

*Comment:*  
*'The Enduring Fascination  
with Salem Witchcraft'*

JILL LEPORE

IN JULY 1741, a man from Massachusetts wrote a letter to a man from New York. 'I am a stranger to you & to New York,' he began, humbly. But he had heard of 'the bloody Tragedy' afflicting the city, in which a series of hasty trials had led to the execution of several African slaves on vague charges of 'conspiracy.' 'I observe in one of the Boston News letters,' the man from Massachusetts wrote, 'that 5 Negroes were executed in one day at the Gallows, a favour indeed, for one next day was burnt at the stake, where he impeached several others, & amongst them some whites.' Such confessions 'are not worth a Straw; for many times they are obtain'd by foul means, by force or torment, by Surprise, by flattery, by Distraction, by Discontent with their circumstances . . . , or in hopes of a longer time to live, or to dy an easier death.' All of which, the man from Massachusetts concluded heatedly, 'puts me in mind of our New England Witchcraft in the year 1692 Which if I don't mistake New York justly reproached us for, & mockt at our Credulity about.'<sup>1</sup>

New Englanders have lots of reasons to hate New Yorkers, not the least of which is the endlessly disappointing Boston Red Sox,

---

1. 'Cadwallader Colden Papers, 1741: Anonymous Letter from a New Englander,' *New-York Historical Society Collections* 8 (1934): 270-71.

JILL LEPORE is associate professor of history at Boston University and is co-founder and co-editor of *Common-place*, an interactive, web-based magazine of early American history.

Copyright © 2003 by American Antiquarian Society

who manage, every year, to fall behind the bewilderingly successful New York Yankees (not to mention the Mets). But here's another reason: Americans remember one of New England's worst moments—the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692—but have almost entirely forgotten one of New York's rottenest hours—the New York Slave Conspiracy of 1741.

Why?

On the face of it, these 'bloody tragedies' have much in common. As the man from Massachusetts observed, 'your present case, & ours heretofore are much the same.' In New York in March of 1741, residents of the city became alarmed when a series of small fires appeared to have been deliberately set. Soon, Dutch and English New Yorkers became convinced that the city's African slaves and free blacks—who constituted over one-fifth of the population—were behind the arson, staging a vast conspiracy to destroy the city. By May, the first Africans had been executed; the executions continued throughout the summer.

What happened in both Salem and New York resulted from widespread terror and panic over previously powerless people suddenly and mysteriously come to power: in 1692, women becoming witches; in 1741, slaves becoming conspirators. In both places, public hysteria was further fueled by confessions extracted by dubious means. 'Negro & Spectre evidence will turn out alike,' predicted the Massachusetts correspondent. And he was right. In New York, the trials came to an end only when the miscarriage of justice became so glaring—and the hanged corpses left to rot in the summer heat so repugnant—that New York's magistrates could no longer stomach either.

When I talk to students about the New York Conspiracy, they usually assume that we remember Salem, and not New York, because the toll was so high in 1692. But the toll in 1741 was higher. In Salem, as Gretchen Adams reminds us, 'the destruction to the community was staggering': 'over 150 arrested and imprisoned, nineteen hanged including a minister, one man pressed to

death with stones, at least four persons died in prison.' But in New York, the destruction was greater: nearly two hundred arrested and imprisoned, thirteen burnt, seventeen hanged, more than seventy forced out of the colony into slavery in the Caribbean.

Why, then, do we remember Salem but not New York? Why is there no cocktail called a 'New York Conspiracy'? No marching band music? No poems at all, not to mention any as cunning and evocative as Nicole Cooley's 'Testimony: Prophecy,' with brutal lines like this: 'The girls in the front row nod.'

'The specter of Salem witchcraft haunts the American imagination,' writes Gretchen Adams in her astute and eloquent appraisal of three centuries of Americans' re-telling of the story of Salem. 'The story keeps dissolving in my hands,' writes Nicole Cooley in a poem from her stunning work-in-progress, 'The Afflicted Girls.' And, indeed, the specter haunts; the story dissolves. Americans are, and seem to have always been, obsessed with Salem, however difficult it is to really wrestle with what happened there in 1692. My question is this: do we risk becoming fascinated by the fascination?

Gretchen Adams's careful scholarship has shown us that Americans' fascination with Salem *has* endured, and Nicole Cooley's potent poetry assures that it *will* endure. But *should* it endure? *Should* Americans continue to care about Salem? Should we write more about Salem, or write more about what people have written about Salem? Why? What does this story tell us about ourselves, as a people, that continues to require reminding? And what does the New York Conspiracy tell us that we have been eager to forget?

Historians are not supposed to ask 'should' questions, I know. Moral engagement is for philosophers, and not for us. But I'm only making a ten-minute comment at a meeting among friends, and I thought maybe I could get away with it.

I know you've enjoyed these two extremely provocative presentations as much as I have. Fortunately, we've a good deal of time left to discuss them. I've tried to start us off by asking a few

questions, and I know you have many of your own. Gretchen's paper, I know, ends with a question that plagues many of us: Did the Salem witches put the curse on the Boston Red Sox? But I'd like to close with a question from the final lines of Nicole's 'Testimony: Prophecy':

Do you want to cure

This world of these infections?

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.