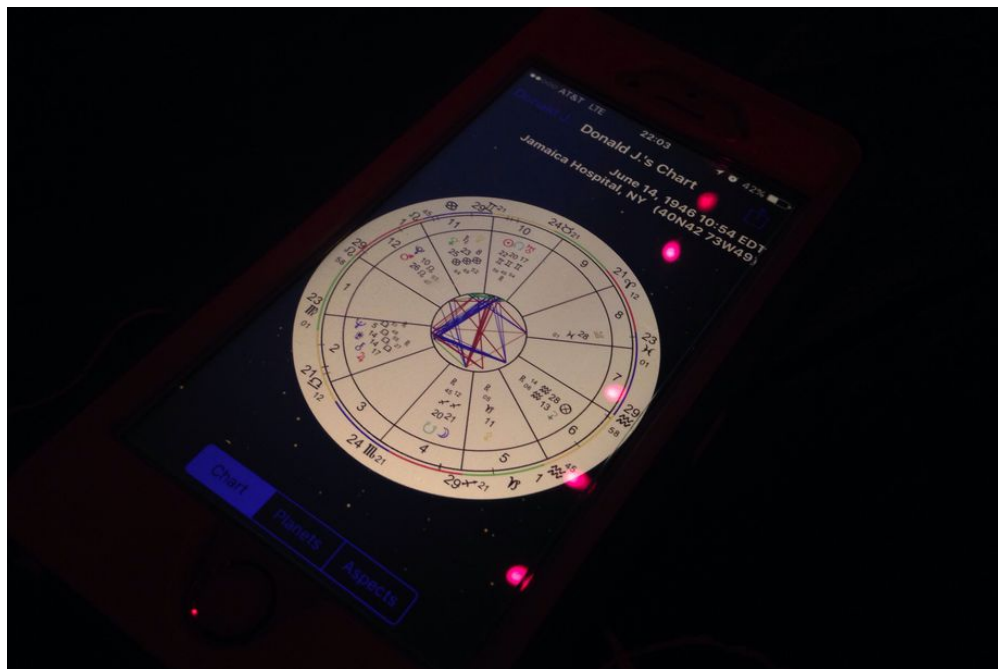




I spent the eclipse with Asheville's witches

For some witches, the eclipse was about banishing negativity. For others, it was about "overthrowing princes."

Updated by Tara Isabella Burton | @NotoriousTIB | tara.burton@vox.com | Aug 21, 2017, 6:10pm EDT



Donald Trump's astrological chart

ASHEVILLE, North Carolina — “Do you want to do something ethically challenging?” asks Queen Lady Passion. She’s smiling.

The solar eclipse, she reminds me, will be at its strongest at 2:38 pm. We have to be ready.

She's prepared the ingredients for the spell: a bottle of rubbing alcohol, a Stop Trump postcard, a cigarette lighter. Her partner, the High Priest Diuvei, who is out of town, left behind the spell paper: a computer printout of the tarot cards for the wheel of fortune — for the overthrowing of princes, Passion tells me. The printout also includes cards for the Hanged Man, of various magical sigils representing the astrology of today's eclipse, and of Donald Trump's astrological Trump.

"Some witches want to bind Trump. I want to do more than bind him," Passion says. She pauses, for a second, so I know exactly what she means.

Queen Lady Passion (her title denotes her status within Gardnerian Wicca) has little interest in soft talk, in what she calls "sweetness and light." In her mid-50, with an uncanny resemblance to Goldie Hawn by way of Stevie Nicks, Passion — High Priestess of the Gardnerian Wiccan **Oldenwilde Coven** in Asheville — sees witchcraft as a calling: the political as necessary for magical influence as the personal. Any "real witch," she says, would feel the same way.

For Passion, the practice of witchcraft is always about resistance. She recalls being estranged from her adoptive, deeply Christian family in Texas when she first starting demonstrating what she calls psychic abilities at the age of 5, verbalizing the hypocrisies of her Christian neighbors. "My adoptive mother dropped my hand — and that's the last time she ever touched me." When she was a teenager, she says, her adoptive mother had her put in a mental institution — "the nut hut," Passion calls it — for practicing magic. "I had to choose magic or madness," she tells me, more than once. "So I chose magic."

She spent 25 years practicing an eclectic form of witchcraft, including time spent as a bruja in a Hispanic community in Texas. She's spent two decades practicing the more rigidly defined Gardnerian Wicca in Asheville, where her coven is, she says, the oldest in town, and where she's launched a number of political campaigns from issues ranging from saving the **town's magnolia trees** to

defending the rights of nurses to criticize doctors to patients' families. She co-wrote a **well-regarded spell book** with her romantic partner. Her daughter—currently in prison — is dealing with schizophrenia (“She didn’t know how to manage her power,” she says). She lost her sight in 2012, a result of complications following spinal surgery for Arnold-Chiari syndrome. “I wish I didn’t have so many windmills to tilt against,” Passion says as she smokes the last of her latest cigarette.

But she does. There’s the personal — getting custody of her granddaughter, currently adopted, as she was, by religious Christians (“they think like Trump,” she says, decrying their Facebook posts). And there’s the political: not just fighting against Donald Trump, but “everything he stands for — that whole mentality” of sexism, of racism, “of doddering old fools.”

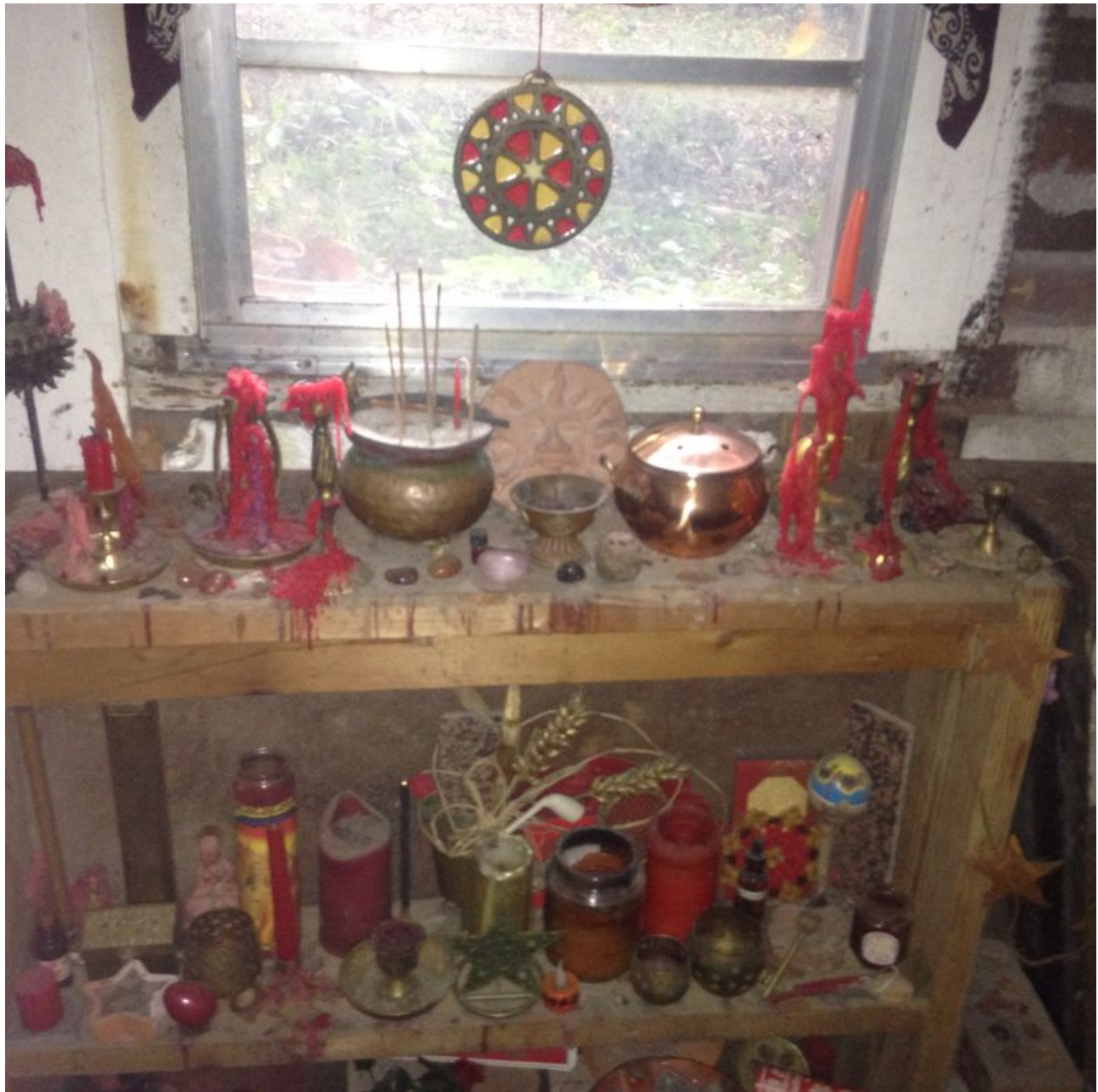
Her spell isn’t just against Trump, she tells me. It’s against everyone who thinks like him. And what could be more perfectly symbolic of that resistance than the sun — a symbol of male power in many occult traditions— being blockaded by the feminine moon?

She takes me out to the garden and leads me to her cauldron. We pour in half a bottle of rubbing alcohol. We create a sacred circle. Passion calls on Hecate and other spirits who preside over east, south, west, and north respectively to open a space between worlds. As the eclipse crosses the sky, the light fades. Passion repeatedly pauses so that I can update her as to the progress of the sun; the cicadas, thinking it is nighttime, begin to chirp louder. It gets cold.

Then Passion kneels. At each cardinal direction, she addresses a different element. At south, for fire, she demands that Trump’s bolt — his power — “miss its mark.” At west, traditionally associated with water, she calls upon the power of human empathy to overcome hatred, and exhorts “the people to rise up and drown you.” She condemns and damns him, repeatedly. She asks that his tongue may rot, that this “bloated, fat fuck” will get what’s coming to him.

Then at 2:38 pm, when the afternoon sky looks like night, the postcards — and the spell paper — are set ablaze with the help of rubbing alcohol. The fire explodes,

and more than once I have to take the stick we've been using as a poker from Passion before it sets her aflame too.



One of Queen Lady Passion's altars. Facing south, this one is devoted to the element of fire.

We sit in silence for a while. Passion is shaking.

"I'm exhausted," she says.

I jokingly suggest that we should check the news, see if it worked.

Passion doesn't laugh.

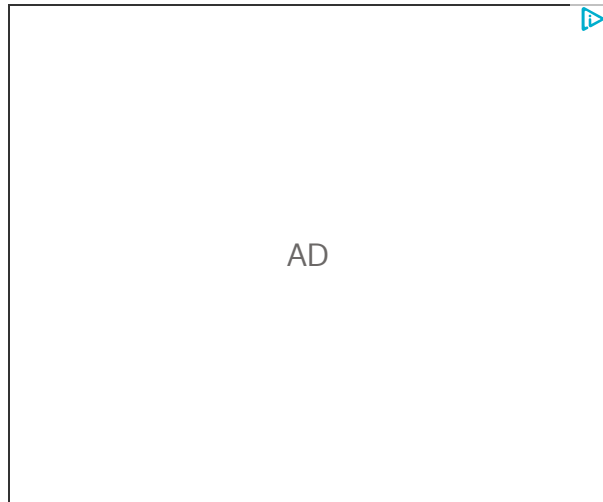
"It worked," she says.

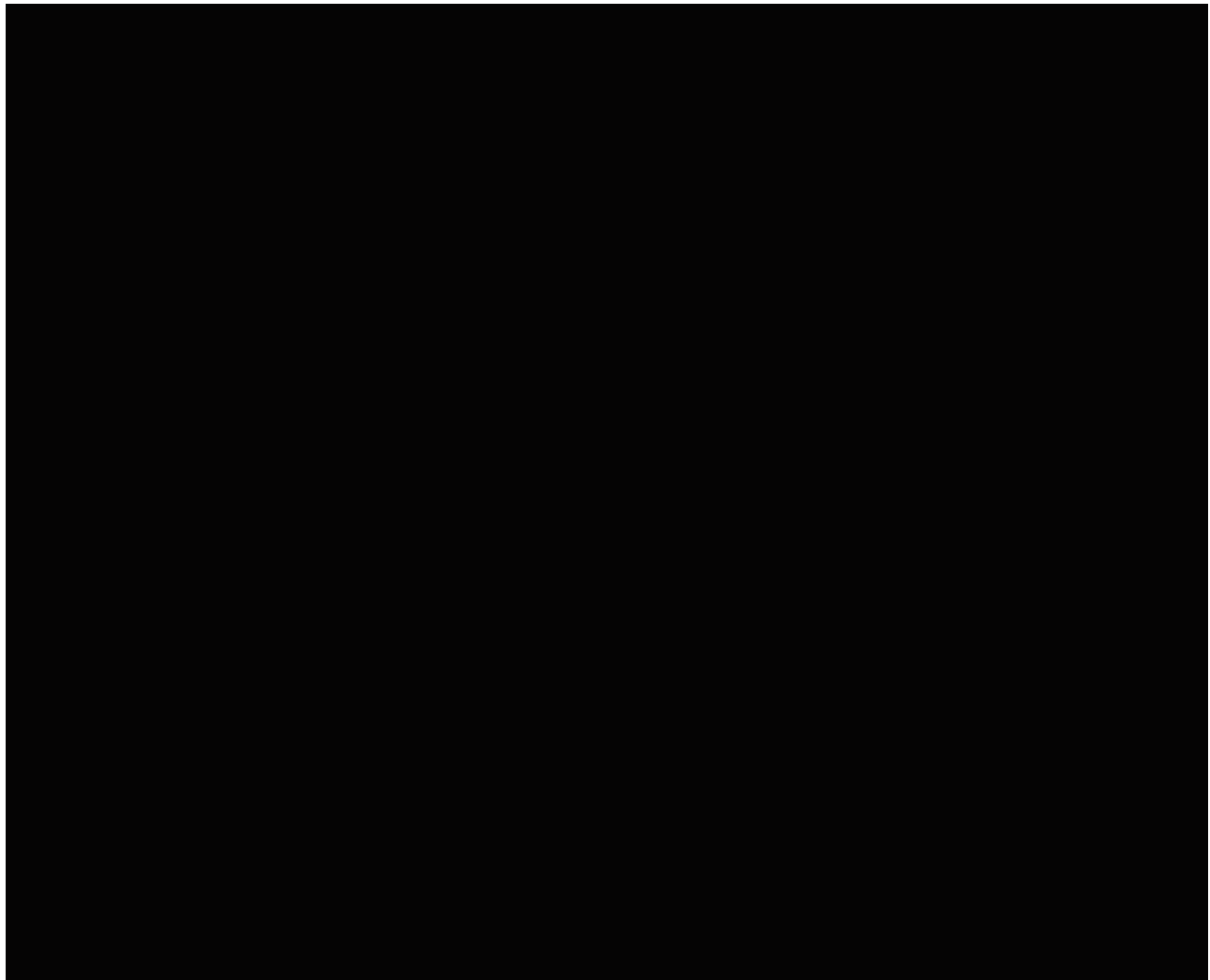
The solar eclipse is a religiously significant event — especially for witches

Monday's solar eclipse has been significant for a number of different faith communities. Anne Graham Lotz, daughter of iconic televangelist Billy Graham and a televangelist in her own right, published a blog post characterizing the eclipse as a sign of **God's coming judgment on the world**. Meanwhile, Religion News Service's Emily Miller **has reported on** the prevalence of YouTube videos and online posts devoted to apocalyptic heralding of the "end times."

But for those who identify as "witches" — a broad umbrella term that can include anything from practitioners of the formal religion of Gardnerian Wicca to a more eclectic "mix and match" approach to pagan and occult traditions — the rare and dramatic nature solar eclipse is a call to arms both personal and political. Activists like the members of the #MagicResistance, who use carefully structured, symbolically loaded rituals to **"bind" Donald Trump** (often represented by whimsical items like a Cheeto or a carrot), see in the solar eclipse an opportunity to direct their spiritual energy toward an administration they see as the embodiment of evil.

In Asheville, North Carolina, that activism seems more urgent than ever.





Isabelle Barron's car altar.

The college town of 90,000 is a liberal enclave in a deeply red state. “It’s a giant ‘fuck you’ to the state of North Carolina’s [conservative] policies as a whole,” says Isabelle Barron — a nanny, doula, and self-identified witch, who’s transformed the dashboard of her Subaru Outback into a makeshift altar. Unlike liberal towns in places like California, Barron points out, Asheville — with its activist streak, its affinity for New Age spirituality— has something to fight against, especially since the last election. Its counterculture has something real to combat again.

“Everyone here either is a mountain bro or into witch stuff” Barron quips.
“All the bathroom signs here are like,

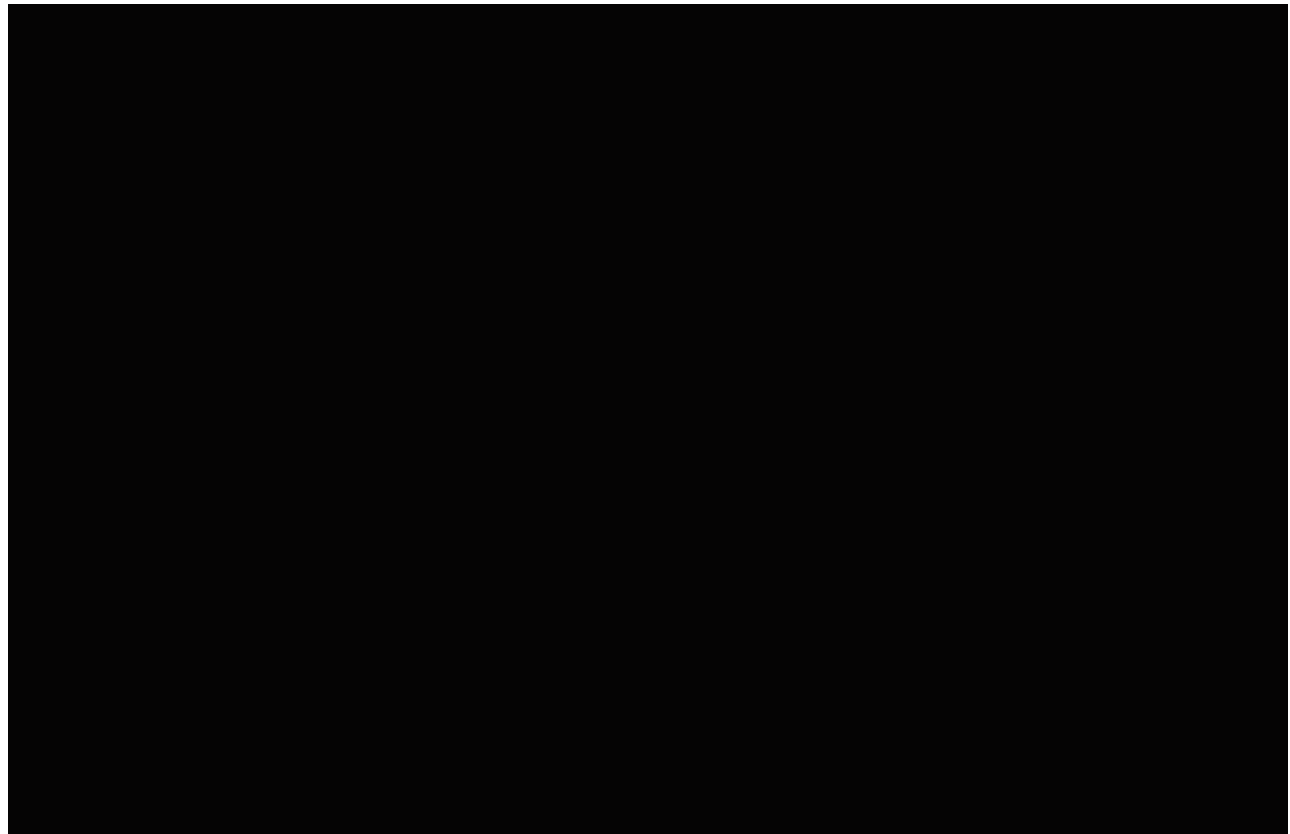
'liberated from the gender binary!": a significant gesture in a state at the heart of **controversial legislation** over whether transgender individuals should be allowed to use the bathrooms of the gender they identify with.

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The looming eclipse, which hit 98 percent totality in Asheville, has only intensified that sense of urgency.

To learn more, I met Micha Maiello, an Asheville astrologer in training, in the garden of a cocktail bar in West Asheville whose outdoor walls are covered in political graffiti (highlights include "Fuck Trump" and "Punch All Nazis"). Michael explained that this eclipse in particular is seen by many in the witch community as relating specifically to Donald Trump.

"The last time we had a solar eclipse like this [i.e., whose path of totality was **exclusively on US soil**] in America was in 1776," Maiello pointed out — the year of the nation's founding. Plus, he added, pulling up Trump's astrological chart from where he has it saved in his phone, the eclipse occurs at the 29th degree of the astrological sign of Leo: a sign associated with Trump because his rising sign — the sign on the horizon when he was born — was also in Leo, at 29 degrees. "It's almost too perfect."

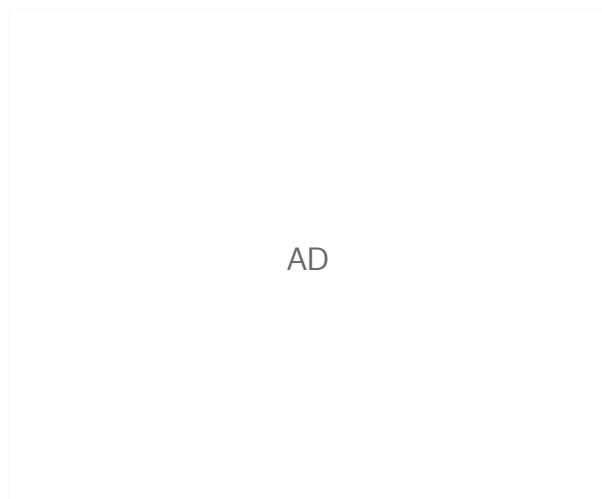


Anti-Trump graffiti in an Asheville bar.

It's easy to be cynical, Maiello said, but then again, if the moon — not even a planet — can affect bodies of water on Earth, its gravitation pull creating tides, why should it be so inconceivable that the movement of other planets affects human beings?

But Maiello himself wasn't planning a formal political ritual. "I'm going to go to the woods with my sister," he said, "do a fire ritual" — something low-key. He planned to use the eclipse as a chance for renewal; to get rid of his own baggage, to reassess his life.

For many in the witch community, the eclipse is

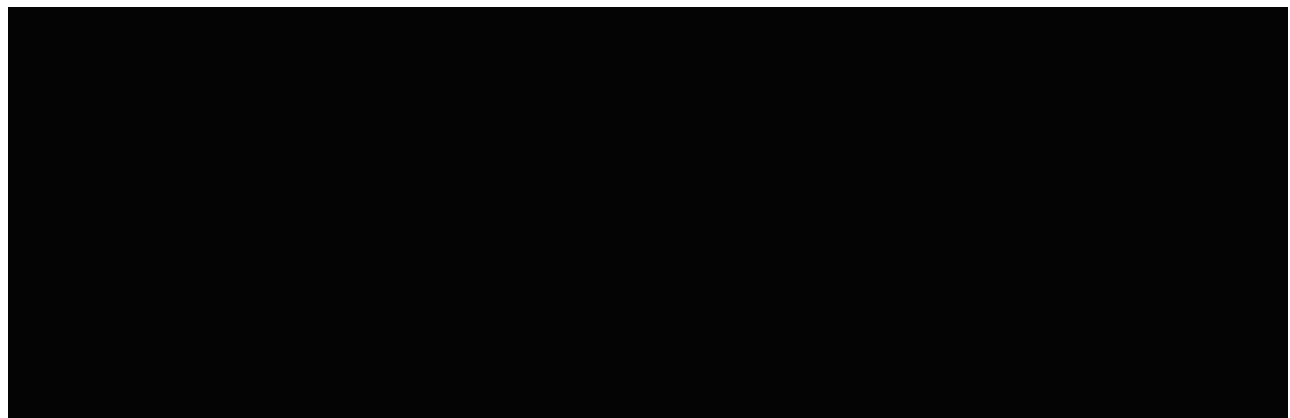


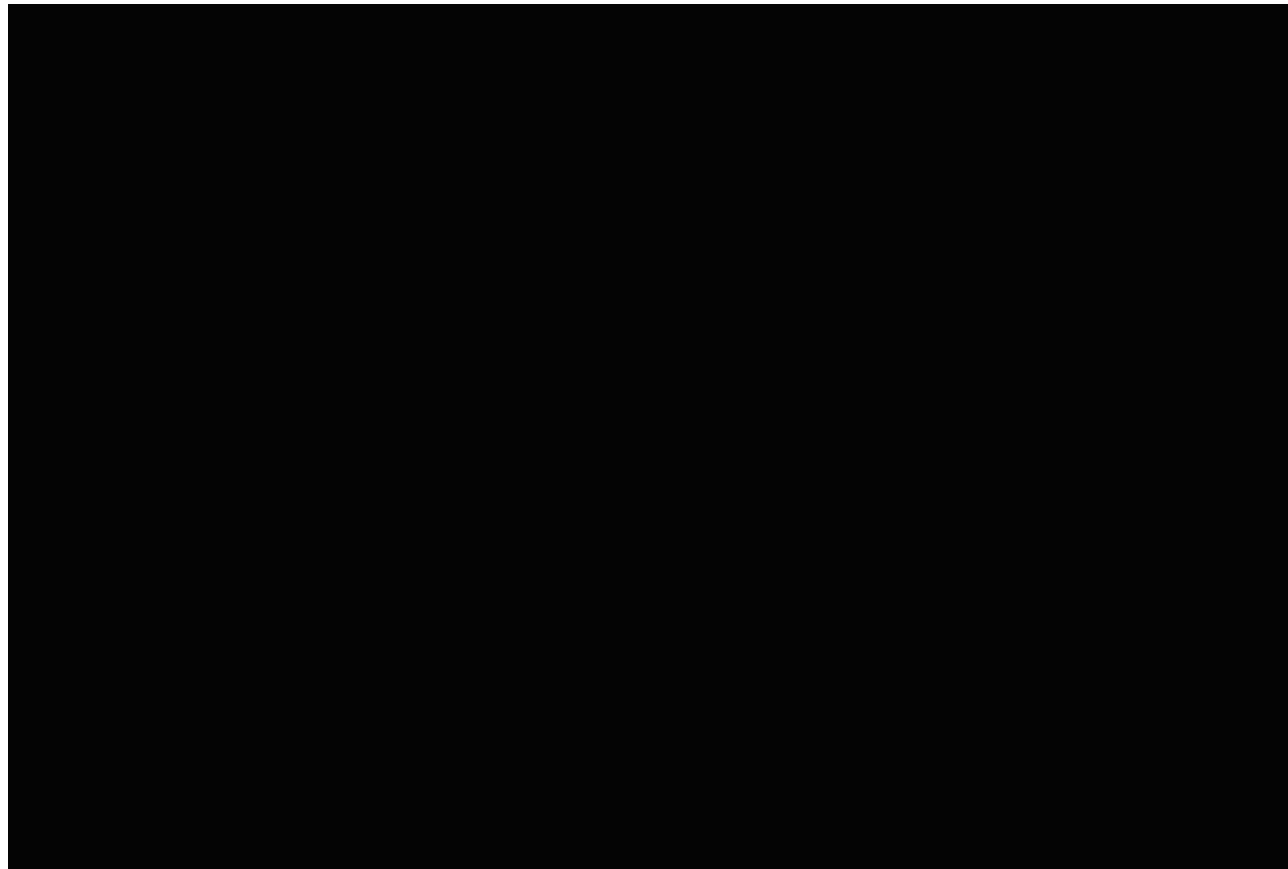
about balancing activism with self-care

Maello reflects the sentiments of many of Asheville's witches, many of whom are experiencing a degree of activist burnout. When I headed to the Asheville Raven & Crone, a metaphysical supply shop north of the city center, two days before the eclipse, the ethos was one of self-care, not resistance. That Saturday, Heather Gaffney-Darnell, the tarot reader, sat in one corner knitting, while shop owner Lisa Svencicki offered guests free ginger tea in the reading room, filled with copies of the Portland activist zine **W.I.T.C.H. PDX**.

Most people who came into the shop over the past week, Svencicki said, were looking for basic tools — a black candle and a white one to represent balance, silver and gold to represent the sun and moon. She, likewise, is planning a more personal ritual of spiritual renewal. "Although," she added with a slow smile, eclipses have often heralded a time of change for rulers, "which may not be so good for Mr. Trump."

"Of course activism is integral to witchcraft," Gaffney-Darnell pointed out. She talked about how some of the visualizations and other tools she'd learned in her own practice could have served the counterprotesters in, say, Charlottesville, Virginia. "Imagining the floor being full of sticky roots [to ground you and give you balance], learning how to raise energy from song and chant." (She wasn't the only one to wonder how magic might have countered hatred there. Later that day, another group of witches attending a talk on Appalachian folk magic wondered aloud whether one could light sage — whose smoke is used to purify and cleanse — off the tiki torches of neo-Nazis.)



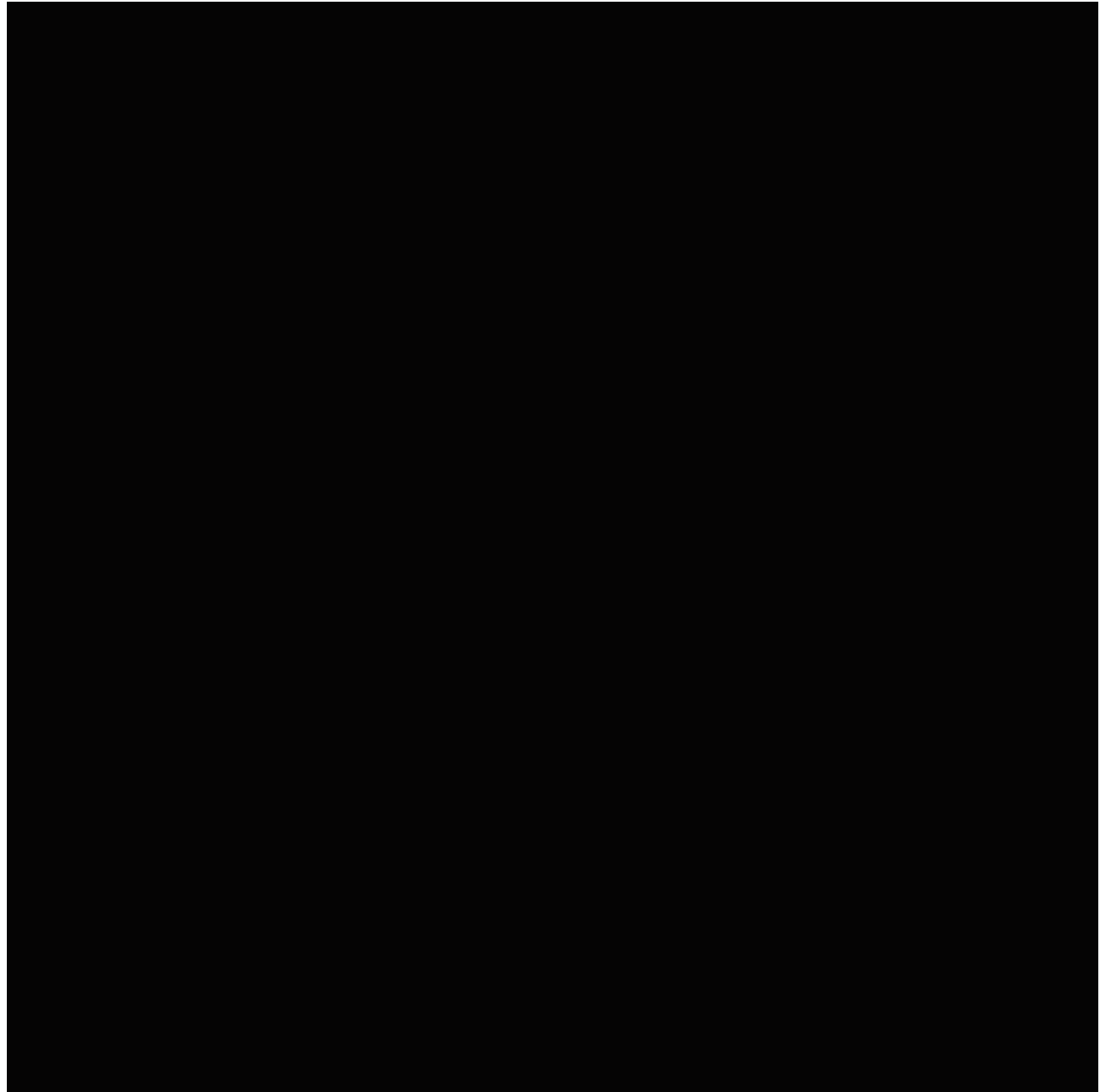


The bulletin board at Asheville Raven & Crone.

Gaffney-Darnell points to the “reclaiming” tradition of neopaganism, which originated among second-wave feminists and ecological activists in San Francisco’s Bay Area in the 1960s, as an example of a particularly politically loaded approach to witchcraft. In the reclaiming tradition, you try to move away from hierarchical models of power — a high priest or priestess, say — and toward a more community-focused approach to spirituality. “It’s about power *with*, not power *over*,” Gaffney-Darnell says. She cites one of the most influential books in the reclaiming tradition, Starhawk and Hilary Valentine’s 2000 book *Twelve Wild Swans*. Starhawk and Valentine, she said, wrote of an “inner track” and an “outer track” whose movements are related: Personal spiritual growth leads inexorably, to political transformation.

Still, Gaffney-Darnell said that in recent years she’s experienced a kind of political burnout. “I was a community organizer for so long,” she said. She said she felt she was spending so much time focusing on others that she wasn’t able to focus on

her own spiritual needs. She was drawn increasingly to the study of formal, traditional, and hierarchical Gardnerian Wicca.



A zine left in the reading room at Asheville Raven & Crone.

Still, Gaffney-Darnell affirms her values through collective celebration. Tonight — two nights before the eclipse — she said she planned to go to a local pagan group's annual “Elton John ritual.” It started as a communal celebration of LGBTQ rights and allyship, then morphed into something bigger: a chance for the witch

and pagan community to use ritual to celebrate art, and to venerate public figures who represent something bigger in the popular consciousness. "I think of it like I do [cards in the] Tarot," Gaffney-Darnell said. "They're archetypes." Last year, the ritual featured Freddie Mercury and celebrated his capacity for self-invention. This year, it's also featuring the Beatles.

"Just make sure you don't summon actual *beetles* instead," joked her colleague Ed.

But the mood in Raven & Crone wasn't all buoyant. Toward the end of my visit, a young woman with dyed pink hair came into the shop in tears. She whispered her requests to Svencicki, who swiftly moved to bring her necessary supplies: a purple candle, often associated with spiritual tranquility, and some bath salts.

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The woman looked up at me through her tears. "Do you know about any of this stuff?"

She half-laughed when I admitted I did not.

The age of Trump has caused some witches to question their principles

Nearly everyone I spoke to in Asheville admitted that the political climate had been toxic — or exhausting — for their practice. When I met with Isabelle Barron, the doula, at a hipster taco restaurant in West Asheville, she was visibly shaken. She told me a man in a truck had just inexplicably pulled to a stop, shouted racial slurs, and then driven off.

"I used to believe what you put into this world was what you got out of it," Barron said. "Then the election happened." For months, she had never considered using any kind of dark magic — not even the kind of "binding spells" she knew other

witches were using on Trump. “But now...” She sighed. Her brand of positivity, she admitted, now seemed cheap to her. She said she sees so many people in the wider witch community using idealistic slogans like “love and light” or “don’t sink to their level” in order to justify a minimum level of political engagement.

“I wanted to channel goodness,” Barron said. “I would never pray for someone’s death” — or even someone’s self-implosion. “But — I hate him!” She stopped herself.

She’s going to do a smaller-scale ritual, she said — right in the middle of the eclipse period. She’s going to light a white candle, not the black one used by the Bind Trump protesters, and said, “I just hope that good triumphs over darkness.”

The eclipse had to mean something, she later added — it just had to. After so many months of uncertainty, of feeling like the world had gone mad, she just needed to feel oriented again. “I feel like we’re all so sick — and we need to throw up to get better. And [the eclipse] is going to be the day we all throw up.”

Update: this article has been updated and clarified to reflect further conversations with Barron.

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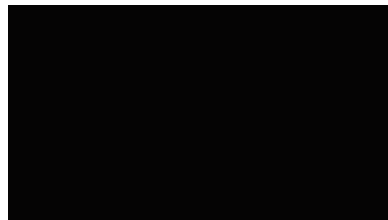
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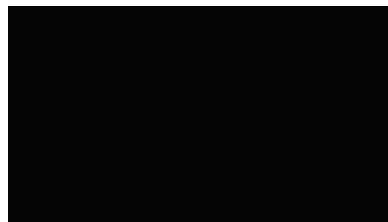
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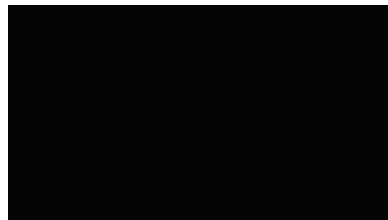
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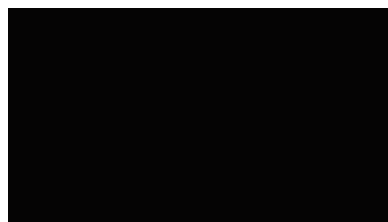
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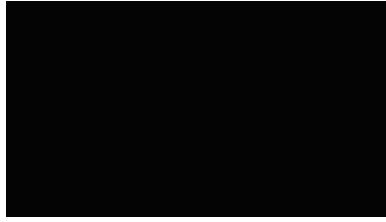
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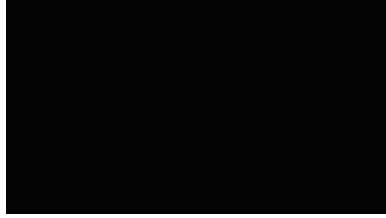
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