Throughout history, feelings of fear, and threat can transcend throughout an entire community, or even in multiple communities, throughout the world, as seen in instances of group hysteria. Group hysteria, or mass hysteria, is an occurrence in which individuals across a society, or community experience a sensation of intense fear, whether it be based upon realistic threats or not. These feelings of intense fear very often lead to action, sometimes impulsively, in order to do away with the perceived threat. One can imagine that this effect of fear, sometimes based upon unsound, or unrealistic threats, leading to actions of defense can create problematic movements that often lead to negative events and perceptions throughout history. The concept of mass hysteria may boggle minds when examined from an outside perspective, yet when in the midst of a panic, the individuals partaking in it are not so perplexed. As they are existing within a particular society, their attitudes, feelings, and predispositions, are *shaped* by this society, and thus so are the predispositions, of those around them. In the simplest of instances, individuals partaking in the mania may be purely unaware of *how* society predetermines what causes them to succumb to panic. Looking deeper into mania, however, it becomes evident how many factors go into these instances of mass panic throughout history. Mass panic is often not caused by the actual threat being pointed to, but rather is a complex entanglement of predispositions for bias and other factors. However, when combined with a fear or discomfort that is not quelled, a predisposed dislike can turn one demographic or individual into an easy target.

Within examining mass panic, there is also a bias from the observer. Individuals with a modern-day lens often take on a bias that mass panic due to unrealistic threats is purely a side effect of the ignorance of the past. Often past mass hysterias are written off as the effect of uneducated individuals trying to make sense of their world that perhaps does not have many scientific and technological advances. However, it is important to recognize this bias and realize that ignorance will be present across history, in all time periods, in differing locations, and in varying circumstances. So, this realization presents the idea that ignorance is not entirely to blame. Yet if it is a factor in mass hysteria, this indicates that any society and any demographic can succumb to mass panic. This type of panic is not something only present in one instance, among one group of people. As proven with historical content, group hysteria is an instance that transcends both time and place, and has the power to disparage *any* group when given the right criteria, outside of the threats that are used as scapegoats.

Group hysteria happens in many cases, one instance of a vulnerable society, which proves to succumb to mass hysteria in line with the modern-day lens’ view of them being ignorant, is Salem, Massachusetts’s infamous witch trials. The modern-day lens sees this group as an obvious victim of mass hysteria. They were a Puritan society taking place in the seventeenth century. This fact remaining, it appears very likely that they would have fear and discomfort towards the many things they cannot explain, due to a lack of modern medicine and psychological knowledge. However, another instance proves this ‘likeliness’ (lack of modern understanding) cannot explain a society’s vulnerability to fall into mass hysteria. In the twentieth century, many communities throughout the world, including the United States, faltered in their ‘modern understanding’ and succumbed to group hysteria. This occurrence came as individuals feared a presence of a secretive Satanist cult whom held a motivation to do harm onto the innocent in the name of Satan. Both of these cases saw trials and rulings in which individuals suffered jail time and/or death as their communities scattered to find the guilty amongst them. These two cases showcase many similarities in how the innocent and guilty were handled in the face of allegations. However, their contrasting time periods showcase that mass panic cannot be blamed upon a lack of modern understanding, and that a fall into group hysteria is an entanglement of many causes. It is “the intermeshing of psychological and social conditions become coupled with a feedback loop that feeds on people’s fears and drives legends and rumor panic in such a way that they come to have a life of their own.” [[1]](#footnote-1)(142 encyclopedia) Together these are the things that create mass hysteria, not threats of witches or satanic cults. **Mass panic is not something that only one demographic is vulnerable to, and in conjunction with prejudices that are side effects of socio-cultural forces, it is a part of an entire movement of aversion towards those believed to practice so-called dark magic. This movement then has dangerous consequences, as presented in the following cases.**

Much of the cause for mass panic in the cases that folllow were attributed to other socio-cultural forces, outside of sources such as witchcraft or Satanic rituals. Social influences are predominantly uncontrollable, and inherently impact all societies. This impact comes as social influences can lead to actions, which may seem rash from an outside perspective, however, through a social lens can be explained. One singular way to explain the actions of the cases to follow is the inevitability of group tension. For society, “group tension is a concomitant of conflict…It means that the group with such concern is poised to react in a hostile manner to what is construes to be an attack on it.”[[2]](#footnote-2) (social order blumer 315) For communities, such as the American examples that will be discussed, this group tension means that the action of attacking will always be followed after the recognition of a concern. As this pattern is inherent in nature, it would have been easy for communities such as Salem, or the America in the 1980s, to falter towards mass hysteria as their nature, while in group tension, is to remedy this strain. For society, having an “anxiety, uncertainty, and in speculating superstition may mark a regression to infantile attitudes or the attempt to gain a sense of control over a difficult situation.”[[3]](#footnote-3) (27 the occult in america) So, as group tension is heightened, it is natural that individuals feel the need to gain control out of the situation. This desire for control is where movements towards aversion in order to do away with threat begin. Thus, as some communities were more susceptible to group tension, due to cultural forces, they therefore had greater need to quell their fears. Within this need is the vulnerability to mass panic.

An already established prejudice or bias can aid in the creation of mass hysteria, especially when there is a predisposition of opposition towards individuals practicing magic. This kind of predisposition is present in both cases, as throughout history there has been a strong intolerance towards Satanic or magical practices from the mainstream. This predisposition can be described as “a recoiling from the occult, imputable to a hostility ever more marked.”[[4]](#footnote-4) (Caillet 3) This reaction towards the occult, and practices related to it has existed for quite some time. Prejudices against devil-related activities, of course, began with the rise and popularization of Christianity, and related religions, which holds a belief of the existence of Satan as an evil-being. As Catholicism grew, and became more involved with government institutions, the capture and punishment of individuals involved in acts, whether they be real or not, surrounding Satan began in “1430-1450”[[5]](#footnote-5) (5 satan the heretic) but the true genesis of the movement began in “1280-1330” during “a moment of high tension between the spiritual and the secular powers”[[6]](#footnote-6) (5 satan the heretic) Around the thirteenth-century, discoveries in “natural science…alchemical and astrological knowledge…appeared to be dangerous to the faith”[[7]](#footnote-7) (20 satan the heretic) As these concepts are explaining the seemingly unexplainable, it is replacing the necessity for religion, faith, and an omnipotent and all-knowing God. These new-found beliefs threatened the church, and therefore were threatening to those that put great trust in the Church and its functions in society. As anxieties grew, and individuals continued to publish more scholarship on the magic-related subjects, one individual appeared to embody this fear: Pope John XXII. He was “incessant on the dangers of demoniacal invocations… in black magic, geomancy, and other magical arts”[[8]](#footnote-8) (22 satan the heretic) and took to formally indicting those that were in relation with magical activities. John XXII was not just representative of the fears of the time for Catholics, but also was representative of the beginning of a formal attack on those that put merit into magical activities not related to Catholic beliefs. Thus, he created a movement towards a strongly institutionalized prejudice against things such as witchcraft and Satanism, which was still present in the cases of Salem and Satanic ritual abuse.

Both cases of Salem and SRA also had false testimonies and accusations, despite the differing time periods, which exasperated the mania. These practices occurred in many cases throughout history, and is still active today. There are multiple ways in which false testimonies can come about in the legal system, but the phenomena that are encountered in the following cases in retrospect to mass panic are “Child Abuse- cases in which interrogators elicited false confessions from children by exploiting their susceptibility to suggestion and manipulation…Mental Fragility- cases in which interrogators elicited false confessions from adults with the minds of children who suffer from mental illness… Inference- cases in which the authorities misconstrued the suspects’ statements as admissions to the crimes”[[9]](#footnote-9) (preface false confessions) These practices as a means to gather testimonies are incorrect in the fact that they give great ease into creating false testimonies. In all cases discussed, involving witchcraft, and Satanic ritual abuse, these means to gaining testimonies have acquired false testimonies, which then create a greater ease to believe in the theories that are being disputed in these societies. With the creation of ease that derives from false testimonies, communities then remained even more vulnerable to mass hysteria in their times of tension.

Times of tension are a great portion of what contributes to the creation of mass panic, as they deal with feelings of discomfort towards the unknown. In order to understand what individuals may feel discomfort towards during the satanic panic, one must understand the cultural positions of the time period. With this, it is vital to recognize that there were changes in society and culture during this time period, that caused threatening feelings, and thus the intense group tension that leads to mass panic. During the 1980s, American society was in the midst of a change socially in its adherence and views of gender roles. Over time, “the percentage of employed married women had risen from less than a quarter in 1950 to over half in 1985”[[10]](#footnote-10) (davis + robinson 2) This change in employment habits indicates a transformation in society, most significantly in the home life. The movement in society of women into the workforce created a complete shift in how family life occurred. Now, many homes were dual income homes, with women working part or full time. Women’s roles as a housekeeper, housewife, and child caregiver was no longer salient. This shift in the woman’s role also created a need for alternate means of child care. Thus, came the popularity of daycare and nanny services. Now, the care of a child was no longer solely placed in the mother, but rather individuals unfamiliar to the family, which plays into discomfort. One can imagine how this shift caused discomfort for individuals, since there was a new “family instability, and a growing concern for children’s safety” which “all contributed to the belief in the ritual abuse of children”[[11]](#footnote-11) (153 encyclopedia) Now there was even a shift in something as intimate as how children were being cared for. With this change comes discomfort, and with discomfort comes a desire to ameliorate it, and thus a panic in the efforts to change it.

Along with shifts in home life and child care, there were also shifts in crime rates, and the public’a awareness of crime. Society in America was now encountering “new sociable fears about cults, child pornography, rising crime,”[[12]](#footnote-12) (153 encyclopedia) as other causes in American society created less control over rising problems, such as these. These increases came in a Cold War Era, as Americans struggled to cope with the anxiety of a possible war. This anxiety caused rising tension amongst Americans, as conflicts felt unresolved. It seemed that American society, at the time was in the midst of an uncontrolled surge of problems, and thus would experience the group tension that caused mass panic. Events unrelated to Satanism at the time also supported these fears of new kinds of crime. Most significantly, “the 1978 mass suicide/murder of the followers of charismatic Rev. Jim Jones in Jonestown, Guyana.”[[13]](#footnote-13) (144 encyclopedia) This crime, although not ritualistic, supported the ideals that crime rates were rising uncontrollably, and were causing large amounts of individuals to succumb to the ‘hidden evils’ represented in cults. This increase in newer types of uncontrolled crimes created an intense discomfort. Therefore, American society in the 1980s had an intense desire to control and change these negative crimes impacting their society, consequently causing mass hysteria to ensue.

A part of the intense desire to control was also present in psychology movements of the time. Amongst the fears quelling in American society also came a new age psychological ideal. With the publication of *Michelle Remembers*, a novel portraying the seemingly true story of a woman who recalled Satanic Ritual Abuse done to her as a child, more psychologists leaned upon the ideal that majority of individuals’ traumas “were frequently unconsciously repressed by victims, resulting in later psychological disorders”[[14]](#footnote-14) (123 modern Satanism) With the rise of this ideal, psychological care providers were more susceptible to validate someone’s false testimonies as truth due to the ideal that repressed memories were commonplace, especially in light of satanic ritual abuse. This idea that experiences of SRA can be not remembered and then recovered, in conjunction with the use of confessions of children, further added to the wrongful indictment of individuals, and thus fueled the panic.

All of these sociocultural implications, and testimonies acquired through questionable circumstances were present in the McMartin Preschool Child Abuse Case. The case involved accusations of child abuse towards teachers in which “the prosecution attempted to prove widespread sexual abuse of McMartin children, the defense tried to prove that the whole show was driven by the suggestive and overzealous interview techniques of the crusading therapists”[[15]](#footnote-15) (archive) These faulty techniques ultimately led to the infamy of the McMartin Preschool Child Abuse Case as an example of the dangers that can derive from hasty accusations that have been presented due to an unquailed fear in society. The case had begun when “an alcohol-addicted mother reported that her 2 ½ year-old son had been sodomized by a school aide, Raymond Buckey, during day care hours at the McMartin Preschool… she alleged Raymond’s mother and owner of the preschool was involved in ritualistic practices”[[16]](#footnote-16) (Butler 2) and was later found to be a “paranoid schizophrenic”[[17]](#footnote-17)(archive). These allegations were also based on no physical evidence, as the mother described the events as follows:

“Billy feels that he left LAX in an airplane and flew to Palm Springs area.  Described the airplane as one like used by federal express only it had windows.  Billy went to armory located behind Judy (?) residence.  Ray drove there in his VW bus.  Billy went with Peggy who drove a red and white VW bus, at the armory there were some people there wearing army uniforms.  The goat man was there.  After going to the armory, Billy was taken to Sand Dune Park, at the armory it was a ritual type atmosphere.  When Billy was taken to a church, Judy believes it was the Church of Religious Science [address].  At the church Peggy drilled a child under the arms (arm pits.) Atmosphere was that of magic acts.  (Ray few through the air.)”[[18]](#footnote-18) (archive)

 Although this illness does not devalue the original accusation of ritual abuse, it does explain the undefinable absurdity in the claims, and the genesis of ritualistic claims. Then, “In the wake of the massive publicity and mass hysteria following the original McMartin charges and building on the pathological implications of the case, the ring of suspicion grew to enclose other preschools in the area.”[[19]](#footnote-19) (Butler 3) The layout of these allegations and accusations clearly indicates there is some type of fear in the community, whether it be underlying or explicit, which was then exasperated by the placement of magical ritualistic behaviors into the story.

The allegations made against the Buckelys showcases that this fear of the occult is apparent, and further exasperating the group tension present in the society, thus leading to mass panic. The claims can be ruled out as completely true being that the original accusations in the McMartin case and surrounding cases were based on no physical evidence, or as some argue “false evidence”[[20]](#footnote-20) (Butler 5) as the accusers utilized the child interrogation techniques described earlier in order to ‘solidify’ the arguments. As the popul;arity of this case grew, group tension increased and furthered the society’s desire to scapegoat. Eventually, “by mid 1984 reports of ritual child abuse skyrocketed”[[21]](#footnote-21) (143 encyclopedia) As hysteria begins with fear, the McMartin case upholds the idea that all mass hysteria must begin with some unaided fear, that needed to be scapegoated. For this community, they had discomfort in the changes of family life, and an unremedied fear due to the rising crime rates, and uncontrollable events around them. When these cultural implications are combined with the group tension of the time period, false accusations happen easily, and as the legal system faulters along with them, feeding into already present biases, mass panic ensues.

In this case, and ones similar to it, the allegations and following arrests did not occur due to actual practicing of satanic rituals, nor even under the intent to harm children. These instances are not supported as cases of Satanic ritual abuse due to the fact that “studies have consistently shown that there is no reliable, empirical evidence to support allegations of wide spread organized multigenerational satanic crime”[[22]](#footnote-22) (145 encyclopedia) These studies indicate that the implications of SRA are, in fact, false. Furthermore, any representation of Satanic practices found in America were unrelated to the cases described above, and anything similar would be a vast outlier, as “Satanism as a religion does not necessarily imply illegal activities”[[23]](#footnote-23) (intro out of darkness) With lack of evidence in a case-by-case level, as well as the evidential lack of Satanic cults that intend to do harm on individuals, it is evident that Satanic Ritual abuse is not in fact the cause for mass panic to arise. As the implication of the existence of Satanic Ritual Abuse is ruled aside, it is now evident that there must be another factor to account for mass hysteria. For the satanic panic in 1980s America, it was not in fact the doing of Satanists that caused panic, but very clearly the socio-cultural occurrences of the time. The cause evidently for such mass panic over Satanism was an already established prejudice towards Satanic practices, as well as the Cold War, gender and family dynamic changes, and radical psychological movements, rather than an actual occult phenomena. Furthermore, the modernity of the society that this panic occurred in further proves that any community is able to succumb to mass hysteria when encompassed by certain socio-cultural influences.

The mass hysteria surrounding the satanic panic, exemplifies a susceptibility that even existed before the creation of the United States. Likewise, this growth of fear and panic that was present in the Satanic panic was also present in seventeenth-century Salem, Massachusetts. Salem was a society who “believed quite sincerely in the doctrines and moral precepts laid down by Puritans.”[[24]](#footnote-24) (9 devils dominion) With a Puritan mindset at hand, the community functioned intertwined with religious practices and beliefs. A part of their religious beliefs was a belief in God, and on the other hand, there was a belief in the devil. Religious leaders were highly-functioning members of their society, and “when new England ministers addressed their congregations in sermons and treatises, one of their objectives was to educate layfolk in the constant threat posed by the devil.”[[25]](#footnote-25) (86 devils dominion) When one is educated of a constant threat to themselves and their community, it is only natural that a fear develops. As being weary of the existence of evil was not only popularized in this religion, but also was heightened at the time, being a main subject matter of sermons. This life in a constant fear of an unseen threat had capability to cause fears and anxieties, which were then heightened as the community faced other tensions.

Tensions also arose in the society during this time period, as similarly to 1980s America, they were facing a shift of social change. Firstly, “the great bulk of witchcraft accusations reflected an unresolved conflict between the neighborly conduct required by the ethical code of the old village community, and the increasingly individualistic forms of behavior which accompanied the economic changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century”[[26]](#footnote-26) (12 witch papers) During this time period, their society was changing in the way individuals acted and reacted to others. This type of change, evidently, causes a tension in itself, on both the intrapersonal and community level. As individuals became more individualistic, they needed means to act out, as they could no longer depend upon the group-driven mindset that was typical in times prior. A shift in how one views themselves as a part of community on such a grand level caused an overall tension in the society at the time, thus fueling a desire to act out on each other and resolve the tensions that came as the society shifted.

As society shifted, there were also many things that were unexplainable. Scientific advances in the medical and psychological fields were not yet comparable to modern day, and often left individuals with no explanation to factors in their lives that can now be explained scientifically. These factors could be things such as disease, death, paranoia, unexplainable emotions, and/ or more. Those that were bewitched were said to be “sometimes they would be deaf, sometimes dumb, and sometimes blind…parental reproof sent them into agony”[[27]](#footnote-27) (21 the witches) Today, these things could be explained with scientific findings or knowledge on disease and the accompanying symptoms, however, in 1692 these things were not advanced and therefore Salem citizens had to look elsewhere for answers. Furthermore, many reports of strange behavior that was assumed to coincide with witchcraft or works of the devil has in recent years become moreso evident in mental illness, something the seventeenth-century would have no comprehension of. Today, “the multiple personality disorder is widely considered a variation of demonic possession. Knowledge about dissociative states informs not only about satanic possession of medieval witches but also about the experiences by satanic cults in contemporary society.”[[28]](#footnote-28) (2 satanism) Now with these discoveries, it is evident how Salem remained confused by things happening in their community. This confusion, and other cultural forces prior described, left them vulnerable to group tension, the underlying cause of mass panic. The community at the time was living with an intense fear accompanied by the unexplainable symptoms of illness, as well as a shift in societal norms, therefore they were extremely susceptible to an outbreak of mass hysteria.

With nothing to explain the struggles of Salem, and an ever-changing society, the community was left with a desire to locate the source of their misgivings, and with a growing group tension, came the necessity for a target. Women at the time were extremely inclined to become victims in the duration of this fumbling for a scapegoat. This society’s belief “…of Puritanism ushered in a different and more dangerous role for women in society…upright they were the vessels of sweetest grace; fallen they became the tools of Satan himself.”[[29]](#footnote-29) (11 female felons) Not only objectified, women at the time were seen as means that held potentiality to be susceptible to the ever-present evil of Satan, that the Puritans were taught to fear. Women at this time were often seen in this light, and also were held to strict social standards, creating greater understanding as to why such large numbers of victims were women who were “typically unpleasant women who had alienated their neighbors.”[[30]](#footnote-30) (11 salem witch papers) This likeness amongst the vast majority of those accused indicates that women were most susceptible to being accused due to the societal expectations. Since women were expected to be “demure”[[31]](#footnote-31) (11 female felons), amongst other strict characteristics, many women were ostracized who did not fit into this frame of character. for the women who did not fit in, this created frustration amongst citizens in the society, as they felt discomfort towards the fact that an individual was acting out of place. This discomfort then of course leads to feelings of tension, not only igniting panic, but also further placing the blame onto women who acted outside the societal norms.

In parallel to the outcry of ritual abuse in 1983, 1692 Salem, Massachusetts witnessed something very similar. The first of witchcraft cases began with “Bridget Bishop, a self assertive woman” whose husband accused her of witchcraft, claiming that ‘she was a bad wife. . . the devil had come bodily to her . . . and she sat up all night with the devil.’”[[32]](#footnote-32) (database salem) Bishop also went against the time period’s expectations of women as she had a marriage that did not follow the typical pattern of marriages at the time, being that “in 1678, Bridget was accused of calling her husband names on the Sabbath, and both she and her husband were sentenced to stand gagged in the market place for their offenses. In January 1679, Bridget and Thomas were both sentenced to be whipped for fighting.”[[33]](#footnote-33) (archive) With this past, Bridget was a woman who did not adhere to the standards for women, and therefore was an easy target as the society looked for a scapegoat to take their group tension out on. Things escalated as “girls made accusations, which were denied by the accused; one or more confessors validated the claim of the accusers; and members of the community told of past acts of witchcraft by the accused. The court used spectral evidence as the only legal basis to convict Bridget Bishop.”[[34]](#footnote-34) (database) This case in particular was common for the time period of witch trials, and began the particular mania in Salem. In typical fashion of mass panic, the accusation began based on pure hearsay, as “spectral evidence was given an unprecedented status.”[[35]](#footnote-35) (archive) The accusations on Bishop can be attributed to her place in the current society as a woman who does not adhere to society’s gender roles at the time. By not adhering to gender roles, Bishop gave an already tense society more discomfort. This difference amongst the norms made her an easy target as the scapegoat, especially with the already formed bias against witches.

As in many cases of mass panic, the genesis of accusation derives from a discomfort, not necessarily crimes of witchcraft. For those that accused they did not just suffer from group tension, but “the lives of young girls were monotonous past bearing and also full of anxiety…for a young girl to exhibit anything but docility in the face of her dreary existence would have been to stir fears she was thoroughly evil”[[36]](#footnote-36)(archive) This dynamic for girls at the time gives further reasoning as to why this society found such great ease in creating accusations. People in this community, particularly Bishop’s husband, had a discomfort towards her personality not adhering to gender roles of the time. This abnormality was inherently frustrating to other surrounding Bishop, and thus made her an easy target once allegations were brought up. Then, as young girls attempted to navigate the sexism of the time then amongst group tension, they then let it out in a way that was acceptable.

With other explanations present to describe the prior cases surrounding the use of ‘witchcraft’, it is evident that there may be other phenomena to describe the Salem witchtrials’ hysteria. For the time period, magic could be defined as not necessarily the unexplainable, but rather something that “empowers human beings through their command of the supernatural.”[[37]](#footnote-37) (9 devils dominion) That being said, in both cases above, as is evident for many, the individuals had expressed no goal to ‘command’ the supernatural or shift the realities they perceived. For scholars today, these ‘supernatural’ phenomena, even those not controlled by witches, “was essentially a disease of the imagination.”[[38]](#footnote-38) (intro history towards witchcraft) Therefore, as the occurrences of these two cases cannot be described as magical or witchcraft, the cause for mass hysteria must be within another source. As the society of Salem, Massachusetts functioned with strict religious and gender roles, and had an intense fear of the devil, they were especially susceptible to developing an unsettled fear that would lead to accusations of the prejudiced, and thus mass panic.

Mass panic has been established as the product of other socio-cultural forces. So, it is evident that the cause for persecution of so-called ‘satanists’ and ‘witches’ was not the actual existence of dark magic, but rather a deeply instilled bias that has been cultivated over time. These biases have created a prejudice that has gone so deep into the American, and colonial culture that witchcraft and satan worship have been watered down to denote evil. It is evident in the prior discussed cases that these practices do not source a cause for panic, but rather are just simplistic scapegoats fueled by bias. Along with this bias, comes the cultural struggles as society shifts, as well as unsettled, and uncontrolled problems, such as high crime rates or lack of psychological explanation. With these forces combined, these societies were faced with the circumstances for high stress in group tension. All together, these complications created a mass panic in Salem, in 1980s America, and will continue to do so.

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