

## Conspiracy, Poverty, and Lost Children in Tracy Letts's *Bug* and *The X-Files*

THOMAS FAHY

In the fifth season of the 1990s hit television series *The X-Files*, federal agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) finds himself strapped to a hospital bed for psychiatric evaluation: “Five years together. You must have seen this coming,” he quips to his partner Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) (“Folie à Deux”). Mental illness looms large in the series, but it tends to function as misdirection. Whether through “spooky” Mulder’s reputation for being “out there,” the Lone Gunmen’s conspiracy theories, or the general view of alien abductees as crackpots, *The X-Files* uses characters routinely dismissed as “crazy” to locate truth in the strange and conspiratorial. The protagonist in “Duane Barry,” for example, takes several people hostage after escaping from a mental hospital, yet his story of repeated abductions inspires one unnamed hostage to tell him: “I just want to say that I believe you.” The show’s creator, Chris Carter, discusses the strategy behind these moments in the DVD commentary to “Fallen Angel”: “It’s a journey for Mulder and Scully to see—and for the audience to see—that these people who are crying wolf might be doing it for a reason [...], that they may be credible, seeing and knowing things that we don’t.” Just as the reasons for crying wolf often involve government conspiracies, Mulder and Scully’s investigations also uncover profound social inequalities at the heart of American culture. The oppressiveness and alienation of systemic poverty offer one example of this, and these economic narratives suggest that the real danger of conspiracy does not come from believing in aliens per se but in allowing these theories to deflect from social problems that demand action.

Thomas Fahy is a professor of English at Long Island University, Post. He has published numerous books and edited collections, including *Dining with Madmen: Fat, Food, and the Environment in 1980s Horror*, *The Writing Dead: Talking Terror with TV’s Top Horror Writers*, *Staging Modern American Life: Popular Culture in the Experimental Theatre of Millay, Cummings, and Dos Passos*, and *Peering Behind the Curtain: Disability, Illness, and the Extraordinary Body in Contemporary Theatre*. He is currently writing a book about Tracy Letts. He can be reached at Thomas.Fahy@liu.edu.

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While *The X-Files* emerged as one of the most popular and influential shows at the end of the twentieth century, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Tracy Letts was writing and revising his second play, *Bug*. The work premiered in London in 1996, and he spent the next decade revising it for various productions. As Letts explains, “the play wasn’t worked out. It took a long time and a lot of productions for me to work out some of the problems with it” (Kenber). One of the great innovations of *Bug* involves its preoccupation with the unseen. Specifically, its psychological exploration of paranoia continually navigates between the real and the imaginary, the factual and conspiratorial. One never sees a bug onstage, and throughout most of the play, the sound of insects can be attributed to either the air conditioner, a distant helicopter, or the hum of traffic. Yet the actors playing Agnes White and Peter Evans respond visibly to the supposed infestation. They swat the air, squish bugs with their fingers, and scratch skin. As Uni Chaudhuri notes in her discussion of the play, “watching other people scratching themselves can cause people to start feeling an itch themselves” and this social contagion—much like one’s response to a yawn—establishes a physiological connection to the drama (332). One’s body becomes convinced of the protagonists’ claims. These elements force viewers to share in Peter and Agnes’s paranoid mindset, enabling Letts to capture both the appeal of and problem with conspiracy theories. Despite providing answers and comfort for the disenfranchised, conspiracy ultimately proves palliative. It provides no meaningful way to bring about social change.

Throughout *Bug* and *The X-Files*, conspiracy also gets linked with the pain of abducted, abandoned, or dead children. Agnes’s son, Lloyd, was kidnapped from a grocery store nearly ten years earlier, and she convinces herself that his disappearance is part of a government experiment to breed scientifically engineered bugs in her body. Fox Mulder constructs a similar narrative about loss. Once he learns about his sister’s abduction through regression hypnosis, he links it with a government plot to hide the existence of extraterrestrial life from the public. For both Agnes and Mulder, conspiracy theories provide solace. They help make sense of profound loss. They offer answers for the inconceivable, such as the abduction or death of a child, and they provide an epic narrative for trauma. Personal tragedies can often feel inconsequential in the broader context of day-to-day life, yet conspiracy theories give a grandeur to individual loss. They enable these protagonists to craft intricate stories whose scope matches the depth of their suffering.

At the same time, *Bug* and *The X-Files* use the conspiracy genre—as opposed to conspiracy theories themselves—as a vehicle for cultural critique. Its narratives about lost children, either among the working poor or among middle-class families victimized by a working-class predator, draw attention to the socioeconomic conditions facilitating exploitation and resentment, and they challenge audiences to recognize the dangers of systemic poverty. Beginning with an overview of the conspiracy genre, this article examines the link between poverty and abduction in *Bug* and *The X-Files*. Ultimately, Letts's play and Carter's series use missing children to represent the forgotten poor and the risks of not seeing social inequality as a social crisis. Confronting the truth about these abductions, these works suggest, requires confronting uncomfortable truths about American society more broadly. It requires the individual to do something about injustice.

### Conspiracy Narratives and Economic Hardship

Most scholars consider the 1960s a turning point in conspiracy culture as greater disillusionment with the US government emerged after the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcom X. According to Peter Knight, the aftermath of these deaths made conspiracy theories “a regular feature of everyday political and cultural life, not so much an occasional outburst of countersubversive invective as part and parcel of many people's normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works” (2). Indeed, a general distrust of the powers-that-be took hold by the end of the decade, and this mindset dovetailed with the disaffection of the countercultural movement. Whether through protests against the Vietnam War, the start of the environmental movement, the rallying cry against patriarchal oppression, or the beginning of the gay rights movement, these efforts forged an antiestablishment sensibility that resonated with millions. It considered white, heterosexist, male-dominated power structures to be the problem. It encouraged skepticism and distrust. And it radically shifted the way Americans perceived the government between the 1960s and 1990s. Prior to 1960, national polls revealed that 75 percent of Americans trusted the government, but that number would drop to 25 percent by 1994 (Knight 36). By the 1990s, in other words, conspiracy theory had moved from the fringes to the mainstream, characterizing the way most Americans viewed the government.

Theories about secret plots and cover-ups, as Theodore Zolkowski notes, have found their artistic counterpart in the conspiracy genre (4). This genre typically

features protagonists joined together by a sense of alienation,<sup>1</sup> placing them on a quest to uncover and destroy a mysterious agenda that threatens themselves and society. According to Adrian Wisnicki, these narratives have six distinct characteristics: 1) a conspiracy theorist, 2) a paranoid subject, 3) the “hidden hand,” 4) inaccessible authorities, 5) men plotting to defraud, and 6) a vanishing subject. The conspiracy theorist (a descendant of the literary detective) and paranoid subject offer a hypothesis that makes sense of and provides a means for resisting the threats posed by a conspiracy. This secret plot tends to be masterminded by inaccessible authorities or an oppressive group, such as the government or military, and oftentimes one character, or “hidden hand,” manipulates events or people behind the scenes (Wisnicki 16). Although the plot to defraud involves two men planning to steal a widow’s fortune in Victorian literature contemporary conspiracies regularly feature governments and corporations obfuscating the truth for financial, social, or political gain (Wisnicki 85). Finally, the vanishing subject refers to “a figure who somehow disappears in response to the oppression/surveillance of the authorities” (Wisnicki 16). These vanishing figures remain relatively undefined, allowing other characters—as well as the audience—to interpret their significance (Wisnicki 130).

The neatness of these characteristics, however, raises questions about the genre’s effectiveness for political engagement. As many scholars have noted, the conspiracy genre often responds to the longing for closure and unity in postmodernism with the assertion that everything is interconnected and explainable. According to Samuel Coale, “conspiracy as a fictional structure converts a cosmos of contingency and chance into a more rational realm of devious plot and secretive performance, thereby attempting to ground the mysteries and ambiguities of postmodernism in some kind of recognizable framework” (6). This contrast with postmodernism highlights the potential limitations of the genre. While conspiracies often draw attention to social problems, suggesting the desire for a better world, they tend to revolve around “systemic investigation, exposure, and elimination.” They fail, as Mark Fenster has argued, “to inform us how to move

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<sup>1</sup> For Timothy Melley, this alienation stems from “agency panic”—the fear that external forces or agents control the individual. As he explains, “paranoia and anxiety about human agency [...] are all part of the paradox in which a supposedly individualist culture conserves its individualism by continually imagining it to be in imminent peril” (6).

from the end of the uncovered plot to the beginning of a political movement” (289).<sup>2</sup> Postmodern fiction, by contrast, rejects the false comforts of conspiracy. It portrays this ideology as another form of entrapment by fostering a sense of alienation and invisibility that “make effective resistance (or separation) impossible” (McClure 258).

Despite these concerns about conspiratorial connectivity, this genre has proven itself an effective tool for addressing issues such as economic inequality. According to David Kelman, conspiracy theories do not merely reflect contemporary crises; they provide “the essential narrative structure of any political articulation. In short, an attention to the narrative structure of conspiracy theories shows that every political narrative must tell the story of an illegitimate force that is undermining the legitimacy of an official or hegemonic discourse” (9). This tension between a rogue force challenging dominant modes of power resonates with the conspiracy genre’s investment in economic exploitation. Many scholars have discussed the important link between financial instability and conspiracy ideology. Even though Richard Hofstadter’s famous essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” primarily focuses on ethnic and religious conflict as the wellspring of paranoia, for example, he acknowledges class as a mobilizing force as well: “Feeling that they have no access to political bargaining or making of decisions, [the dispossessed] find their original conception of the world of power as omnipotent, sinister, and malicious fully confirmed” (39). Knight finds economic inequity particularly important for understanding the conspiracy mindset of the 1990s. The widening gap between the wealthy and poor coupled with declining wages in the middle class inspired many in the “formerly secure mainstream [...] to turn] to the language and logic of extreme politics.” As he explains, deregulation offered greater flexibility to corporate America, but “flexibility for corporations often means insecurity for workers” (40). Indeed, as Colin Harrison observes, “America may have been richer, but its citizens were more divided and more insecure” (7). By 1999, for example, “half of the nation’s income was earned by the top fifth of the population while the bottom fifth took only 4.2 per cent” (Harrison 7). These conditions fostered feelings of

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<sup>2</sup> Such a sentiment has been echoed by a range of scholars. Charles Soukup, for example, notes that Mulder and Scully work for the very government they seek to expose, enabling the audience of *The X-Files* “to playfully resist governmental corruption [...] while maintaining] the desire for the system to correct itself” (23). Likewise, Stephanie Kelley-Romano observes that “it is easier [...] for people to blame a governmental conspiracy for low wages than it is to contemplate complex theories concerning economic restructuring” (117).

disenfranchisement and powerlessness, enhancing the appeal of conspiracies to provide a scapegoat for socioeconomic hardships.

*Bug* and *The X-Files* tap into this intersection between conspiracy and oppressive class hierarchies through their depiction of working-poor life in 1990s America. Poverty circumscribes the lives both of Letts's characters and of the destitute seeking Mulder and Scully's help. Conspiracy theories only fuel this oppression by tacitly condoning the status quo and deflecting attention away from social problems. Although both Letts's play and Carter's series acknowledge the psychological appeal of such theories, they do so to highlight their failure to inspire political action. *Bug* and *The X-Files* thus use the conspiracy genre to critique the way this ideology perpetuates social injustices, and the vanishing child, in particular, emerges as an image for the nation's failure to "see" the problems of poverty and ultimately to do something about it.

### "Put it together. The pieces fit.": Conspiracy Culture, Loss, and Poverty in *Bug*

Letts's *Bug* focuses on the relationship between two characters who turn to conspiracy theories as a way of coping with loneliness, loss, and economic hardship. After the abduction of her six-year-old son and the incarceration of her abusive ex-husband, Agnes White withdraws from the world. She takes refuge in a motel room outside of Oklahoma City, works a dead-end job as a waitress, drinks in excess, freebases cocaine, and appears to have only one friend, a lesbian coworker named R.C. One night, Agnes begins a romance with Peter, a handsome stranger from the bar, and she soon learns that this Gulf War veteran has recently gone AWOL from a military hospital. Peter claims to be the victim of a secret government program to test various technologies, chemical weapons, diseases, and drugs on soldiers. He soon becomes convinced of an insect infestation in Agnes's room, which he attributes to egg sacks that have been implanted under his skin by the military. In many respects, *Bug* maps Agnes's descent into Peter's conspiratorial view of the world. Their shared delusions give them a sense of belonging (to each other). They provide answers to the loss of her son and the loss of Peter's sanity. And they give Peter and Agnes a central role in a government plot to hatch experimental bugs that will infest the planet. This movement from victims to heroes, from marginalized poor to lynchpins in an international conspiracy, highlights the extent to which the working poor feel invisible in America. Peter and

Agnes rely on conspiracy for some degree of recognition. Ultimately, Letts uses the conspiracy genre to expose the flaws of this ideology. Peter and Agnes lock themselves inside a motel room, shut off from the outside world, and this insularity reflects the failure of conspiracy theories to inspire social change. This presentation of paranoia also calls attention to the harmfulness of economic inequity, and the culminating violence of the play—with both characters immolating themselves to save the world—serves as a warning about the dangers of maintaining hierarchies that disenfranchise so many.

Although Peter's unwavering conviction in conspiracy theories might even give Fox Mulder pause, these extreme beliefs mirror the extent of Peter's alienation. He references the medical experiments of Edgewood and Tuskegee, mind control, US collaboration with Nazi scientists, surveillance, domestic terrorism, chemical poisoning, Gulf War syndrome, abductions, implants, aliens, and machines/robots masquerading as humans. As Christopher Bigsby points out, there is an unnerving truth to many of Peter's claims, and the bizarreness of the play "is outdone by reality. Letts was in Oklahoma at the time of the bombing, which led him to become interested in people who had 'slipped out of the matrix' and desired to make sense of the event by locating it within a larger story" (Bigsby 104). The power of *Bug* does not come from the underlying truth in some of these assertions, however. It comes from the way conspiracies reflect a profound need among the dispossessed. They offer this group validation by acknowledging their struggles and by placing their lives, which mainstream society often ignores, at the center of contemporary life.

Peter, for example, relies on conspiracy to mitigate the depth of his social and familial isolation, but it only serves to marginalize him further. He admits that he has no place to go and in asking for Agnes's friendship, he explains, "I'm just trying to make a connection" (Letts 13). This isolation stems from his recent break with the Army. After serving in the Gulf War and spending four years in a military psychiatric hospital, Peter decides to go AWOL. This decision leaves him rootless and penniless, for he viewed the Army both as his family and as a path to a lifelong career. Even though he believes himself to be a victim of medical and technological experiments, the loss of this military family removes him from the community he has relied on for self-definition. It also parallels the absence of his biological family. His mother died at a young age, and his father is a preacher without a congregation or church.

This career mirrors Peter's own status. He has lost his congregation in the military. He has neither a home (church) nor a source of income. And he preaches conspiracy in the hopes of finding converts. At several points in the play, Agnes challenges his ideas, recognizing that this conspiratorial mindset may be an attempt to reestablish his identity as a soldier: "I'm just playin' devil's advocate here. [...] Maybe you're just lookin' for a connection to the army" (42). For Letts, this moment underscores the palliative nature of conspiracy culture. It appears to connect Peter with others, such as veteran Timothy McVeigh for being the other recipient of a "subcutaneous [...] computer chip," yet this "community" is artificial (48). Peter has never met McVeigh. In essence, Peter replaces real connections to family, fellow soldiers, and women with the extremist violence of the Oklahoma City bombing. The inexplicable horrors of that attack become a way for him to understand the horrific losses in his own life. They enable him to blame his own madness and feelings of violence on the government. Like the conviction that he is under constant surveillance, these beliefs offer him a narrative of self-importance that offsets the extent of his loneliness.

Agnes's isolation stems from poverty and familial loss as well. As a waitress in a dive nightclub, she makes just enough money to pay for a motel room and a steady stream of drugs and alcohol. Agnes cannot afford many consumer goods, an apartment, or a ticket out of town, which makes her vulnerable to Goss's (her ex-husband's) harassment. As such, her furnished room with its temperamental air conditioner captures the limitations of this working-poor life. She may take a certain satisfaction in the motel's "maid service," but she admits that she cannot pay all of her expenses. At one point, Goss even recalls their marriage in terms of economic hardship: "I drove [a sausage truck] twenty hours a day sometimes, so I could feed my wife and my kid" (Letts 31). Agnes's literal poverty also becomes a metaphor for her emotional losses. She hoped marriage and motherhood would give her a sense of belonging, but that proved not to be the case: "I just get sick of it, my lousy life, laundromats and grocery stores, dumb marriages and lost kids" (40). Economic hardship parallels the pain of broken families.

Just as marriage proved disappointing and dangerous (as Goss nearly killed her once in a drunken rage), the abduction of her son, Lloyd, remains an ongoing source of anguish. Nearly ten years ago, "he was with me, in the grocery store...in the cart...I forgot to get an onion...I went back for an onion, and left him in the cart...I came back to the cart, and he...he was just...he was gone" (Letts 50). Not surprisingly, when R.C. offers to protect her from Peter, Agnes protests: "You come

in here and try to take away the only thing in the world I have, that's mine. Why can't I have one thing?" (28, 39). As her motel residence suggests, Agnes has nothing. She wants this relationship to compensate for the emotional, economic, and material deficits in her life. She hopes that having "one thing" will make the mundane routines of life, like doing laundry and shopping for groceries, bearable.

Amid the pain of lost children and poverty, conspiracy ideology emerges as both a coping mechanism and an ironic means for maintaining hierarchies that erase the poor. Through her gradual acceptance of Peter's mindset, Agnes begins to view her friendship with R.C. as part of a government plot. Specifically, R.C. and her partner, Lavoice, are fighting a seemingly hopeless custody battle for Lavoice's child: "I don't think the state's too hot on reuniting children with their beautiful lesbian mothers" (Letts 9). The surprise victory, however, heightens Agnes's sense of injustice. On one level, it represents her own fears of insignificance. The legal system grants R.C. and Lavoice the kind of family denied to Agnes. Despite their friendship, Agnes cannot understand how a homophobic state could help them and not her: "I just can't believe it, not in Oklahoma" (37). Unable to reconcile the difference between her losses and R.C.'s gains, Agnes attributes it to a broader conspiracy: "The kid, Lavoice's boy, they gave her Lavoice's boy, they never woulda done that, but she brought the bugs to me in exchange for Lavoice's son" (51). Interestingly, this view of herself as host or queen bug lessens her guilt about Lloyd. It shifts the blame for the abduction from herself to governmental forces outside of her control. It also hinges on her ability to be a mother again, for Agnes can now view herself as exceptional: "I'm the supermother. I'm the super-mother. I'm the supermother" (52). As the repetition and the hyphen suggest, conspiracy enables Agnes to reimagine herself as a good mother and to view her insect progeny as too attached to leave: "they wouldn't leave us, they'd never leave us [...], so they're coming in here, these people, to kill us, and send the bugs out, out into the world, the world" (52). Conspiracy theories thus mitigate this loss by restoring her maternal identity and providing her with children that will not disappear.

While the abduction of Agnes's son becomes a metaphor for the erasure of Americans trapped by poverty, Letts also uses it to expose conspiracy ideology as perpetuating harmful class hierarchies. Agnes recalls that the FBI and police "wouldn't help" find her son, and just as the legal system never protected her from Goss ("I'd get another court order if I thought it'd do any—"), both details capture her sense of insignificance within broader social institutions (Letts 50, 18). The decision to "hermitize" herself on the margins of Oklahoma City reflects this sense

of erasure as well, for her isolation dovetails with the realization that society does not care (9). In the final moments of the play, she and Peter weave an intricate theory that magnifies their place in society. It provides a narrative for the inexplicable by removing the mystery surrounding some of the most difficult aspects of living—lost love, broken relationships, and missing children. It validates the depth of her loss. And it suggests that she and those in her socioeconomic circle matter. Though their narrative captures the fundamental appeal of conspiracy, it also highlights the tragedy of this ideology. Such a story offers Agnes no path for change or growth. Instead, she finds herself locked inside a motel room, walls covered in foil, contemplating suicide.

According to Peter, the driving force behind these secret experiments is maintaining the status quo, and Letts uses this theory to underscore his central message about economic inequity:

PETER: A consortium of bankers, industrialists, corporate CEOs, and politicians [in the 1950s ...] drew up a plan for maintaining the status quo. [...] It's *the way things are*. It's the rich get richer, and the poor poorer. It's a piece of shit, but you got to where you kind of liked it. [...] They devised a plan to manipulate technology, economics, the media, population control, world religion, to keep things *the way they are*. (48; italics in original)

Peter's narrative gets increasingly convoluted as he tries to explain the origins of brainwashing bugs, but his commentary about a class system that thrives on inequality resonates. It is a moment of moral and social clarity in the play. As the audience has been watching this relationship unfold in a grimy motel room, poverty emerges as one of the primary sources for their entrapment. Their use of drugs and alcohol for escapist pleasure—like Goss's desire to watch TV—fits Peter's assessment that "you got to where you kind of liked it." Such poverty stems from limited resources as well as a tacit acceptance of social practices that disenfranchise one group at the expense of another. For Letts, the conspiracy genre becomes an ideal vehicle for exposing the palliative nature of conspiracy theories. They reduce everyone to victims of outside forces, and as such, they perpetuate the status quo by discouraging change. Peter and Agnes turn inward, and their gestures at resistance remain largely private. Ultimately, Letts uses their immolation to suggest that such socioeconomic inequities have explosive consequences for the nation.

Lost Children and the Forgotten Poor in *The X-Files*

From 1992 to 2002 (as well as the current revivals in 2016 and 2018), *The X-Files* placed protagonists, FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, at the center of a government conspiracy to hide the truth about extraterrestrial life, alien abductions, the engineering of alien-human hybrids, and a host of other horrors. Not every installment focused on this mythology. In the tradition of *The Twilight Zone* and *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, *The X-Files* offered monster-of-the-week episodes, which featured various creatures such as ancient insects, cockroaches, werewolves, vampires, golems, zombies, and other mutants. Even these stand-alone episodes often revealed government agents and the military as responsible for varying degrees of mayhem and deception. The fundamental tension in *The X-Files* involves the juxtaposition of Mulder's unquestioning belief in conspiracy and supernatural phenomena with Scully's rational, scientific sensibility as a medical doctor. This dichotomy functions largely as sleight of hand, for science rarely triumphs in the show. It ends up supporting Mulder's paranoia by inviting audiences to find answers in conspiracy as well, much like Agnes does with Peter's ideas in *Bug*. In the world of *The X-Files*, the government is the problem. It tests biological weapons on the public, works closely with former Nazi scientists, stages alien abductions, assassinates people with impunity, impregnates (rapes) women to breed alien-human hybrids, and colludes with alien forces intent on colonizing the planet. As Douglas Kellner notes, the series depicts government agencies and the military as "filled with individuals who carry out villainous actions and constitute a threat to traditional humanistic moral values and human life itself" (218). In this context, conspiracy becomes the only reasonable lens for viewing modern American life.

*The X-Files* is also preoccupied with missing children. The driving motivation of Mulder stems from the loss of his sister. As he explains in the pilot episode, nothing matters more than finding out the truth about Samantha's abduction. Yet Mulder has only the vaguest recollection of what happened. With the Watergate hearings on television, his parents at a party next door, and the board game Stratego on the living room floor, he recalls a bright light carrying her away. This moment of utter paralysis foreshadows the way this loss will freeze him in time. Neither eyewitness accounts nor forensic evidence can confirm his story. In fact, from the beginning of the series, *The X-Files* raises doubts about Mulder's account through both Scully's scientific skepticism ("What I find fantastic is any notion that there

are answers beyond the realm of science”) and the fact that this memory can only be recalled through “deep regression hypnosis” (“Pilot”). Such uncertainty pushes Mulder into an obscure branch of the FBI called the X-Files—a potpourri of forgotten, unsolved cases involving paranormal phenomena and alien abductions. These strange cases, like the ambiguity surrounding Samantha’s abduction, become vehicles for the series to use lost children as metaphors for uncomfortable truths about American culture that people see but do not want to believe.

Many scholars have noted the way extraterrestrials or aliens allude to the theme of alienation in *The X-Files*. Kellner, for example, views the alien “as a figure for what humans have become in an era in which individuals no longer feel that they control their own destiny, in which their own bodies mutate out of control, and their minds and bodies are invaded with new societal, technological, and political forces” (228). Such feelings of vulnerability inspire many characters in *The X-Files* to turn to conspiracy for answers, and this shared ideology often forges connections among people of different economic and ethnic backgrounds. As Teresa Gellar has observed, the show’s exploration of social alienation includes “disenfranchised groups such as POWs from the Vietnam War and undocumented immigrants” (24), and Mulder and Scully’s efforts on their behalf demonstrate an earnest investment in justice. These investigations also challenge the kind of binaries that often justify the marginalization of certain groups. For Paul Cantor, such divisions are critical for the nation-state, which needs to create “aliens” to maintain power: “Nationalism rests on simplistic polarizations between *us* and *them* and above all develops a notion of distinct national identity, often based on ideas of cultural homogeneity, monolingualism, and even racial purity” (123, italics in original). The alienating impact of the nation-state stems largely from “its attempt to impose economic and bureaucratic rationality on its citizens; it alienates them from their ethnic heritage, their regional ties, their communal traditions, and above all their myths—which the nation-state views as an archaic sources of irrationality that must be eliminated for the sake of progress” (Cantor 190). This pressure for cultural uniformity, in other words, heightens the immigrant’s/outsider’s/alien’s sense of isolation and their vulnerability to exploitation.

Certainly, *The X-Files* includes ethnic identity in its portrait of alienation in the modern world, but far less attention has been paid to the show’s exploration of class. While immigrant groups (“aliens”) from Mexico, Haiti, Africa, China, and the like experience mistreatment because of their ethnicity, they also suffer from poverty. In “Hell Money,” for example, Hsin (Michael Yama) begins gambling

with his organs because he cannot afford medical treatment for his daughter's leukemia. Samuel Aboah (Willie Amakye) in "Teliko" can prey on poor African-American males because their deaths go largely unremarked outside of the black community: "young black men are dying and [...] nobody cares" (00:08:07-00:08:11). And poverty utterly shapes the lives of the Native Americans living on the Trego Indian Reservation in "Shapes." Other episodes use class resentment as a backdrop. In "Drive," for example, Patrick Crump (Bryan Cranston) believes that the "Jew FBI" has been secretly experimenting on him and his wife, in part, because the government views poor people as expendable. Jenny Uphouse (Gina Mastrogiacomio) in "Chimera" views her affair with the sheriff as a kind of revenge against the snobbery of middle-class suburban wives. She might not get access to the nice houses of these families, but sex at least provides a temporary outlet for feeling superior. "Pusher" features a killer, Robert Modell (Robert Wisden), who can impose his will on others. As an unremarkable student with a community college education, Modell only seems capable of getting a job as a convenience store clerk, and this mundane, working-class life makes him desperate for recognition. Pushing his will onto others becomes an inversion of the way external forces such as limited opportunities have determined his life. And "Theef" involves a poor, Southern man who uses voodoo to enact revenge on a wealthy doctor for euthanizing his daughter. Hexes and curses are the only weapons he has against the privilege and status of people like Dr. Wieder (James Morrison).

As with Tracy Letts's *Bug*, some of the most provocative uses of poverty in *The X-Files* come from its intersection with the lost child motif and its ability to expose conspiracy ideology as inhibiting social change. A number of episodes such as "Oubliette," "Paper Hearts," "Sein und Zeit" and "Closure" establish a connection between lost children and economic hardship, making abduction a metaphor for the invisible poor and conspiracy a way of avoiding the real impact of economic injustice in America. These episodes tend to place abduction at the center of broader narratives about poverty, forcing Mulder and Scully to confront their own privilege as they encounter the poor and destitute. Even when the abducted child is middle class, as with Samantha Mulder in "Paper Hearts" and "Closure" or Amy Jacobs in "Oubliette," the threat tends to come from working-class predators, suggesting a need to address some of the profound social problems and resentments at the heart of American society. Ultimately, through missing children, Mulder and Scully must engage with people of different socioeconomic backgrounds to solve a case, and in some instances, they must act on their behalf. In doing so, *The X-Files* suggests the

need to recognize the forces that marginalize people—particularly poverty—and it invites audiences to assume a shared responsibility for these groups as well.

Written by Charles Grant Craig, “Oubliette” juxtaposes two child abduction stories in its examination of class tensions in the United States. At the exact moment of Amy Jacobs’s (Jewel Staite) kidnapping in suburban Seattle, a fast-food waitress named Lucy Householder (Tracey Ellis) collapses with a severe nosebleed across town, muttering the words of the kidnapper and bleeding Amy’s blood. Mulder, intrigued by this strange connection, seeks out Lucy’s help in finding the missing girl. He soon discovers that Lucy had been kidnapped as a child, held captive in a basement, and sexually abused for years. Now, she seems to relive this abduction vicariously through Amy. The contrast between these young women establishes the different values associated with middle-class and working-class life. Amy is an attractive, articulate fifteen-year-old girl that appears to be a good student (as suggested by the books on her nightstand) and a model teenager, sharing a room with her baby sister and going to bed by ten o’clock. She lives in a suburban home with a spacious front yard and tastefully decorated rooms. Her bedroom contains countless stuffed animals, books, toys, and a stereo. In the opening sequence, both she and her sister nuzzle comfortably under thick comforters, and the open window suggests the family’s confidence in the security promised by suburbia. They do not expect a working-class photographer’s assistant to climb through the window and take their daughter. As Mrs. Jacobs (Sidonie Boll) explains in a daze, “Who could take somebody who wasn’t there’s?” (00:06:06-00:06:07). In many ways, however, the episode is about who takes things in America at the expense of others. Amy’s abduction garners the full resources of local police and the FBI. No expense is spared to find her, for Amy represents the values of white suburbia—values that must be protected from the likes of working-class predators.

By contrast, Lucy’s abduction experience has driven her to illegal, self-destructive behaviors, making her representative of an underclass that mainstream America would like to forget. The title, “Oubliette,” refers the dark cellar where sexual predator Carl Wade (Michael Chieffo) holds young girls captive, and this space becomes a haunting image for Lucy’s experiences both as a victim of prolonged abuse and as a member of the working poor. With hunched shoulders and darting eyes, Lucy’s body language communicates her sense of ongoing entrapment by past and present traumas. As Mulder notes, “She’d been held in the dark so long her eyes were hypersensitive to the light. [...] She’s thirteen years old here [in a video made shortly after her escape] and can barely string two words

together” (00:19:07-00:19:21). She subsequently turns to drugs and prostitution to cope. Like her status as a trainee at a fast-food restaurant, Lucy’s life in the Bright Angel Halfway House captures her financial and social instability. She is stuck between imprisonment and freedom, between a presumed middle-class childhood and a working-poor present, and between transitional housing and owning (“holding”) a home as her last name suggests. At one point, Mulder comments that “it’s amazing she’s gotten anywhere in life,” to which Scully replies: “Well, by most yardsticks, she hasn’t” (00:19:25-00:19:28). The yardstick here is a middle-class value system, and the episode suggests that those who fall outside of such standards tend not to be measured at all.

This contrast between Amy and Lucy also crafts the oubliette into an image for the hidden poor and for economic exploitation more broadly. Lucy’s prominent role in this case draws attention to her life on the social margins. Local cops grumble about her “kind,” convinced that poverty and a criminal past define her, and they have no interest in the forces that have produced and continue to limit Lucy. In this way, the quest to save Amy becomes a way of preserving middle-class values at the expense of the poor. Lucy’s vicarious experiences make her a victim of this crime without any support from officials (apart from Mulder). Lucy’s body bears Amy’s scratches and bruises. She feels the same bone-chilling cold, desperate thirst, and blindness from being locked in the dark. This shared pain culminates in Wade’s attempt to drown Amy. During this sequence, the camera cuts repeatedly to Lucy’s face as she coughs up water, turns blue, and draws her final breath. Not only does the coroner find five liters of water in Lucy’s lungs, but Amy also walks away unscathed. As Scully summarizes: “There were no injuries. [...] She didn’t have a cut on her, and nobody wants to talk about that right now. Everyone is just relieved to have her back again, to have her safe” (00:43:11-00:43:26). This moment underscores the class implications of the episode. A certain silence surrounds Lucy’s death and the lives of the working poor more broadly. As her damaged body suggests, Lucy becomes an expendable resource for the middle-class suburban culture that Amy represents. Lucy is used to find, rescue, and spare Amy the horrors of molestation and murder. Mulder may optimistically conclude that this sacrifice was “the only way she could escape, the only way she could forget what happened seventeen years ago. Finally the only way she could outrun Carl Wade.” But she cannot outrun the limitations of her class. Clearly, the police and community are much happier substituting Amy for Lucy, and Lucy’s erasure in death mirrors her social insignificance in life.

Finally, the connection between this case and Samantha Mulder's abduction reinforces the episode's message about economic inequity. Throughout the investigation, Mulder encourages Lucy to fight on Amy's behalf: "You're sharing her pain. [...] Now [she] needs some of your strength [...], and you have to help her" (00:35:43-00:35:49). This call to take a shared responsibility for others aligns with Mulder's theory about the case: "Wade's abduction of Amy triggered some kind of physical response in Lucy, some kind of empathic transference" (00:29:21-00:29:25). This notion extends to the audience as well, for the episode challenges viewers to empathize with both Amy and Lucy. In fact, Mulder's empathy for Lucy focuses the audience's attention on the various hegemonic forces that have victimized her, most notably poverty and trauma. Even Scully's questions about Mulder's motives end up supporting his perspective: "You're becoming some kind of an empath yourself, Mulder" (00:29:46-00:29:47). For Scully, this is a case of misplaced loyalties: "You are so sympathetic to Lucy, as a victim, like your sister, that you can't see her as a person who is capable of committing this crime" (00:29:48-00:29:53). Mulder, however, proves to be right about this transference, and Scully's errors in judgement—from Lucy's innocence to Amy's ability to be resuscitated—include the importance of self-sacrifice as well. Lucy's extreme empathy saves Amy's life after all, and in this way, the show makes empathy a heroic act. Mulder models such behavior, demonstrating an indefatigable willingness to sacrifice himself for both Lucy and Amy. In rejecting Scully's reductionist view of his relationship with Lucy, Mulder argues that "motivations for behavior can be more complex and mysterious than tracing them back to one single childhood experience" (00:30:00-00:30:05). His interest in the circumstances of her life transcends the personal. He recognizes the social factors that continue to trap Lucy, and his actions become an attempt to rectify some of this injustice.

The closing scene invites audiences to make Mulder's and arguably Lucy's commitment to individual sacrifice. After looking through her childhood pictures, which capture moments of carefree innocence and happiness, Mulder moves from Lucy's bed to the window. The acts of sitting on her bed and looking out her window reflect the depth of his empathy. Like his decision to protect her from law enforcement, Mulder tries to occupy her spaces and to assume her perspective on the world. He might not have any experience with a working-poor life, but he has done what no one else was willing to do: to understand and care for Lucy. In the final shot, with Scully now on the bed and Mulder at the window, the viewer's

vantage point from the doorway does not reveal what Mulder sees, and this distance suggests that we have to earn that place at the window. We—the show’s predominantly white, upper-middle-class viewership<sup>3</sup>—have to make efforts to see the struggles of people like Lucy. It is not enough to watch from a distance as one does with television. We have to enter the room and take steps that lead to social change.

### Lost and Found in the Age of Conspiracy

Just as Peter, Agnes, and Scully use microscopes to examine evidence, their desire to see the unseen invites questions about who and what gets overlooked in America. In a sense, *Bug* and several episodes of *The X-Files* give the audience a microscopic view into the lives of the working poor and their feelings of alienation and desperation. This kind of poverty proves to be fertile ground for conspiracy. Such theories provide solace, moving one from the margin to the center. They offer an escapist outlet for the hardships of daily life and explain the inexplicable: whether the loss of one’s child or sense of self. They do so, however, at the cost of maintaining the status quo. By providing no meaningful solutions for social problems, conspiracy reduces Agnes and Peter, for example, to victims of larger forces. It may function as a microscope for seeing previously hidden government plots and military secrets, but in truth, conspiracy is like the bug infestation that they fret over. It spreads and spreads, replacing one plot with another to avoid uncomfortable truths about modern life.

The infectious nature of conspiracy has only intensified in the twenty first century, giving *Bug* and *The X-Files* a compelling resonance today. The Internet Age has made it easier than at any other point in history to embrace the conspiratorial, to shut out dissenting voices and challenging viewpoints, and to find like-minded support for the most cynical and callous beliefs. This myopic insularity makes conspiracy believers particularly vulnerable to manipulation. Hackers can influence elections by spreading untruths. President Donald Trump can lie with

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<sup>3</sup> According to Soukup, “Demographically, viewers of *The X-Files* are upper middle class, white Americans. In fact, the Nielsen company ranked *The X-Files* as the top rated prime-time show for \$75,000-plus income homes (‘Nielsen Ratings,’ 1998). Increasing ratings, a devoted fan-base, and an ideal demographic audience (i.e., affluent, upwardly mobile consumers with disposable income) led to a record setting \$1.5 million per episode syndication deal with the cable network FX (Dempsey, 1998)” (15).

impunity on a daily basis, dismissing facts as “fake news,” and his administration can use conspiracies to justify draconian policies. In this climate, the conspiracy theory has made paranoia and intolerance the touchstone of American politics. And it has been weaponized to hurt the most vulnerable among us, whether putting migrant children in cages at the Southern border or attempting to tighten food stamp eligibility and other social services.

The conspiracy genre proves to be a particularly effective tool for exposing this ideology as part of the problem. It taps into the popularity of this thinking—with its simplistic view of the world (good/evil, us/them) and self-aggrandizing impulse—to comment on the need for social and political transformation. By using the vulnerability of missing children as an image for the working poor, the conspiracy genre in *Bug* and *The X-Files* challenges audiences to “see” those who have been alienated and to act on their behalf. The painful losses that afflict Agnes and Mulder require them to retread familiar ground to seek answers. As Agnes descends further into conspiratorial madness, her motel room becomes a relentless image for her social and psychological entrapment. Likewise, Mulder’s encounters with abducted children—like the ongoing mythology of the series—expose him repeatedly to class inequities and tensions. In both cases, audiences are challenged to look closer at these problems. They are asked to abandon the false comforts of conspiracy and to consider what responsibility they have for protecting the most vulnerable among us.

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