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From Witch Trials to Abortion Bans: Persuasion, Control, and Rhetoric of Women

They didn't attack witches; they attacked women. They don't care about the life of the child; they care about the control of women.

The Salem Witch Trials lasted in small puritan towns in Massachusetts, from 1692 to 1693. Where 150-200 people were jailed for witchcraft, 14 women and 5 men were hanged, one man was tortured to death, and at least five people perished in prison. (Salem Witch Museum₁) Don't be fooled though, witch hunts weren't just happening in North America, they have been occurring throughout the world for centuries - even in the modern day. Witch hunts have been happening around the world since at least the early middle ages. Originally, witchcraft was a neutral technology, but there was a shift in view on witchcraft in the 1200s. A target was placed on what was considered a witch's back and the fear of witchcraft became a "widespread public concern" by the 15th century. Religious hierarchies stressed the fear of witchcraft, but the true motive was social change. In the 1480s, *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches Hammer) was published and became known as the "textbook of the Inquisition" in states that witchcraft was practiced by women due to them being insatiable and having carnal lust. At a time, the marriage age was rising, and many people weren't marrying in general. Somewhere from ⅓-½ of women aged 15-44 were unmarried and women were often looking for work in the growing urban

industrial label markets, along with birth control and infanticide being on the rise. There was an increase in midwives being a particular target for which hunts due to the infanticide and birth control. (JSTOR Daily)

Overtime, you can note that fear is a large variable that factors into the stories of injustice across history. Xenophobia in connection to the border crisis. Racism in connection to the transatlantic slave trade. Homophobia and religious intolerance to simple hate across the public eye. This hateful and fear-based persuasion, lack of understanding, insecurity across social and economic lines, the gains and losses of power dynamics, along with historical trauma, all fuel injustice across the history of humans. But for this paper, I want to focus on sexism and power dynamics. Now, there is a formula to identify the pattern of behavior that creates witch hunts, “fear + a trigger = a scapegoat.” (Salem Witch Museum₂) Previously I noted a variety of fears, and some of the triggers that respond to someone’s brain due to their own experiences and knowledge lead to the creation of scapegoats.

But it wasn’t just the church working to arrest and accuse witches, the state worked with the church to grow terror on the Massachusetts villages. Church and state work together, the perfect duo to get the job done. Although the Salem witch trial started with a confession of Tituba, the paranoia seed was planted and accusations came and went. The fear was if one could be a witch, anyone could. It wasn’t until an accusation against Governor William Phips wife in October, that the trials were dismissed - accusations calmed. The last person to be exonerated of witchcraft was in July 2022, where Elizabeth Johnson was finally pardoned. The mass hysteria of the Salem Witch Trials, and other mass witch hunts since the 13th century, were motivated by

extreme religious agendas that fell short of being named femicide. We can draw the parallel from witch hunts hundreds of years ago to the attack on abortion rights today. Symbolic interactionism is used today to understand the true nature of the long lasting witch hunts. Fear of women becoming the ruling class, or even equal.

Symbolic interactionism is an extremely important concept heavily relied on for this paper. Symbolic interactionism is subjective, it's based on each person's individual experiences, the people they've grown up with (who have affected them), their knowledge base and their cultures. The Puritan society in the 1690s during the Salem Witch Trials, had a culturally deep connection to Christianity. From birth to death - that's what you preach. You grew up learning that the devil could give people the power to harm others in return for their loyalty, also known as witchcraft. It was simply what you knew then. It was what you were taught. (Smithsonian Institution) Today, symbolic interactionism is used heavily for each person, especially with the addition of 24/7 media that influences your thoughts, concepts, ideas, goals, and beliefs. Being a subjective concept - my own personal belief is that the current abortion bans across the United States are a modern day witch hunt - just not named one by the framed monopolized main media.

During my downtime, I came across a short film titled, "The Trial." Directed by Gandja Monteiro in partnership with the All* In Action Fund to "[draw] on chilling parallels between 17th-century witch trials and today's political landscape—where abortion bans are denying care and putting women's lives in danger." (Business Wire) The 4 minutes and 53 seconds short film, released on October 2th, just a week before the 2024 Presidential Election. It's set up to look like a small puritan scaffolding, with townsfolk surrounding and verbally bashing a woman who is

accused of having an abortion. You hear a variety of quotes, some by the woman accused, some by the people around her. The following are a list of quotes you'll hear: (The Trial)

"I still wake up in a cold sweat terrified of the nightmares of being hunted down." - Lauren Miller
(Denied Abortion Care)

"Shame on you killing babies! You're a murderer!" - Representative Susan DeLemus, New Hampshire

"I refuse to be shackled by your question." - Professor Michele Goodwin, Pro-Choice Advocate

"The prosecution is just a consequence of taking an innocent human life." - Bob Titus, Missouri

"I did not want to continue the pain and suffering that has plagued this pregnancy." - Kate Cox
(Denied Abortion Care)

"It's about killing a child because you weren't responsible enough to keep your skirt down." - Lt. Governor Mark Robinson, North Carolina

These quotes, revealed after the skit is over - are revealed to be real quotes stated by politicians, witnesses and advocates regarding abortion care. Leading into my connection of Rhetoric of Dissent.

Stories of women dissenting against the social injustice against them have been told since the beginning. Simply saying no, is dissent. During the Salem Witch Trials, not only women spoke out against the witch hunts, men had spoken out, including John Proctor, including some of the men who were killed such as Giles Corey. When the final woman was pardoned of witchcraft in 2022, it took 8th grade students of Massachusetts to dissent against her being the

only woman left with guilt - the last woman standing on the scaffolding of a Witch Hunt that had been dead for 300 years.

The pro-choice movement today, the fight for Reproductive Rights, has included protests, storytelling, visual and physical media use, arguments and cases across the United States - speaking out in dissent against the bans put in place. From putting on handmaid's Tale costumes in connection to the parallels of a story and the incomparable laws in place, to screaming at the doorsteps of the Supreme Court, dissent of human rights advocates have put themselves on the pedestal. Even with the threat of doxing and degrading, losing their jobs, their families, and friends. The three left wing Supreme Court Justices; Justices Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan all noted their dissent in the *Dobbs v. Jackson* rule of 2022.

The extreme abortion bans that took place immediately after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* - have been seen before in history. Restrictions over women's rights over their bodies, a witch hunt for women, came after a series of pandemics and hardships, with a shorter human mortality rate and fear of losing populations of the working class. (JEP) From women considered dangerous, women without husbands or children, midwives, and prostitutes, women who partook in abortions - all redeemed witches, all were not recognized as human. Today we're seeing the start of the same chain reaction. We are living in a world in which the United States has seen a decrease in women having children, the age of women having children being older than previously before, women deciding not to have husbands or women a part of the LGBTQ+ community, women who would rather work than be housewives or stay at home moms. There's no doubt about the fact that the people in power, the representatives for each town, city and state

across the United States are wary of these statistics, because losing people in the working class could disrupt their way of life. It's been very easy to strip women's rights away, as *Roe v. Wade* was extremely easily overturned once a right wing majority Supreme Court was in place and a lawyer drew up a case. It should be noted that *Roe v. Wade* wasn't meant to be the be-all end-all for women's reproductive rights. Even Ruth Bader Ginsburg disagreed in which the way *Roe v. Wade* was put in place, its permanence as a right to privacy wasn't guaranteed. It would've been better if it was under the constitution as a protected human right. The abortion bans today have affected 22 million people of reproductive age that live in states with abortion bans. (Center for American Progress) While it's hard to track exactly how many women and uterus having people have died since the extreme abortion bans have been put in place, it's been researched and found that there has been a, "7% increase in total maternal mortality" in states with bans than states without. (Tulane University) There's been an increase in rapes in sexual assaults in states with extreme abortion bans.

Like I said, previously, most of the witch trials in history, fell short of being named a femicide due to men also being killed. The extreme abortion bans that have led to the deaths of so many, also fall short of being named a femicide: due to the fact that we absolutely must include trans men and non-binary people in the conversation about abortion and reproductive rights. (Not Safe For Mom Group) When you displace someone's voice in the conversation - you disregard their voice entirely. We are seeing more and more groups pop up around the country, Go Fund Me's providing help to women and uterus having people to get medically necessary care, a modern day underground railroad for people to safely get abortions.

The history of witch trials and abortion bans reveals an enduring pattern of fear-driven control over women's bodies and autonomy. From the Salem Witch Trials to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the rhetoric of oppression has evolved but remains rooted in the same foundations of misogyny, power, and fear of women's independence. Symbolic interactionism demonstrates how man made societal constructs—whether 17th-century religious constraints or modern-day political ideologies—create scapegoats and justify injustice under the guise of morality or public interest. Both witch hunts and abortion bans disproportionately target women who defy societal norms: those who remain unmarried, exercise reproductive autonomy, or reject traditional gender roles. They serve as reminders of the ways in which institutions - religious or political - collaborate to enforce conformity and suppress dissent. However, just as there were voices of dissent during the Salem Witch Trials, the modern fight for reproductive rights shows that resistance persists. From Supreme Court justices to grassroots activists, people continue to challenge these injustices, often at great personal risk.

The parallels between these historical and contemporary struggles highlight the cyclical nature of oppression but also underscore the resilience of those who oppose it. As long as there are systems that seek to control and dehumanize, there will be those who stand against them, advocating for equality and justice. The fight for reproductive rights today is not only a fight for individual autonomy but also a broader struggle against the systemic forces that have sought to silence and control women for centuries. It is through this ongoing dissent that the cycle can be broken, and true equality might one day be achieved.

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