CULTURE

To be or not to be a sexy mouse

// BY LILY SCHECKNER

"In the regular world, Halloween is when children dress up in costumes and beg for candy. In girl world, Halloween is the one night a year when a girl can dress like a total slut and no other girls can say anything about it."

Thus begins the famous Halloween sequence of the 2004 coming-of-age classic "Mean Girls." A montage of the main trio follows: Regina in a sparkling corset and pink bunny ears, Gretchen in sleek black leather and cat ears and, finally, Karen. "What are you?" Gretchen asks, confused, when Karen emerges in dark lingerie. "I'm a mouse," she proclaims. "Duh!" Amanda Seyfried's big green eyes blink emptily at the camera as she points at the fuzzy grey ears atop her head.

The phenomenon of sexy Halloween costumes is satirized in "Mean Girls." The mean girls themselves are somewhat ridiculed by the camera in this scene. They are not only slutty. It is not just about the presence of their sexuality but the absence of something else: moral character, intelligence, creativity. As Cady walks into the Halloween party in her elaborate scary bride get-up, the audience feels intense second-hand embarrassment. Here is this girl trying to enjoy a true Halloween, and she is surrounded by a bunch of mean, dumb tramps. Unquestionably, the three girls are dressed like sexy animals in order to play into the male gaze — to become, as it were, sexy pets for the men around them. Cady is exempt from this judgement — that is, until later in the film, when she succumbs to the appeal of a tight black mini dress.

Sexy Halloween costumes reopen an age-old question. Do these choices empower women, or are they another symptom of a patriarchal system?

Natalie Greene '29 said Halloween costumes have "always felt empowering rather than restricting." Choosing an outfit she feels confident and comfortable in helps her "keep her head high in such a male-centric world," she said. She added that she believes choosing to be unapologetically herself is, in a way, its own form of resistance, "fighting the patriarchal expectation that women should be subordinate and silent."

Maya Koerber-Marx '29 agreed that sexy Halloween costumes can be liberating, even though they likely originated in the opposite context. "It is empowering for women to be able to wear whatever they want and go out and feel safe and get as drunk as they want, and still get home safe and have a good night," she said.

It's about flipping the narrative. While a lot of sexy Halloween costumes were initially created to appeal to the male gaze, it is empowering to dress sexy for one's own enjoyment.

But Maya also cautioned against some of the harmful stereotypes that sexy Halloween costumes can perpetuate. She specifically referenced sexy school girl costumes, as well as other costumes that sexualize various professions. "I think those ones are really harmful, and the sexy little girl is really creepy," Maya said.

Anya Mehrotra '28 took a similar stance. "I personally think it's empowering to be sexy on Halloween, but I do think that there's a line," she said. For one, Anya brought up the fact that despite knowing she wants to look good for herself, she also knows much of society's standards of what is sexy and beautiful are determined by the patriarchy. She questioned whether we totally recognize the impact of that on what we view as sexy or empowering.

Anya agreed with Maya that "there's a line where we start 'sexy-costuming' things that are inappropriate." Anya brought up religious figures such as nuns and historically tragic figures such as Jackie Kennedy on the night of her husband's assassination. Some costumes, Anya said, like the Kennedy one, shouldn't be done at all, much less sexualized.

Where does empowerment end and objectification begin? Is that something we can even identify, when patriarchal judgements are so entrenched in modern-day beauty standards? It seems that this is another situation in which women cannot win. A sexy costume is seen as playing into the male gaze. A modest costume is seen as mousy. Choosing either side of this binary is an implicit comment on the patriarchy, a message that is different to the wearer and to each observer, man or woman, whom they come across.

Or is it? While these thoughts permeate our collective subconscious, there is something comforting in knowing that starting on Friday — or Thursday, or Wednesday, if you're ambitious — they will fade away into the Halloween haze. In many ways, we are at our most united on Halloween. We are united in our love for the one secular holiday that has grown from a shared childhood experience of candy and jump-scares.

Yale students — including, I'm sure, future presidents, Supreme Court Justices and other important people — become figuratively anonymous behind their costumed facades, as ridiculous or seductive as they may be. In all its bloody, sexy, shallow glory, Halloween emerges untouched. And every mouse, as sexy or unsexy as they may choose to be, should bask equally in the glow of it.

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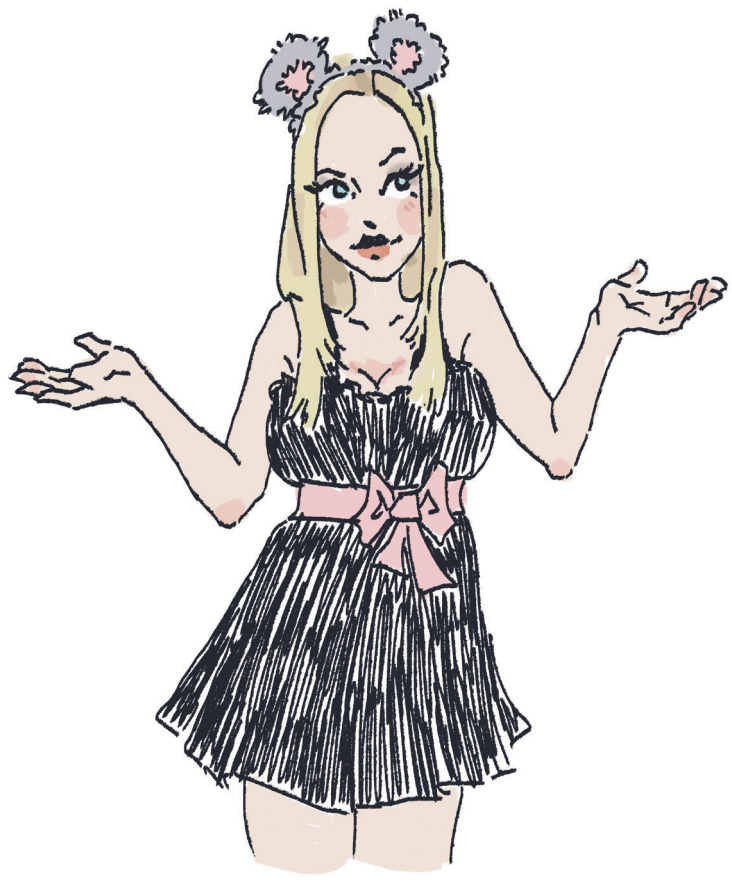


ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE GLADSON

CULTURE

Witch hunts to haunted houses: the spooky history of Connecticut

// BY ABIGAIL BERNSTEIN

As the temperature drops and bright autumn leaves fall from the trees, something eerie is in the air. Our beloved New Haven may seem like a cozy college town, but what most people do not know is that 45 years before the infamous Salem witch trials, Connecticut was hanging witches of their own. The Salem witch trials started in 1692 and ended in 1693, but long before that, in 1647, the first woman in North America to be hanged for witchcraft was convicted in Hartford. Her name was Alice Young of Windsor, and though reasons for her accusation are unknown, historians theorize that she was blamed for an influenza epidemic that swept through Windsor that year. Young and her daughter survived the epidemic, while four children next door died and many more perished at a higher rate than the year prior, establishing Young as a potential suspect for witchcraft.

Throughout Connecticut's 50-year witch panic, at least 49 people were accused of some sort of witchcraft, 34 were indicted, and at least 11 were hanged. Hartford became the center for these trials in something known as the Hartford Witch Panic between 1662 and 1663, during which a flurry of trials led to four hangings. That began when Elizabeth Kelly, an eight-year-old girl, delirious with fever, claimed that her neighbor, Goody Ayres, was choking her. This accusation prompted the Ayres couple to flee, but set the stage for flurries of accusations to follow.

In addition to historical eeriness, Connecticut has its fair share of urban legends and generational ghost stories. One such story, according to Joseph A. Citro's 2005 book "Weird New England," describes "frog people" — secluded in a rural house and separate from society. He claims these people have features more similar to amphibians than humans due to inbreeding. In 1998, "Fairfield County Weekly" ran an article claiming the frog people live in a compound near the center of Bethel, Conn., and occasionally go into town.

Yet another disturbing legend, this time closer to New Haven, is that of the Melon Heads, a mutant people with abnormally large heads who live in the woods of Monroe, Weston, Oxford, Seymour, Southbury, Trumbull and Shelton. Some people say they are a lost colony of inbred mountaineers; others say they are escaped mental asylum patients from a place near Newtown, Conn. They are known to haunt the roads of Velvet Street in Trumbull, Zion Hill Road in Milford and Saw Mill City Road in Shelton.

In terms of haunted houses, Connecticut doesn't disappoint either. The Benton Homestead, for one, is allegedly home to the Benton family's ghosts. Legend says that when Elisha Benton, the grandson of the original homeowner Daniel Benton, was captured fighting in the Revolutionary War, he contacted a case of smallpox on a British prisoner ship. Benton was eventually traded for a British prisoner and subsequently sent home, where he returned to his lover, Jemima Barrows, who was 12 years younger. They say she tended to him till he died of smallpox in 1777, and then five weeks later, she succumbed to the illness as well. Over the years, people have reported supernatural activity at the homestead, like figures moving around windows at night, flickering lights, random knockings, crying girls, a young soldier patrolling the grounds and a young lady roaming the house in a wedding dress.

The Connecticut Haunted History Trail, a self-guided trail established by the Connecticut government to promote tourism launched on Sept. 16. Partaking in this trail, visitors can tour some of Connecticut's spookiest sites, including "historic homes and theaters associated with reported paranormal activity, centuries-old cemeteries, reportedly haunted restaurants and hotels" and all things "connected to Connecticut's longstanding fascination with the unexplained," according to the state's website.

One of the trail's notable stops is the Blackbird House in Wethersfield, a colonial inn where suspected witches were accused and hanged. You can also head to Fairfield and visit Edward's Pond, which was once used for "ducking tests." During those tests, accused witches were bound and thrown into water, and if they floated, they were guilty; if they sank, they were innocent. Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disbrow, two women accused and tried in 1692, volunteered to be ducked. Although both women floated, they were eventually acquitted.

Top attractions this Halloween also include the Ghosts of New Haven Tour and the Downtown Mystic Ghost Tour. If you want to stay somewhere scary, the Griswold Inn in Essex, Conn., is widely reported to be haunted, as well as the 1754 Woodbury home in Woodbury, Conn., which is thought to be plagued by 17th- and 18th-century ghosts.

Rest assured, no one can accuse Connecticut of lacking in Halloween spirit. At least the scariest thing right now is finding three costumes for Halloweekend, not dealing with a 100-year old poltergeist in your dorm room.

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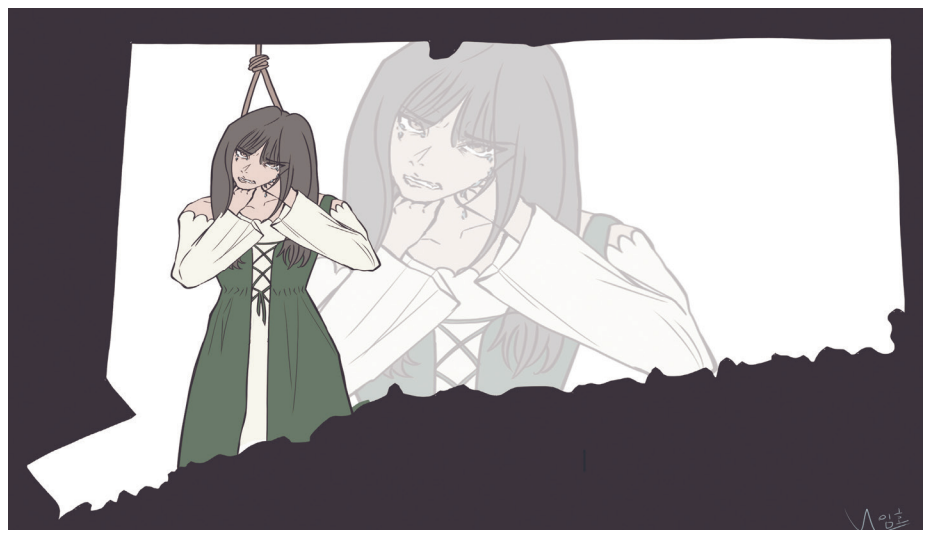


ILLUSTRATION BY VINCENT KIM

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

TURNING YOUR DORM INTO A HAUNTED HOUSE