



For a number of years, I've been teaching a graduate seminar at the University of California, Irvine, titled Memory and the Law. The course has a strong focus on the repressed memory controversy. In the 1990s, thousands of individuals claimed to have recovered repressed memories of extensive brutalization, often after suggestive psychotherapy. Sometimes they claimed they were forced to participate in horrific satanic ritual abuse. Rarely was there an iota of corroboration. Graduate students must write a final paper, and one paper submitted by Emma Rodgers was so unusual, so impressive, that I thought it needed to have a wider readership than just one single professor who would be providing her with a grade for the course. I asked Rodgers whether she would be interested in submitting the paper to the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, and she was thrilled with the idea. It turns out she had long been a devotee of the magazine—an interest she shared with her father. And so that is how it came to be that a relatively new graduate student would come to be writing for this splendid magazine.

—Elizabeth F. Loftus, Distinguished Professor, University of California, Irvine

Searching for Satan in 2021: An Update on Satanic Ritual Abuse Claims

An active network of therapists, scientists, and community figures are making questionable claims about repressed memories and satanic ritual abuse that sound eerily similar to those from thirty years ago.

EMMA LOUISE RODGERS ROMERO

Outside of baseball, cheap beer, and Botox, paranoia is America's favorite pastime. From Salem to Pizzagate, the American psyche has so routinely blazed with paranoia that conspiracy has become accepted as a part of our jangled quilt. Yet few moments in U.S. history can eclipse the turbulent events of the late 1980s and early 1990s now known as the Satanic Panic. Marked by a rash of court cases alleging

widespread satanic ritual abuse, including sexual abuse and human sacrifice, what made the Satanic Panic so shocking was an almost complete lack of concrete evidence. As fringe as it may sound today, it was a fear that gripped mainstream American consciousness for the better part of a decade.

The Satanic Panic was fueled in part by the widely accepted belief that memories of horrific ritual abuse could be

first repressed and then recovered. With increasing frequency, adults with no previous memory of abuse claimed to suddenly recover memories of being physically and sexually assaulted by satanic cultists as children. More disturbing, these recoveries were frequently made after entering psychotherapy for seemingly unrelated problems. Therapists and patients went on daytime talk shows to broadcast their stories to the masses (Hughes 2017). Their diagnosis was grim: not only was Satan real, but thousands of his cronies were silently operating in your community, slaughtering babies and sexually assaulting children. What's worse, free of the burden of memory, absolutely anyone could be a victim. Part pop psychology, part legal drama, all marked with supernatural flair, it is easy to see why this was a particularly effective paranoia.

The ripples of this time still lap on modern shores. Within the past year, multiple major news sources have published articles calling for a reappraisal of the Satanic Panic, including the *New York Times* (Yugas 2021). Chiefly these pieces highlight the connections between the Panic and recent QAnon theories of ritualistic sacrifice. However, a closer look under the rock reveals an active network of therapists, scientists, and community figures making claims that sound eerily similar to those from thirty years ago. In early 2021, I set out to survey the aftermath of the Satanic Panic, discovering that news of Satan and friends didn't disappear—it just went online.

Mind Control Is the New Black

An initial wellness check revealed an updated field. First, I noticed that many, though not all, believers have elected to shed the “satanic” from satanic ritual abuse in what appears to be an attempt to distance themselves from the Satanic Panic and increase their credibility.¹ There are a few exceptions, including *r/SatanicRitualAbuse* on Reddit—a jumbled collection of exorcism videos, Satanic anecdotes, and cryptic comments that lean very heavily into the classic satanic ritual abuse angles. However, a general survey reveals that even those who don't label it as such still very much subscribe to the satanic aspects of the ritual abuse. It seems this shift is perhaps more of a public relations strategy than a fundamental difference.

The concept of repressed memory seems to have also evolved. Perhaps due to push back from the scientific community surrounding repressed memory (Patihis et al. 2014), a new phenomenon has taken the center stage: mind control. Somewhat bizarrely, it appears mind control is a modern-day explanation for the lack of memory many self-described satanic ritual abuse victims experience. Mind control, it is posited, is achieved through a systemic method of mental reprogramming, ranging in severity from physical torture to strangers on public transit engaging in “subtle hand signaling” (e.g., excessive nose scratching) (Brick 2003; Brick 2017). In an almost direct repeat of Satanic Panic era—therapeutic practices, modern-day therapists who specialize in ritual abuse cases claim that such mind control results in dissociative identity disorder—formerly known as multiple personality disorder, a diagnosis that was used during the Satanic Panic to add

legitimacy to claims of repressed memory. Though history may not repeat, it sure is rhyming.

Few websites provide a more thorough representation of modern satanic ritual abuse claims than S.M.A.R.T. (Stop Mind Control and Ritual Abuse Today—they almost had it with that acronym), a highly active resource for all things ritual abuse, mind control, and cult activity. S.M.A.R.T. is an organization founded in 1995 by Neil Brick, who identifies as a survivor of ritual abuse and mind control tactics. The organization operates on the platform of “disseminating information on the connections between secretive organizations, ritual abuse, and mind control by providing resources to survivors of child abuse, ritual abuse, and mind control.”

S.M.A.R.T. publishes monthly newsletters that are available on its website, covering recent news and criminal cases that are claimed to provide hard evidence of widespread, global satanic ritual abuse. In reality, S.M.A.R.T. seems to cherry-pick articles that relate to sexual abuse broadly and tout them as irrefutable evidence of underground sex abuse rings. S.M.A.R.T. reported extensively on the Bill Cosby case and sexual abuse propagated by members of the Catholic Church. None of these events, while possibly true and terrible, has been in any way linked to satanism by outside legal or journalistic entities.

S.M.A.R.T. seems to cherry-pick articles that relate to sexual abuse broadly and tout them as irrefutable evidence of underground sex abuse rings.

Another half or so of the S.M.A.R.T. newsletter is devoted to smearing opponents. Nearly every newsletter has an entry dedicated specifically to the Satanic Temple and its current leader, Lucien Greaves. They have called him, at various times, a potential anti-Semite and a friend of pedophiles (S.M.A.R.T. n.d.), then hidden behind disclaimers such as, “All accusations are alleged. . . . The ideas I discuss here today are only my own or where cited taken from sources.” Similarly, they routinely bash the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF) as a massive occult disinformation project. FMSF is a long-standing support group for families and individuals impacted by false memory accusations. The organization has no history of openly attacking S.M.A.R.T.

Then, once a year, the circus comes to town. S.M.A.R.T. hosts an annual conference open to the public, featuring presentations ranging from the benign (“Nature and the Nature of Healing: How the Natural World Restores Us to Our Senses—Inside and Out”), to the cryptic (“Deception by Organized Abuser Groups: Helping Your Front People and Your Insiders Recognize the Lies and Tricks Which Keep You Enslaved”), to the ironic (“How to Avoid Being Mind Controlled at a Conference”). Open to the public, of course, means something different in S.M.A.R.T. lingo. Members of

the press and people openly skeptical of ritual abuse are prohibited from entry.

Frequent contributors to the S.M.A.R.T. conference and website include Randy Noblitt, a professor at Alliant University in Los Angeles; Alison Miller; and Miller's patient and coauthor Wendy Hoffman. Each of these individuals firmly believes that underground cults are sexually abusing children and engaging in personality-splitting, brain washing techniques to make them unaware of the abuse. And none of them wanted to talk to me.

Determined to hear it from the horse's mouth, I emailed mental health practitioners, researchers, religious leaders, and folks working in unrelated fields who had shared their experiences online. Almost none responded. It wasn't until after I received my first reply that it occurred to me that I was going about it all the wrong way. Until this point, I had been reaching out to folks through my university-sponsored email address. I would cite myself as a doctoral student in the Psychological Science program at University of California, Irvine, explain that I was searching for current cases of satanic ritual abuse, and ask if a professional source could pretty please hop on Zoom and help me understand what is going on with these Satanic cults. After sending a decidedly annoying number of emails to a few of the head figures in the community (notably, Noblitt and Neil Brick), one of my solicitations finally yielded a response.

Ellen Lacter is a San Diego-based therapist and author whose publications include *Guidelines to Diagnosis of Ritual Abuse/Mind Control Traumatic Stress* (2008) and *Torture-Based Mind Control: Psychological Mechanisms and Psychotherapeutic Approaches to Overcoming Mind Control* (2011). Her personal website, endritualabuse.org, offers resources for victims of ritual abuse and the practitioners who aim to help them. I reached out to Lacter with a standard inquiry, and,

to my surprise, I received a response within a few minutes. Lacter dryly informed me that she doesn't stay current on court cases involving ritual abuse. She then shared with me a few pro-repressed memory resources from her website that I had already explored, including articles from the Recovered Memory Project.

Then the email got interesting. Lacter closed her correspondence with a short paragraph: "Before I would agree to do a Zoom meeting, I need to know if you endorse the work of Elizabeth Loftus. If you do, I cannot meet with you because I would be concerned that I would be misrepresented." Elizabeth Loftus is a faculty member at my university and an expert in memory who has long spoken out against the lack of scientific integrity in cases of repressed memory. I had not mentioned to Lacter that I was a student in Loftus's class, nor had I brought into question the validity of the claims that she and her collaborators were making. I went back and reread my original inquiry to be sure I hadn't done so much as imply disbelief. Then, I drafted a thorough, three-paragraph message stating that I am *not* a student in Loftus's lab, or a collaborator in any way, but am enrolled in a quarter-long course she is teaching. I followed this up by stating I've been trying to contact other S.M.A.R.T. figures, hoping that by showing I'd done my homework she would be willing to talk to me.

My three paragraphs were quickly answered with three sentences. "I need more clarity on your position on Loftus's work." She cut to the chase: "I also need to know your position on the existence of ritual abuse as a form of abuse. If you consider Loftus to operate with integrity or if you believe that ritual abuse may not exist, I cannot help you." I was shocked. I immediately began writing another email saying I wasn't aiming to discredit her but wanted more information before I believe in claims of mass ritual abuse. Then, I stopped. Just by being a student at the same institution as a known skeptic,



I posed too great a threat to engage in a Zoom meeting with Lacter. There was nothing I could say short of lying about my healthy skepticism and disparaging my professor that would yield a discussion. I never sent another email from my university address, and I have not responded to Lacter.

Perhaps this is for the best, however. In 2009, Neil Brick went to war against an undercover “journalist” who attended a S.M.A.R.T. conference (Mesner 2009; Brick 2009). This journalist, operating under the pseudonym Douglas Mesner, wrote an article about his experiences at the conference. Brick attacks Mesner first on a personal basis, for paying for the conference in a canceled check. Then, he tears down the statements Mesner made regarding the weak scientific evidence behind repressed memories, citing links to the “proof” listed on the S.M.A.R.T. website. In a more comical turn, Brick also defends the anti-electromagnetic mind control metal hat display that was at the conference that year, essentially stating that it was poor form to poke fun at the literal tin-foil hat stand.

Somehow, things got even weirder. While looking for the fabled article, I discovered that Douglas Mesner’s other alias is Lucien Greaves—the current leader of the Satanic Temple and a neuroscience Harvard graduate who specializes in false memory syndrome. The same Lucien Greaves who S.M.A.R.T. makes a point of attacking in nearly every newsletter. It remains unclear whether Greaves attended the conference. The only evidence he was there comes from S.M.A.R.T. itself, which would be highly motivated to report a card-carrying Satanist infiltrated its ranks for a weekend. Perhaps it is best to keep these folks at an arm’s length. But all this makes me wonder: Would the Satanists respond to my emails?

The Perennial American Witch Hunt

In every post, article, webpage, and interview I found, fear was the reigning emotion. Ellen Lacter, Randy Noblitt, and Neil Brick were all actively promoting fear of global ritual abuse rings and mind control. Moreover, I felt all these folks had an intense fear of *me*. For them, I was a proxy for skepticism. And the fear of skepticism was so potent that it was almost impossible for me, a first-year graduate student with no history of ... well ... *anything* related to their field, to secure more than an email in return. The irony that this all-or-nothing, us-vs.-them mentality so closely resembles recognized cult behavior seems to be entirely lost on them.

At first glance, it may seem a waste of time to care about these claims considering bigger antiscience issues at hand. Indeed, many of these people operate from a place of wanting to help, not harm. But the truth remains that, as goofy as these concepts may appear, they can have real-world repercussions. Other than the terminally jangled psychology student, I’m certain that most people perusing the S.M.A.R.T. website are in pain. People suffering from depression, anxiety, or a mood disorder can easily wind up searching for relief on YouTube, where videos such as one titled “Are You Repressing Memories of Sexual Abuse?” (which currently has over 100k views)

tout terrifying and unscientific claims that their symptoms are side effects of repressed memories. Hoping for answers, they could wind up at a website such as S.M.A.R.T., where they find acceptance and an explanation for their struggles in believing they are victims of ritual abuse. In some ways, the greatest fear that all these people hold is the fear that, sometimes, our pain doesn’t have to come from anywhere at all.

As far as my fear goes? I’m fairly confident that I’m on a S.M.A.R.T. do-not-admit list somewhere, but apart from that, I remain blissfully unfazed by my mad dash through the 2021 world of satanic ritual abuse. If anything, I am comforted to know that Satan hasn’t gone anywhere. We could all use some good music. ■

Note

1. The website <https://strengthtoheal.org/understanding-ritual-abuse/> is a clear example in which the term *ritual abuse* is used and described as “anti-God” without using the terms *Satan* or *satanic* at all. Is this a PR move?

References

- Brick, Neil. 2003. How cues and programming work in mind control and propaganda. Survivorship East Coast Conference Presentation (May 24). Available online at <https://ritualabuse.us/mindcontrol/how-cues-and-programming-work-in-mind-control-and-propaganda/>.
- . 2009. Rebuttal to the report from the SMART 2009 conference. Available online at <https://ritualabuse.us/ritualabuse/rebuttal-to-the-report-from-the-smart-2009-conference/>.
- . 2017. How to Avoid Being Mind Controlled at a Conference and Freedom from Mind Control. Survivorship Ritual Abuse and Mind Control 2017 Conference Presentations. Available online at <https://ritualabuse.us/ritualabuse/how-to-avoid-being-mind-controlled-at-a-conference-and-freedom-from-mind-control/>.
- Hughes, Sarah. 2017. American monsters: Tabloid media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000. *Journal of American Studies* 51(3): 691–719. Available online at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-american-studies/article/abs/american-monsters-tabloid-media-and-the-satanic-panic-19702000/D674D558FA7399E91149BFCAB138792D>.
- Mesner, Doug. 2009. Report from the S.M.A.R.T. Ritual Abuse/Mind Control Conference 2009, part 1. *The Process Is ...* (August 25). Available online at <http://www.process.org/discept/2009/08/25/report-from-the-s-m-a-r-t-ritual-abuse-mind-control-conference-2009/>.
- Patihis, Lawrence, Lavina Y. Ho, Ian W. Tingen, et al. 2014. Are the “Memory Wars” over? A scientist-practitioner gap in beliefs about repressed memory. *Psychological Science* 25(2): 519–530. Available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797613510718>.
- S.M.A.R.T. N.d. Grey faction, Satanic Temple and Lucien Greaves fact sheet. Ritual Abuse Pages. Available online at <https://ritualabuse.us/ritualabuse/grey-faction-satanic-temple-and-lucien-greaves-fact-sheet/>.
- Yuhas, Alan. 2021. It’s time to revisit the Satanic Panic. *The New York Times* (March 31). Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/31/us/satanic-panic.html>.



Emma Louise Rodgers Romero is a PhD graduate student in Psychological Science at the University of California, Irvine.