

The New England Witch Trials as Episodes of Settler Colonial Violence

There is a host of scholarship in both the literary and historical disciplines regarding the witchcraft trial episodes in colonial New England. The general orientation of this work emphasizes either a psychoanalytic framework, seeking to diagnose the symptoms that informed the panic, or a cultural studies lens, trying to contextualize notions and accusations of and about witchcraft within the ideological coordinates of a respective municipality in the 17th century. I believe these approaches, while capable, both ultimately fail to acknowledge some basic moral truths about the government of Boston and Salem which should therefore impact scholarly conclusions.

I note a dearth of acknowledgement of Boston and Salem as both settler-colonist outposts as well as a slave trading ports. For reasons that seem morally dubious, there is little judgment upon the church and state superstructures and its respective actors for their role in one of the greatest crimes in human history, the genocidal eradication of the American Indian and the genocidal enslavement of the African on American shores. For a long time now, the politics of historiography regarding colonial New England have been reticent, putting it mildly, regarding moral judgments that otherwise are placed upon simultaneous historic episodes in Europe. For instance, scholarship on *Othello* has been indicative of the merits and shortcomings regarding Shakespeare's portrayal of Black masculinity and we find similar conclusions regarding antisemitism in *The Merchant of Venice*. Why is it that Shakespeare scholarship is, relatively speaking, much more progressive than that regarding Boston and Salem?

I believe this is a symptom of a longterm prejudice within the historical discipline stemming back to the Progressive era of the late 19th and early 20th century. With this period's major hallmark thinkers being Charles and Mary Beard, Woodrow Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt, the historiography defined American history in stages. Summarily stated, it was argued the American Revolution was a step forward in human governance and history because it was the first instance where monarchy was thrown off in the name of representative liberal democracy. This claim was further buttressed by the

occurrence of the French revolution, which was catalyzed, both directly and indirectly, by the events in North America. Within this framework, the two genocides attendant the birth of the United States were aberrations, shameful but also symptomatic of the limitations of the “bourgeois democratic” stage of history. The successors of the original Progressive historians, such as Phillip Foner and Herbert Aptheker, argued that only in the 20th century with the ascendancy of the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban revolutions did humanity step forward into the next stage of history, one that entailed a redress of colonial grievances.

Only very recently have we seen this tendency challenged by heterodox thinkers. In this instance, I reference *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in 17th Century North America and the Caribbean* by Gerald Horne, a history that specifically deals with the period the Salem trials took place in. In an interview with this writer for the website *Washington Babylon*, Dr. Horne says:

I think it is well past time for progressive people...to take a critical eye to the tragic events that unfolded when the European invasion commenced post-1492 and the genocide that befell the indigenous population and the mass enslavement that ensnared the Africans. I think that failure to look more critically at that process and seeking to rationalize it, saying ‘Well, at the end of the day, post-1776 this republic emerged which was a great leap forward for humanity’, in some ways serves to rationalize and justify genocide and mass-enslavement. And if you can rationalize genocide and mass-enslavement, that just provides a fertile womb for all manner of opportunism. And in some ways this can lead directly to the November 2016 election of a US president and the horrors that have unfolded since that date... It seems to me that you can call these events a ‘bourgeois democratic revolution’ as long as you have a major caveat, which is that, if this was a ‘bourgeois democratic revolution’, let’s not have any more! Let that be the last one! If you are going to use that term then critique that term... Folks in the United States are

capable of doing a multi-sided critique of revolutions except 1776, where they come to this absurd conclusion that ‘Oh, it went well, except, you know, the genocide and mass enslavement.’... What kind of thinking is that? Part of the problem is that until the anti-Jim Crow movement took flight, many Black historians in particular were barred from the archives or even were barred from graduate school and that handicapped the ability of those who might be most disposed to take a critical look at history. Now obviously it doesn’t speak well for those that did have access to the archives that they could not come to this conclusion because, as I’ve been saying for some years, this is not a difficult case to make. This was not rocket science coming to these conclusions! What was created was an apartheid state.

Horne provides the insights of a moral lens that has not previously been utilized so robustly in the historiography of the period of the witchcraft trials.

While such conclusions about these events are new, this moral lens is not. Vijay Prashad's essay “Colonial Fascism” about Aimé Césaire's classic *Discourse on Colonialism* to provides further dimension on this lens.

In 1950, Aimé Césaire, the communist from Martinique, one of the clearest voices of the 20th century, looked back at the long history of colonialism that was coming to an end. He wanted to judge colonialism from the ashes of Nazism, an ideology that surprised the innocent in Europe but which had been fostered slowly in Europe’s colonial experience. After all, the instruments of Nazism – racial superiority as well as brutal, genocidal violence – had been cultivated in the colonial worlds of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Césaire, the effervescent poet and communist, had no problem with the encounter between cultures. The entanglements of Europe’s culture with that of Africa and Asia had forged the best of human history across the Mediterranean Sea. But colonialism was not cultural contact. It was brutality... Césaire was adamant: colonialism had produced nothing that would earn it respect in the scales of history...

What had come to define fascism inside Europe through the experience of the Nazis – the jackboots and the gas chambers – were familiar already in the colonies. This colonial fascism...needed to be emphasized. (Location: 1,119-1,130)

As a polemic, *Discourse* indicts Europe and repudiates the Progressive view of history:

The fact is that the so-called European civilization—“Western” civilization—as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem; that Europe is unable to justify itself either before the bar of “reason” or before the bar of “conscience”; and that, increasingly, it takes refuge in a hypocrisy which is all the more odious because it is less and less likely to deceive. *Europe is indefensible*. (Location: 344)

Informed by surrealism and his own experiences as a French colonial subject (Kelley *Poetics*), Césaire claimed the brutal immorality of colonialism “oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack” (Location: 390) at home and abroad.

The application of a 20th century political formation's name to a 17th century politics raises immediate protests over blatant anachronism. In his interview on *Democracy Now! with Amy Goodman*, however, Robin DG Kelley elaborated upon Césaire's point:

...It was Césaire, when he wrote *Discourse on Colonialism*, that kind of made the argument that...the brutality and barbarism that defined colonialism came back to roost in some ways and can explain fascism in Europe.

Elsewhere in *Discourse*, Césaire uses the metaphor of a boomerang:

And then one fine day the bourgeoisie is awakened by a terrific boomerang effect: the gestapos are busy, the prisons fill up, the torturers standing around the racks invent, refine, discuss. People are surprised, they become indignant. They say: “How strange! But never mind—it’s

Nazism, it will pass!” And they wait, and they hope; and they hide the truth from themselves, that it is barbarism, the supreme barbarism, the crowning barbarism that sums up all the daily barbarisms; that it is Nazism, yes, but that before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples... (Location: 383)

Césaire's formulation of fascism is novel. Rather than seeing it as an isolated episode of socio-political violence in recent history, he instead defines it as one particular episode in a long chronology of that existed for much longer than his contemporaries claimed. By contrast, the definition of fascism formulated by the Communist International (Comintern) Césaire belonged to described such politics “*as the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.*” [Italics in original] (Dimitrov) Finance capitalism in turn, according to Marxist-Leninist theory, developed after the 1860s, a notion itself derived from the Progressive historiography of Europe. Yet for Césaire, fascism's expropriation of property and state-sanctioned murder of Jews, Slavs, Romani, and other minorities had been done previously to American Indians and Africans, not to mention the rest of the nations of the Global South.

The specific judgement this lens provides with regard to the accounts about the witchcraft trials is detailed and explicit. Césaire writes:

First we must study how colonization works to *decivilize* the colonizer, to *brutalize* him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene

sets in, a center of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and “interrogated,” all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward *savagery*. (Location: 376)

I take this passage as a judgement upon Cotton Mather and Deodat Lawson. While the two may have some very basic differences in their biographies and respective involvements with the prosecution of the witchcraft trials, both were beneficiaries and participants in the settler-colonial enterprise. On the very basic level of presence in North America one derives a judgement, namely that they were participants in a morally-mutilating and ethically indefensible enterprise.

Such a judgment begs for a contrary example, namely an instance of the alternative. Besides the obvious though not immediately-tenable solution of not coming to this continent in the first place or returning to England, the maroon colonies, projects that developed outside the municipal boundaries of European colonies, serve as a viable and tenable moral counterpoint to the Salem enterprise. Maroon colonies are defined by scholarship as

An ever-present feature of **ante-bellum southern life** was the existence of camps of runaway Negro slaves, often called maroons, when they all but established themselves independently on the frontier. These were seriously annoying, for they were sources of insubordination. They offered havens for fugitives, served as bases for marauding expeditions against nearby plantations and, at times, supplied the nucleus of leadership for planned uprising. (Aptheker 167) [Empahsis added]

However, the maroon colonies were just one expression of a wider phenomenon, the instance of African and American Indian cohabitation and solidarity in opposition to the settler-colonial project.

Self-emancipated Africans oftentimes found refuge and comfort amongst American Indians. *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, Rhode Island*, a memoir of the 19th century written by an African American, includes a genealogy featuring an American Indian woman who paid to have an African American released from captivity before marrying him. Cotton Mather's expression of judgment upon such actors in his *Memorable Providences* is quite revealing:

...There are Devils and Witches; and that tho those night-birds least appear where the Day-light of the Gospel comes, yet New-Engl. has had Exemples of their Existence and Operation ; and that not only the Wigwams of Indians, where the pagan Powaws ¹ often raise their masters, ² in the shapes of Bears and Snakes and Fires, but the Houses of Christians, where our God has had His constant Worship, have undergone the Annoyance of Evil spirits. (99)

This passage and others like it regarding “Houses of Christians” facing “Annoyance of Evil spirits” will be further dissected momentarily. However, it seems tenable to argue that Mather's moral proclamations are underwritten with white supremacy and political reaction to abolitionist currents. Could it be possible that the longtime fear of Gothic genre fictions find as their antecedents the fear of Afro-Indian solidarity? In another interview with this writer, Horne said:

Part of the hysteria that helped to generate anti-Communism was precisely the idea that the Communists were going to engage in uncompensated expropriation of private property. That's what animated anti-Communism. If you look at the Haitian revolution, you also saw the uncompensated expropriation of private property. That is to say, when the slaves were freed, the slave owners, at least in North America, were uncompensated... The hysteria about uncompensated expropriation of private property is one of the animating principles of history of the past two centuries. (Stewart)

White supremacy's invocation of terror regarding people of color and various dimensions of their humanity, such as sexuality or criminal proclivity, is well-known in contemporary times. Could it be

much older than assumed? Horne offers the following insights with regards to Salem:

The ructions in New England were also driven by morbid concern about “witches,” which apparently was a byproduct of the slave trade from the Caribbean in indigenes. It was almost as if the settlers were enacting a drama that involved their justifiable persecution for the horribleness they had visited upon indigenes. (*Apocalypse* Location: 3,285)

In another volume, he indicates:

This [slavery] business benefited handsomely some entrepreneurs in New England—notably in Massachusetts and Rhode Island—where the trade flourished. This region contained the “greatest slave-trading communities in America,” according to Lorenzo J. Greene: “the profits from the slave trade were almost incredible. Seldom has there been a more lucrative commerce than the traffic in Negroes,” since “gross profits [were] sometimes as high as sixteen hundred percent,” as “the slave trade easily became the most lucrative commerce of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” **The “Puritan colonies,” says Greene, “were the greatest slave-trading communities in America.** From **Boston, Salem** and Charlestowne in Massachusetts; from Newport, Providence and Bristol in Rhode Island; and from New London and Hartford” emerged these vessels of opprobrium—and profit. And “of the American ships involved in [shipboard] insurrections, **those from New England suffered the most,” with Massachusetts leading the pack.** Simultaneously, this phenomenon bonded colonies—north and south—on the altar of slavery and nervousness about African intentions [regarding rebellion against their captors]. (*Counterrevolution* 5-6) [Emphasis added]

While this statement is with regards to the colonial economy just prior to the rebellion against the British crown, mention seems meritorious because the period under consideration saw significant growth and development of the northern slave system and therefore the abolitionist movement.

Manisha Sinha writes in her history of abolitionism:

Caricatured as unthinking, single-minded fanatics who caused a “needless war,” abolitionists are often compared unfavorably to political moderates and compromise-minded statesmen... [T]he dominant picture of abolitionists in American history is that of bourgeois reformers burdened by racial paternalism and economic conservatism... **Slave resistance, not bourgeois liberalism, lay at the heart of the abolition movement...** The actions of slave rebels and runaways, black writers and community leaders, did not lie outside of but shaped abolition and its goals. As most abolitionists understood, **the story of abolition must begin with the struggles of the enslaved.** The connection between slave resistance and abolition in the United States was proximate and continuous. Prominent slave revolts marked the turn toward immediate abolition. Fugitive slaves united all factions of the movement and led abolitionists to justify revolutionary resistance to slavery. Recent historians have declared black resistance to enslavement passé, but it was central to abolition. (Sinha 1-2) [Emphasis added]

I believe that one can begin to understand, based on this context, the true nature of these writings and the witchcraft trials they derive from. In particular, Sinha's formulation of politics suggests a new understanding of Tituba and other Africans present at the time as abolitionists. While they very well may not have engaged in praxis equivalent Harriet Tubman's, it is certain that, at the very least, they would not like the idea of being held in the bondage of chattel slavery and would feel sympathy for those who were, if not expressed solidarity and support for those seeking self-emancipation in a multiplicity of ways. The precarity of freedom from chattel slavery's bondage was a real and ever-present existential issue for all Africans in America, with kidnapping of freedmen who were sold into chattel bondage, as seen in the case of Solomon Northup, being a real phenomenon. Furthermore the American slave trade in the northern colonies found its genesis with the conclusion of the Pequot war and the sale of its prisoners of war into bondage out of Boston harbor.

By 1641 Massachusetts Bay, in large part because the authorities wanted to define the legal

status of the hundreds of indigenous Pequot captives then in bondage, passed one of the first laws peculiar to the enslaved in London's colonies. Some of these captives wound up in Bermuda, the Caribbean, the Azores, Tangier, and possibly even Madagascar. "We sent them to Bermuda," boasted John Winthrop, as if that were the sole destination. Despite their subsequent preening of being a sector of settler colonialism bereft of enslaved Africans, there is actually evidence of the presence of this group as early as 1633. (*Apocalypse* Location: 942)

Mather's *Memorable Providences* is addressed to one Wait Winthrop, "son of Governor John Winthrop of Connecticut and grandson of Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts" according to a footnote by George Lincoln Burr. (93) If it is not yet plain how morally-dubious the parties involved in the composition of these accounts were, consider specific passages.

In *Memorable Providences*, Mather opens a note *To the Reader* with a polemical statement about "The old Heresy of the sensual Sadducees" and the claim "Angels and Men not being made for civil Converse [sic] in this world" (95), two statements worthy of consideration. The word "Sadducees" refers to currents in political discourse at that time which were promoting secularism in civil affairs as opposed to the theocratic vision propounded by the Boston and Salem municipalities. It would furthermore seem fair to indicate that Mather's reference to the "civil Converse" of "Angels and Men" might be an indirect and sensational mis-representation of Quakerism. At the time of these events, the Society of Friends was a location of radical abolitionist praxis and solidarity. In Quaker Meeting ceremonials, the congregation comes together in a room, everyone in attendance is given the same position and standing within the body, and attendees rise and give testimony on the basis of divine inspiration, what they call "the Still Small Voice," which functions in a manner not unlike the Pentecostal speaking in tongues or Roman Catholicism's notion of the Holy Spirit speaking through the Pope. This supposition is further buttressed when Mather writes "I brought her a Quakers Book; and That she could quietly read whole pages of" (113). With the instance of Goody Glover, the reader is

presented with a number of “Calamities” that have befallen a pious family because of Glover’s witchcraft. However, a careful reading makes clear that Mather is actually mis-representing the behaviors of a practicing Irish Catholic spinster as something diabolical. Her inability to recite the Lord’s Prayer properly stems from two distinctions between English Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. First, the two polities by that point prayed two different versions of that particular prayer, with Protestants appending “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.” Second, Catholics in this time still prayed in Latin as opposed to the vernacular language. This is clearly misrepresentation and opportunism on the part of Mather to justify prosecution of Glover. He evidently has an agenda that is informed by his religious biases. Furthermore, his logic is based around an ideological closed universe that is contemptuous and hostile to any sort of skepticism.

But I am resolv’d after this, never to use but just one grain of patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a Denial of Devils, or of Witches. I shall count that man Ignorant who shall suspect, but I shall count him down-right Impudent if he Assert the Non-Existence of things which we have had such palpable Convictions of. (123)

In other words, there is no way to refute these claims because doing so proves you are in league with the enemy we bear testimony against here. That is a very convenient system for Mather’s agenda.

In *Wonders of the Invisible World*, Mather makes much more blatant his political and racial motivations. There is mention of “several Poppets, made up of Rags and Hogs Brussels, with Headless Pins in them, the Points being outward. Whereof she could give no Account unto the Court that was Reasonable or Tolerable.” (228) This clearly is suggestive of voodoo dolls. The affiliation of African syncretic religion with diabolism is a longtime reactionary political trope within American religious discourse that has manifested even in contemporary times.

In *A Brand Pluck’d Out of the Burning*, written anonymously by Mather, his literal demonization of Black and Brown bodies is completely manifest and on display.

There exhibited himself unto her a Divil having the Figure of A Short and a Black Man; and it was remarkable that altho' shee had no sort of Acquaintance with Histories of what has happened elsewhere, to make any Impressions upon her Imagination, yett the Divil that visited her was just of the same Stature, Feature, and complexion with what the Histories of the Witchcrafts beyond-sea ascribe unto him; he was a wretch no taller than an ordinary Walking-Staff; hee was not of a Negro, but of a Tawney, or an Indian colour; hee wore an high-crowned Hat, with strait Hair; and had one Cloven-Foot. This Divil still brought with him unto her a considerable Number of Spectres...(261)

This is a man who clearly was using his position and religious opinion to buttress a religious and civil discourse premised on two genocides. Deodat Lawson traffics in similar verbiage, writing of “They accused her of having Familiarity with the Devil, in the time of Examination, in the shape of a Black man whispering in her ear.” (156)

The theology and logic of settler-colonialism, like fascism, is one that is in part dependent upon its lack of logic. Unlike contemporary philosophical systems, settler colonialism in its Anglo Protestant formulation carried within its coordinates a mysticism, sometimes posturing as part of rationality, but in reality solely indebted to medieval superstition. That Mather tried to promote his project in terminology couched in scientific verbiage merely indicates the start to what would later become known as scientific racism. Or, using Dr. Horne’s words, “what might be called 'white identity politics' or the construction of whiteness...” (Horne Six Questions)

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