

CFP: Conspiratorial Thought in Early America

The 2020s have become what Rolling Stone calls the “age of conspiracies,” from the QAnon theories arguing that real power is exercised by a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles including the likes of Tom Hanks, Lady Gaga, and Opera to the conflation of the QAnon and anti-vax movement coalescing in the message that the COVID-19 pandemic response is a grand plan masterminded by Bill Gates to implant microchips, activated by the rollout of 5G, in everyone’s arms to control the world population through social media. This unreal thinking has exploded onto the world media landscape, becoming a pervasive part of American life.

Much the same could be said of the early American republic, where conspiracy manifested most overtly in the ubiquitous theories regarding Freemasonry, the Bavarian Illuminati, and slave revolts like Gabriel’s Conspiracy. However, as Gordon Wood in “Conspiracy and Paranoid Style” over 40 years ago, conspiracy is evident not just in these theories but in “the underlying metaphysics of eighteenth-century culture” (407). Conspiracies display an urgency to find order in an unpredictable and disturbing disorderly world. They can also create reassuring feelings of empowerment: the conspiracy theorist possesses special knowledge about how the world works that gives them a sense of superiority over the ignorant masses. Like today’s media ecology, early American print culture is saturated with conspiratorial dynamics: paranoia, secrecy; gossip; causal chaining; hidden identities; network theory; messianic logic; and conflicting truths. These dynamics occur across genres, spurred in part by the hyper-local and partisan nature of material print culture and mirrored in the increasing stratification of knowledge that occurs across social media platforms and algorithms today.

The explosion of conspiracy theories in our current moment therefore renews the need to investigate early American conspiracy inaugurated decades ago. This panel seeks papers that explore specific conspiracies, conspiratorial dynamics, and/or conspiratorial thinking more generally from any aspect of print culture in the early American period.

Please send a 250-word proposal and short CV to Helen Hunt (hhunt@tntech.edu) and David Lawrimore (davidlawrimore@isu.edu) by October 23, 2022.