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The Blacklist and the Witches: *The Crucible* and Conspiratorial Cancellations of Innocuous  
Adversaries in Communist America

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Abstract

By Tripp Burton

Conspiracy theories and cancel culture dominate today's social discourse. These two responsive actions often stem from a singular source—moral panics. The sociologist Stanley Cohen popularized the theory of moral panics, highlighting their ubiquitous cultural presence and detrimental outcomes. When paranoia and fear infect human thought, there lies a tendency for cultural leaders to create, identify, or unearth enemies; what Cohen calls folk devils. Those same leaders then engage in conspiratorial behavior to build a case against the folk devil, often overexaggerating or outright misdiagnosing the threat posed by supposed deviants. The frenzied public, too frightened to notice the fraught nature of the accusation, adopts the conspiracy and advocates for persecution, or cancellation, of the folk devil. The relationship between moral panics, conspiracy, and cancellation is often imperceptible to the public, but it consistently pervades cultural life. In the late 1940s, the United States government, led by the House for Un-American Activities Committee, swore to eliminate Communist infiltration of America. Their conspiratorial behavior led to systemic purges, most notably the Hollywood blacklist. The playwright Arthur Miller was a target of these conspirators. *The Crucible*, his 1953 play that dramatizes the Salem Witch Trials, mirrored the cultural structures and accusatorial tactics present in Miller's America. Miller's play, born out of his experience with the anti-Communist movement, emphasized the manner in which moral panics empower leaders to weaponize conspiracy. While conspiracists hope to alleviate panic, they only further fragment their communities, spawning environments wherein fact becomes subjective and societal factions become more estranged.

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## Introduction

There are some places too impenetrable to enter. The White House, the Louvre, or the Kremlin—fortresses immune to unwanted entrances. These buildings gain such reputations not because they can't be overrun, but because they never have. Take the U.S. Capitol. Long thought an impervious stronghold, the famed dome in the heart of Washington, D.C. succumbed to invasion on the afternoon of January 6, 2021. A mob in support of President Donald Trump attacked the Capitol, and the United States Representatives and Senators within, hoping to carry out the final act of a flawed rebellion.

Leading up to the 2020 election, Donald Trump's rhetoric was unfoundedly confident, dangerous, and posturing. Chief amongst his concerns was the validity of the election. Seldom do presidential incumbents lose elections, but in the summer of 2020, it appeared Trump was on track to do so. Polling showed Trump trailing his opponent, Joe Biden. These projections prompted him to adopt a peculiar strategy—alleging the upcoming election would be unfair, stolen, and systematically designed to Biden's advantage. When asked if he would peacefully make way for Biden should he lose, Trump responded, "the only way that we are going to lose this election is if the election is rigged."<sup>1</sup> Some Trump supporters, zealously loyal and ardently vocal, believed him. Couple that belief with the ongoing difficulties of the coronavirus pandemic, and a swath of the American electorate felt uneasy, repressed, and concerned their country was on the verge of collapse.

Trump's summer claims of election fraud were hearsay. But in the months after the election, he would continue to transmit misinformation. On the night of the election, with no

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<sup>1</sup> United States. Congress, House of Representatives, House Impeachment Committee. *Trial Memorandum of The United States House of Representatives in the*

*Impeachment Trial of Donald J. Trump*. Government Printing Office, 2 Feb 2021.



clear winner discernible, Trump spoke to a crowd in the White House during a televised event, prematurely declaring victory and again arguing the elections were stolen.<sup>2</sup> Days later, Biden was declared the winner; Trump still harped on election fraud. Months of Trump-inspired litigation followed, but all of Trump's allegations were disproved. With the election days away from final certification, Trump resorted to one more misguided strategy, this time involving Vice President Mike Pence. On January 6, the United States Senate would meet to certify the election. Trump encouraged Pence to disagree with the Senate and overturn the results. Pence, constitutionally, could not do so. That day, Trump spoke to a deluge of supporters in Washington, assuring them that "we will never give up, we will never concede... You don't concede when there's theft involved."<sup>3</sup> His impassioned rant reminded his followers that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."<sup>4</sup> These comments, whether or not they directly inspired the insurrection on the Capitol, contributed to the fury that galvanized thousands to descend upon the Capitol.

The events of January 6 were the result of Trump creating moral panic, touting conspiracy, and eliminating enemies. His patterned behavior is not without precedent. Throughout history, conspiracists emerge out of moral panics to encourage the cancellation of rivals.

Moral panics, a theory coined by sociologist Stanley Cohen, are "panics or overreactions to forms of wrongdoing or threats believed to be threats of the moral order."<sup>5</sup> During a moral panic, masses of people are perturbed by someone or something infringing upon their lives.

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<sup>2</sup> United States, *Impeachment* 9

<sup>3</sup> Trump, Donald. "Speech at the Save America Rally." The Save America Rally hosted by Women for America First, 6 Jan 2021, The Ellipse, Washington, D.C. Speech.

<sup>4</sup> Trump

<sup>5</sup> Critcher, Chas. "Moral Panics." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology*. 29 March 2017.

Moral panics are built on fear, and they “use specific events or problems as symbols of what many feel to represent ‘all that is wrong with the nation.’”<sup>6</sup>

The events inspiring moral panics are manipulated, twisted to fit narratives that reinforce and expand the panic. This manipulation is often achieved through conspiracy. The shared paranoia predisposes people to believe in these conspiracies because they want explanations for their misfortunes. In other words, those under the influence of moral panics create their enemies through conspiracy. Cohen calls these enemies folk devils.

Once conspirators build the case against the folk devil, elimination follows. The methodology of doing so, of ridding the world of the enemy, bears some resemblance to the cancellation that underlies modern cancel culture. It is not cancel culture, per se, that fulfills this process, but rather the desire to ruin the reputation of, or entirely dispose of, the folk devil.

This thesis focuses on two cases of the relationship between moral panic, conspiracy, and cancellation. The first is Hollywood in the late 1940s, when a national fear of Communism prompted members of Congress to publicly accuse Hollywood screenwriters of Communist subversion. The House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) held public trials, resulting in the infamous Hollywood blacklist.

The second case is one depicted in Arthur Miller’s 1953 play *The Crucible*, a work inspired by Miller’s experiences with the anti-Communist movement in America. Miller’s play depicts the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692 that led to the wrongful persecution of dozens. These trials take place in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, where a religious moral panic ensued, undoubtedly enabling the witch trials.

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<sup>6</sup> Critcher

Both the Hollywood blacklist and *The Crucible* exemplify that, in times of mass paranoia, authoritative groups rely upon conspiratorial tactics to justify a cancellation of their folk devils. In reality, the conspiracists only enhance the moral panic, as they wrongly accuse and conspire against innocent or harmless opposition. The result is not only a more persistent panic, but a full-scale degradation of trust, reason, and cohesiveness in the respective communities.

## I. The Moral Panics

Moral panics are grassroots movements. They are manufactured realities that grant credence to an otherwise unbelievable threat. A key characteristic of any moral panic is that it takes a minor societal inconvenience and “transforms [it] into one with general threat.”<sup>1</sup> Moral panics twist the narrative to present the public with an existential threat, creating mass paranoia over what should be minor annoyances.

After large swaths fall into believing a monstrous enemy works to destroy the fabric of society, the moral panic escalates. But there can be no evil without devils. Psychiatrist Vamik Volkan classifies enemies, or “common denounced targets,” as an innate human need.<sup>2</sup> For Cohen, the most evident byproduct of moral panics is the creation of what he calls “folk devils.” These are those who come to be “visible reminders of what [others] should not be.”<sup>3</sup> They are the ones working in the shadows, scheming to eradicate the human race. They are the scapegoats, the deviants. But folk devils are often wrongly caricatured, creating shallow hatred and prejudices. A Cohenite would argue that adherence to folk devilishness generated Islamophobia, homophobia, or secularphobia.<sup>4</sup> In moral panics, enemies are made out of people who are far from dangerous. Those supervising the moral panic, who Cohen calls “control agents,”<sup>5</sup> continuously fortify their hatred for the folk devil, never relenting until they eradicate their “suitable targets.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the unjust defamation of the folk devil, moral panics have myriads of other harmful consequences. The groupthink required to amplify the moral panic is reliant upon a

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen 81

<sup>2</sup> Volkan, Vamik. “The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: A Developmental Approach.” *Political Psychology*, vol 6, no 2, 1985, pp 219-247.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen 2

<sup>4</sup> Al-Natour, Ryan J. “Folk Devils and the Proposed Islamic School in Camden.” *Continuum: Journal of*

*Media & Cultural Studies*, vol 24, no 4, 2010, pp 573-85; Zuckerman, Phil. “Why Americans Hate Atheists: Understanding Secularphobia.” *Psychology Today*. 23 Jun 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen 89

<sup>6</sup> Volkan 231

narrow world view. It is akin to Freud's notion of paranoia, where a fixation on oneself and one's agenda leads to outright exclusion of the external world.<sup>7</sup> When this occurs, so too does a degradation of truth. If one only exists inside their own like-minded bubble, everything outside of that bubble is non-important, evil, and wrong. And in order to reinforce one's own world view, there arises a reliance on rumor, half-realized interpretations, and ambiguous perceptions.<sup>8</sup> Those are then funneled back into people's minds, thereby creating a feedback loop of false claims, unfounded accusation, and conspiratorial prophesizing. This cycle of "manufactured news" continues until the moral panic resituates itself at the "dim edges of consciousness."<sup>9</sup>

### **The Communist Moral Panic**

Communist infiltration of America remained a relatively subdued and nascent fear until 1938, when Congress created the House Committee on Un-American Activities, led by the Democratic Representative Martin Dies. The committee's primary function was to investigate disloyalty, subversion, or Communist infiltration. The committee, known as HUAC, was not yet the predatory control agent that would attack Hollywood, but this iteration nevertheless exposed millions to the so-called Red Menace.<sup>10</sup>

There were Communists in the United States. Some were even government employees.<sup>11</sup> Pro-labor movements popped up throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Few questioned anti-Communism, as it was a view shared by most everyone—liberals and conservatives, upper class and lower class, union members and bosses.<sup>12</sup> Cohen never said moral panics were *fake*. In fact, they foment societal upheaval because, at their center, sits real opposition. And there were

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<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "On the Mechanism of Paranoia." *General Psychological Theory*. Macmillan, 1962. Pp 29-49.

<sup>8</sup> Cohen 24

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 41; Miller, Arthur. "Why I Wrote 'The Crucible.'" *The New Yorker*. 14 Oct. 1996.

<sup>10</sup> O'Reilly, Kenneth. *Hoover and the Un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace*. Temple University Press. 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Fried 45

<sup>12</sup> Fried 36

real historical events that inflated the moral panic. Winston Churchill “Sinews of Peace” speech in 1946 created Europe’s Iron Curtain. The conviction of Alger Hiss, and his highly publicized trial in 1948, informed the country that a Soviet spy held a government position. The Rosenberg’s were executed for espionage.

Communism was a true threat, and nearly every pro-democratic American became anti-Communist. The difference between basic anti-Communism and the anti-Communist moral panic lies in the portrayal of a political opposition party as a perilous, iconoclastic organization fated to destroy America.

By the early 1940s, hordes of Americans came to believe their country “was being taken away from them and their kind,” and they were encouraged to try to “repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.”<sup>13</sup> Key to this narrative was the deployment of the mass media, which “reproduces and sustains the dominant ideology” of the moral panic.<sup>14</sup> As long as the media covered Communism, the fear of Communism would persist. And as long as the media gave credence to the theories of Communist aggression, the Communist panic would fester. Martin Dies, the first chairman of HUAC, seemed to recognize the power of the press, as he said the only thing that was of importance in his hearings was what “got into the paper.”<sup>15</sup> He wondered “who in the world is going to bother about the official record?”<sup>16</sup>

The dangerous relationship between expansive paranoia and mass media was of great interest to the media theorist Marshall McLuhan. Best known for proclaiming “the medium is the message,” McLuhan ardently studied the impact various media forms have on sustaining and strengthening moral panics.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Cohen xxxvi

<sup>15</sup> Doherty, Thomas. *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist*. Columbia University Press. 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Doherty, 2018; 17

In the mid-twentieth century, mass media was entering a new age. The advent of radio and television marked a radical shift in the dispersal of information.<sup>17</sup> The Communist moral panic coincided with this media sea change, and it can be argued that the public's lack of experience in navigating the new media world created an outsized role for the press, radio, and television.

The press enlarged the Communist moral panic, but it was television that truly elevated it to massive significance. Television came of age virtually in concert with the peak of HUAC's trials, so it was naturally linked to the anti-Communist movement. Television condensed the world into a small, discernible space. It was more capable than old media in almost every facet. When it arrived, it "dwarfed the impact of other media."<sup>18</sup> It also outshone other media in its propagation of panic.

Television, quite literally, created a stage for anti-Communists to advance their message. Among the first major nationally televised broadcasts, the HUAC hearings of the late 1940s ensured "television came of age oppressed by a witch-hunt atmosphere and traumatized by phobias."<sup>19</sup> For years, millions were concerned Communists existed amongst them. When they saw, on television, the faces of supposed Communists, their fears were realized. They saw what American Communists looked like, what they wore, how they acted. They could put faces, and voices, to names.

With the media obsessed over Communists, the moral panic rapidly escalated. It began with spurious attribution, what Cohen calls "widening the net."<sup>20</sup> In order to allay their fears and rid the nation of Communists, people began attributing every bad thing in life to Communism. If

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<sup>17</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. 1964. The MIT Press. 1994

<sup>18</sup>Doherty, Thomas. *Cold War, Cold Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*. Columbia University Press. 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Doherty, 2003; 3

<sup>20</sup> Cohen 87

something wasn't expressly pro-American, it was Communist. A perception of Communist evil was established, and once that occurs, "the tendency is to assimilate all subsequent happenings to it."<sup>21</sup>

By the late 1940s, a "growing preoccupation with anti-Communism had come to be reflected in every niche of American culture."<sup>22</sup> Nothing was immune to Communism, so people thought. A nationwide onslaught of Communist ideals ensued, as Americans "labored to eliminate noxious sorts of entertainment, thought or culture."<sup>23</sup> John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* was deemed Communist propaganda. The painter Diego Rivera had a mural at Rockefeller Center destroyed because, nestled amongst hundreds of other figures, sat Vladimir Lenin.<sup>24</sup> Anti-Communism impacted God, even. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once "warned of man's power, a menace which could never be eliminated, and of the fallacy of human thought." The worst offenders? "Communists."<sup>25</sup>

Arthur Miller found himself amongst the group of devilized creatives. Publicly vocal against HUAC and the anti-Communist fervor of the 1940s, Miller became a victim of the moral panic in the early 1950s. When the film adaptation of his play *The Death of Salesman* was released in 1951, Columbia Pictures asked Miller to sign an anti-Communist declaration that would then be used to discourage protest.<sup>26</sup> Columbia worried Miller's liberal leanings would spur some to accuse the film, and the studio, of Communist propaganda. That was not Miller's first conflict with Columbia, either. In 1947, Miller wrote a screenplay called *The Hook*. The head of Columbia, Harry Cohn, showed the script to the FBI to ensure it was up to anti-Communist standards. The FBI asked Cohn to have the gangster antagonists in the film changed

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<sup>21</sup> Cohen 172

<sup>22</sup> Fried 80

<sup>23</sup> Fried 30

<sup>24</sup> Keyes, Allison. "Destroyed by Rockefeller, Mural Trespassed on Political Vision." *NPR*. 9 March 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Fried 65

<sup>26</sup> Miller, 1996



to Communist antagonists. Miller felt this move would maim the film, so he left the project.

Cohn irately phoned Miller, telling him “the moment we try to make the script pro-American you pull out.”<sup>27</sup> Miller was vilified once more in 1955, when another script was trashed after producers feared his status as a “disloyal lefty.”<sup>28</sup>

Miller became personally awakened to the operations of the moral panic. He became one of its folk devils—becoming so typically exposes one to the wrath of a panicked world. The anti-Communist movement created a situation, he said, where “rather than physical fear, it was a sense of impotence which seemed to deepen with each week.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Miller notices that moral panics are not defined by the physical, but by the emotional and mental. He postulated his world was one where “the political and moral reality had melted like a Dali watch.”<sup>30</sup> It was as if “the whole country had been born anew,” a place where “all they knew was terror.”<sup>31</sup> He was even astute to the panic’s manufactured beginnings, as he was astonished people were so consumed by a fear “planned and consciously executed.”<sup>32</sup>

The anti-Communist moral panic targeted Arthur Miller, but it also inspired him. He emerged from each misdealing with a desire to respond to the “phenomenon” that “paralyzed a whole generation.”<sup>33</sup> This was quite typical of Miller—it was his credo to speak truth to power, to “never back away from the societal issues of the day, mining his own misgivings and frustrations to create plays that proved the complexities of a flawed society.”<sup>34</sup> While suffering through the panic, he obliged himself to create a contemporarily relevant work. It was his

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<sup>27</sup> Miller, 1996

<sup>28</sup> Miller, Arthur. “Are You Now or Were You Ever?” *The Guardian*. 16 Jun 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, 2000

<sup>30</sup> Miller, 1996

<sup>31</sup> Miller, Arthur. “Introduction.” *Arthur Miller Collected Plays: 1944-1961*. Viking Press, 1957. Pp 3-55.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, 1957

<sup>33</sup> Miller, 2000

<sup>34</sup> Abrams, Nathan. “An Unofficial Cultural Ambassador: Arthur Miller and the Cultural Cold War.” *Divided Dreamworld?—The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, edited by Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smit and Joes Segal. Amsterdam University Press. 2012. Pp 13-32; Nottage, Lynn. Foreword. *The Penguin Arthur Miller: Collected Plays*, by Arthur Miller, Penguin Books, 2015. Pp xii-xvii.

perception that “art should be in active conversation with the culture.”<sup>35</sup> In this instance, the culture was one of paranoia, apprehension, and mistrust. He desired to find something intelligible to say on the topic, to gracefully “respond to this climate of fear,” but he found it difficult to “illuminate miasma,” to deal with the “mirage world” in which he was living.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Puritan’s Moral Panic**

The vehicle for Miller’s story lay not in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but in the late 17<sup>th</sup>. Miller stumbled upon *The Devil in Massachusetts*, a book by Marion Starkey that explained the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.<sup>37</sup> After reading this book, Miller found a way to illuminate miasma. In Salem, he found a town destroyed by fear and accusation. But he also found a town that was subject to its own devastating moral panic.

The first Puritan colonists to arrive in Massachusetts at the turn of the sixteenth century carried with them a singular motive, based in reasons “primary religious and not secular.”<sup>38</sup> In England, Puritanism was met with disdain from the crown, and the majority of English decried this new iteration of Protestantism. Rather than remain in England and toil to keep their Puritan values intact, hundreds traveled to Massachusetts to establish a purely Puritan land. They believed it their destiny to form Massachusetts into a Puritan stronghold.

Puritanism is deeply Calvinistic. John Calvin was a fierce adherent to the “doctrine of Providence;” the Puritans viewed Providence as a fundamental pillar of their religion.<sup>39</sup> Trusting in Providence meant identifying God as the divine arbitrator. If everything that happens does so according to God and His wishes, then nothing in the world that is good happens independent of

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<sup>35</sup> Nottage xvii

<sup>36</sup> Miller, 1996; Miller, 2000

<sup>37</sup> Bigsby Bigsby, Christopher. Introduction. *The Crucible*, by Arthur Miller, Penguin Books, 2003, pp. vii- xxv.

<sup>38</sup> Gunn, Giles. “Puritan Ascendancy and Decline.” *The Pragmatist Turn: Religion, the Enlightenment, and the Formation of American Literature*. University of Virginia Press, 2017, pp 42-65.

<sup>39</sup> Gunn 43

God. Therefore, when something is not immediately and inherently good, it must not be Godly. Puritans ardently believed in this reasoning, and it is a major contributor to their later tendencies of isolation and crass enemy creation.

Puritans believed they were God's chosen people, and it was their responsibility to spread His grace. They viewed their new world as a place full of unholiness, and they saw it their duty to make it holy. It was their understanding that they "held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world."<sup>40</sup> Recall, the Puritans were not merely immigrants seeking a new land. Their mission was to spread religion. Success would only come with extensive conversion, "and nothing was going to interfere with that success if they could help it."<sup>41</sup> Modern perception of the pilgrim Puritans often attribute them as religious fanatics. Whether they were more fanatic than other religious groups is debatable, but they were avowedly "more determined to succeed" in their task.<sup>42</sup>

These factors seemed to create an overwhelming sense of Puritan exceptionalism. In believing they were the light in the darkness, the divinely appointed spreaders of God's teachings, and the saviors of a troubled world, the Puritans identified themselves as the greatest race of humans on the planet. When a group of people unabashedly believe such things, they inherently see anyone that is not them as someone in need of curing. And if there is any dissent to their cause, it is evil.

Although they saw themselves as righteous and holy, Puritans were resolute advocates of continuous self-improvement. The practice of resisting temptation is consistent across Christianity, but Puritans took a relatively pessimistic approach to doing so. Whereas other forms

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, Arthur. *The Crucible*. 1953. Penguin Books, 2003. Pp 5.

<sup>41</sup> Park, Charles E. "Puritans and Quakers." *The New England Quarterly*, vol 27, no 1, 1954. pp 53-74.

<sup>42</sup> Park 63

of Christianity acknowledge it common to fall into temptation, Puritans saw it an imminent failure to sin.<sup>43</sup> In their minds, no good Puritan would ever be capable of sin.

As a result, Puritans were incessant scrutinizers, both of themselves and of others. If temptation existed at all times, they could fall into it at any moment. So, they felt there was a “necessity for incessant scrutiny of one’s life for signs of backsliding or corruption, the relentless discipline of self-accusation and renunciation, and the ceaseless pursuit, through repentance, of moral growth.” Essentially, to be Puritan in Massachusetts was to accept a “lifetime project of self-study and personal reformation.”<sup>44</sup>

While this lifetime project seems harmless and beneficial on its face, it, like other Puritan beliefs, became skewed in practice. Puritans were acutely judgmental. They wanted their congregation to be as divine as possible, and instead of trusting each individual to fulfill their spiritual obligations, many Puritans took it upon themselves to be the moral police. Throughout this time period, this behavior consistently resulted in accusation of others, and in some cases created feelings that people were out to get one another. In Salem, Arthur Miller recognized that the villagers had a massive “predilection for minding other people’s business.”<sup>45</sup>

The Massachusetts Puritans were not the gentlest in dealing with conflict, either. Hostility seemed to be the favorite choice of Puritans. Sinners were not to be forgiven but eradicated. Enemies were not to be understood but overcome. The Puritan leader John Norton, known for his persecution of Quakers, believed “God punished Christian societies that failed to punish heretics.”<sup>46</sup> Now, punishment can come in various forms, and need not be anything more than brief castigation. But couple Norton’s comments with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s (the leader

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<sup>43</sup> Gunn 50

<sup>44</sup> Gunn 51

<sup>45</sup> Miller, *The Crucible* 4

<sup>46</sup> Winship, Michael P. *Hot Protestant: History of Puritanism in England and America*. Yale University Press. 2018.

of the Church of England, from which Puritanism arose), who emphasized that “Christ said he came not into the world to send peace, but the sword,” and it becomes clear that the Puritans were predisposed towards aggression and animosity.<sup>47</sup>

It was not until the rise of the second generation of Massachusetts Puritans that their moral panic truly began to formulate. The beliefs and attitudes of the earlier Puritans groomed a class of people who were relatively insecure, power hungry, entitled, and hostile. When formidable opposition arose in many areas, from women to the woods, the Puritans’ worst instincts took over, and full-scale moral panic ensued.

I mentioned earlier that the primary immigratory interest of Puritans centered on religion. As the second generation of Massachusetts Puritans aged into adulthood, religion remained the preeminent force in life. However, the new generation was more invested in “political liberty, commercial opportunity, physical adventure, the opportunity to work off one’s adventure, forgetfulness, or any number of other things.” Gradually, people were concerned “less with saving the soul than with building a new society.”<sup>48</sup> While Puritan society was fundamentally dependent on religion, and while the second generation was still devout, their diversification of interests signaled a new era for their church. A wandering eye does not exactly equate to disinterest, but it does equate to a desire for new possibilities. Puritanism was still potent, but the second generation began to weaken religion’s grip.

The Puritans began to panic when multitudes of groups threatened their way of life. One such group was women. As is the historical tendency of most cultural establishments, Puritanism repressed women. The Massachusetts Puritans proclaimed themselves members of the

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<sup>47</sup> Winship 2

<sup>48</sup> Gunn 61

“priesthood of all believers.”<sup>49</sup> Women were precluded from this membership. They were believed to be “intrinsically incapable of theological expertise.”<sup>50</sup> Christianity proclaims all humans as equal in God’s eye, but in Puritan Massachusetts, “all men were, by definition, closer to God than women.”<sup>51</sup> Puritans held that women were Satan’s first temptation of man, citing Eve’s pestering of Adam. John Winthrop, a governor of the colony, said women “were fitted and trained to [Satan’s] service for interrupting the Kingdom.”<sup>52</sup> A rudimentary interpretation of Winthrop’s comments affirms that Puritans equated women to agents of Satan.

Women were not the only folk devils that arose from within Puritan ranks. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Quakers began to break off from mainstream Puritanism. Regarded as hardline Puritans, Quakers found conflict with the more “rigidly hierarchical and theologically strict Puritan establishment.”<sup>53</sup> They felt the church, as an institutional establishment, was “not only unnecessary, but downright objectionable.”<sup>54</sup> The Quakers saw the Puritan organizational form as ridden with jealousy, strife, and narcissism.

Puritans had strong distaste for Quakers. In *Quakerism Anatomiz’d and Confused* (1670), Thomas Jenner described Quakers as possessed, witch-like, and Satanic. Notions spread that if Quakers obtained a foothold in Massachusetts, law and order, the authority of the church, and the “entire Holy Experiment” would be imperiled.<sup>55</sup>

Hate for Quakers was so strong that Puritanism implicitly included a “hair trigger suspicion” of Quakerism, and all other anti-establishment narratives.<sup>56</sup> Quakers were rejected for simply being Quaker. Rarely was there any instigation of violence or hostilities, but Quakers

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<sup>49</sup> Barker-Benfield, Ben. “Anne Hutchinson and the Puritan Attitude toward Women.” *Feminist Studies*. vol 1, no 2, 1972, pp 65-96.

<sup>50</sup> Barker-Benfield 69

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 68

<sup>52</sup> Ibid 65

<sup>53</sup> Traister, Bryce. “The Salem Witchcraft’s Defense of Faith.” *Female Piety and the Invention of American Puritanism*. Ohio State University Press. 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Traister 58

<sup>55</sup> Park 70

<sup>56</sup> Ibid 69

were nevertheless robbed of their daily lives. For example, Puritan churches often held lectures, which served as open forums where anyone could speak. If a Quaker were to speak at a lecture, they were arrested, taken to Boston, and tortured.<sup>57</sup> In one instance, a Quaker was sentenced to death. The crime? Being an “obdurate Quaker.”<sup>58</sup>

The crafting of women and Quakers as folk devils aligns with a theory Cohen consistently reinforces—folk devils and control agents are not polar opposites, and in many ways, they are quite similar. Cohen suggests that moral panics become most dangerous when “things [are] too close to home.”<sup>59</sup> These folk devils were quite close to the homes of Puritans. Because they were so engrained into Puritan society, the response was swifter, and more ruthless. The Puritans spent all their efforts banishing certain women and Quakers from Massachusetts, never quite realizing “they were so much alike.”<sup>60</sup> This would be repeated in Salem, where friends betrayed friends. When confidantes are turned into enemies, the tension only increases. Miller was supremely interested in this “breaking of the social contract that binds a community together.”<sup>61</sup>

Folk devils do not necessarily need to be human, either. For the Puritans, the wilderness was a foreboding folk devil. Their panic over the wilderness exhibits the tendency for most panics to survive off of mythologies and stereotypes.<sup>62</sup> Puritan fear of Satan, paganism, and Native Americans led to an obsession with the wooded wilderness.

In the wilderness, the Puritans saw an earthly realm for their spiritual enemies. The wilderness was the “domain of the demonic” and the “savages.”<sup>63</sup> Once the forest began, so too did “non-civilization;” as did “Satan’s stamping ground.”<sup>64</sup> Fortifying their belief in their own

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<sup>57</sup> Park 71

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 72

<sup>59</sup> Cohen 221

<sup>60</sup> Park 73

<sup>61</sup> Bigsby xv

<sup>62</sup> Cohen 155

<sup>63</sup> Gunn 65

<sup>64</sup> Barker-Benfield 84

excellence, Cotton Mather called the Puritans a “flock of sheep amidst a Thousand Wolves.”<sup>65</sup> The woods were a place teeming with “fiery flying serpents.”<sup>66</sup> Salem residents, surrounded by forest, believed that “the virgin forest was the Devil’s last preserve, his home base and the citadel of the final stand.”<sup>67</sup> The woods were allegedly dark and full of terrors.

Puritans rallied together to face the wilderness and all its evils. There were consistent calls for the Puritan people to conquer the wilderness. Edward Johnson, a deputy in the Massachusetts General Court, petitioned others to civilize the uncivilized. He told them to expect difficulties, but to not “thereby be hindered from taking the worke in hand.”<sup>68</sup> John Winthrop urged his people to “come together in a wilderness,” where there “is nothing but wild beasts and beastlike men,” in order to “populate this howling Desart.”<sup>69</sup> The wilderness evolved to serve a moral purpose for the Puritans. Since the devil was in the woods, there existed a “continual temptation” that would threaten their religious purity. It was then their duty, according to Increase Mather, to rise and defeat all the wilderness, both physically and spiritually.<sup>70</sup>

The fear of women, Quakers, and the wilderness directly fed the most infamous Puritan panic—witchcraft. Witches contained an element of each preceding folk devil. They were women in contention with the Puritan church and its teachings, and, of course, Satanic. The key distinction between the witchcraft panic and the others is that, well, the others were real. Women were real people. So too were the Quakers. And while the woods were not the domain of the devil and all things evil, they were a real place. Witches, on the other hand, were entirely construed by Puritans.

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<sup>65</sup> Heimert, Alan. “Puritanism, the Wilderness, and the Frontier.” *The New England Quarterly*, vol 26, no 3, 1953, pp 361-382.

<sup>66</sup> Heimert 378

<sup>67</sup> Miller, *The Crucible* 5

<sup>68</sup> Heimert 369

<sup>69</sup> Ibid 376; 368

<sup>70</sup> Ibid 379



Just like the Communist panic, the Puritan witchcraft panic embodied the worst-case scenario for moral panics. There was a fury of spurious attribution, and the more that someone cried witchcraft, the fear increased. In Salem, when magistrates exposed more witches, more fear spread, leading to more accusations and more suffering.<sup>71</sup>

Miller had a profound understanding of Salem's panic. In Salem, he saw "the spectacle of a whole village, whose imagination was captured by a vision of something that wasn't there."<sup>72</sup> Miller was angered by the degradation of reason in his own time, and to him Salem displayed the same "built-in pestilence in the human mind... the unprecedented outbreak of alarm."<sup>73</sup> *The Crucible* became his way to comment on his modern time, but in a historical setting. The two situations were too similar to be ignored, namely in the way widespread and long-brewing moral panics infected daily life. His play accentuated "the insidious way in which fear can reshape a community's notion of reality," whether it be Salem in 1692 or America in 1953.<sup>74</sup> The work became a dual commentary of the two societies—both were prone to "human imagination inflamed."<sup>75</sup>

While researching for *The Crucible*, Miller said he came to dread the plight in Salem. He became fearful of a modern repetition of Salem, not in physical terms but in the "spectacle of intelligent people giving themselves over to a rapture of murderous credulity."<sup>76</sup> He recognized the "hysteria in Salem had a certain inner procedure... which [they] were duplicating once again."<sup>77</sup> What was being duplicated wasn't reckless accusation or delirious vilification. America in the 1950s and Salem in 1692 were guilty of the same behavior that plagues our modern

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<sup>71</sup> Winship 283

<sup>72</sup> Miller, 2000

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Bigsby xii

times—a reliance on conspiratorial behavior as ammunition against overexaggerated or altogether non-existent threats.

## II. Conspiracy

Literary scholars have dissected *The Crucible* for decades. A majority of this criticism focuses on the witch trial's effects, symbolism, and moral implications. Given its rather skeptical portrayal of Puritanism, many scholars find interest in the play's morality and religiosity. Miller does not provide an explicit critique of Puritanism in the play, but Puritan codes foreground the action. Puritan values created strict absolutism in Salem. The Puritan theologian John Preston said, "all men are divided into two ranks, either they are good or bad... there is no middle sort of men in the world."<sup>1</sup> Scholars consistently identify Salem's absolutism, stressing the contentions it creates between accused and accuser. Stephen Fender notes "Puritan predestination...sweeps away any idea of degrees of good and evil."<sup>2</sup> This adherence to absolute morality results in a "construction of human pride [that] makes devils of the opponents of orthodoxy and destroys individual freedom."<sup>3</sup>

John Proctor is a favorite of critics. As the main character of the play, Proctor is endlessly studied by literary scholars. Many interpret him a victim of guilt, seeing his downfall as a byproduct of his individual indiscretion. Christopher Bigsby notes Proctor's guilt "renders him powerless," saying it induces him to "believe himself."<sup>4</sup> This guilt is regularly expanded into a discussion of Proctor as Miller's tragic hero. Miller often adhered to Aristotelian axioms of "the blameless, unspotted hero" being "an inadequate protagonist."<sup>5</sup> As such, Miller dramatized Proctor as an adulterer. Giving Proctor these failings situates him in a complicated, yet sympathetically remorseful state. Some go so far as to identify Proctor a martyr—David Bronson

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<sup>1</sup> Fender, Stephen. "Precision and Pseudo Precision in 'The Crucible.'" *Journal of American Studies*, vol 1, no 1, Apr 1967. Pp 87-98.

<sup>2</sup> Fender 90

<sup>3</sup> Levin, David. "Salem Witchcraft in Recent Fiction and Drama." Review of *The Crucible* by Arthur

Miller. *The New England Quarterly*, vol 28, no 4, 1955. Pp 538-542.

<sup>4</sup> Bigsby xiii

<sup>5</sup> Popkin, Henry. "Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible.'" *College English*, vol 26, no 2, 1964. Pp 139-146.

sees Proctor as “a man of essential purity,” who by the “gesture of his commitment is putting himself on the stake, secure in the knowledge that his cause is righteous and a great reward.”<sup>6</sup>

Proctor’s downfall is commonly framed against the linguistic style of *The Crucible*. Miller chose to keep the play’s language that of 17<sup>th</sup> century Salem. This language, as Fender notes, limits the characters and their knowledge, as well as the court’s legal discourse.<sup>7</sup> Proctor conflicts with this language. Fender and John Prudhoe posit Proctor’s preeminent battle as that of linguistic rejection. Prudhoe frames Proctor’s cries as the cries of “a man who has rejected the world in which he lives and hence can no longer use the language of that world.”<sup>8</sup> Fender, however, says Proctor’s language does not oppose Salem’s, as Salem has no distinct structures which can be opposed—“Proctor demolishes their phoney language... the effect of this achievement is not to break away from the ethic of Salem; rather it is to construct the first consistent moral system in the play.”<sup>9</sup>

The overwhelming majority of *The Crucible*’s literary scholarship examines Miller’s historicism, as well as the play’s relationship to 1950s America. Some appreciated Miller’s historical commentary, others derided it. Miller’s intentions and influences were well understood—critics instantly recognized the play as a commentary on “modern fragmentation.”<sup>10</sup> Writing in *The New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson commended Miller’s vision, acknowledging that “out of a dark episode in American history, Mr. Miller has written a fiery play.”<sup>11</sup>

During the 1950s, liberal writers were thrust into the spotlight. Miller, a staunch liberal, released the play in a rather monumental period for liberal authors. Many writers felt the

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<sup>6</sup> Bronsen, David. “‘An Enemy of the People:’ A Key to Arthur Miller’s Art and Ethics.” *Comparative Drama*, vol 2, no 4, 1968. Pp 229-247.

<sup>7</sup> Fender 94, 97

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 88

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 88

<sup>10</sup> Popkin 87

<sup>11</sup> Atkinson, Brooks. “The Crucible: Arthur Miller’s Dramatization of the Salem Witch Trial in 1692.” *The New York Times*. 1 Feb 1953.

incessant gaze of HUAC, yet actively produced works that were thinly veiled denunciations of the era's politics. Liberal writers felt themselves consistently on trial and used their literature to inform the world of their suffering.<sup>12</sup> *The Crucible* emphasized the liberalists' dissatisfaction with their government.

Multiple scholars contest Miller's historical approach, finding it cursory and perfunctory. Some took issue with Miller's dramatic choices, accusing him of overextending the narrative in order to conveniently parallel HUAC. For example, he amplified the contentious nature of the courtroom scenes to match the riotous Congressional trials. It was argued Miller devalued and misappropriated the Puritan experience by making the villains more vain, naïve, and delusional than they realistically were.<sup>13</sup> His political commentary was critiqued as ineffective and shallow. William McGill called the play "fuzzy-minded liberalism," a "failure as a political analogy."<sup>14</sup> In equating the witch trials to HUAC, Miller was accused of "exaggerating the danger to civil liberties in the US."<sup>15</sup>

The most outspoken detractor was Robert Warshow. In his essay "The Liberal Conscience in *The Crucible*," Warshow discredits the notion of the play as a universal, timeless work. He said Miller's account of the Salem trials was bereft of political congruence. The trials, he argued, had no relevance to civil rights or civil liberties.<sup>16</sup> Where Miller did acknowledge fictionalization, Warshow found issue, as he considered Proctor and Abigail's dramatized roles detrimental to the overall message and emotion of the play. He insulted Miller with his comments that the "message isn't there at all," and those that claim to see the message "agreed to

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<sup>12</sup> Prigozy, Ruth. "The Liberal Novelist in the McCarthy Era." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol 21, no 3, 1975. Pp 253-264.

<sup>13</sup> Levin 540

<sup>14</sup> McGill, Jr., William J. "The Crucible of History: Arthur Miller's John Proctor." *The New England Quarterly*, vol 54, no 2, 1981. Pp. 258-264.

<sup>15</sup> Harrington, Michael. "The Committee for Cultural Freedom," *Dissent*. 1955. Pp. 116

<sup>16</sup> Warshow, Robert. *The Liberal Conscience in "The Crucible: Arthur Miller and his Audience*. March 1953.

pretend” it was there.<sup>17</sup> Warshow reasoned critics preemptory contextualization of *The Crucible* as a political commentary primed audiences to misinterpret the play.

The historical accuracy of *The Crucible* can be, and has been, endlessly debated. But Miller excels in adequately highlighting one similarity between HUAC and the Salem Witch Trials, one which has seemingly gone unnoticed amongst the critical community—the use of conspiracy. Literary scholars have hinted at conspiratorial behavior, like when William McGill said “perceived reality and not scientific truth” determined human behavior in Salem and in anti-Communist America.<sup>18</sup> I described the dominant analyses of the play because conspiracy undergirds each discussion. The court’s use of conspiracy strengthened the Puritan’s moral absolutism. Proctor’s journey as a tragic hero is a battle against unjust conspirators. The conspirators’ language threatened those that opposed the conspiracy. Lastly, the conspiracy in Salem mirrored HUAC’s conspiracy. In both cases, the control agents relied upon conspiratorial methods and accusations to cancel their folk devils.

Conspiracies, in their most basic forms, proclaim that “unseen forces are bending the arc of human lives.”<sup>19</sup> Both HUAC and the Salem girls consistently cried out that there were people scheming to slowly submerge their societies in darkness. But the very nature of a conspiracy theory necessitates that it is untrue. Communists, although present in Hollywood, were not subverting studio heads and peppering movies with Communist propaganda. The people of Salem were not possessed by witches, but rather falsely accused based on hearsay and conspiratorial showmanship.

No matter the efficacy of the respective conspiracies, both came to be roundly regarded as truth. Largely responsible for the success of these conspiracies is the moral panic in which

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<sup>17</sup> Warshow 268

<sup>18</sup> McGill 264

<sup>19</sup> Garber, Megan. “The Paranoid Style in American Entertainment.” *The Atlantic*. 13 May 2020.

they were executed. Conspiracy groups are most effective when they “harness paranoia to fervent hope and a deep sense of belonging.”<sup>20</sup> The Red Scare provided a basis for the Hollywood conspiracy; the Puritan’s unease and insecure religiosity buttressed the cries of witchcraft. The control agents may have been epistemologically corrupt, but they were skilled prognosticators of public opinion. As broadcaster Edward R. Murrow noted in a 1954 takedown of Joseph McCarthy, HUAC “didn’t create this situation of fear; they merely exploited it—and rather successfully.”<sup>21</sup> The same can be said of Abigail Williams, Reverend Parris, Judge Danforth, and the countless other Salemites that speculated witches were scourging the village.

### **The Un-American Conspiracy**

In the latter half of the 1940s, the House for Un-American Activities Committee became conspiracy entrepreneurs—people who “profit directly or indirectly from propagating their preferred theories.”<sup>22</sup> The theory was that Communist actors, directors, and screenwriters were slowly wresting control of Hollywood and establishing a new era of pro-Communist films. The committee comprised politicians who, as politicians are prone to do, saw in every event an opportunity to boost their agenda and garner political favor. The politicians that sat on HUAC were, first and foremost, “motivated by specific political messages and individual predispositions.”<sup>23</sup> In attacking Communist folk devils, politicians reckoned they would be deemed the all-American defenders of democracy.

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<sup>20</sup> LaFrance, Adrienne. “The Prophecies of Q.” *The Atlantic*. June 2020.

<sup>21</sup> “A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.” *See it Now*. CBS. 9 Mar 1954.

<sup>22</sup> Sunstein, Cass. “Conspiracy Theories.” *Conspiracy Theories & Other Dangerous Ideas*. Simon & Schuster. 2014. Pp 1-32.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver, J. Eric and Thomas J Wood. “The Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion.” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol 58, no 4, 2014, pp 952-966.

The most prominent conspiracy entrepreneur during the HUAC hearings was its chairman, J. Parnell Thomas. A Republican from New Jersey, Thomas became chairman in 1946, and immediately turned the committee's attention to Hollywood. He was the first major proponent of the conspiracy, and in devoting the hearings to an examination of Hollywood, he gave the conspiracy a home. He was the de facto leader of the conspiracy cohort, a role he used to bend the hearings to his will. Additionally, he quite literally admitted he personally stood to benefit from the hearings. At the onset of the trials in 1946, Thomas said, "I'm going places now that I'm chairman of HUAC. Going after reds is going to make me."<sup>24</sup>

The first task of the HUAC conspiracy entrepreneurs was to establish the conspiratorial narrative framework. Conspiracies are "more appealing than they are satisfying," so HUAC knew they would need to craft an intriguing story as to how Communists were destroying Hollywood.<sup>25</sup> The narrative framework of a conspiracy is typically established with multiple people "negotiating the boundaries" of narrative thought through "repeated, albeit brief interactions."<sup>26</sup> In other words, a group of conspiracists ploddingly push the envelope of reason by repeatedly connecting the conspiracy's disparate elements. In this instance, Communist propaganda and members of Hollywood were the disparate elements.

In the early stages, HUAC set out to express the complexity of the Communist plot. They wanted the public to know this was not limited to a few screenwriters and directors, but that the infiltration extended much deeper in Hollywood. In testifying to the Dies Committee, the precursor to the Thomas Committee, the writer J.B. Matthews informed the committee that

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<sup>24</sup> Doherty, 2018; 107

<sup>25</sup> Douglas, Karen M., Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichoka. "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories." *Association for Psychological Science*, vol 26, no 6, 2017, pp 538-442.

<sup>26</sup> Tangherlini, Timothy R., Shadi Shahsavari, Behnam Shahbazi, Ehsan Ebrahimzadeh, Vywani Roychowdhury. "An Automated Pipeline for The Discovery of Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theory Narrative Frameworks." *PLOS One*, vol 15, no 6, 2020, pp 1-39.



“almost everybody except Mickey Mouse and Snow White has been signed up by the Communists at one time or another.”<sup>27</sup> Later, when subpoenas were distributed for the marquee trials in the fall of 1947, they were said to have been “launched like unguided missiles.”<sup>28</sup> Matthew’s melodramatic exaggeration of Communist membership in Hollywood and the Thomas Committee’s haphazard leveeing of subpoenas spread the conspiratorial accusations across so many areas that some were bound to stick and instigate public groundswell. If you hit so many tee shots, a few are bound to land close to the hole. This was the strategy of HUAC—take so many shots, and a few are destined to fit the conspiracy. By widening the net of their conspiracy, they increased the likelihood of its adoption.

Conspiracies are highly influenced by their temporal context. In the early 1940s, Hollywood often made pro-Russian films. With the United States and Russia allied during World War II, films like *The North Star* and *Mission to Moscow* portrayed Soviets in a positive light.<sup>29</sup> But in the latter half of the decade, with the war over, the Iron Curtain raised, and Communism an ever-growing worry, the conspirators cared little as to how films catered to their initial audience. Rather, they cared how the film’s creators fit into their current political environment. The government turned a blind eye to Communist sentiment in film during the war; after the war, any semblance of Communist involvement was a death sentence for those involved.

Hollywood, despite its size and complexity, was a highly structured institution. Putting a film in theaters takes months, and projects are passed between studio departments like a cigarette between chain smokers. Nevertheless, every inch of a film reel is reviewed with great precision. Nothing is put to film that is not meant to be there. So, when studio executives assured HUAC

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<sup>27</sup> Doherty, 2018; 19

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 85

<sup>29</sup> Cojoc, Andrei. “The message of American pro-Soviet movies during World War II – *The North Star*,

*Song of Russia, Mission to Moscow.” Journal of Global Politics and Current Diplomacy, 2013, pp 91-104.*

that no Communist propaganda was in their films, HUAC had no reason to distrust them. However, conspiracy theorists often show a disregard for “structural features of institutions.”<sup>30</sup> If the anti-Communist conspiracy theorists argue Communist propaganda made its way onto screen, then they fundamentally neglect Hollywood’s long standing organizational mechanism.

The conspiracy stabilized over the course of two weeks in October. The trial room was packed to the brim with men in suits. Document-laden tables populated the room, creating a suffocating lack of space. Massive cameras lined the edges, broadcasting the trials to millions of Americans. Those cameras were aimed at the front of the room, where witnesses sat at small tables, practically on top of each other. The committee members sat at an elevated dais, presiding over the proceedings with pompous arrogance. Throughout the room, people scribbled notes, others would often walk to the front to deliver documents; no one seemed able to sit still.<sup>31</sup> The trials were frenzied and full of activity, and everything about the room emphasized that these trials were not of the conventional sorts—they were a “bastard hybrid, part show, part trial,” engineered to fluster witnesses and concretize the conspiracy of the anti-Communists.<sup>32</sup>

The trials were structurally unorthodox. For one, they centered around a conspiracy, whose outcome was predetermined. The witnesses’ fates were decided before they ever took the stand. Investigations based on conspiracy may “look like investigation, but the conclusion is already determined, and any inconvenient facts are quickly airbrushed.”<sup>33</sup> Conspiracy-fueled investigation may seem legit, but in reality, it “offers sweeping, totalizing narratives, without complications and caveats.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, the investigation is not really an investigation at all,

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<sup>30</sup> Christensen 592

<sup>31</sup> *Hollywood on Trial*. Directed by David Helpern, performance by John Huston, Dalton Trumbo, Edward Dmytryk, Albert Maltz, Walter Bernstein, etc. Corinth Films, 1976.

<sup>32</sup> Doherty, 2018; 105

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, Helen. “The Mainstream Media Won’t Tell You This.” *The Atlantic*. 12 June 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis

but merely a confirmation of the conspirators preexisting beliefs. Investigatory committees created by conspirators devolve into Potemkin investigation committees. Edward Sullivan, a reporter at the *New York Daily News* during the hearings, commented on this illegitimacy:

This is a star chamber proceeding that not only exempts the investigators from the intervention of a jury, but also exempts them from observing the telltale bearing of accused and accuser, when brought face to face.<sup>35</sup>

Legal scholar Cass Sunstein suggests conspiracy theories operate on “conspiracy cascades.”<sup>36</sup> One such cascade is the information cascade, wherein one person making a judgement subsequently lowers the bar for the next person to accept such a judgement. This process repeats until numerous others accept the information.<sup>37</sup> HUAC continuously activated this cascade leading up to the October hearings, so that by the time the first witnesses took to the stand, the public’s bar for acceptance was considerably low.

Conspiracies thrive upon repeated activation of the relationship between its actants.<sup>38</sup> In other words, the more the conspiracy and the people involved in the conspiracy are mentioned, the likelier the conspiracy survives into the future. Additionally, at this point, with the relationships already established, the conspiracy becomes highly resistant to both additions and deletions.<sup>39</sup> If a witness were to recant his or her testimony, it is unlikely the anti-Communist conspiracy would be affected. Once the conspiracy is developed, it cannot be undeveloped.

Further, the more people that tell similar stories, the more the conspiracy sticks. The repeated reference from multiple people creates an “imminent narrative framework,” and it becomes nearly impossible to convince people of its falsities.<sup>40</sup> So, although the exact story of

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<sup>35</sup> Doherty, 2018; 189

<sup>36</sup> Sunstein 15

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Tangherlini, et al. 3

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 4

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

how a Communist screenwriter would get Communist propaganda onto the screen was never presented, the fact that so many witnesses attested to its possibility submitted the conspiracy into the imminent narrative framework zone. The committee's framework was then cemented by one of the most important men in Hollywood.

When Jack Warner, the president and co-founder of Warner Brothers, entered the trial room, he had already made his intentions known—he was coming as a “friendly.”<sup>41</sup> This meant he was sympathetic to the cause of HUAC. Warner was one of the first witnesses in this round of trials, and that was no coincidence. HUAC likely wanted Warner to appear early on in the trials, so as to finalize the narrative framework that would then linger over subsequent testimonies.

Warner was HUAC's golden knight. He voiced support for their mission, frequently asserting that Hollywood was no place for Communists. While he never explicitly said Communists worked in Hollywood, what he did say nevertheless kindled the conspiracy. He told the committee “subversive germs breed in dark corners,” and said, “let's get light into those corners.”<sup>42</sup> He called writers that embraced Communism “cracked.”<sup>43</sup> When asked where Communists operated, he answered that he was unsure, but “wherever they may be, I say let us dig them out and get rid of them. My brothers and I will be happy to subscribe generously to a pest removal fund.”<sup>44</sup>

Reputation is another one of Sunstein's conspiracy cascades. In this cascade, people accept the conspiracy because it is better to be in favor of the conspirators. Jack Warner, along with Louis B. Mayer, the founder of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, took part in the reputation cascade. Warner and Mayer, pestilent to the post-war labor strikes at their studios, wanted to show that the

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<sup>41</sup> Doherty, 2018; 107

<sup>42</sup> United States. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture*

*Industry*, 80th Congress, 1st Session, October 20, 1947.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

studios were in compliance with the United States government, and that they in no way harbored Communist innuendo in their productions. The two studio icons went so far as to distance themselves from the criticism that oft accompanied testifying, as they deflected all putdowns of Hollywood onto the small group of screenwriters set to appear later in the trial.<sup>45</sup> Despite their short and sober testimonies, Warner and Mayer's siding with HUAC granted an unprecedented amount of credibility to the conspiracy.

After the friendlies finished their testimonies, it came time for the more hostile witnesses to face the committee. By the time they appeared, the conspiracy stabilized, and the imminent narrative framework guided discourse. This fact is key because a select few of the hostile witnesses attempted to show the conspiracy, that Communists were making Communist films in Hollywood, was objectively false. But once a conspiracy is stable, it becomes highly resistant to falsification. The conspirators discount or cover up counter evidence, thereby denying a platform for conspiracy debunkers.<sup>46</sup>

The most asinine and tactless example of Thomas's vocation to prevent falsification of the conspiracy came in an incident involving John Charles Moffitt, John Weber, and Chalmer Goodlin. Moffitt, a screenwriter and film critic, alleged John Weber, the head of the William Morris Agency, asked Goodlin, a military test pilot, to give up classified military secrets for a film script. Thomas loved the story and believed it made for a compelling addition to the record. Goodlin later called Thomas, denying the claims, saying Moffitt made "malicious assertions."<sup>47</sup> He demanded to testify, stating that he "as a patriotic American, feels it is only just that the committee records contain my rebuttal and that the press be advised accordingly. If need be, I will gladly place myself along with documentary evidence at your disposal." Thomas never

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<sup>45</sup> Doherty, 2018; 107

<sup>46</sup> Douglas, et al. 538

<sup>47</sup> Doherty, 2018; 133

called Goodlin.<sup>48</sup> Thomas prevented any semblance of factual testimony that would poke holes in his conspiracy.

When Dalton Trumbo testified, Thomas's questionable conception of evidence continued. Trumbo was a member of a group dubbed the Hollywood Ten—screenwriters and directors that were members of the Communist Party of the United States and ascertained as critical folk devils. Trumbo asked to submit to the record twenty of his scripts, each commended by generals and chaplains in the armed forces. He wanted to prove the absence of Communist propaganda in his film. Thomas offhandedly responded, “too many pages.”<sup>49</sup> The length of the scripts didn't deter Thomas; the presence of considerable evidence against his conspiracy did. These Trumbo scripts did not have any Communist innuendo, which would then mean the conspiracy was baseless.

After the dismissal of the scripts came the manipulative use of the Communist party cards. The committee, via the FBI, obtained Communist Party membership cards belonging to certain witnesses. Trumbo asked about the cards, and Robert Stripling, the chief investigator for the committee, informed Trumbo the cards would not be presented. Meanwhile, Thomas, ever gauche, recklessly pounded his gavel, and vehemently alerted Trumbo that he was “not asking the questions!” Trumbo retorted, “I believe I have the right to be confronted with any evidence that supports this question. I should like to see what you have.”<sup>50</sup>

Trumbo was the paragon of the HUAC resistance cohort. Those that opposed HUAC did so for various reasons, but none were successful in reversing the outcome of the trials. The primary factor in their failure is the fact that conspiracy theories are “extremely resistant to correction.”<sup>51</sup> No matter the level of truth in the conspiracy, once a theory is solidified and

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<sup>48</sup> Doherty, 2018; 133

<sup>49</sup> Ibid 230

<sup>50</sup> Ibid 231

<sup>51</sup> Sunstein 9

adopted, disproving it becomes a monumental task. For one, “direct attempts to dispel the theory are often folded into the theory.”<sup>52</sup> Taking a stance against a conspiracy implicates one in that exact conspiracy. If a witness testified that Communism was not a threat and Hollywood was not under siege, Thomas and his committee then assumed the witness was in on the scheme. Denial of a conspiracy is immediately coopted into confirmation of the same conspiracy, and “the evidence mustered on behalf of the denial might be seen as corroborative, rather than contradictory.”<sup>53</sup> However, staying silent is not an option either. Silence is complicity, and conspirators “contend that ‘no comment’ is a concession.”<sup>54</sup> If subpoenaed, there was no running, as witnesses subpoenaed by HUAC had to choose between being “pilloried” for Communism or being “pilloried” for choosing to not appear.<sup>55</sup> The folk devils witnesses suspected the Thomas Committee would take such a stance, so they refused to plead the 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Speaking against HUAC made one a Communist. Staying silent made one a Communist. The only path for the common citizen to engage with the event was by joining the side of the conspirators, or risk branding as a Communist. The Thomas Committee crafted the archetypal conspiracy environment, where conspiracy groups vehemently decree “those who are not with us are against us.”<sup>56</sup> When it comes to Thomas’s HUAC, it was understood that “anyone who exposed [them], anyone who does not share [their] hysterical disregard for decency and human dignity and the rights guaranteed by the Constitution must be either a Communist or a fellow traveler.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sunstein 26

<sup>53</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>54</sup> Ibid 26

<sup>55</sup> Doherty, 2003; 124

<sup>56</sup> Boym, Svetlana. “Conspiracy Theories and Literary Ethics: Umberto Eco, Danilo Kiš, and the Protocols of Zion.” *Comparative Literature*, vol 51, no 2, 1999, pp 97-122.

<sup>57</sup> Doherty, 2003; 186

## Salem's Conspiracy

*The Crucible* revolves around conspiracy. The Salem conspirators are much like the HUAC conspirators, in that they have a twisted perception of proof, a personal agenda, and hatred for opposition. As soon as the first person cried witch, the town lost sense of itself. Neighbors turned on each other, and community goodwill evaporated. The Salem of *The Crucible* is squarely in the midst of the Puritan's moral panic. The witchcraft narrative was the perfect conspiracy for their anxious souls, as it was amongst the class of conspiracies where the "fable plugs neatly into the existing worldview."<sup>58</sup>

*The Crucible's* conspiracy entrepreneurs are numerous, headed by Abigail Williams, a teenage girl. Abigail deftly convinces the townspeople she was attacked, and thereby situates herself at the center of the conspiracy. The most powerful conspiracy entrepreneurs are the ones that skillfully portray themselves as a "victim warrior fighting against powerful forces"<sup>59</sup> When she victimizes herself, she garners sympathy for the cause. But Abigail is not victim to any crime. Rather, she creates the conspiracy as a revenge tactic. As Act 1 begins, Abigail is under immense personal stress. She loves John Proctor, and the two briefly had an affair. But he halts her advances. She is angered and stunned by Proctor's denial and is subsequently determined to transfer that anxiety elsewhere. This is common for conspiracists, who often experience "intra-individual subjective experiences of stress and the experiences of negative life events."<sup>60</sup>

Abigail's individual stress creates the conspiracy, and it is then adopted by an afflicted village.

Abigail leads a small group of girls in the accusations. The attention given to these girls is noteworthy—recall that Puritan's believed women to have little societal importance. For the

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<sup>58</sup> LaFrance

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Swami, Viren, Adrian Furnham, Nina Smyth, Laura Weis, Alixe Lay, Angela Cow. "Putting the

Stress on Conspiracy Theories: Examining Associations between Psychological Stress, Anxiety, and Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol 99, 2016, 72-76.



nine months *The Crucible* details, these girls hold elocutionary power that far outweighs what society had previously granted women. Persecution was the common Puritan response to outspoken women; reverence is given to *The Crucible's* female conspirators.

Multiple conspiracy entrepreneurs exist outside of Abigail and her disciples. Three men specifically grow the conspiracy. One is Reverend Parris, the minister of Salem's church. Parris is greedy and power hungry, consistently reminding his townsfolk that he is to be respected. He desires more than his position as minister gives. For example, he is agitated that he does not own his house, which denies him the all-important distinction as a property owner.<sup>61</sup> He lives in a house owned by the church. A town's minister being disgruntled over this fact is not the most inspiring spirituality-wise.

Parris is not well-regarded. And he is highly miffed because of it. He contends little people listen to his decrees, and worries people see him as a farce. No one should dare disagree with him, as he warns his townsfolk that "a minister is not to be so lightly crossed and contradicted... there is either obedience or the church will burn like Hell is burning."<sup>62</sup> These comments arise from deep-seated feelings of estrangement and reprobation. Belief in conspiracy is directly correlated to some variations of alienation and dissatisfaction, of which Parris is doubly guilty.<sup>63</sup> And, as a Puritan minister, he has a propensity to believe in the Devil and his acolytes. Pair all of these qualities together, and Parris becomes a textbook pro-conspiracy vocalist.

The second man to become a key conspiracist is Thomas Putnam. Within the first few pages, Putnam wholly advocates for the conspiracy. His instantaneous acceptance of evil in Salem is mostly attributed to him seeing the village as increasingly deranged. He has many rivals

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<sup>61</sup> Miller, 1953; 28

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> Goertzel, Ted. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology*, vol 15, no 4, 1994, pp 731-742.

in Salem; very few men have favor with Putnam. He is “embittered,” a “man with many grievances.”<sup>64</sup> He has an extremely “vindictive nature,” which likely provokes his belief in the conspiracy.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Putnam has an agenda. He wants land and feels that other Salemites had stolen his property (they hadn’t).<sup>66</sup> In toting the conspiracy and targeting the accusations, Putnam invariably sees the opportunity to exterminate his rivals, and then obtain their land. Conspiracists often use the conspiracy to “further their own nefarious goals.”<sup>67</sup> No conspirator in Salem demonstrated this tendency more than Putnam.

Reverend Hale is the next man to ignite the conspiracy. Summoned to Salem by Parris, Hale is the region’s resident witch expert. Conspiracists relish the opportunity to be seen as a person with exclusive knowledge, a seer of the unseen. Hale views himself with great esteem, as he exudes “the pride of the specialist whose unique knowledge has at last been publicly called for.”<sup>68</sup> He strides into Salem with witchcraft books he asserts are “weighted with authority.”<sup>69</sup> Years of experience ‘identifying’ witches grant him a “painfully acquired armory of symptoms and diagnostic procedures.”<sup>70</sup> People respect and believe him because of his prestige. With his title comes the understanding that, at least to the people of Salem, his judgement is accurate. So, when he tells everyone, “we cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are definite as stone,” he gives credentialed validity to the conspiracy.<sup>71</sup> This comment also separates the belief in witchcraft from the world of superstition, as Hale shrewdly places fear of the Devil in opposition to superstition. In doing so, he pulls superficiality out of the conspiracy, inserting a fundamental religious belief in its place. Conspiracists can be

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<sup>64</sup> Miller, 1953; 14; 13

<sup>65</sup> Ibid 14

<sup>66</sup> Ibid 30

<sup>67</sup> Oliver, et al. 952

<sup>68</sup> Miller, 1953; 31

<sup>69</sup> Ibid 34

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Ibid 35

supremely convincing when they display a “particularly astute interpretive ability;”<sup>72</sup> Hale’s arrival in Salem meant a studied professional had now joined the side of the conspiracists.

This group—Abigail, Putnam, Parris, Hale, and co.—is often attributed as the villains of the play. Their wretchedness is quite evident to any audience member. This wretchedness does not arise from mere impurity, hostility, or resentment. Rather, it arises from their pursuit of personal desires. But since those desires are unattainable in the normal course of life, they attempt to create a new reality wherein they are granted their wishes. And when certain people stood in their way, they cooked up a conspiracy to make those people irrelevant.

The conspiracy entrepreneurs take center stage as soon as the play begins. *The Crucible* opens with Betty Parris, Reverend Parris’ daughter, bed-ridden and feeling ill. Rumblings of witchcraft precede the action of the play, but the first to mention witchcraft in the play are Thomas Putnam and his wife. The two, neither of whom is highly intellectual, see Betty and immediately assert “her soul is taken surely.”<sup>73</sup> Later, upon hearing Parris say the words “going up to Jesus,” Betty moans, and Putnam vociferously says, “that is a notorious sign of witchcraft... a prodigious sign.”<sup>74</sup>

A majority of conspiracies are born out of a desire for understanding.<sup>75</sup> No one knows what truly afflicts Betty. Out of that lack of knowledge arose the conspiratorial suggestion that witches are present in Salem. Puritans were historically fearful of witches, so these Salemites are at least familiar with the purported signs of witchcraft. They use that crass explanation to diagnose Betty as a witch. They take the common conspiratorial route of locating the “source of unusual phenomena in unseen, intentional, and malevolent forces.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Tangherlini, et al. 31

<sup>73</sup> Miller, 1953; 13

<sup>74</sup> Ibid 23

<sup>75</sup> Douglas, et al. 540

<sup>76</sup> Oliver, et al. 953

Throughout Betty's examination, many offer basic, logical arguments as to what is occurring. Prudent explanations are immediately shot down, presumably because they are boring, drab, and contain no mention of the ire of witchcraft. Rebecca Nurse offers perhaps the most reasonable and rational statement in the entire play when she, reflecting on raising her many children, says, "I have seen them through their silly season... A child's spirit is like a child, you can never catch it by running after it; you must stand still, and, for love, it will soon itself come back."<sup>77</sup> Rebecca's measured observation that children act like children, and perhaps that is why Betty seems unruly, is derided by the others. Mrs. Putnam mockingly says, "this is no silly season, Rebecca."<sup>78</sup> Apparently, it is silly to believe that children can spontaneously act out, but not silly to believe that an evil force is turning all the villagers into nefarious witches.

Typical interpretations of *The Crucible* identify Abigail as the instigator of Salem's frenzy. While Abigail is the most vocal and dedicated conspiracy entrepreneur, the trials were not of her singular doing. In fact, Miller opening the play with Betty's affliction insinuates that the conspiracy was present before the curtain rises. Betty is instantly suspected to be possessed. Miller does not build up this diagnosis over the course of the play—it is mentioned in the opening pages. The play is often seen as developing its accusation, a concerted effort from Abigail and the court to build a case against their folk devils. The opening, however, affirms the conspiracy as present from the outset. The rest of the play, then, is not necessarily a development of accusation, but a month's long effort to uphold conspiracy.

As soon as the Putnams first utter the claims of witchcraft, people reflect on their past and create revisionist history. Wondering if they have seen signs of witchcraft, they wrongly assume small coincidences, irregularities, or oddities are unassailable indicators. One such 'sign'

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<sup>77</sup> Miller, 1953; 25

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

is dancing. As Hale conducts his investigation into Betty's status, Parris tells him Betty, Abigail, and Parris' servant Tituba were dancing in the forest the previous night. Hale, seemingly aghast in hearing such information, turns to Parris and worryingly mutters, "you permit dancing?"<sup>79</sup> The concerned response from Hale, the witchcraft professional, suggests to the others that witches, and only witches, dance. If the three girls were dancing, then that must be a sign of witchcraft, right? According to the conspirators, that seems to be the case.

Concerned they unknowingly encountered warnings of witchcraft, the others ask Hale if certain experiences were really intimations of witchcraft. Corey Giles tells Hale of a peculiar interaction he had with his wife. Mrs. Giles was reading a book in a corner of their home, and when Giles attempted to pray, he was unable. Mrs. Giles soon stopped reading and walked out of the room, and Giles was suddenly able to pray again. Upon hearing this story, Hale ponders to Giles, "the stoppage of prayer—that is strange. I'll speak further on that with you."<sup>80</sup> Now, not only is dancing a sign of witchcraft, so too is reading.

The story of the girls dancing in the forest and Mrs. Giles's book are molded into the conspiracy. Recall that the narrative frameworks of conspiracies are vital to their adoption, and conspirators have a "natural attraction toward melodramatic narratives as explanations."<sup>81</sup> Girls performing Satanic dance rituals in the forest and Mrs. Giles enchanting her husband are quite the melodramatic narratives. Both stories make the logical mistake of assuming a condition necessary for an outcome to occur is sufficient to make the outcome occur. Witches are understood to dance, and witches are understood to cast spells. But dancing and casting spells do not automatically make one a witch. Hale's responses to both stories, however, suggest to others that dancing and reading are sufficient signs of witchcraft. Hale's actions here, while small, are

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<sup>79</sup> Miller, 1953; 36

<sup>80</sup> Ibid 38

<sup>81</sup> Oliver, et al. 954

considerable inflection points for the conspiracy. Now that the smallest of signs can be taken for witchcraft, the conspirators are better equipped to expand their wicked ambition.

Throughout the life of the conspiracy, the Salemites suffer from crippled epistemology. This theory, introduced by Russel Hardin, states that conspiracists “know few things, and what they know is wrong.”<sup>82</sup> These Puritans have a considerably crippled epistemology. A large swath of their knowledge is limited to that which is explained by religion. When dealing with the stricken, they do not have experiences with many thought disciplines. For example, if they were to have a psychoanalytic approach, they would be more sensitive to the possibilities that the girls were lying and putting on performances. While the science of the time was limited, a scientific approach would reveal Betty to be perfectly healthy. So, with limited knowledge of theoretical explanations for the situation, the conspirators turn to what they know. They know that Devil is evil and infectious, and that he can tempt people to disobey God. They know he can possess people and make them into witches.

Their crippled epistemology also reinforces their extreme religious views. Not only does their Puritanism inform their daily life, their daily life informs their Puritanism. They fit all of their existence into religion. Hardin says that crippled epistemology can reinforce conspiracists’ views because “they have little relevant information, and their extremist views are supported by what little they know.”<sup>83</sup> The Salem conspirators have little information on what is really occurring, but they have religious views that warn of witchcraft. Their crippled epistemology, therefore, supports their extremist interpretation of Betty’s condition.

This is not to say that religion necessitates a crippled epistemology. Rather, the fact these Puritans analyze *only* through their religion creates the crippled epistemology. If a

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<sup>82</sup> Sunstein 12

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

mathematician only examines the world through math, he will never know how a flower grows, how to treat a sprained ankle, or how a guitarist plays a chord. Math could possibly be helpful in those areas, but only using math to interact with those areas would lead to a lot of nonsensical judgement. Conspiracies do exactly that—they over rely on ill-fitting knowledge, leading to the creation of nonsense, and “the influence of nonsense, when unchecked by science, by direct observation, by a shared epistemological reality, can be profoundly damaging.”<sup>84</sup> There exists a conception that conspiracies operate solely on misinformation. Conspiracies do thrive on misinformation, but they more so function off *misattribution*, especially in times of moral panic.<sup>85</sup> Abigail, Hale, Putnam, and the rest of the Salem conspirators misattribute religious beliefs in the supernatural and paranormal, fomenting a fear that Puritans are under siege by the Devil.

The suspicion of witchcraft becomes a believed reality at the end of Act 1, when Abigail asserts herself as a leader of the conspirators. Abigail is questioned by Hale and Parris about dancing in the forest. Abigail admits to dancing and attempting to speak to Satan, but she hastily points to Tituba, and yells “she made me do it! She made Betty do it!... She makes me drink blood!”<sup>86</sup> Attempting to make this lie more believable, she also says Tituba, “sends her spirit on me in church; she makes me laugh at prayer.”<sup>87</sup> Parris affirms this claim, as he says Abigail “have often laughed at prayer.”<sup>88</sup> Abigail, blaming her disrespectfulness in church on Tituba’s ‘powers,’ knows Parris often sees her laughing in church. By using real events, of which many are witness, and redefining their cause, Abigail props up the conspiracy with tangible evidence.

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<sup>84</sup> Lewis

<sup>85</sup> Oliver, et al. 964

<sup>86</sup> Miller, 1953; 41

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

Hale, now fully acknowledging that witchcraft is present, turns to Tituba and scolds her. He assures her that she no longer has power over the suddenly improved Betty, Abigail, or any of the girls. He questions her on why she “compact with the Devil.”<sup>89</sup> Notice, Tituba is already deemed guilty. The conspiracy is now reality, and its first folk devil is identified. Tituba confesses, but only because her two options are to confess or be hanged. The conspiracy survives off this line of questioning. When the two choices are to confess to witchcraft or die, the accused has already been convicted, and the conspiracy already proven. To confess is to be a witch, to die is to implicitly acknowledge one is a witch.

After Tituba confesses, Hale thanks her and says, “God will bless you for your help.”<sup>90</sup> Recognizing they could gain favor by ousting more witches, Abigail and Betty proceed to name multitudes of people, calling them all witches. The conspiracy, in a matter of minutes, solidified and expanded to include dozens of people in Salem.

As Abigail and Betty give names, Hale and Parris are joyous. Parris begins saying “prayers of thanksgiving,” and Hale praises the two for their bravery.<sup>91</sup> Hale and Parris, implicitly incentivize Abigail and Betty to continue their actions. Their positive reinforcement convinces the two girls they are doing the right thing, that the conspiracy is a morally-just mission. Conspirators typically believe they are warriors fighting injustice, the only ones “brave enough to expose hidden injustice.”<sup>92</sup> The witchcraft conspiracy had only recently stabilized, and its fiercest advocates were now empowered to explode the conspiracy into widespread cleansing of the folk devils.

After Tituba’s confession and the girl’s proclamation of names, the play jumps forward a few months-time to the famed Salem witchcraft trials. With the conspiracy stabilized, those

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<sup>89</sup> Miller, 1953; 41

<sup>90</sup> Ibid 45

<sup>91</sup> Ibid 45

<sup>92</sup> Lewis



opposed to the trials struggle to adequately attack the accusers. John and Elizabeth Proctor, the main opposition force, realize they have the futile task of debunking the conspiracy. The two know Abigail is a “fraud.”<sup>93</sup> But, when Elizabeth begs John to go the court and expose Abigail, he reminds his wife he has “no proof for it.”<sup>94</sup> In the world of conspiracy, where proof is rarely enough to reveal the truth, the Proctors’ personal knowledge of Abigail’s interests is inconsequential.

Amidst the Proctors’ conversation, Mary Warren, the Proctors’ servant, arrives and informs them Mrs. Osburn was accused and convicted during the trials. The Proctors are close friends with the Osburns. They are appalled because they know Mrs. Osburn is wrongly accused. They demand to know the basis of the decision. Mary Warren told Proctor there was “hard proof, hard as a rock, the judges said.”<sup>95</sup> Upon closer examination, this hard proof is rather soft and circumstantial.

Mrs. Osburn’s trial centers around a story involving Mary Warren. Mrs. Osburn appeared at the Proctor’s door one day, asking Mary Warren for food and drink. Mary Warren consistently turned her away. She told the judges, “whenever I turned her away empty, she mumbled.”<sup>96</sup> Mary Warren would later get sick, but she did not indicate how closely this coincided to her encounter with Mrs. Osburn. She initially thought nothing of it, but now that witches are exposed in Salem, she thought to tell the judges.

Mary Warren, playing the part of a conspiracist, brought forward yet another accusation that further stabilized the conspiracy. She made use of the conspiratorial tactic of aligning “unrelated domains of human interaction.”<sup>97</sup> She related Mrs. Osburn’s mumblings to her

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<sup>93</sup> Miller, 1953; 51

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Ibid 51

<sup>96</sup> Miller, 1953; 55

<sup>97</sup> Tangherlini, et al. 30

sickness. This is not a case of correlation equaling causation, as the time between mumblings and sickness is unclear. Mary Warren fell ill, remembered that Mrs. Osburn said something under her breath at some point in the past, and presented those two unrelated facts to the judges.

The judges, now suspecting Mrs. Osburn to be a witch, bring her to trial. When questioning her, they ask if she can recite her commandments. She cannot, but wishing to prove herself a good Puritan, she says she can. She recites a majority of the commandments, but misquotes some, and forgets a few. After she stumbles through the recitation, the judges claim to “have her in a flat lie.”<sup>98</sup> The court condemns her and takes her to jail for witchcraft. Mrs. Osburn is guilty of not knowing her commandments. She is not guilty of being a witch. But there is nothing to prove that she was not a witch, so she is deemed guilty. The conspirators see it logical to assume mumblings and not knowing the commandments make her a witch. It fits their conspiratorial narrative, so they tout it as true.

The wife of Corey Giles is next to be accused. Years before the trials, a man named Walcott bought a pig from Martha Giles. The pig died shortly after. Walcott was incensed that Mrs. Giles would sell him a compromised pig (the pig was perfectly normal at the time of the sale). When Walcott went to confront Mrs. Giles, she told him “Walcott, if you haven’t the wit to feed a pig properly, you’ll not live to own many.”<sup>99</sup> Walcott thought nothing of this confrontation, until, years later, he heard the story of Mrs. Giles and her book. Suddenly feeling enlightened, he hurriedly tells the court he “cannot keep a pig alive for more than four weeks because [Martha] bewitch them with her books.”<sup>100</sup> Not only does Walcott clearly not know how to take care of a pig, he also does not have the ability to separate fact from fiction. He is upset his pigs always die, but never concedes their deaths are his fault. When the story of the books comes

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<sup>98</sup> Miller, 1953; 55

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Miller, 1953; 68

along, he suddenly finds a compelling and fitting explanation. In his mind, the conspiracy fits, and it excuses him of all culpability or ineptitude.

The poppets followed the pigs. Elizabeth Procter finds herself accused on account of her poppets. With a tinge of mockery, Elizabeth asks if “the court has discovered a text in poppets now?”<sup>101</sup> The Proctors are well aware of the court’s dismal interpretation of evidence and refuse to cooperate with the court until the case against Elizabeth is laid out.

Abigail supposedly collapsed at dinner, finding a needle “stuck two inches in the flesh of her belly.” Abigail then testified it was Elizabeth’s “familiar spirit” that “pushed it in.”<sup>102</sup> John Proctor implores they “not take this for proof,” but they do. Hale, now present, is “struck by the proof,” and Cheever asserts “it’s hard proof.”<sup>103</sup> Mary Warren witnesses the bewildered Proctors facing unjust persecution, and confesses it was herself who put the needle in the poppet. In stunning adherence to the conspiracy, Hale assumes Mary Warren is imperiled, suggesting that “perhaps, someone conjures her even now to say this.”<sup>104</sup> Mary Warren provides outright proof of Elizabeth’s innocence, but it is dismissed on the basis of Mary being corrupted by Elizabeth’s spirit.

Elizabeth denounces Hale, Parris, and the court, and she categorically denies the existence of witchcraft. Earlier in the play, she told everyone she “cannot believe it... cannot think the Devil may own a woman’s soul.”<sup>105</sup> She calls the court liars, and correctly assumes the entire situation was a farce, a conspiracy. But anyone that denies the existence of a conspiracy becomes a target of that conspiracy. Elizabeth vocalizes her distaste and makes herself an enemy

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<sup>101</sup> Miller, 1953; 69

<sup>102</sup> Ibid 71

<sup>103</sup> Ibid

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

<sup>105</sup> Ibid 66

of the court. Proof of her innocence lacks resonance with the conspirators, and she is forced to appear in court with her fate all but predetermined.

The condemnations of Mrs. Osburn, Mrs. Giles, and Elizabeth Proctor are all functions of conspiratorial interpretation of evidence. Conspirators welcome an influx of evidence as “long as there is some kind of process for meeting falsehood with truth.”<sup>106</sup> The conspirators admit evidence in their courtroom because they can frame it in any manner they please. The witchcraft narrative is established and held to be true, so the judges can quite easily twist evidence to complement the accusations. It does not matter that some evidence is absolving. When conspiracies gain footing, the “conditions for corrections are not present; even if they are present, people are strongly motivated to disregard them.”<sup>107</sup> In these cases, the conditions for correction are absent in two of the three—Mrs. Osburn and Mrs. Giles cannot produce evidence to fully prove the conspiracy wrong. In the other, the condition for correction is present, but Hale deems Mary Warren’s comments as influenced by the Devil inside Elizabeth.

Conspiracies eventually reach a point where the real truth is considered fake, and the fake truth considered real. The Salem conspiracy evidently reaches this point before Elizabeth Proctor is set to face the court. John Proctor, thinking he can cure the wrongs of the court by admitting his own faults, approaches Hale in private. He proceeds to tell Hale the root cause of all this—his affair with Abigail, and subsequent rejection of her love. Proctor asserts Abigail set off this entire conspiracy as a form of vengeance against him (in Act 2, Scene 2, a scene Miller deleted from the play in 1971, Abigail all but admits this is her motivation).<sup>108</sup> Yet, Hale believes this explanation lunacy, telling Proctor “it profit nothing you should lay the cause to the vengeance of a little girl.”<sup>109</sup> Hale then delivers an extended remark to Proctor, one full of conspiratorial

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<sup>106</sup> Sunstein 19

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>108</sup> Miller, 1953; 142

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid* 74

claims and behavior. Hale “cannot think God be provoked so grandly by such a petty cause,”<sup>110</sup> so instead of acknowledging pettiness as the cause, he proceeds to adopt a conspiratorial cause that preserves the goodliness of certain Salemites. He implores Proctor to “think on cause... let you counsel among yourselves; think on your village and what may have drawn from heaven such thundering wrath upon you all.”<sup>111</sup> Proctor not only thinks on cause, he provides Hale with the singular cause of the entire episode. But Hale instead opts to condemn the town for creating an environment suitable for evil. Yes, Salemites, enduring their moral panic, lived a petty and hostile lifestyle. But this does not allow Hale, an instigator of the ongoing conspiracy, to excuse himself from all culpability. Instead, he continues to maintain that it is his moral duty to expose the existential threat bubbling beneath the surface. Proctor acknowledges defeat and prepares to appear in court along with his wife.

This moment in the play marks Proctor’s downfall. It is usually interpreted as the point where Proctor succumbs to guilt, where his heroic efforts are marked for naught. Proctor’s admission is not him surrendering, nor is it his final act. Rather, it is the moment he decides to expose conspiracy. Prior to this interaction, the majority of Salemites spoke in fabrications. Proctor saw the dismal treatment of reason and truth and hoped people would eventually come to their senses. But conspirators rarely come to their senses. Proctor, too incensed to let the conspiracy go on, finally presents outright truth. His admission of adultery is not a result of overwhelming guilt. It is not a humble acceptance of imperfection. It is a presentation of the fundamental truth that should kill the conspiracy. But he waited too long to act, and the conspiracy will soon swallow him whole.

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<sup>110</sup> Miller, 1953; 75

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

The play then shifts its setting to the courtroom. In the solemn and foreboding room, a new conspirator takes power—Judge Danforth. Egotistical, rigid, and devoutly Puritan, Danforth comports himself with one goal in mind—persecuting witches. And he, like the other conspirators, gives little consideration to any animosity. When Corey Giles bursts into the courtroom, distraught over his wife rotting away in a jail cell, and asserts the court made a mistake, Danforth has him forcibly removed. Patronizingly, he asks Giles, “do you take it upon yourself to determine what this court shall believe and what it shall set aside?”<sup>112</sup> This privilege, Danforth would posit, is reserved for the judges. The Salemites’ beliefs, therefore, are set by conspiracist judges.

Danforth and Proctor share considerable hate for each other. Danforth already believes the conspiracy, as he argues he has “not the slightest reason to suspect that the children may be deceiving me.”<sup>113</sup> He believes Abigail, and he believes the accused are guilty until proven innocent. And he is aggravated by Proctor’s antagonism, as he reminds John a “person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there is no road between.”<sup>114</sup>

Conspiracies can often be ironic. They spur judgement based on double standards and flawed logic. When information supports the conspiracy, that information is regarded as unassailable. But if the same information were to disprove the conspiracy, it is wiped from existence. Of course, the conspirators never recognize their irony. In *The Crucible*, the conspirators build their argument through convenient attribution—Tituba with her dancing, Mrs. Osburn with her mumblings, Mrs. Giles with her books, and Elizabeth with her poppets. But when the enemies present relevant and harmless information, the judges become incredulous to convenience. In one such case, Elizabeth Proctor tells the court she is pregnant, knowing that, if

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<sup>112</sup> Miller, 1953; 79

<sup>113</sup> Ibid 84

<sup>114</sup> Ibid 87

she is condemned, she cannot be killed before her child is born. Danforth suspects Elizabeth is lying, thinking her pregnancy “too convenient to be credited.”<sup>115</sup> The narrative of witchcraft erected its foundations on convenience; when Elizabeth wants to protect her unborn child, the conspirators think it contrived and fictitious.

As the trials inched to a close, one person remains unsentenced—John Proctor. In the largest act of conspiracy yet, Abigail and multiple other girls put on one final performance. Mary Warren, at Proctor’s demand, defends him in court. Suddenly, Abigail and the others begin wailing, screaming, and frantically running about the room. They claim to see spirits flying around the air and vicious birds tearing through the ceiling. They start mimicking Mary. Abigail then screeches that Mary turned into one of the birds and is attacking the girls. They yell out that large talons are scratching at their heads. And finally, they inform everyone Mary’s spirit entered theirs.<sup>116</sup> The ‘witches’ do not stop their performance until Mary Warren, succumbing to their tirade, runs out of the courthouse. But, in order to exonerate herself, she points at Proctor and says, “you’re the Devil’s man.”<sup>117</sup> The court, along with the public, comes to see Proctor as the orchestrator of witchcraft. He is subsequently condemned, and the conspiracy claims its primary target.

Abigail brought witchcraft to life. She brought the folk devil to life. While taking on the folk devil persona, she exhibits that her perceptions of witchcraft are based purely on expectation, not experience. She has never seen a witch; she has only heard fables. Their performance is based on myth, on what they are told witches would do if they were to exist. Their behavior is foregrounded by the court’s reaction—if the court believed their acting to be true, the conspiracy is brought to life. Abigail and her followers performed a “normative element” of

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<sup>115</sup> Miller, 1953; 85

<sup>116</sup> Ibid 106-110

<sup>117</sup> Ibid 110

the folk devil that “reinforce[s] societal reaction.”<sup>118</sup> Her co-conspirators manipulated the perception of the folk devil to bring witchcraft into the courtroom.

### **The Conspiratorial Effects**

The Anti-Communist and Salem conspiracists fundamentally altered the perception of truth, justice, and legality in their respective communities. In his book *Cool War, Cool Medium*, Thomas Doherty classifies the era of HUAC as one of the “corruption of truth, the abandonment of our historical devotion to fair play. It is the abandonment of the due process of law. It is the use of the Big Lie and the unfounded accusation against any citizen... it is the rise to power of the demagogue who lives on untruth.”<sup>119</sup> The same can be said of Salem in 1692. In both cases, the conspirators upended systemic conventions, manipulating the truth in order to obtain and retain political and moral power.

In every sense, the conspirators performed corrupt investigations based on half-truths. On his nationally broadcast program *See it Now*, Edward R. Murrow delivered a succinct summation of HUAC’s tactics when he said their “primary achievement has been in confusing the public mind as between the internal and external threat of communism.”<sup>120</sup> Substitute the word communism for witchcraft, and Murrow’s comment equally applies to Salem. Murrow sternly said, “accusation is not proof, and conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law.”<sup>121</sup> Unfortunately, in both cases the conspirators operated on their own conceptions of proof, evidence, and due process. HUAC and the Salem conspirators ignored convention, instead favoring interpretations that would confirm their conspiracy.

In his novel *You Can’t Keep the Change*, Peter Cheney hinted that conspiracies are “a collection of people giving false information or telling lies, because circumstances either forced

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<sup>118</sup> Cohen 187

<sup>119</sup> Doherty, 2003; 15

<sup>120</sup> “A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.”

<sup>121</sup> Ibid



them or led them into the process.”<sup>122</sup> The moral panics did not cause the control agents to foment conspiracy. Rather, the panics *enabled* the conspirators to do so. The anti-communists and staunch Puritans played into the immense fear of many, providing them with physical embodiments of their worst anxieties. Throngs of people were predisposed to believing the conspiracies. Moral panic primed the conspiracies; the control agents arrived and made the conspiracies truths.

Neither HUAC nor the Salem Puritans stopped to consider the effects of their actions. They were so invested in creating folk devils they never realized the conspiracies were slowly destroying their social orders. Conspiracies “erode social capital and frustrate people’s need to see themselves as valuable members of morally decent collectives.”<sup>123</sup> But what *The Crucible* does with its conspiracy is the same thing HUAC did with theirs—it weaponized conspiracy. These were not harmless conspiracies that quietly ran their course. Miller raged against anti-Communists unsubstantiated ruination of intellectual opposition; his hero John Proctor raged against Salem’s bogus court proceedings. The anti-Communist conspiracy was used as justification in an onslaught on American industries, an episode *The Crucible* mirrors in Salem’s execution of innocents.

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<sup>122</sup> McLuhan 67

<sup>123</sup> Douglas, et al. 540

### III. Cancellation

*The Crucible* not only found inspiration from HUAC's reliance on conspiracy. It also emulated HUAC weaponization of said conspiracy, in the form of cancellation. Cancellation and cancel culture are not synonymous. Cancel culture has morphed into a movement both good and bad, controlled and chaotic. Cancel culture is a structure, a societal entity. Cancellation, on the other hand, is an action, one that preceded cancel culture. The distinction lies in the role of the folk devil. Cancel culture's inherent goal is to identify as many folk devils as possible, across all strokes of morality. The cancellation employed by anti-Communists and Salem Puritans, however, was pointed at a select few folk devils. Cancel culture is reactionary—it waits for wrongdoing, then exposes it. HUAC and Salemites methodically bred their targets through arduous conspiracy crafting. Their cancellation acts were not reactionary. Rather, they were the necessary end in the battle against their moral panics.

Cancellation is “a way for a dominant group to label an ‘other’ as evil and cast that evil out, as if it would then no longer abide within them and they could imagine themselves free of blemish.”<sup>1</sup> The HUAC and Salem conspirators hoped to retain their purity by casting out those they labeled as evil. The anti-Communists surmised their actions would strengthen pro-American sentiments. The Salem Puritans believed the elimination of purported witches would preserve their Puritan excellence.

In relentlessly conspiring against the folk devils, the control agents were, in their minds, taking an unyielding stand against deviance. By assigning themselves the arbiters of goodness, they attribute themselves to be righteous, as “condemning wrongdoers implies that one is above

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<sup>1</sup> Mishan, Ligaya. “The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture.” *The New York Times*, 3 Dec. 2020.

transgression.”<sup>2</sup> When conspirators denounce the folk devils’ crimes, they insinuate they are too flawless to partake in such misbehavior.

The control agents opted for cancellation via calculated public punishment. They both had a constituted view of punishment, where “shame and guilt are the aim.”<sup>3</sup> The key dogmas to this brand of punishment are “punitive hostility” and “social censure.”<sup>4</sup> HUAC and Salem Puritans were fully reliant on these punishments occurring in public. Effective shaming relies “to a good extent on an aspect of publicity and a large audience. Their exposing, ceremonial aspect is not accidental.”<sup>5</sup> After building their conspiracy and condemning innocent folk devils, the control agents made it their duty to “debase the offender by reprimanding them publicly.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The Hollywood Blacklist’s Cancellations**

With the common American increasingly angsty after the HUAC hearings, studios were faced with an ultimatum—“if Hollywood refused to blacklist the Communists, moviegoers would blacklist Hollywood.”<sup>7</sup> The movie industry functions through the box office, and if viewers refused to buy tickets, movies would cease to exist. HUAC’s conspiracy birthed the folk devils, but the responsibility to “clamp down hard, make an example of these offenders and deter others” now fell to Hollywood.<sup>8</sup>

Simply firing the Ten or continuing televised admonishment would not accomplish the desired outcome. The Ten were thrust into a formulated role—the completion of that role was total extinguishment. If a movie’s villain survives the third act, they tend to reappear in the sequel. If folk devils survive attacks, they return again and again. Those engaged in cancellation

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<sup>2</sup> Henderson, Rob. “What Propels Cancel Culture?” *Psychology Today*. March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Rodogno, Raffaele. “Shame, Guilt, and Punishment.” *Law and Philosophy*, vol 28, no 5, 2009, pp 429-464.

<sup>4</sup> Rodogno 441

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 446

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Doherty, 2018; 309

<sup>8</sup> Cohen 114

tend to seek more “than pat apologies and retractions.”<sup>9</sup> In the minds of the controllers, the Ten required total erasure from the narrative of Hollywood.

On November 24, 1947, the top studio heads in Hollywood met at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City to forever cancel the Hollywood Ten. This group included Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, Albert Warner, and Eric Johnston. The most powerful individuals in Hollywood joined in one room to equivocally address HUAC’s conspiracy, deciding the best way forward was to formally denounce the claims of Communism, while also punishing those tried by Congress. Their subsequent document, called the Waldorf Declaration, read:

Members of the Association of Motion Picture Producers deplore the action of the 10 Hollywood men who have been cited for contempt by the House of Representatives. We do not desire to prejudge their legal rights, but their actions have been a disservice to their employers and have impaired their usefulness to the industry...We will forthwith discharge or suspend without compensation those in our employ, and we will not re-employ any of the 10 until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt and declares under oath that he is not a Communist...We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods...There is the risk of creating an atmosphere of fear. Creative work at its best cannot be carried on in an atmosphere of fear. We will guard against this danger, this risk, this fear. To this end we will invite the Hollywood talent guilds to work with us to eliminate any subversives: to protect the innocent; and to safeguard free speech and a free screen wherever threatened...Nothing subversive or un-American has appeared on the

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<sup>9</sup> Mishan

screen, nor can any number of Hollywood investigations obscure the patriotic services of the 30,000 loyal Americans employed in Hollywood who have given our government invaluable aid to war and peace.<sup>10</sup>

The Waldorf Declaration cut the heads, or rather the hands, off the screenwriting, directing, and movie producing folk devils—the Hollywood Ten were no longer members of Hollywood. Thomas and HUAC provided Hollywood elites with the conspiratorial ‘evidence,’ and the Waldorfers turned that evidence into unmitigated cancellation. The government and the privately controlled movie industry joined together, and cancellations are “far worse when sponsored or tacitly sanctioned by the state.”<sup>11</sup>

For such a monumental document, the Waldorf Declaration is riddled with flaws and non sequiturs. If “nothing subversive or un-American” made its way into films, then the entire conspiratorial basis for cancelling the Ten is thrown into question. The writers spent their careers ingratiated into Hollywood, so they had ample opportunity to be subversive if they so pleased. Moreover, the writers were confirmed Communists. Of all active writers in Hollywood during the 1940s, if anyone were to sprinkle Communist propaganda into blockbuster films, it would be them. Yet, the orchestrators of the blacklist claimed there was no previous un-Americanness on their screens. Therefore, if no subversive propaganda existed, then condemning writers for subversion bears no logical congruence.

Contradictions are quite frequent in conspiracies. Nearly every major conspiracy is intensely ironic or hypocritical. Trump would have found himself in an awkward position if he had won the election. Would he have all of the sudden said the election wasn’t fraudulent or rigged? In *The Crucible*, girls that were believed to be possessed delivered debilitating

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<sup>10</sup> Nelson, Donald M. *The Waldorf Declaration*. Dec 1, 1947.

<sup>11</sup> Mishan

testimonies against newly accused. They were seen as controlled by the Devil, but when they corroborated claims, they were seen as reliable witnesses. How can one be possessed but also rational? And, if HUAC admitted Hollywood films were impervious to subversion, why would they still accuse The Hollywood Ten of Communist propaganda? This furthers the argument that the Hollywood Ten, as well as the Salem witches, were not true threats—they were victims of a paranoid public that, via controllers’ conspiratorial deftness, came to be convinced of the dangerous and treasonous natures of the folk devils.

The Waldorf Declaration neutered Hollywood. Dalton Trumbo recounted utter despair in seeing men “say goodbyes to their families, go off to jail, lose their jobs, theoretically permanently, and then be subjected to public disgrace and punishment.” When asked what he would say to someone facing the blacklist, Trumbo ominously whispered, “get ready to become nobody.”<sup>12</sup> During cancellation and shaming, “loss of reputation is the targeted disvalue.”<sup>13</sup> Trumbo’s warnings quite clearly assert the effectiveness of the blacklist cancellation apparatus.

The Hollywood Ten were not going to stop the blacklist. They could protest ad nauseum, but the deviant never gets a say in their fate, and cancellation is “disobliging of open debate.”<sup>14</sup> Such is the power dynamic between control agents and folk devils; the controller can impose any rule or regulation onto the folk devil, and because of the mass paranoia caused by the moral panic, the controller will enjoy widespread support and admiration for their enforcement.<sup>15</sup> With the blacklist, the rhetoric of the era was etched in stone—Hollywood would not allow their pictures to be taken over by Communists.

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<sup>12</sup> *Hollywood on Trial*

<sup>13</sup> Rodogno 447

<sup>14</sup> Velasco, Joseph Ching. “You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence

of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging.” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol 12, no 5, 2020, pp 1-7.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen 140

Operationally, the blacklist found great success as a cancellation system. Communist personas were suppositionally eliminated from the industry, and with it “threats of boycotts evaporated, calls for federal censorship were suspended, and congressman expressed condign approval.”<sup>16</sup> At Trumbo’s breach of contract trial against Metro-Goldwyn Mayer in 1948, Eric Johnston proudly recalled the Waldorf Declaration receiving “extensive and wide notice and publicity in newspapers and over radio throughout the United States.”<sup>17</sup> Johnson said he “noted a sharp change in public attitude toward the motion picture industry in respect of the matters as to which the public, until then, had been sharply critical.”<sup>18</sup> People supported the blacklist cancellation as a way to show they were pro-American. It is common for cancellations to gain public support in this manner, as “uniting against a perpetrator demonstrates loyalty to group values.”<sup>19</sup> After a half-decade of public hesitation towards the movie industry, the blacklist manipulated the moral panic to bring support back in droves.

After the initial blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten, spurious attribution ran amok. Any person with a semblance of Communist connection was blacklisted. Cancellation loomed for anyone with a controversial opinion, anyone deemed a “suspect individual,” or “public figures who break the loose norms of social acceptability.”<sup>20</sup>

There was an acute lack of forgiveness in the cancellation of Hollywood deviants. This was most pronounced with Edward Dmytryk. One of the few members of the Hollywood Ten not a member of CPUSA, Dmytryk denounced his association with the party long before being subpoenaed by HUAC. A friendly witness, his testimony was quaint, quiet, and uneventful, another distinguishing factor between him and the rest of the Ten. He toiled to clear his name, as

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<sup>16</sup> Doherty, 2018; 324

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Henderson 38

<sup>20</sup> Doherty, 2003; 37; Velasco 2

he said, "I did not want to be a martyr for a cause I did not believe in."<sup>21</sup> But he failed and was blacklisted along with the rest of the Ten in 1947. He was fired by RKO Studios, and fled to England to make pictures during his ostracization.

Dmytryk's case features another fallacy in the treatment of these folk devils. The entire rationale for the blacklist was to rid American culture of Communist influences. Dmytryk was avowedly not Communist. Separate factors in the creation of the blacklist were the punishment of those uncooperative with HUAC and those that refused to answer questions. In 1951, he was called to testify. Dmytryk obliged this iteration of HUAC and answered every question posed. Logically, Dmytryk should not have been cancelled. Perhaps the preeminent victim of the blacklist's unfairness, he was arbitrarily placed into a group of deviants seen as the paragons of Communism, and the societal desire to ruin the folk devil halted his career. His is yet another case furthering the interpretation of the cancellations as hypocritical, overzealous, and haphazard. Conspirators become so obsessed with fulfilling the conspiracy that they do not consider the logical rationale behind their decisions.

Dalton Trumbo occupied the orbital center of the blacklist era. He was the folk devil people most wanted to keep at bay. His allegiance to Communism and his antics during the hearings granted him status as 'public enemy No. 1.' It is not unreasonable to say the blacklist was designed to specifically keep him off American screens. His rhetoric intensified after his hearing, to the point that he openly agreed with his contempt charge, saying, "I *did* have contempt for that Congress."<sup>22</sup> By the time of the Waldorf Declaration, Trumbo was *persona non grata* in Hollywood. Both his politics and his oration angered the control agents so profusely that they stripped his name of any semblance of importance.

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<sup>21</sup> *Hollywood on Trial*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*



## The Deadly Cancellation of Salem's Witches

Arthur Miller witnessed every HUAC cancellation, and he devoted a considerable portion of *The Crucible* to Salem's version of cancellation and conspiracy weaponization. The fourth act of *The Crucible* opens with nearly every accused witch or wizard in prison. Some were already hanged; others were awaiting the same fate. The Salem conspiracists' behavior during this process exhibits "the familiar American need to assert a recoverable innocence even if the only guarantee of such innocence lay in the displacement of guilt onto others."<sup>23</sup> Evil entered their town, and Puritans believed evil exists only where sinners cultivated it. These Salem Puritans want to erase the witches, thinking it would also erase a blemish from their soul. They place the town's guilt, that of failed religiosity, onto the witches, and anticipate renewed holiness.

Their first action is the removal of the folk devil from common, everyday life. It is understood that "the convicted had not only forfeited participation in the community of man in this life, but in the community of saints in the next."<sup>24</sup> Not only are they banned from earth, but eternal coexistence is also unthinkable. The conspiracists demanded they not be associated with the witches in any manner, including a shared experience in the afterlife. Heaven is a place full of equally holy individuals, but the control agents did not recognize any semblance of holiness in the folk devils.

Cancellers often relish such stark distinctions. Apportioning punishment is more palatable when it is less personal, so the conspiracist cancellers chose not "to recognize themselves in those they denounced."<sup>25</sup> A principled Puritan thinks it vile and reprehensible to punish a fellow Puritan, so they molded the accused into non-Puritan classifications. For their cancellation to work, they need to entirely disassociate, thereby removing all remorse.

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<sup>23</sup> Bigsby xi

<sup>24</sup> Ibid vii

<sup>25</sup> Mishan

The opportunity to elevate their own Puritanism provided the conspirators with another motive in the full-on cancellation of the witches. In presenting the condemned as unholy and punishable, they implicitly assume they are the moderators of holiness. They “engage in moral grandstanding to enhance their own rank,” and “targeting others for moral violation serves those drives.”<sup>26</sup> They placate those drives through unmitigated torture. *The Crucible* shows what can happen when a conspiracy enables paranoid people to selfishly act as they please. Cancellation does not only satisfy one’s desire for excellence; it satisfies conspiratorial appetite. Conspiracies, especially when they operate in times of panic, identify some supposed moral infidelity. They become attractive, as they did in Salem, as a means towards attaining noble merit.

The Salem control agents held a distinct advantage in their designation of punishment—they had the legal capacity to do as they pleased. Puritan law had much to say about witchcraft, and it strongly prioritized identification over impact. Their precepts “referred only to evidence of a witch’s alliance with the devil, not to the malicious harm inflicted upon their neighbors.”<sup>27</sup> The Salem control agents detained dozens on the basis of an alliance between the Devil and possessed witches (an alliance entirely born out of conspiracy). New England law dictated those in “this dreadful religious alliance” be “brought to the gallows.”<sup>28</sup> Legal precedent granted the ability to administer the resolute cancellation—death.

Judge Danforth leads the cancellation effort. He is unwaveringly determined to see the punishment through. When his colleagues suggest postponement of the hangings, Danforth bellows “I will not receive a single plea for pardon or postponement. Them that will not confess will hang.”<sup>29</sup> Those are the two options they give their subjects—confession or death. By giving the accused those two choices, their conspiratorial accusations are to be ‘confirmed’ either way.

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<sup>26</sup> Henderson 37

<sup>27</sup> Winship 290

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Miller, 1953; 120

Danforth does not budge on the scale of punishment, either. He believes himself to be an honorable Puritan, and honorable Puritans carry zero remorse for witches. The judge reminds Parris he “cannot withhold from them the perfection of their punishment.”<sup>30</sup> Control agents set out on the path of cancellation convinced they are doing the correct thing, and in the correct way. Neurologically, “when a violent action is congruous with one’s moral convictions, the brain represents it by amplifying the neural response of the reward system.”<sup>31</sup> Viciously besieging one’s enemies is satisfying and fulfilling. Finding reward in punishing the witches, Danforth, like most cancellers, came to see his “punishment clause as just.”<sup>32</sup> To his utmost satisfaction, public punishments are surmised as ‘just’ punishments.

The hunger for power seemingly underlies all cancellation attempts. When considerable punishment is part of the cancellation, people immerse themselves in the “blood sport thrill of humiliating a stranger” in front of a “gleeful, baying crowd.”<sup>33</sup> For maximum thrill, the canceller must believe “that [deviants] really deserve it.”<sup>34</sup> If it was not already evident, Danforth ardently believes the folk devils require the ultimate punishment. His crazed passion for destroying the witches influences him to continue the hangings with aplomb. But John Proctor, his white whale, remains uncanceled.

When Proctor appears in Act 4, he is disheveled, scrawny, and bruised. He shows every mark of a torturous, months-long prison stay. Danforth calls Proctor out of his cell so he can sign a written confession. According to Danforth, the confession must be written for the “good instruction of the village.”<sup>35</sup> Cancellation is most effective when victims are made into examples.

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<sup>30</sup> Miller, 1953; 290

<sup>31</sup> Chiou 298

<sup>32</sup> McWhorter, John. “Academics are Really, Really Worried about Their Freedom.” *The Atlantic*. 1 Sep 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Mishan

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Miller, 1953; 128

Danforth identifies Proctor as the most useful example, but that is dependent upon Proctor's signature.

After initially refusing, Proctor eventually signs the confession, but withholds it from Danforth. He will not let himself be made the figurehead of a conspiratorial cancellation attempt. Instead, he opts to keep the punishment and eradication private, away from Danforth's public audience. Agitated by Proctor's antics, Danforth tells him "the village must have proof," but Proctor interjects and tells him a confession to God "is enough."<sup>36</sup> Despite his supposed Puritan values, Danforth disagrees, continuously asserting the confession be made public. A cancellation is worthless if countless others do not witness it. Also, notice that Danforth now commands the village need proof, whereas in the conspiracy stage he abashedly denied the need for proof. The road from conspiracy to cancellation is riddled with hypocrisy.

Proctor keenly picks up on Danforth's intentions. Knowing Danforth longs for a public archetype, Proctor forcibly says, "You will not use me!... It is no part of salvation that you should use me!"<sup>37</sup> He patronizes Danforth, asking if there is "no good penitence but it be public?"<sup>38</sup> Danforth and Proctor fundamentally disagree on the necessity for a public confession. In religious terms, Proctor is correct in saying penitence need only be shared with God. Danforth has other motives. He wants to humiliate Proctor, to strip away his dignity in front of the whole of Salem.

Danforth offers one final opportunity for Proctor to capitulate, but Proctor holds his position. When Danforth begs for his full reasoning, Proctor informs Danforth that he will not sign the papers, and will not face public confession, for one specific reason:

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<sup>36</sup> Miller, 1953; 131-132

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 132

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name.<sup>39</sup>

Proctor's comments are the closest *The Crucible* comes to an explicit commentary on cancellation. Those engaged in the practice not only wish to eliminate the folk devil, but to eliminate any meaning associated with the folk devil. As long as the folk devil has a significant name, and identity, they have a platform. Proctor recognizes the conspiracist control agents are attempting to erase his reputation, and rather than confess, he would rather die as a man with a name.

Similarly, Proctor's final plea continues his battle against the conspiracy. He chooses death over confession. Yes, he does so to preserve his name, his dignity. But I also suspect Proctor does so because he favors death over confirmation of the conspiracy. If he were to confess, he would announce the conspiracy as real—he cannot call himself guilty of witchcraft without affirming the Salemites' conspiracy. Miller's hero cannot overpower the conspiracy, nor can he avoid cancellation. In an attempt to stave off both, he valiantly accepts death.

The conspiracist cancellation efforts create a new Salem. The town is destroyed from within, as nearly every community-based social structure is withered. Friends turn into enemies, and the church is hectic. The conspiracists, in attempting to quell the moral panic, only create more anxiety. In pursuing the “primeval structure of human sacrifice,” the Salem control agents sparked the “furies of fanaticism and paranoia.”<sup>40</sup> After purging their own people, there was “nothing left to stop the whole green world from burning.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Miller, 1953; 133

<sup>40</sup> Miller, 1996

<sup>41</sup> Miller, 1953; 67

## The Impacts of Cancellation

The cancellation efforts of the anti-Communists and the Puritans, while differing in scale and effectiveness, were based on the same behavioral conventions. The controllers were unable to accept that people be different, that people be conflicted and petty, that people they believe to be good are bad, or that people they believe to be bad are good. The two groups showed a “refusal to accept the ineluctable limitations and imperfections of human existence, such as transience, dissent, conflict, or fallibility.”<sup>42</sup> Their shared ability, or lack thereof, to consider interpretations outside of their own led to an immoral, conspiracy-fueled persecution of undeserving folk devils.

The process damaged more than just the folk devil, however. While the conspiracists’ degradation ceremonies are effective in the short-term cancellation of the folk devil, they are almost deadly for the control agents in the long term. Inflicting punishment on another becomes consuming and empowering, but few are aware that “inflicting humiliation involves the state in the communication of a kind of message it should not want to express.”<sup>43</sup> By seeing out their conspiracy cancellations, HUAC and the Puritans endorsed messages and behaviors in opposition to the very truths they proclaim. United States politicians working in a democratic government, should not target and harm Americans holding different political views. Yes, Communism was a viable threat, and the Hollywood Ten were mostly Communist. But they were not working in ways to actively threaten the people of the United States, and certainly not to overthrow the government. In Salem, a town built upon the religious principles of Christianity, church leaders expelled and killed people for suspected bedevilment. Forgiveness is a pillar of Christianity; instead of murdering the sinful and corrupted, a good Christian would forgive and

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<sup>42</sup> Hofstadter

<sup>43</sup> Rodogno 462

nurture. And while the Hollywood Ten's punishment was considerably less virulent than the suspected witches' punishment, "pain elicited by purely symbolic punishment is still pain."<sup>44</sup> The HUAC and Salem conspirators were so misguided in their ambition that they disobeyed the very values they believed they were protecting.

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<sup>44</sup> Rodogno 461

## Conclusion

The completion of the moral panic to cancellation process does not end with winners or losers. Everyone loses. Years after his elevation off the blacklist, Dalton Trumbo echoed this sentiment, when he said those involved with the HUAC trials and its aftermath were “all victims.” He proclaimed everyone “felt compelled to say things he did not want to say, to do things he did not want to do, to deliver and receive wounds he did not want to exchange.”<sup>1</sup>

These impacts were felt in Salem, as well. While researching for the play, Arthur Miller noticed an overall “breaking of charity” in Salem—a previously tightknit village was fractured, left with the feeling that “nothing was going to be sacred anymore.”<sup>2</sup> In both cases, people were radicalized, made to believe in falsities that inspired hatred. Those that are hated suffer, but so do those that hate. The paranoid conspiracist, then, is a “double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies, as well.”<sup>3</sup>

The paranoid conspiracist is not a role reserved for the most recluse, downtrodden among us, either. In the weeks after the Capitol Insurrection, the comedy show *Saturday Night Live* aired a skit wherein seemingly normal, unharmed suburban adults were bombarded by the FBI for their participation in the attacks.<sup>4</sup> Despite its whimsy, the skit highlights an unfortunate truth about the process I have detailed—we can all be participants, sometimes unknowingly. We can all become flustered via moral panics, only to find solace in conspiracies that destroy our enemies. The scale of such actions may differ, but the mechanisms remain consistent. In his essay “Notes on Nationalism,” George Orwell noted that “we deceive ourselves” if we think we

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<sup>1</sup> Doherty, 2018; 347

<sup>2</sup> *Bigsby* xv

<sup>3</sup> Hofstadter, Richard. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” *Harper’s Magazine*. Nov. 1964.

<sup>4</sup> “Pandemic Game Night.” *Saturday Night Live*, hosted by John Krasinski, starring Aidy Bryant,

Cecily Strong, Beck Bennett, Kyle Mooney, and Heidi Gardner. Produced by Lorne Michaels. NBC, Jan 30, 2021.



are personally immune to radicalization. He wrote that the “most fair-minded and sweet-tempered person may suddenly be transformed into a vicious partisan, anxious only to ‘score’ over his adversary and indifferent as to how many lies he tells or how many logical errors he commits in doing so.”<sup>5</sup>

Exposure to conspiratorial cancellations stimulates behavior wherein conflict becomes inherently dangerous and disagreement forfeits its capability to enlighten. Anti-Communist America and Salem exemplify that competition, when it is fueled by immaterial claims and insincere leaders, devolves into an assault on diversity of thought and opinion. Engaging in conspiratorial cancellations situates oneself into a limited worldview—the conspiracy informs someone that there is one truth, that of the conspiracy, and that everything outside of that conspiracy is wrong and immoral. In other words, belief in conspiracy necessitates one carry great contempt for the target of said conspiracy. In 1940s America, that contempt was for Communists. In Salem, that contempt was for purported witches.

Contempt arises from a lack of understanding. And that is the foundation to this entire process—instead of cooperating with and learning from their opposition, the conspirators chose to punish them on the basis of conspiratorial evidence. We are all impacted by the moral panic, conspiracy, and cancellation process precisely because we can all become engaged in it. We become anxious, priming us to believe in false ideas that suit our worldview, and we use those false ideas to denigrate our personal folk devils. While we may not carry this out to the extent of the anti-Communists or Salem Puritans, we can nonetheless emulate them on a smaller scale in our personal relationships. Widespread moral panic is constant, but when it is coupled with conspiracy and cancellation, chaotic disintegration of civility ensues. And it is always much

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<sup>5</sup> Orwell, George. “Notes on Nationalism.” *Polemic*. May 1945.

easier to spot wrongdoing when one is not personally engaged in such wrongdoing. America is a wonderful experiment, but it is not without error. Preeminent among those errors is the belief that this country is “at the same time both guilty and without flaw.”<sup>6</sup> Too often have we conspired against enemies, ignorant to the fact that it is not the enemies who are guilty of immorality, but us.

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<sup>6</sup> Bigsby xxv

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