iconic exes of Amsterdam accompanied by a pair of regally lounging lions presiding over the whole affair.

Because the building was unmarked from the outside, none of us exactly knew what its modern uses were. Some websites claimed it was owned by the church next door, while others affirmed it was a popular hotel. Wrought iron spikes festooned the high brick walls of the building, obscuring any attempted glances inside. As we rounded the building, we came across a small plaque with MEERTENS INSTITUTE written across it. Underneath it was a sign for the KNAW Humanities Cluster, and shortly after that was the Netherlands Institute for the Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The once notorious female penitentiary was now a quad of progressive social science institutes.

The four of us didn't linger too long for fear of raising the eyebrows of university folk, so we made our way towards the shining canal at the building's back. We looked at each other and rocked back on our heels as the wind ruffled our jackets in the silence.

"Pretty anticlimactic," a friend deadpanned.

"Yep, no ghosts here," another echoed.

At that, we all parted our separate ways on a course for home.

UNEXPECTED UNDERWHELM

I was vaguely baffled by the Spin Huis that I had seen when the one that I had read about seemed like an entirely different location. Websites like the DutchReview.com described the Spin

⁷ "Women's Problems in the City," *Township of Amsterdam*, August 15, 2019.

Huis as a place "where tortured souls of past lives roam around restlessly." ⁸

AdequateTravel.com said of the ghost story that "Even staff members are frightened by this and refuse to enter [the building]." ⁹ Even though the building was beautiful and the carved statues

above the door were severely off-putting, I struggled to find the spooky atmosphere that was promised to me on so many of these websites. I was disappointed but not necessarily surprised.

All of the sources that had provided my information on the location had not only originally been in English, but they were explicitly written for foreign tourists looking to explore a darker side of Amsterdam—of course, they were going to overinflate reality. Even more so, I was befuddled as to why the city of Amsterdam wouldn't treasure and advertise such a dark and rich historical site.

In the hopes of finding out more about why the Spin Huis was so underwhelming in its self-presentation, I went to the city of Amsterdam's website, which included a short article in Dutch about the history and modern relevance of it.

WOMEN PROBLEMS IN THE CITY: A CONTRADICTIONARY DEPICTION

Within the first few paragraphs, I saw an immediate difference in frame. The article entitled "Women Problems in the City" begins by enunciating the transition from an era when it was normal to beat, mutilate, and execute criminals to the 17th century when the invention of rehabilitation houses became normalized. ¹⁰ It wrote that at the time of the Spin Huis's conception, more than fifty percent of all crimes in the city were committed by women who were "left to their own devices" due to their male guardian's participation in Amsterdam's booming sailing industry. ¹¹ It also cites Dutch women's demeanor as a reason for the invention of the Spin

⁸ Alexandra Huetter, "5 of the Most Haunted Places in Amsterdam," *The Dutch Review* (blog), October 29, 2020, <https://dutchreview.com/culture/history/5-haunted-places-amsterdam/>.

⁹ Ritu Singh, "6 Famous Haunted Places in Amsterdam | Mysterious Places in Amsterdam," Adequate Traveler (blog), December 26, 2019, <https://www.adequatetravel.com/blog/6-famous-haunted-places-in-amsterdam/>.

¹⁰ "Women's Problems in the City."

¹¹ *ibid*

Huis, citing not only their "entrepreneurship, independence, and inventiveness" but also their "assertiveness and directness," which allowed them to "stand [their] ground."¹² These are allegedly the attributes that "Amsterdam [women] later became known for."¹³ In a strange dichotomy, the city of Amsterdam's website positions women of the time as reckless and criminal without the oversight of their patriarchs, yet simultaneously they are innovative and admirable in their headstrong nature. Women are depicted as being in need of reprimand yet were simultaneously the prototype for today's resilient and outspoken modern woman. This claim conveys a subtle sense of pride in the supposedly unique nature of Dutch women, but it also implies that this nature warranted punishment and correction.

CREATING A NATIONAL IDENTITY OF PROGRESS

In its narrative of the penitentiary, the city of Amsterdam subtly paints a portrait in which the Spin Huis was a mark of the Netherlands' ingenuity and progressiveness. In doing so, it differentiates itself from less evolved places. The article enunciates the novelty that was reform-labor in comparison to the common practice of outright execution. Moreover, it justifies the necessity of this enterprise by citing the plethora of criminal women who were left unmanaged by the men of Amsterdam. In order to outweigh the misogynistic undertones of this statement, the article praises the obstinate and self-sufficient attitude of women of the time, going so far as to proudly project it onto a ubiquitous modern Dutch woman. These first few paragraphs demonstrate that the article, and by proxy, the City of Amsterdam, attempts to quietly reify a national identity of progressiveness and modernity through its depiction of the Spin Huis and the women who inhabited it, especially in juxtaposition to external people and territories.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

SEXUAL EXCEPTIONALISM

The Netherlands constructs its national identity in relation to its progressiveness; subsequently, sexual freedom and gender equality are positioned as integral to Dutch society. In her essay "Subjects of Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in the Netherlands," author Sarah Bracke discusses this phenomenon. In demonstrating the belief that the Netherlands is exceptional from the rest of the world in its gender equity, Bracke recounts Social Affairs Minister Aart Jan de Geus' proclamation. On Women's Day in 2003, he proclaimed that "women's emancipation was fully achieved for 'autochthonous' women in the Netherlands" and that "Emancipation policies from then onwards [...] need only to focus on 'allochthonous' women."¹⁴ This quote illuminates the Netherlands' identity as an evolved country in regards to women's equality. This patently false statement positions itself in opposition to other countries, namely non-white and predominately Muslim countries, in an attempt at constructing a patriotic image of socio-cultural advancement. As such, the article's partly reverent depiction of the self-possessed Dutch woman can be attributed to semi-conscious gendered exceptionalism. Even so, this self-conceptualization naturally comes into conflict with historical realities that women faced in the era of the Spin Huis.

DISSOCIATION THROUGH PROJECTION ONTO FOREIGNERS

The city of Amsterdam's article further distinguishes the Netherlands from other countries by its discussion of foreign involvement in the Spin Huis. In giving background on why the Spin Huis was a necessary venture for the city, the website recalls that "Three-quarters of the women arrested come from outside Amsterdam."¹⁵ Although it might not have been the

¹⁴Sarah Bracke, "Subjects of Debate: Secular and Sexual Exceptionalism, and Muslim Women in the Netherlands," *Feminist Review* 98, no. 1 (July 2011): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2011.5>.

¹⁵ "Women's Problems in the City."

original intention of the article, it nonetheless conveys an attempt at displacing the sordid nature of the Spin Huis onto external sources. Despite its prior emphasis on the number of ungovernable Dutch women present in the city, the article doubles back by projecting this epidemic of criminality onto foreigners. In doing so, the parts of the Spin Huis that are incongruous with modern Dutch self-conceptualization are slightly softened.

The implication is reminiscent of modern Western sentiments about the corruption of utopian society by immigrants and external cultures. Recently, right-wing parties have used the rhetoric of infiltration as a tool of xenophobic nationalism. In a demonstration of this, in 2016, the extreme right-wing Dutch politician Geert Wilders tweeted a picture of a young crying girl with the caption "Islamic immigration is raping our civilization one girl at a time... What is YOUR daughter worth?"¹⁶ Author of the essay "Sexuality, Race and Masculinity in Europe's Refugee Crisis," Betty de Hart, writes of this tweet that nationalistic leaders like Wilders fabricate external threats in an attempt to construct a utopian and crime-free Netherlands that is in need of protection.¹⁷ In doing so, he deflects the presence of crime in the Netherlands while also creating an identifiable enemy to rally against. The city of Amsterdam's article on the Spin Huis is in no way comparable to the outright racism and xenophobia of Geert Wilder's tweet, but it nonetheless vaguely echoes a nationalistic attempt at constructing a morally exceptional nation that is held in contrast to foreign bodies.

DISSOCIATION THROUGH PROJECTION ONTO TOURISTS

Further supporting this supposition is the article's discussion of the Spin Huis and foreign tourism. In one of its final portions, the article writes about the popularity of 17th-century

¹⁶ Betty de Hart, "Sexuality, Race and Masculinity in Europe's Refugee Crisis," in *Migration on the Move*, ed. Sandra Mantu and Paul Minderhoud (Brill | Nijhoff, 2017), 31, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004330467_004.

¹⁷ de Hart, "Sexuality, Race and Masculinity in Europe's Refugee Crisis," 31

tourism to the penitentiary. It writes that "For a fee, one can spend a day in a correctional house and marvel at the poor and devilish spinners. That's not a pleasant sight."¹⁸ It explains that the women of the Spin Huis "sometimes have syphilis-eaten faces and make obscene gestures. [...] Still, the penitentiary houses are worth seeing, comparable to the current Artis or Rijksmuseum: in the 17th century, half of all foreign visitors to Amsterdam visit one of the penitentiary houses."¹⁹ In foregrounding the revolting nature of the women in the Spin Huis, the article orients foreign tourists as inexplicably desirous of the Spin Huis' gratuity. Contrary to the pride exhibited in earlier portions, the article distances Amsterdam from its own distasteful history by projecting the fascination with the Spin Huis onto foreigners who revel in its tawdry details.

THE MISSING HAUNTED HISTORY

Despite what I consider to be a subtly nationalistic attempt at constructing a progressively exceptional national identity, the article might not be entirely wrong in its depiction of foreign fascination with the Spin Huis. Most notable throughout the article was the absence of any mention of the ghost story that had originally led me to this parcel of Amsterdam history. The article concludes with a brief note about its current day status: "The Meertens Institute is now located here. The 21st-century office worker now spends his working life on the place where once many women swore their sentences behind a spinning wheel."²⁰ The quote and its notable lack of reference to the paranormal culture the Spin Huis currently retains indicates an attempt at distancing itself from the reputation cultivated by other sources. Moreover, it alludes to a sense of advancement from the era of the Spin Huis. Blogs intended for foreigners render Amsterdam as a place where history lives in close proximity to the modern world, such as when the

¹⁸ Women's Problems in the City."

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

DutchReview.com writes that Amsterdam’s “old and narrow streets have many spooky tales to tell.”²¹ In contrast, the city of Amsterdam’s article intentionally highlights the dominance of a modern office worker in a place where history has long since disappeared into the past.

This is no surprise considering the haunted version of the Spin Huis' history foregrounds the punishment of a woman's sexuality in a time where religion managed the moral attitude of the city, which currently stands in complete opposition to the Netherlands' current self-identification as a sexually progressive, modern, and secular country. Through its praise for the invention of the Spin Huis, its contradictory depiction of women, its subtle xenophobic undertones, and its insistence on burying the past beneath the present, it is evident that the city of Amsterdam is working to create distance between its modern reputation and previous incarnations of its regressive self. That being said, it is apparent that other sources, particularly ones created by and for non-Dutch people, do not have the same reservations about the Netherlands' haunted history. This theme will become increasingly evident in the upcoming section dedicated to the Amsterdam Dungeon.

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SECTION 2: THE DUNGEON

I sat in a dark and crowded room with nothing but the light filtering between heavy iron cell bars to light my way. I couldn’t see who was in the room with me, but I could hear a variety of languages, none of them Dutch—and I could definitely smell beer. As I ran my hands over the slightly damp walls trying to guide myself to a seat, my Doc Martens found themselves wedged on top of someone’s tennis shoes.

“Oy, it's too dark in here innit?”

²¹ Huetter, “5 of the Most Haunted Places in Amsterdam.”

I politely laughed and issued an apology, finding my way to an empty section of bench that was slightly sticky, likely from the last round of people who had sat upon it. Chatter and revelrous laughter filled the cell. I, being alone, bided my time by watching the ever-steady stream of newcomers who were queued outside of the dark chamber. Entry required not only a cursory fee but also participation in what I could only assume was an attempt at playful psychological manipulation prior to the contents of the show. The cashier, after collecting payments, asked in her thick British accent for guests to loudly declare their worst fears and biggest sins, promising that if they lied, it would come back to haunt them soon enough. A family consisting of two parents, a young adult son and a daughter who could not have been over 13, lingered at the ticket counter. After finishing the family's transaction, the cashier made a flashy show of taking out a pen and paper.

She leaned across the table and stage-whispered, "What is your biggest sin, little lady?"

The girl, obviously shy, stuck to her mother's side but fell short of holding onto her. She blanched a little, and the corners of her mouth pulled downwards at the question.

Noticing this, the cashier asked, "Are you prepared to get scared, my friend?"

The girl pinched her lips together and leveled a sober look across the table.

"Don't worry! If you get too scared, just give out a big scream! Give it a try. Give me your biggest scream."

Silence ensued. The girl looked up at her mom blankly with eyes that read: *what did you get me into?*

I couldn't help but ask myself the same question. Why was I subjecting myself to this dark, wet, and overly-pungent tourist trap?

In looking for more tales of Amsterdam's haunted history, I found myself repeatedly coming up short. As discussed previously, ghost tales and folklore are harder to come by in the Netherlands than in other places, especially in terms of what still remains in Amsterdam's physical geography. A quick Google search of 'ghost story Netherlands' brought me to the Dungeon's doorstep.

Listed on Google as a place that "attempts to show history through an interactive adventure" and allows you to "live and breathe Amsterdam's darkest history," I bought a ticket without a second thought, content to be surprised upon arrival. And I very much was.

In order to make up for my lateness, I sped-walked through Neuiwemarket, dodging trams and bicyclists as I went. Sweaty and out of breath, upon entry to the Dungeon, I was immediately accosted with a pillory and stocks. Disoriented by the dark and still mentally diverted from my journey there, I must have been unresponsive because the doorman led me to the wooden shackles and bolted me in without further conversation. He then took a likely unflattering flash photo of me looking damp and confused and then sent me on my way into the Dungeon.

From that point onwards, I assumed that my hopes of a relaxed living history museum were likely to remain unfulfilled. This was confirmed after I had publicly confessed my fears and sins and been sent to a jail cell to await "my inquisition."

After a few minutes of waiting, a tall man in a macabre jester outfit entered the room. While slamming his cane against the rickety floorboards, he ushered us down a hallway into a room lined with 17th-century themed posters and paraphernalia. He began a dramatic monologue introducing the Dungeon as well as the rules for participants, stopping every so often to make intense eye contact with guests within inches of their faces. My attention veered when my eye

caught on a strangely sexualized poster of an accused witch. I was lost in thought over how contextually inappropriate it was when my concentration was abruptly shattered by the fingers on my jaw.

The jester had noticed my wandering eye and demanded my attention. I was so surprised that I didn't entirely register what he said to me, but it was something to the effect of:

"You're a brave girl to come into the dungeon all by yourself."

My skin crawled, and I snapped my head back out of his reach. The audience of roughly twenty laughed awkwardly, so the jester parlayed the incident into a transition to the first section of the Dungeon. A hatch was pulled, revealing a thin faux-wooden elevator ready for descent, and a young Irish woman was unceremoniously shoved inside of it alone.

In his affected British accent, the jester called out, "We don't want any of our ladies alone down in the Dungeon. Can a *real* man please accompany her?"

The woman's presumed partner stepped forward but was cut off by the jester, who exclaimed, "Too bad I can't seem to find one in here!"

The crowd responded with uproarious laughter and subsequently filed into the elevator.

Upon entering the first subterranean level, the audience was led into a large room lined with various tools spattered theatrically in blood. In the middle of the room sat a chair with fake manacled attached to both of the arms. A new actor had emerged from the gloom, clad in 16th-century garb and holding what looked to be a giant wrench. The torturer commenced his introduction, punctuating his address with the stamping of his feet or the banging of the wrench against the wall to force a startle from the audience. He gesticulated to the crowd with his tool, ushering a young man with a Balkans accent into the chair despite his half-hearted protests. The actor struck a deal with the audience: if they could guess what the tool was used for correctly,

then he wouldn't use it on the participant. Unsurprisingly, the audience did not manage to spare the subject, so the torturer was awarded the ability to pantomime the tools' usage. He removed a hook from the wall, swiveling around to give his guests a full view of it. The audience ventured guesses on its usage ranging from being used to hook a mouth, a nostril, or an eye socket, but the grin that slowly spread across the actor's face indicated our blunder.

He requested for the man in the chair to spin around, placing his hands on the chair's arms and spreading his legs apart, leaving his backside exposed to the audience. The jester heartily joked about the hook traditionally being used for *other* orifices as he mimed its predestined usage. Blushing intensely, the participant left the stage early and returned to his teasing group of friends. At a loss for another participant, the torturer called upon the young girl who I had noted while waiting in the jail cell. She sat down in the chair, evidently unenthused to have been asked to participate.

The performer removed another tool from the wall, this time what looked to be primitive sheer. Again, the audience was incorrect in their guesses, leading the torturer to slowly turn towards the girl.

Placing the tool between her knees, he snapped the blades together, startling both the girl and the audience.

"This," he gestured to the mechanism, "is a chappy chopper. But depending on the prisoner, it could be adapted to be the clam shucker."

The audience did not laugh at this. Uncomfortable silence leached its way through the room. Nervously, the young girl fled the stage and returned to her family on the floor.

Still not yet finished, the torturer invited one last man up to the chair. He demonstrated the mechanics of the "chappy chopper" between his knees while he enunciated, "And I chop off one

inch . . . two-inch . . . three-oh there's none left." The jovial laughter from the audience was noticeably male-dominated as he called out, "This group needs more men!" and ushered us into the next section.

After descending through various other dark parts of Dutch history, although it was noticeably scant on the history portions, the group entered the chambers of the Council of Blood. A man in a red robe lazed upon a raised dais, holding a gavel and a scroll. As we entered the judicial chamber, the new performer embarked on his quest for any secret witches in the room. He pointed a long bony finger towards the blonde Irish woman who had previously been ushered into the elevator and requested for her to stand below and in front of him.

"You, madam, stand before me accused of the most egregious crime one can commit," he paused for dramatic effect. "You are a witch!"

Upon his prompting, the audience chanted, "Witch! Witch! Witch!" The woman on stage laughed nervously, twisting her hands in front of her and tossing glances to her partner across the room.

"You, my dear, are a witch, and you, therefore, must be executed," the judge continued. "But, because I am benevolent, I will offer you a choice: die by fire, die by drowning, or..." an oily smile slowly spread across his face, "do something to please me."

Being left no other choice, the woman requested the third option.

"Prove yourself not to be a witch by taking your clothes off and giving us a little dance," he drawled.

The woman didn't move, confused as to what she was supposed to do. The judge impatiently waved his hands at the audience, mimicking a conductor. He cajoled the crowd into

chanting, "Dance, witch, dance! Dance, witch, dance," to which he supplemented rhythmically, "Dance, dance, naked witchy dance" whilst banging his gavel.

The woman, still visibly addled, removed her sweatshirt stiffly, revealing a tank top. The physical result of the bit made it real and tangible, stopping the judge and his chorus abruptly.

Breaking character, the actor declared, "no, no, put your clothes back on. We're only joking." With a sweeping look over the audience and bantered, "sorry, fellas, if you want any more of that, you'll have to go around the corner," referring to the Red Light District that stood less than a ten-minute walk away.

The three separate groups of men, mostly British, made a collective noise of comradely approval, shoving each other's shoulders and making promises for the night to come.

The tour continued into 3 or 4 other historical sections, each inlaid with various layers of audience sexualization and humiliation. Finally, after an hour and forty-five minutes, the tour concluded back at street level.

I was intensely relieved to be rid of the stale stink of fog machines and drunk tourists, so I scurried past the picture of me sweating in the stocks selling for thirty euros and into the gift shop. Quite like in a horror movie, when you've let your guard down believing that you've survived all the horrors of the day, I was startled to a stop in my pursuit of the exit by an array of shot glasses that read "Don't call me a WITCH, I'm your WIFE" followed by the silhouette of a busty woman on a broom. I laughed humorlessly and exited the darkness of Dungeon, reemerging onto the bustling streets of Amsterdam, exponentially more grateful for the sunlight than I was two hours prior.

A CONFOUNDING EXPERIENCE

What the Spin Huis lacked in self-presentation, the Amsterdam Dungeon made up for in extravagance many times over. In searching for an alternative to the clinical and austere perspective of the City of Amsterdam's website, I found not a stroll through the darker parts of old Amsterdam as was advertised but rather an unrestrained male fantasy masquerading as haunted history. There was a puzzling dissonance in the presence of the Dungeon in Amsterdam: its location simultaneously contradicts the very nature of the Dutch identity as established in the previous chapter, yet it successfully uses the Dutch identity in the foreign imagination to attract clients. Truly a corporate enterprise, the Dungeon was designed by foreigners for foreigners, which partly explains why there was such an absence of Dutch customers and performers as well as Dutch history. What this does not explain, however, is the constant insistence on hypersexualization and enforcement of gender roles present throughout the show. In both the emasculation of male audience members and the sexualization and exploitation of female audience members, it is apparent that a portion of the Dungeon's entertainment is derived from acting out these forbidden desires.

DARK TOURISM AND THE PURSUIT OF A TRANSGRESSIVE EXPERIENCE

The Dungeon, acting as a dark tourist attraction, preys upon the transgressive nature of the city to create space for tourists to enact fantasies outside of a normative and acceptable sphere. Dark tourism is still new within academia, having acquired a multitude of increasingly vague definitions. Dark tourism in the current cultural zeitgeist connotes war and genocide tourism, urban exploring, or ghost hunting, but it can also define experiences that are more mundane and singular. In the article "Progress in dark tourism and thanatourism research: An uneasy relationship with heritage tourism," author Duncan Light enunciates a distinction between dark tourism, dark leisure, and thanatourism. One contested definition for dark tourism

is "an umbrella term for any form of tourism that is somehow related to death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy or crime."²² Dark leisure, on the other hand, is defined as "a form of leisure that is liminal and transgressive' with a particular focus on activities and practices that are deviant and/or taboo."²³ Thanatourism indicates the desire to travel for close encounters with death, and such is not as relevant to the scope of my paper as dark tourism and dark leisure.²⁴ The definitions of dark tourism and dark leisure feasibly encapsulate the Amsterdam Dungeon as it attracts customers because of its depictions of suffering and proximity to "deviant" activities.

At its primary level, the Dungeon is a showcase of death and suffering in the Netherlands, either through partial history or ghost stories. On a secondary level, it's also a place in which the audience and actors can enact taboo fantasies. Dark tourism is an activity that inherently functions on the margins of society, involving confrontation with things that are regularly evaded, including the realities of death, violence, and suffering. Author Dorina Buda argues that the pursuit of dark leisure "can illustrate a desire for the forbidden."²⁵ This transgressiveness can often allow for a positive and constructive rebellion against oppressive social norms, but it can also be used as tacit permission for misbehavior. Because of the subversive precedent set by the Dungeon regarding death and suffering, it also generates a space in which hyper-sexuality and exploitation can flourish. As seen in the frequent references to castration, small penises, and lack of "real manhood," the Dungeon might act as a space protected by transgressiveness that can be used to act out and process gender-related insecurity—a topic often avoided in normative society.

²² Duncan Light, "Progress in Dark Tourism and Thanatourism Research: An Uneasy Relationship with Heritage Tourism," *Tourism Management* 61 (August 2017): 277, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2017.01.011>.

²³ Light, "Progress in Dark Tourism and Thanatourism Research," 277.

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Dorina Maria Buda and David Shim, "'Real' and 'Normal' North Korea: On the Politics of Shining Light on the Darkness. Reply to: 'Shining Light on the Darkness. Placing Tourists within North Korean Tourism,'" *Current Issues in Tourism* 20, no. 4 (March 12, 2017): 443–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1032897>.

However, this also seems to be done at the expense of the audience, particularly the women in it. Because the Dungeon is socially protected under cover of dark leisure, it also offers an opportunity to affirm male insecurity through fantasies of power. The emasculation of male audience members, the restraint and pantomimed genital mutilation of a young girl, and the feigned abuse of authority to sexually exploit a powerless woman serve to fulfill the forbidden desires of both the actors and audience members. The Dungeon acts as a liminal space where the audience and actors are not subjected to the rules of normative society. As such, male supremacy is secured through the reifying of history as a space ubiquitously dominated by men at the expense of women. All of this occurs through the vehicle of Amsterdam's haunted history, namely the tales, whether real or imagined, that involve the torture and execution of female witches. These desires sit adjacent to the reputation Amsterdam has for liberalism regarding sex work within the foreign imagination.

THE DUNGEON: SITUATED IN A COUNTRY OF “TOLERANCE”

The Dungeon appeals to its audience by leveraging Amsterdam's global reputation for tolerance. As previously established, the dark tourism found in the Dungeon allows for the processing and participation in the taboo. Authors Philip R. Stone and Richard Sharpley, in their article "Deviance, Dark Tourism, and 'Dark Leisure'" articulate an "interrelationships between dark tourism [...] with notions of deviance, morality and boundaries of the taboo."²⁶ Further, they posit that deviant behavior or "death, sex, gambling, drug use, and violence are visually and textually offered for casual consumption" within many instances of dark leisure.²⁷ Stone and

²⁶ Philip R. Stone and Richard Sharpley, "Deviance, Dark Tourism and 'Dark Leisure'," in *Contemporary Perspectives in Leisure: Meanings, Motives and Lifelong Learning*, ed. Sean Gammon and Sam Elkington (Routledge, 2014), 56–57.

²⁷ Stone and Sharpley, "Deviance, Dark Tourism and 'Dark Leisure'."

Sharpley qualify that deviance is a socially constructed and entirely subjective reality but nonetheless use it to indicate activities that are typically disparaged by hegemonic Western society. As such, I will use the term in the same way. In its hyper-sexual commentary and recommendation of the Red Light District to male audience members, the Dungeon interlaces itself with Amsterdam's sexually tolerant reputation in order to appeal to foreign tourist customers.

The Netherlands' national identity is undergirded by the social and legal philosophy of "Dutch tolerance." Author Ybo Buruma writes in his article "Dutch Tolerance: On Drugs, Prostitution, and Euthanasia" that "without the notion of tolerance, we cannot understand Dutch culture."²⁸ He continues by stating that "Most Dutch citizens are not proud of it, but many tourists visit the Netherlands because of the *coffee shops* [places where you can legally buy weed] and that "The Amsterdam red-light district is almost as synonymous with Holland as windmills and tulips."²⁹ The Netherlands, for large swaths of its history, had identified with the pragmatic tolerance of various religions, racial identities, and businesses for the sake of economic benefit.³⁰ In the modern era, the Netherlands has positioned itself as a bastion for tolerating behavior such as patronizing sex workers and using drugs, and as such, has adopted it as an international reputation, attracting visitors and tourists with the express desire to experience this unique national identity.

This is also closely tied to the Netherlands' identification as a secular country. Despite Calvinism reigning as the Netherlands' most dominant religion, historically, the country politically functioned through its societal compartmentalization of religion.³¹ The functioning of

²⁸ Ybo Buruma, "Dutch Tolerance: On Drugs, Prostitution, and Euthanasia," *Crime and Justice* 35, no. 1 (January 2007): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1086/650185>.

²⁹ Buruma, "Dutch Tolerance," 88,96.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹

political society was predicated on the tolerance and coexistence of different religious factions.³² Academics such as Buruma claim that this compartmentalization gave rise to Dutch secularism in that there was a tangible transition from tolerating differences in religion to fully setting religion aside in pursuit of common interests.³³ A 2018 report by Statistics Netherlands stated that more than half (51%) of Dutch people 15 and over considered themselves non-religious.³⁴

In relation to dark leisure, Stone and Sharpley argue that “in an age of secularization and liberalization, new mediating institutions of the taboo are emerging, particularly within contemporary museology and the visitor economy.”³⁵ In other words, without the moral management of religious institutions, tourism and the patronage of museums can gauge how society views, interacts with and mediates what is taboo. As such, the Amsterdam dungeon can act as a lens through which we can see the moral conceptualization and inherent hypocrisy of the Netherlands' national identity from a foreign perspective.

THE HYPOCRISY OF DUTCH “TOLERANCE”

The Amsterdam Dungeon acknowledges Amsterdam's reputation and therefore curates its show to accommodate tourists seeking a transgressive experience through dark tourism and dark leisure. All of this is accomplished through the vehicle of Amsterdam's tolerant reputation. As such, the Netherlands' national identity of tolerating "deviancy", especially in relation to the expression of sexuality, fosters the liminally misogynistic atmosphere of the Dungeon. Despite this, the Dungeon is inherently incongruous with the Dutch national identity of sexual and secular exceptionalism as established in the previous section. Its presence within the tourist hot

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ “Over Half of the Dutch Population Are Not Religious,” *Statistics Netherlands*, October 23, 2018.

³⁵ Stone and Sharpley, “Deviance, Dark Tourism and 'Dark Leisure,'” 57.

spot of Amsterdam illuminates a subset of the Dutch national identity that condemns a specific type of "bad" tourism which in turn demonstrates the hypocrisy and inconsistency of "Dutch tolerance." With this, it is reasonable to assume the Dungeon attracts a similar clientele as the Red Light District does: groups of men, typically foreign, looking for "deviant" experiences involving violence, recreational drugs, and sex. Despite the legal allowance for some of these behaviors, the Dutch identity simultaneously condemns them due to its self-prescribed reputation of progressive advancement.

Proposed by the Amsterdam government, Project 1012 was an attempt to reformat the area of De Wallen, which houses the Red Light District, in order to crack down on crime and undesirable tourism. A document explaining its rationale and strategy begins by stating that "behind the exciting, unconventional, 'anything goes' image of the city centre lurks a different reality; a reality consisting of sex trafficking, forced prostitution, and money-laundering operations; a reality caused by the concentration of brothels, smart shops, coffee shops, souvenir shops, foreign exchange bureaux, gambling halls, minimarts, peep shows, massage parlours, and low-quality hotels, bars and restaurants."³⁶ Following this blurb is a picture labeled "stag party" in which two men, one of whom has a fur jacket, gold cane, and a champagne bottle, appear to be riding in a golf cart through the Red Light District. The implication is that they are foreign tourists visiting Amsterdam for a stag or bachelor party.³⁷ The brochure interlaces the presence of foreign tourists, likely of the same ilk that would patronize the Dungeon, with undesirable and criminal aspects of Amsterdam. It goes on to propose the implementation of high-end restaurants, luxury hotels, and museums within De Wallen and the removal of around 200 or 40% of the sex work windows.³⁸

³⁶ "1012 Under Construction" (Municipal Council of Amsterdam, 2011).

³⁷ "1012 Under Construction."

³⁸ *ibid*

In this section, the brochure writes that "A civilised society cannot ignore sex trafficking. Behind a smile on the Wallen there is often a lot of sorrow lurking."³⁹ In preserving its own identity as a "civilized society," Amsterdam vilifies foreign tourists and their patronage of sex workers. Under the guise of protecting sex workers from human trafficking and exploitation, it proposes closing shop windows and relocating the remaining shops to a peripheral area of the city. This performance of sexual exceptionalism contradicts "Dutch tolerance" in that it effectively denies and deprioritizes sex workers' ability to work. The article "Sex Work Realities Versus Government Policies: Meanings of Anti-trafficking Initiatives for Sex Workers in the Netherlands" by Maite Verhoeven interviews 21 Amsterdam sex workers about their conceptualization of government involvement in sex work. It summarizes that sex workers view themselves as highly autonomous professionals who have no desire for change within their careers.⁴⁰ Further, they find government anti-trafficking initiatives to be "misguided attention, false intentions, control, or discrimination."⁴¹ In cracking down on "bad tourism" in an attempt to protect sex workers, the city of Amsterdam effectively contradicts its reputation for "tolerance" in that it deters streams of revenue for sex workers and degrades their quality of life.

The Amsterdam Dungeon partly exists because of one subset of the Dutch national identity, yet it also acts as a lens through which we can see the contradictory and hypocritical elements of a sexually progressive national identity. This can also offer further insight as to why haunted history is scant within the Netherlands. Haunted history not only revives a historical memory that is discordant with Dutch sexual exceptionalism, but it also appeals to foreign tourists who are situated adjacently to the other subset of national identity of freedom and

³⁹ "1012 Under Construction."

⁴⁰ Maite Verhoeven, "Sex Work Realities Versus Government Policies: Meanings of Anti-Trafficking Initiatives for Sex Workers in the Netherlands," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 14, no. 4 (December 2017): 378, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-016-0264-7>.

⁴¹ Verhoeven, "Sex Work Realities Versus Government Policies."

tolerance, which is steadily falling out fashion in pursuit of a more refined air of progressivism. Haunted history, especially in regards to the depiction of women, can help tease apart the complicated and often contradictory nature of the country's own constructed national myth.

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SECTION 3: DE HEKSENWAAG

Having set aside multiple hours for the task, I set upon my mission to locate any and all instances of witchcraft in the art on display in the cavernous Rijksmuseum. Like some macabre gamemaster, I commissioned three friends who had accompanied me to assist in locating these paintings.

Starting at the top floor, intending to work our way down, we combed through every piece available, eyes lingering over potential witch symbology. We were disappointed time and again by the snakes that turned out to be the devil in an 18th-century portrait of Adam and Eve or the bird bones lit by candlelight that were merely a still life study. The next floor, which was also barren of what I had hoped to find, was filled instead with portraits of famous generals, decadent gilded furniture, and intricately recreated Dutch ships. Almost on the verge of defeat, we dove into the medieval art that resided on the lowest and final level of the museum. Freshly renewed with hope considering the relevance of the time period, our cadre scattered, rapidly rounding corners and speeding down hallways to be the first to find anything relating to witchcraft.

After thirty minutes of searching, I entered the remaining untouched room. I scanned the walls, confronted on all sides by oil paintings of tortured saints and oddly proportioned baby Jesuses. I lost hope believing that, like the rest of the museum, this portion would be as barren in regards to the Netherlands' dark history. Yet, in a small dark corner next to the exit sat three paintings. On one side was a woman clad in red holding the head of a bearded man on a platter,

on another side was a snake clinging to a nude Cleopatra, and finally, in the center sat a cacophony of witches.

A nude hag brandishing a staff sat regally in the forefront of the painting, hailed by the owls, satyr, and harpy creature at her feet. Across from her sat a harem of witches encompassing a goat with twisted horns. Above them, a flying naked woman sitting upon a horse skull was pulled by two roosters. Beyond her was an endless array of women surging from the sky on an array of animals armed with sticks and brooms.

After searching for hours for any thread of witchcraft in the Netherlands' largest art museum, I was finally rewarded with an endless array of satanic characters. Despite depicting a biblical scene, the painting *Saul and Witch of Endor* gave me a brief glance into the 16th-century imagination in regards to witches.⁴² The paintings on either side were from the same era and depicted Salome with the head of Saint John the Baptist and Cleopatra in the final throes of her death, both women known for their sinfully seductive qualities. It felt like I had stumbled onto a dark corner that allowed for the less-than-perfect depiction of women to shine through the gilded splendor that decorated the rest of the museum. This painting piqued my interest in what else I could find buried in the annals of Dutch history, so I set to work locating the witches of the past.

Leentje Willems, a 27-year-old girl from a small town in Utrecht Province, initially seemed to live an idyllic life. Married to a powerful and wealthy widower by the name of Jan Aertsz, Leentje was financially well off and had given birth to five out of Jan's nine total children. Unfortunately, Leentje was a Catholic who had migrated from another town. When a neighbor's child fell ill, her identity made her vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. It being the year 1647, this charge could mean the difference between life and death for Leentje. A slander trial was brought to court by Jan on behalf of Leentje against the Cornelis family, who had

⁴² Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen, *Saul and the Witch of Endor*, 1526, Oil on panel, 85.5cm × w 122.8cm, 1526.

leveled the original accusation. Unfortunately, the trial would have cost both families an enormous price, and by the time a formal conclusion would have been drawn, the court of public opinion might have already made a decision regarding Leentje's innocence. Taking the matter into her own hands, Leentje decided to make a pilgrimage to Oudewater in the hopes of petitioning a magistrate for a certificate. Amongst other, more violent methods, weighing someone was said to be an indicator of whether or not they were a witch because if one weighed less than was reasonable for their size, it implied the feasibility of flying a broom. Lauded for its trustworthy practices, accused witches flocked to Oudewater to receive fair weighings.⁴³

For this reason, I too was on my way to Oudewater, but instead of huddling in a horse-drawn cart, I was trying to discern which was the first class or second class coach on a Sprinter train bound for Utrecht. Arriving at my platform, I stopped to take in gulps of fresh cool air and soak in the first rays of sunshine I had seen in days. The bus to Oudewater idled by the curb as I sat and waited for it to start boarding. Sitting beside me was an elderly man with a paper sack of birdseed and a fedora, as well as a young couple who seemed a few euro cents short for the bus fare. All four of us boarded the bus, and we remained only the four of us for the rest of the journey. The old man got off five stops before me, and the young couple got off one stop before, leaving me to enter Oudewater alone.

The bus stop that I had stepped off onto was situated in the midst of a never-ending field of grass and dairy cows. The contrast between bustling Amsterdam and this small agrarian hamlet was stark, but it was also exciting. As I approached the town, I imagined that Oudewater had not visually changed much in the past 400 years: the infinite fields surrounding it were

⁴³ Jonathan Barry, Owen Davies, and Cornelia Osborne, eds., *Cultures of Witchcraft in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63784-6>.

probably used in the same way then as they are now, the canals had likely not changed, and the architecturally improbable stone buildings seemed to be out of a history book.

After strolling through the small, charming, and virtually empty town, I proceeded to the weigh house situated in the middle of Oudewater center. Upon entering the building, I was immediately confronted with a colossal wooden scale. The wooden bases had discolored indents worn into them due to years of use, and the ropes as thick as my arms were yellowed and frayed. Apart from the small gift shop at the front of the house, the rest of the building seemed like it had been untouched by time.

The museum portion resided upstairs while the weighings occurred on the first floor. Instructed to work from the top down, I ascended the stairs. I was welcomed by a sign that read, "Welcome to the Museum de Heksenwaag - the Witches Weighing - House. In this room, you can experience a number of audiovisual presentations. These films tell about the delusional beliefs in witchcraft and the prosecution of witches."⁴⁴

I, being the only person present in the museum, took a seat in the front row and began the short introductory video in English. As I sat, the room slowly began to fill up with other guests. The four sets of families waited on the periphery of the seating, tossing me irritated glances. I remained the only person sitting, so I gestured to a man and his granddaughter to the seats next to mine. He gave a polite wave in decline and said that he'd wait until I was done so they could start the dutch version of the commentary instead. By the time my video ended, the room was almost packed to capacity with Dutch families and their children. This stood in stark relief to the Amsterdam Dungeon, a space dominated by predominantly male tourists. This room instead contained people looking for themselves and their children to understand their own history.

⁴⁴ "Mooyman-Martens Room of the Museum de Heksenwaag" (Oudewater, the Netherlands, May 1, 2022).

The video was mainly an introduction to the history of the weigh house as well as the history of witchcraft in the Netherlands. The "delusional" and "paranoid" belief in witchcraft was attributed to fervent spiritual beliefs of Catholics. In concluding the video, pagan symbols and gothically dressed women flashed across the screen as the narrator noted that witches still exist today but in a different form than in medieval times. Being the lone foreigner watching the English version of the introduction, I scurried to the side of the room and apologetically interjected myself into the other video portions of the museum.

In the next video, a narrator discussed the presence of witches in the Netherlands' history. A map was drawn with the top in blue and the bottom swathed in dark red in order to draw a distinction between the Northern protestant Netherlands and the southern Spanish-controlled Netherlands in the 16th century. The narrator continued on to discuss the "dark and shameful stain on Dutch history" that was the Roermond witch trials. Sixty-three women and one man were burned alive in the span of one month due to accusations of witchcraft. This massacre was pinned entirely on the religious fervency of the dominant Catholic administration in Roermond. The map expanded to encompass all of Europe, marking areas with red spots of fluctuating size.⁴⁵

The narrator remarked, "Although the Netherlands experienced its fair share of witch trials, especially when occupied by the Spanish, other parts of Europe suffered far worse. 300 people were executed during a single witch trial in France, 800 in Cologne, Germany, and over 2,000 in Hungary. The Netherlands stood apart from its neighbors due to the outspoken opposition of lawyers, scholars, magistrates, and Protestant community leaders. Impressed by the Netherlands' critically discerning reputation, Charles V rewarded Oudewater with the privilege

⁴⁵ "Mooyman-Martens Room of the Museum de Heksenwaag."

of being the only certified weigh house in Europe. This proved to be a good decision considering no woman was ever found guilty of Witchcraft by the Heksenwaag."⁴⁶

After concluding, I relocated to the final screen, where I found a familiar name: Leentje Willems. The story was comparable to the one that had led me to the Heksenwaag, except for the absence of her husband Jan and the depiction of Leentje as a young teenage girl. The dramatized reenactment of the story picked up where mine had left off: After her accusation, Leentje begged the magistrates of Oudewater to weigh her. Initially rebuked, she tried again, pleading that she feared for her life if she did not receive formal clearance from the Weigh House. Her request was finally accepted. After removing all her clothes to prove the efficacy of her weight, Leentje stepped onto the wooden scales and was found to be proportionally accurate to her size, securing her safety and social reputation.⁴⁷

After finishing the exhibit, I returned to the scale room on the first floor. I was thwarted in my attempt to leave the museum by the curator, who declared it suspicious that I was trying to escape the weighing. I laughed and agreed to step onto the scales.

The boards creaked under my weight, and the pulley positioned above me squealed with the movement of the rope. All the patrons of the museum stood around me, emulating the public spectacle of weighing a witch. I knelt on the wood, my knees fitting perfectly into the brown divots that had been worn smooth by all the people who had knelt there before me. I felt a little reverent, kneeling in the same way women like Leentje had hundreds of years earlier, waiting for words that would either condemn them to death or be their salvation.

I was, unsurprisingly, found to not be a witch. I stood up and vacated the scales, making room for the gaggles of children behind me. Walking through the gift shop to pick up my weigh

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ *ibid*

house certificate, I found a fascinating array of wares. Despite the chronic condemnation of spirituality and vaguely comedic implication of people still believing in witchcraft present in the informational video, tarot cards, crystals, and pendulums sat for sale next to the counter. The gift shop was adorned with books on Wiccan practices and tiny caldrons inlaid with witchy symbols.

In anticipation of my long journey home, I stopped at a local cafe, engrossed in thought about the museum I had just vacated. I recorded my thoughts as the waitress brought me hot chocolate and apple pie. After I had paid and was making my way to the exit, I noticed the name of the restaurant on the door: the Hex Cafe. Finding immense charm in the homage to the town's source of fame, I commenced my journey back to Amsterdam.

PRIDE IN THE HEKSENWAAG

In stark contrast to both the Spin Huis and The Amsterdam Dungeon, the Heksenwaag is a point of pride for both the town of Oudewater and the Netherlands as a whole. Listed on the Netherlands' official travel guide website as a top museum to visit and included for free with a national museum card, it is apparent that the Weigh House is a revered part of Dutch history. Further supporting this conjecture is the presence of Dutch people in the museum itself. In comparison, no one was at the Spin Huis, and only foreigners were at the Dungeon. In the Heksenwaag, much of the information was only in Dutch, and I appeared to be the only foreigner present. Despite the Heksenwaag's discussion of unpalatable topics that contradict the national identity of progress and advancement, it is nonetheless a site of pride for the Netherlands. This is likely due to its distinction as a heritage site rather than a dark tourist site.

The Heksenwaag is advertised as a piece of living Dutch history and acts as a marker for the Netherlands' social progress despite its dark history. In the essay "Interpreting place and past

in narratives of Dutch heritage tourism" by Susan Broomhall and Jennifer Spinks, academic David Uzzell is quoted as saying that if "museums and interpretive centers see their role as one of telling people about place, the past and their position in both, then they should also be about enhancing people's sense of identity with place and the past."⁴⁸ As discussed previously, the Netherlands has built a national identity around its reputation for tolerance and progressiveness. The Heksenwaag, although an homage to the historical realities of matricide in medieval Europe, also stands as a monument to Dutch exceptionalism. Broomhall and Spinks write that "tourism offers an opportunity to access the public presentation of histories."⁴⁹ Although the Heksenwaag is more than likely accurate in its portrayal of its own history, it nonetheless is the last remaining weighing scale from this time period. Other scales in the Netherlands were used to weigh witches but were tampered with in order to officially condemn the accused witch. The Heksenwaag remains standing while others have disappeared into history because it promotes a public presentation of history to both foreigners and locals that support a Dutch narrative of progress. This progress hinges on the savior of women.

SECULAR SAVIORISM

The recurring theme of the Netherlands being a place of refuge for women coming from conservative religious backgrounds is evident in the presentation of the Heksenwaag. In its video presentations, the Weigh House repeatedly emphasized the important role of the increasingly secular political leadership of northern Holland in the savior of women. The presentation highlighted the opposition of historically secular and highly educated careers such as doctors, lawyers, and scholars to the persecution of Witches. It also focused on the migration of women

⁴⁸ Susan Broomhall and Jennifer Spinks, "Interpreting Place and Past in Narratives of Dutch Heritage Tourism," *Rethinking History* 14, no. 2 (June 2010): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642521003710854>.

⁴⁹ Broomhall and Spinks, "Interpreting Place and Past in Narratives of Dutch Heritage Tourism," 281.

from the southern catholic parts of the Netherlands and other parts of Europe to Oudewater in order to get their highly sought-after certificate. These movements are undoubtedly historically accurate, but it nonetheless acts as a rhetorical tool to position the Netherlands as a place for foreign religious women to find salvation from persecution.

In Sarah Bracke's essay "From 'saving women' to 'saving gays': Rescue narratives and their dis/continuities," she begins by enunciating the framing of Dutch feminism in opposition to foreign religion by quoting Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. In an interview with a Dutch Newspaper in 2002, Fortuyn is recorded as saying,

I want a very strong emancipation policy for Islamic women in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In particular, the highly-educated Turkish and Moroccan girls get a sound thrashing from me. They leave their sisters in the lurch. Take an example from our feminists in the seventies. [...] I expect the same from those Muslim girls, instead of putting on a headscarf as some kind of protest. Take it off and make sure your sisters do not have only one right of existence: the kitchen.⁵⁰

Bracke notes of this speech that it not only frames feminism as inherent to the culture and history of the Netherlands but that it also conflates religious observance through the use of a headscarf as antithetical to the Dutch brand of feminism.⁵¹ Fortuyn advertises the Netherlands as a location in which women from "oppressive" religious backgrounds can find salvation from persecution, but in doing so, it is required that they abandon their religious roots, namely in the disposal of their hijabs. The Heksenwaag is not as outright in its condemnation of religion, allowing for some nuance in its presentation of religious participation in the witch trials. Nonetheless, it works to build a national ethos of progressive salvation for immigrants to the country. As seen in the quote above, this sentiment is used as a rhetorical means of discrimination against the presence of what is perceived as a "backward" religious presence in the Netherlands. This

⁵⁰ Sarah Bracke, "From 'Saving Women' to 'Saving Gays': Rescue Narratives and Their Dis/Continuities," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 2 (May 2012): 238, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506811435032>.

⁵¹ Bracke, "From 'Saving Women' to 'Saving Gays,'" 238.

sensibility, although built on a foundation of supposed progressive protections for women, is simultaneously entirely contradictory to "tolerance" as it is used to homogenize the religiosity of the country. Ironically, the Heksenwaag rhetorically condemns organized religion for its own nationalistic gain, yet it also subtly promotes neo-spirituality through its gift store commodities.

NEO-SPIRITUALITY IN SECULAR SPACES

The Netherlands, despite identifying as a highly secularized culture, nonetheless permits and praises the presence of modern neo-spirituality. In the essay "Seeking Guidance from the Spirits: Neo-Shamanic Divination Rituals in Modern Dutch Society," author Hanneke Minkjan details the growth and reasoning behind the recent explosion of alternative spirituality in the Netherlands. Neo-shamanism, neo-spirituality, or alternative spirituality is a "way of exploring the unknown in order to elicit answers to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding."⁵² This can include finding answers to questions about the world, but more often than not, it's about finding answers in regards to oneself. Practices to achieve this can include using tarot cards, guided meditations, shamanic rituals, pendulums, and much else. Minkjan attributes the rapid growth of alternative spirituality in the Netherlands to the departure of organized religion, which offered comfort to those who experience existential anxiety.⁵³ As such, in order to mitigate the lack of guidance and support from religious institutions, people have begun to turn to unorthodox means of spiritual satisfaction.⁵⁴ Minkjan also notes that participation in these neo-spiritual practices is dominated by "highly educated middle-aged women" who are predominantly white.⁵⁵ The justification for these demographics, according to Minkjan, is that women have historically been responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of their

⁵² Hanneke Minkjan, "Seeking Guidance from the Spirits: Neo-Shamanic Divination Rituals in Modern Dutch Society," *Social Compass* 55, no. 1 (March 2008): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768607086498>.

⁵³ Minkjan, "Seeking Guidance from the Spirits," 56-57.

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ *ibid*

friends and family and dominate care professions.⁵⁶ Since the decline of organized religion, a once communal space for spiritual support, they now desire a collectivist space apart from organized religion in which they too can be cared for and seek spiritual support. This rationalizes the presence of neo-spirituality in the Netherlands, but it does not account for the double standard experienced by practicing women from traditionally non-white faiths.

The rising acceptance of neo-spirituality in the Netherlands is indicative of the hypocritical condemnation of non-white religions. As previously seen through examples of anti-muslim rhetoric propagated by Dutch politicians, Muslim women are held in opposition to white Dutch women. Muslim women's highly visible performance of religion and gender, for example, through the use of a veil, acts as a target for nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric, while the movement of sexual liberation in the 70s is lauded for its positive effect on Dutch culture. Adam Possamaï, in his article "Cultural Consumption of History and Popular Culture in Alternative Spiritualities," explains that alternative spirituality is widely accepted because it acts as a "consumer product in contemporary society" through its relationship to "neo-liberal capitalism and globalized consumer culture."⁵⁷ Further, he writes that this commodification is partly achieved in its repackaging and adaptation of non-white cultures⁵⁸. As seen in the Heksenwaag, religiosity was almost ubiquitously dismissed in the museum portion, but spirituality was instead sanctioned by the commodification of spiritual goods within the gift shop. Spirituality, set in opposition to religiosity, is acceptable within the Netherlands because of its ability to participate in the neoliberal marketplace. Moreover, it is predominantly practiced by white Dutch people. These two attributes mark neo-spirituality as a non-threat to the Dutch

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ Adam Possamaï, "Cultural Consumption of History and Popular Culture in Alternative Spiritualities," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no. 2 (July 2002): 198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146954050200200203>.

⁵⁸ Possamaï, "Cultural Consumption of History and Popular Culture in Alternative Spiritualities," 198-200.

cultural sensibilities of neoliberalism, women's freedom, and cultural whiteness. While other non-white religions that are not easily commodified are rhetorically situated in opposition to Dutch culture.

ADAPTING CONTRADICTORY IDENTITIES

The Heksenwaag, much like the Spin Huis and Amsterdam Dungeon, reveals new elements of the Dutch national ethos. In its saviorism of foreign religious women, condemnation of religiosity, yet its sanctioning of spirituality, it further demonstrates the fallacies present in the Netherlands' self-conceptualization as a secularly and sexually exceptional country. Despite its admittedly exceptional history in regards to witchcraft, the Netherlands nonetheless stands to expand its conceptualization of women's participation in foreign religions. Without an adapted perspective on the freedoms of religious women, the Netherlands stands to entirely negate its tolerant identity.

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CONCLUSION

In the quickly chilling dark, a friend and I stood underneath a street lamp, waiting for the ghost tour to begin. The cool wind tore stray strands of hair out of my bun, and I nestled further into my jacket. The unseasonably cold air smelled of autumn and reminded me of past Halloweens in Salem, Massachusetts.

A man in a long dark jacket and a flamboyant cane made his way to the center of the group. A hush fell, and the crowd's attention turned toward our tour guide. After a beat of silence, he began:

"Welcome all to the Amsterdam Ghost Walk. Tonight you will hear tales of ghosts, demons, and witches from years long past. I promise every tale I tell you is completely true. You can choose to believe me or not, but all the stories I have collected have a historical basis from archives, newspapers, and primary sources. But be warned: our group of fourteen might suddenly turn into more depending on whether or not a spirit deigns to join us." He glanced around, continuing, "Members of my party in the past have been known to feel light-headed, ill, or sometimes panicky. Please, if this happens, notify me. There's nothing *I* can do about it," the crowd laughed, "but I at least want to know . . . for research purposes."

At that conclusion, he began walking, and the rest of the group followed. My friend and I exchanged silent amused glances at his eccentricity. I might not have believed his stories, but I definitely trusted his belief in them.

As we walked down Rokin street and past the Dungeon, we began to approach the area of the Spin Huis. I smugly turned to my friend, expressing my pre-existing expertise on the subject. When we arrived, our tour guide embarked on the history of the Spin Huis, but interestingly enough, he abstained from recounting the famous ghost story and instead only talked about its gruesome real-world history.

At the end of his speech, he turned to look at me, remarking, "...and now today, after all that suffering, it's a school of Sociology" he bobbed his head in what looked like acknowledgment.

I smiled, pleased that he remembered the research I was doing. After a split second, I turned to my friend with wide eyes and whispered, "I never told him I'm studying sociology *or* the Spin Huis."

She rolled her eyes at my naivete, scoffing, “there was exactly a one in fourteen chance he was going to make eye contact with anyone in the audience and say that exact same thing.” We laughed together and carried on with the tour. In its finale, our tour guide brought us to the snow-covered cemetery adjacent to the Nieuwekerk or New Church. Complete darkness descended as he began. His voice echoed off of the stones and reverberated through the empty square. As his story's tension ascended, the tiny chihuahua housed in a fellow audience member's purse began to whimper, emitting squeaky barks at an unseen foe. Just as his story hit its climax, the church bells rang out, startling my heart into a staccato rhythm. The bell's deep rhythm continued to wash over us, stopping on the final words of our guide.

The audience erupted in applause. My adrenaline was still pumping from the story, and I was deeply in awe of the stories I had heard. With the strange omniscience in regards to my research and the mystical atmosphere of his final story, a small part of me, left uncorrupted by cynicism, wondered if he might, in fact, be telling the truth about his ghost tours. Maybe people really did connect with something bigger while wandering the city streets alongside him. After allowing the crowd to disperse, I made my way over to the guide to inquire about his sources and express my gratitude for the tour.

He looked at me with a severe gaze and said flatly, “Yeah, no. I made all that stuff up. Total fabrication.”

What, I thought.

He must have noticed my expression because he amended, "I'm a historian by trade. I'm getting my Ph.D. in history at the University of Amsterdam. This," he gestured at the now absent crowd, "is more like theater for me."

I was too impressed with his storytelling skills to truly be hurt, but it made me think: Is truth at all relevant to the analysis of haunted history?

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As disappointed as I was in the cynical perspective of our tour guide, I was nonetheless grateful to have received a truthful response from him. If it weren't for his honesty, it's quite possible that I would have included those stories as sources in this paper. Even so, it made me wonder if the sources I had included were really any different than what was provided to me on the ghost tour.

In reality, they likely weren't based on historical truth. The ghost story of the Spin Huis not only changed from source to source, but it was completely absent from other sources, including, most ironically, an Amsterdam ghost tour. As far as my research could tell, there was no record of a priest's involvement in the Spin Huis. It was highly plausible that the story existed only in the foreign imagination of tourists and expats.

The Dungeon, as a place destined for overinflation and fabrication, was unsurprisingly not a historically accurate source. The Blood Council, a main portion of the show, was not used to persecute witches but rather to punish rebellious protestants during the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands. Even when googling the "chappy chopper," no informational resources were available beyond what was present on the Dungeon's website, and even then, there was never a reference to its usage on vaginal anatomy.⁵⁹

Even the Heksenwaag, a place with an exponentially more historical ethos, depended on occasional speculation. It was repeatedly emphasized that "allegedly" or "according to legend," Charles V declared the weigh house the only official witch weighing spot in Europe. Moreover,

⁵⁹ "7 of Our Favourite Torture Devices," *The London Dungeon* (blog), April 27, 2017, <https://www.thedungeons.com/london/information/blog/7-of-our-favourite-torture-devices/>.

most of the records kept in the weigh house have been lost to time, so even the story of Leentje Willems is subject to inaccuracy.

Nonetheless, these lapses in historical accuracy do not change the reality of how they were presented or received or what they implied about the Dutch national identity. Even with gaps in knowledge, the City of Amsterdam's website nonetheless crafts a historical narrative of the Spin Huis that supports an identity of sexual exceptionalism at the expense of foreign entities. The Dungeon's mere presence demonstrates the juxtaposition between Amsterdam's identity in the foreign imagination and Amsterdam's self-conceptualization as a city of refined progressivism. This illuminates the hypocrisy in the city's secular and "tolerant" identity in regards to the treatment of sex workers. Lastly, the presentation of the Heksenwaag's history exemplifies the xenophobic undercurrents of secular saviorism and unequal religious privileging present in Dutch society. Regardless of its historical accuracy, the physical remnants of haunted history can still be used to decipher numerous contradictions and inconsistencies. The role of women in the country's presentation of haunted history demonstrates incongruities and hypocrisies present in the Netherlands' progressive, tolerant, and sexually and secularly exceptional national identity.

Indeed, the fictionalized qualities of haunted history might be necessary to the process of dissecting national myth construction. In the way that haunted history is informed—but not entirely controlled—by canonical history, neither are national identities. The myths and legends regarding women, or the pointed absence of them, are used rhetorically to support and propagate a nationalist ideal of the Netherlands, but as I have argued, these identities are occasionally found to be incongruous with the behavior of Dutch social and political entities. In this way, the piecemeal production of haunted history—the inclusion of lies to make the story work or the

pieces of information left out for convenience—mirrors the construction of national identities. Because of this, I believe it necessary to continue studying the construction of nationalism through lenses that might often be overlooked due to their speculative or historically adjacent qualities. Looking at the presentation of history, rather than history itself, through vehicles such as museology, dark leisure, or tourism can expose rhetoric and propaganda that we might otherwise be desensitized to.

National myths left unanalyzed and uncensored lead to a blind trust in people and systems that do not inherently possess altruistic intentions. Phillip McArthur, in a forward for William A. Wilson's article entitled "Folklore, Nationalism, and the Challenge of the Future," writes that "the danger lies in how people can be persuaded by folklore to participate in acts of domination and aggression, or minimally, persuaded to essentialize difference and imagine themselves in superior positions."⁶⁰

I do not deny that the Netherlands has made strides in the creation and preservation of women's rights, especially in comparison to other countries such as my own. Nonetheless, as I have discussed throughout this paper, these national promises of progressivism are proven to be inconsistent with xenophobic inclinations towards immigrants (namely Muslim) in the Netherlands as well as the treatment of sex workers. Without thorough analysis and critique, it is easy to settle for the empty promises of a "tolerance." Haunted history, however small a part it plays in Dutch culture, is a tool through which we can discover inconsistencies in the commitments to progress tacitly made by this national myth. It is a way in which we can find clarity and hold nations accountable for the promises they have the potential to, one day, truly uphold.

⁶⁰ Phillip McArthur, "Folklore, Nationalism, and the Challenge of the Future," in *Marrow of Human Experience, The: Essays on Folklore by William A. Wilson*, ed. Jill Terry Rudy and Diane Call (Utah State University Press, 2009), 142, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt4cgkmk>.

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