Article

Rumpelstiltskin, Kung Fu Panda, Jacques Derrida, and Conspiracy Theory: The Role and Function of Secrecy in Conspiracy Narrative and Practice

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Abstract: The article argues that where secrecy and secrets are key aspects of conspiracy theory narratives and practice, the genealogies of the/a secret have not been well understood. We argue that two forms of the secret, one a premodern notion of the secret as truth and revelation, the other a post-Derridean non-secret, inform two distinct forms and functions of contemporary conspiracy practice.

Keywords: secrets; secrecy; folklore; conspiracy theory; authoritarian; populist; post-truth; legend; rumor; motif; tradition

1. Introduction

Secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy, ought never to be the system of a regular government.

Jeremy Bentham[1]

The great paradox that animates the project of conspiracy, powers its beating heart, lies within the core conception of itself, the Newcomen engine of a bygone day or the future hopes of a fusion reaction, is the secret. The secret is made of an inexhaustible multitude of a secrets; and here the inexhaustible, the "inconsumable" (Eco and Chilton 1972), is how the indefatigable conspiracy exists, since neither its engine nor the resources it consumes is finite, since the/a secret is always an immanent noun, an always almost now, a story with no end, middle, or overarching structure that would make itself exhaustible: the hero over the finish line, done, and with them the story. Conspiracy practices' only constraints are with their externalities, which are the hidden hands of their emergence: people and the context they live in; that is, people's labor and creativity caught within contexts' constraints, and the bending, rending of reality they allow and demand. This paper is about the multitude of modes, forms, and possibilities of the/a secret within the crucible of conspiracy theory: it catalogues some of the discursive genealogies (traditions) that make it possible to use them as narrative building blocks (motifs), elusive forms or quotable and referenced absent/present narratives (tale types). This analysis also demonstrates the way that the selection of certain types of secrets, their use, and the perpetuation of their histories in conspiracy practices (while rejecting other types and imaginings of secrets) displays a gulf in the more mundane and pragmatic utility of scholarly analyses that focus narrowly on issues of worldview, belief, and ideologies. Chasing the genealogy of the/a secret also traces the fissure points between two imaginings of modernity and the chronotope(s) of the now that make up our, and conspiracists' everyday, conception of the modern.

What this paper will demonstrate is that there exist two modes of the secret that are expressed and underpin part of the logic of secrecy and its constant twin, transparency/revelation within conspiracy theory. The first traces its genealogy from premodern traditional narratives captured and preserved in some folktale motifs, myth and Christian apocalyptic discourse (Barkun 2013; O'Leary 1994; Madisson 2014), and philosophies and pragmatics of contemporary transparency discourses (West and Sanders 2003; Hood 2006).

The second mode of the secret is rooted in Derrida's reconfiguration of Nietzsche and the practice of deconstruction specifically, and poststructuralist semiotics generally (Derrida and Ferraris 2001).

　　My argument is that the first mode makes up the bulk of conspiracy practices and represents what we would think of as folk conspiracy (as sociology and process). Beginning with tale types and motifs like "the singing bone" and ending with Rumpelstiltskin, the seemingly nonsensical elements of conspiracy narrative and practices will be shown to be consistent with a traditional idea of the/a secret as a form of knowledge-at-depth whose revelation unveils and secures an unambiguous truth. Combining this insight with West and Sanders's (2003) notion of the link between conspiracy theory and occult cosmologies (the visible world and the truer invisible one) extends the genealogy into myth, as well as the various reworkings of these genres into and through pop culture forms which preserves and transmits the traditional secret to vast audiences. Here, the folkloric insight into the interlocking and constant productive borrowing from various cultural registers and media forms is necessary to understand the actual socio-cultural communication ecology through which conspiracy theories are reproduced. Two points for orientation can be briefly made here. First, folklore exists in a constant dialogue with popular and elite culture, and its content and forms inform the production of cultural texts and their concomitant ideologies (Narváez and Laba 1986; Brunvand 2001; Foster 2016). Second, a consistent failure to account for or marginalize subculture folk groups (Kitta 2012), counter-knowledge communities (Thompson 2008), and the stigmatized vernacular (Goldstein and Shuman 2016), which conspiracists re-create, partially accounts for the failures in pandemic public health policy, vaccination rates, public dis/order, etc., which accompanied the pandemic but long proceeded and will outlast it.

　　The second mode of the secret is the bad faith use of deconstruction to create radical epistemological relativism, a post-Derridean exercise in undermining consensus reality. This practice is the provenance of political elite and activist authoritarians' pragmatic use of conspiracy. Here we find the true adherents and practitioners of the nihilism school of deconstructionism. For example, Steve Bannon's famous dictum: "[T]he way to deal with them [media] is to flood the zone with shit" is a clear example (Lewis 2018). Whether or not the conspiracy theories crafted by authoritarians is polyvocal—that is, able to be both meaningless (in a Derridean sense) to their creators/encoders and meaning-full in a premodern Protestant Christian "abundance of signs" (St. George 1998) to their audience/decoders—is a question that eludes this paper, but thus far the evidence that it is so is that consumers of authoritarian conspiracy theories (who are themselves embedded in pre-deconstructionist heuristic communities[2]) become the re-performers and co-creators of companion conspiracy (multimedia) narratives, while also defying simplistic labels of "believers" by signaling a range of belief(s) in the material[3] (on authoritarian propaganda use of conspiracy, see Astapova et al. 2021, p. 6). Whether or not we can say what an authoritarian like Trump actually believes about his Great Lie is unclear; however, it will shortly be tested within a court of law (The State of Georgia v. Donald J. Trump, et al.).

　　Primary sources for this paper are drawn from a dataset made up principally of fifteen open access Facebook pages with avowed anti-lockdown and COVID-skeptic activist intentions from 15 February 2020 to March 2023. All but two of the pages were eventually shut down by Facebook or abandoned by their creators. The pages had not less than two thousand users each and were from Canada and the United States of America, with most users being North American and communicating in English. For the purposes of this paper, I will mainly be drawing on examples from and practitioners of the QAnon "super-conspiracy" (Barkun 2013; Bodner et al. 2021). Briefly, QAnon began as a benevolent conspiracy theory that was being slowly revealed online by a person inside the White House with Q level clearance. Q posted information on socio-technical networks like 4chan and later 8chan/kun which spun a tale that Donald Trump and a small band of confederates were engaged in taking down the "deep state" that actually and clandestinely controlled the government. Subsequent research reveals that the conspiracy was part of the larger

pro-Trump meme-war begun in 2016. QAnon was started on 28 October 2017 by Paul Furbar and later ceded or stolen by Jim and Ron Watkins of 8chan/kun around 1 December 2017 (Bodner, forthcoming). As the conspiracy grew past the deep state narrative, it layered on a conspiracy that a pedosatanist elite are part of a globalist plot to destroy national governments and traffic children for nefarious and deadly purposes (Campion-Vincent 2021). As of 2022, 14% of Americans believe in QAnon, with 22% believing QAnon adjacent conspiracies (Smith 2022).

2. Secrets, Secrecy, Transparency, and Revelation

This section introduces the basic parameters by which I am approaching the idea and implications of secrecy to the study of conspiracy theories; however, as I will demonstrate, the idea of secrecy is always twinned with its antithesis, knowledge (in the work of Simmel 1906), transparency (in contemporary governmentality) and revelation (in Christian, folk tradition, and this paper). It is a simple enough task to display the centrality of secrets and secrecy to conspiracy theory, as it lies at the center of the general consensus of the *topic:* I will not say "genre" since we lack a general generic definition of conspiracy theory, with most approaches reflecting Andrea Kitta's observation that conspiracy theory is formless and exists only at the level of content (2012, p. 82). Michael Barkun (2013, p. 3) gives a succinct definition which includes the/a secret: "a conspiracy belief is a belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end". Hoftsteader spoke of them as a "gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (Hofstadter 1965, p. 29). Massimo et al. (2020) note: "Meaning-making in conspiracy theories is largely based on the search for secret signs of conspiracy and on demonstrating the significance of these signs" (p. 44). Peter Knight (2003) offers a similar definition but with a key distinction: "a small group of powerful people combine together in secret to plan and carry out an illegal or improper action, particularly one that alters the course of events" (p. 15). Knight notes that conspiracy theories are a kind of general theory of history (and the world) itself, and that change is explained by specific acts of clandestine groups (p. 16). Tangherlini et al. (2020), following Ellis (2000) assert that conspiracy theory is a general collapsing of domains into an all-encompassing hermetically sealed explanatory narrative. While a case can be made against conspiracy as a totalizing system, Tangherlini's orientation points to the way that conspiracy theory is part of a "explanatory meta-story" (p. 43) which extends to a person's and group's fundamental worldview.

Despite a recognition of the centrality of secrecy to conspiracy theory and practitioners' worldview, the scholarship remains remarkably thin and naïve about the complexity, historic contingencies, and competing meanings of secrecy itself. What is needed, and partially addressed in this paper, is a genealogy of secrets/transparency; their shared and twinned existence across diverse contexts; and their particular configuration, discourses, and semiotic networks of meanings (traditional, emergent, hybrid) from which contemporary conspiracy theories are woven and from which these narratives can be understood, not as broken epistemologies (Sunstein and Vermuele 2009) but rich reworkings[4] of various traditions in the service of a pragmatic belief system.

Indeed, the centrality of secrets in everyday life is such that Georg Simmel built an entire sociology around it in his 1906 work *The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies*:

> Whatever quantities of knowing and not knowing must comingle, in order to make possible the detailed practical decision based upon confidence, will be determined by the historic epoch, the ranges of interests, and the individuals. The objectification of culture referred to above has sharply differentiated the amounts of knowing and not knowing essential as the condition of confidence.

(p. 450)

The "objectification" he speaks of is the transition from the management of risk within the premodern relations of knowledge about and of others, to what we would now characterize as bureaucracies of knowing and their regimes of disciplining relations between

people. The continued relevance of Simmel's observation is evidenced in Diane Goldstein's work on HIV/AIDS legends, and Newfoundlanders' re-creation of the "AIDS Harry" version of "Welcome to the World of AIDS". The HIV/AIDS contemporary legend was partially transformed by Newfoundlanders because of the island's strong belief and reliance on networks of trust ("everyone knows everyone") within which keeping secret one's identity (a stranger) and health status was impossible, and thus, the cultural logic of Newfoundland demanded this specific legend oikotype (Goldstein 2004). As Goldstein demonstrates, secrecy and social relations exist in a dynamic simultenaity[5] which is reflected in the production of appropriate cultural texts.[6]

Simmel's larger point is that all human relations are built out of managing secrecy and knowing, and that secrecy itself structures human relations (in the most extreme case, secret societies, but also structural social distance, inequalities, interpersonal relations, personal identity, and the meaning of each). A definition of conspiracy theory that acknowledges secrets but does not interrogate them is therefore insufficient.

Fan and Christensen (Fan and Christensen 2023) provide a clear summary of contemporary thinking on and about our topic:

> The growing, yet limited, scholarship on secrecy has differentiated secrecy from "secrets", defining the latter as information that is unknown to others. As there are things secret that are not deliberately concealed (Derrida and Ferraris 2001), what is unknown is not necessarily equivalent to what is *kept* secret. Secrecy usually refers to processes of *intentionally* blocking information about something from reaching particular parties (Bok 1982; Simmel 1906). Secrecy, thus, might be considered "a method for handling concealed information" (Bellman 1981, p. 8) that sets apart keepers of particular knowledge from those who are excluded from it (Simmel 1906). When something is intentionally kept secret, it becomes clear that there is more to it than its informational content.
>
> Through the structuring of concealment, secrecy infuses and shapes informational and social interactions.
>
> (2023, p. 4)

As Fan and Christensen admit, our modern notions of secrecy and transparency are predicated on genealogies that are nestled in traditional, premodern concerns and practices, many of which are preserved in and reproduced in traditional narratives both as content and form. Several folklorists have noted that, at the folk level, phenomena that create social strain, like the current pandemic, are largely investigated, interpreted, and acted on via traditional narratives like the contemporary rumor-legend (Fine and Ellis 2010, p. 5), personal experience narratives (Lee 2014), outbreak narratives (Kitta 2019), or in this case, conspiracy theory (Bodner et al. 2021). As Priscilla Wald (2008) has noted, these various genres use traditional aesthetic forms to not just reach a social consensus on a phenomenon but to understand that phenomenon within an ethical and moral framework that conforms to the individual and folk groups' cultural norms and values:

> "Many of these narratives make moral judgments on nonwhite, homosexual, and/or nonmale bodies, and it is critical to deconstruct and analyze outbreak narratives since these narratives clearly have consequences. As the disease spreads, so too do the narratives about the disease. These narratives can affect contagion routes and survival rates, promote stigma, and influence the perception of the disease and its consequences. The ways in which the narrative is framed can turn individuals, groups, and places into legends, changing the victim(s) into the embodiment of the contagion and/or contamination. Pathways of communication can turn into the networks of infection."
>
> (2008, pp. 3–4)

The power of folk narrative and folk process have been clearly demonstrated in the COVID-19 pandemic where conspiracy and counter-knowledge narratives have directly led to the

stymying of public health practices and resulting loss of life (Wood and Brumfiel 2021). Part of unravelling the pragmatic effects of conspiracism relies on understanding the/a secret.

We can access some elements of traditional notions of secrecy and broader relations of meaning by surveying its presence in motifs and tale types in the Indo-European corpus of tales and legends covered by Thompson (1955), and Uther's (2011) index (c.f. Dundes [1979] 2019, 1997). The thirty-seven motifs directly related to secrets within traditional narratives fall into five general categories which I have labeled: taboo to break a secret; justice or consequences of revealing a secret; keeping a secret as a test; identity is a secret; knowledge of secret give power over character. Excluding the fifth category, the other motifs refer to keepers of or agents subject to secrets and thus fall outside of the narrative domain of conspiracists since it would be the kinds of stories secret plotters tell of themselves. The single topic where taboo and consequences for revealing a secret would apply are the narratives (including the genres of personal experience narratives, fabulates, and legends) outlining the torment and punishment of whistleblowers who bravely expose the secret schemes and schemers. For professional conspiracists like Mikki Willis and Judy Mikovits' in the 2020 film *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind COVID-19*, the suffering endured by the secret breaker is a key motif within the larger whistleblower identity narrative which, while outside the scope of this paper, constitutes a traditional sub-genre within conspiracy culture (Willis 2020).

Revelation, as I am using it here, is most closely related to motifs of revealing a murder and tale types like N271 "Murder will out".[7] The most striking example is AT780, "the singing bone" in the Childe Ballad #10 "The Twa Sisters" or "The Cruel Sister", with is associated motif E632 "reincarnation as musical instrument". In the ballad, the murdered sister, refashioned into a harp, is brought to the wedding of her murderer (the elder sister) and her bridegroom whereupon the harp sings her charge, and the murderer is killed. As Stith Thompson ([1946] 1977, p. 130) has pointed out, a substantial number of folktales are meditations on justice: "[I]n [folktale] conflict good shall eventually triumph and wickedness receive a fitting punishment". A key part of a folk notion of justice is that it is linked to a revelation that is immediately accepted, acted upon, and punishment is understood as equivalent exchange.[8] The folktales' notion of folk-justice is remarkably similar to that espoused by QAnon and similar conspiracy communities where once the identities of the covert plotters are revealed they must immediately be judged and punished. For example, in replying in a Facebook thread about the Canadian government's secret plan to destroy the country through COVID-19, Kevin N states:

> It is Time to Prosecute all the Authorities, Media & Corporations that pushed and continue to push this False Narrative in order to Steal our Civil Liberties and Destroy our Country's Economy. We need to Punish Everyone who Propagated the Covid Con Job & Lockdowns in the Fullest and most Severe ways available to "We the People" ight for your Freedom, Fight for your Rights.

In QAnon communities, this call to justice is "the storm". One example of ostensious[9] enactment of this narrative of immediate justice occurred during the 6 January insurrection which had participants construct a gallows, and carry zip ties and other restraint items, all while calling for the capture and death of specific elected leaders.[10] The fixation on justice is not unique to QAnon, as I have argued elsewhere, "As a subset of worldview, folklaw is always already present—expressed through and shaped by the myriad cultural texts and associated generic traditions with which folk groups make and remake their world" (Bodner et al. 2021, p. 7). In conspiracy narrative, folklaw will necessarily be a central fixation simply because the alleged plotters are engaged in monstrous crime(s); at one extreme conspiracy, communities and individuals may take on a totalizing conspiracy by adopting/creating counter-knowledge folklaw systems, like the Sovereign Citizen movement. Even at the less extreme end of the spectrum, conspiracy versions of folklaw expose and expound extrajudicial violence.

Moving from traditional narrative to broader mythical systems, West and Sanders (2003) argue in *Transparency and Conspiracy* that secrecy lies at the heart of all supernatural

systems, which they call "occult cosmologies". The link between religion and conspiracy theory has been made from several perspectives. Stephen D. O'Leary (1994) is one of the foundations of the Millennial school which sees conspiracy theories as borrowing apocalyptic rhetoric but also Evangelical Christianity's teleology and narrative chronotropes (Mendoza 2021; Barkun 2013; Bodner et al. 2021). Others have identified key tropes, motifs, and antecedents within Christian traditions that were adopted into the satanic panic, and accompanying legends and conspiracy theories (Ellis 2000, 2004; Victor 1993). For others, a Christian[11] scapegoating tradition like The Blood Libel legend serves as an enduring link, which gained increased relevance with the centrality of the tale type in the sprawling conspiracy that is QAnon (Dundes 1991). Extending out from Christian antecedents, Beres, Remski, and Walker, in their recent publication and ongoing podcast, document the link between contemporary (predominantly American) spirituality movements, their history, and structural use of cult-like conspiracy theories for pragmatic and ideological reasons during the COVID-19 period (Beres et al. 2020–2023, 2023). This diversity of scholarly approaches and populations can, however, be partially reconciled by returning to West and Sanders who argue that conspiracy and occult cosmologies share a core principle:

> Occult cosmologies suggest that there is more to what happened in the world than meets the eye—that reality is anything but 'transparent.' More specifically they claim that power operates in two separate yet related realms, one visible, the other invisible; between these two realms, however there exist causal links, meaning that invisible powers sometimes produce visible outcomes.... Not only do occult cosmologies suggest that power sometimes hides itself from view, but they also often suggest that it conspires to fulfill its objectives (each an essential trait of conspiracy theory).
>
> (2003, p. 6)

Sanders and West's work expresses a general description of occult worldview which is consistent with the writing of, for example, Cotton Mather's (1693) *More Wonders of the Invisible World*. Mather gives a clear reconning of the relationship, and our obligations to attend to the seen and unseen truths that surround us:

> I will venture to say thus much, That we are safe, when we make just as much use of all Advice from the invisible World, as God sends it for. It is a safe Principle, That when God Almighty permits any Spirits from the unseen Regions, to visit us with surprizing Informations, there is then something to be enquired after; we are then to enquire of one another, What Cause there is for such things?
>
> (p. 28)

The bifurcation of the visible and invisible is a common emic and etic way of visualizing the occult geography and its various forces; however, Robert Blair St. George (1998) offers a more complex rendering that redefines the place of the sign and signification. St. George's "poetics of implication" approaches a historic case study of how colonial New England's people reconciled and performed a world of signs that were, at the same time, both mundane and supernatural—insofar as the world is evidence of the creator's work. In St. George's interpretation of the Puritan worldview, the world is not bifurcated (spatially and temporally) into the seen and unseen but into the co-present intentions of the sign, thus the overabundance of the sign (1998). Both notions are similar to Mark Fenster's (2008, p. 95) observation that conspiracy theory is "a form of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as reservoirs of signs that demand (over)interpretation, and that signify, for the interpreter, far more than their conventional meaning". In either case, the revelation of the secret meaning is the acknowledgement of a truer truth, a premodern assurance of the semiotic undergirding of existence by the scaffolding of the occult.

Secrecy's twin, transparency initially appears to be a largely contemporary invention of the democratic bureaucratic state; for example, a touchstone date would be the creation of international organizations like Transparency International in 1993 or the passage in Canada of the Access to Information Act (1983) and its subsequent modification in 1998.

Christopher Hood notes a lack of a social history of "transparency" but still finds traces of it in ancient Chinese legal theory, classic Greek ideas of the polis, and the philosophies of Kant, or Rousseau, who Hood paraphrases thusly: "public servants should operate 'in the eyes of the public', and that a transparent society in which no one's private conduct can be veiled from the public gaze, is a key mechanism for avoiding destabilizing intrigues and cabals" (2006, p. 7). If we use Rousseau as a center point, nestled into The Enlightenment age he was to become an exemplar of, the role of light as a metaphor for transparency and revelation ironically shares its metaphoric potential with another pillar of the period, and a traditional bugbear of conspiracy theory, the Illuminati (among other secret organizations promoting 'scientific' and humanist government reform/revolution). Light remains a chosen metaphor even in contemporary transparency discourse, with various transparency laws in Canadian Federal and Provincial jurisdiction known as "sunshine laws" or "sunshine lists". Curiously, the Manichean structure of secret/dark and transparency/light is fundamental to conspiracy theory's aesthetic, ethical, and folklaw, which I noted are found in traditional beliefs in transparency-as-revelation encoded in several folktales and motifs which are themselves rooted in larger Christian worldviews on hidden truth, justice, and revelation. The continued relevancy of the paradoxes and dialectics of The Enlightenment thesis is clearly seen in the shared lineage of responsible government movements and activist conspiracy theorists (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2020; Koselleck [1959] 1988; for a critique of Koselleck, see: Jacob 1991).

Fan and Christensen have argued that secrecy and transparency exist in a dialogic relationship that is fundamentally performative ("constituted through discourse, rituals and other social practices") (p. 3). Their dialogic paired structure means that actions at one pole will produce new regimes of secrecy or transparency at the other. A similar orientation is accepted by QAnon. For example, it is a collective movement involving thousands of active "researchers" who labor together to expose the secrets of the deep state (Hartman-Caverly 2019). This massive labor is necessary because the counterweight of secrecy techniques appears always slightly more effective than the researchers' labors (see below on practical secrets). The performance elements of transparency within QAnon are novel in the way that it exists within the emic online communities and is performatively displayed in the real world where adherents declare themselves with signs or T-shirts reading "Q Sent Me". In this case, they are not only declaring a subculture membership, but an identity as an agent of transparency.

3. Kung Fu Panda, Jacques Derrida, and a New Secrecy

In the film *Kung Fu Panda* (Osborne and Stevenson 2008), our hero Po is transformed by two successive realizations stemming from the discovery that The Dragon Scroll Master Shifu has given him does not contain the secrets of unlimited Kung Fu power but is only a mirror. First there is Po's despair at the lack of secret knowledge, followed a few scenes later by redemptive revelation that brings about his self-actualized liberation, that there is, in the words of his father, "no secret ingredient". There is no evidence that the film is indebted to Jacque Derrida, but it is the clearest pop culture encapsulation of his views on the nature of the sign and his practice of deconstruction[12]. As with all things Derridean, we are discussing at least two questions at the same time. Artificially, we can treat his clearest statement in *A Taste For Secrets* as a kind of pragmatic semiotics which is already anticipated in Simmel's work but is included here as it informs the second part of his argument below:

> In consensus, in possible transparency, the secret is never broached/breached....
> If I am to share something, to communicate, objectify, thematize, the condition is
> that there be something non-thematizable, non-objectifiable, non-sharable. And
> this 'something' is an absolute secret, it is the absolutum itself in the etymological
> sense of the term, i.e., that which is cut off from any bond, detached and which
> cannot itself bind; it is the condition of any bond but it cannot bind itself to
> anything—this is the absolute, and if there is something absolute it is secret.
>
> (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, p. 57)

When taken as part of his deconstruction and reconfiguration of the sign, however, the secret takes on a different but related project, one described in detail by Ian Almond (2003):

> [P]erhaps we should begin by saying what everyone else has said about the Derridean secret—that it is a non-secret, an illusion, a semantic surface forever kidding us with a promise of depth. Beneath all sign-systems writes Carl Raschke, is buried the secret of all traditions of structured discourse—that they signify nothing. Morny Joy speaks of a Derrida whose 'disclosure is the absence of any presence—of any secret'.
>
> (2003, p. 461)

Quoting Marc C. Taylor, Almond continues,

> Since the 'genesis of secrecy' is always missing there is nothing to tell. I repeat: There is nothing to tell. The secret is that there is no secret. . . . There are no secrets—or, if you like, there are only secrets, an endless succession of them, each one promising to be resolved by its successor. And this is precisely what a 'secret', traditionally understood would be—a sign which would somehow, magically, unproblematically, explain all the previous signs leading up to it in one all-enlightening moment of magnificent self-presence. The disclosure of a secret would be the end of meaning. Nothing more could be said.
>
> (Ibid.)

The last three sentences are, of course, part of the traditional premodern notion of the secret which underpins the epistemology of conspiracy theory as well as much of the utopianism of the contemporary transparency movement (insofar as elements of it are embedded with traditional notions of the secret). However, Derrida and deconstructionism mark a rupture in the traditional secret, that, when combined with his contemporaries like Foucault (2002), Baudrillard (1994), and others, argues that an investigation of the/a secret produces not revelation of a true meaning but a recursive field of discourses whose provisional meanings are contingent on contextual relations of power which are mythically constitutive of the world itself (Barthes 1972). Deconstruction specifically, and poststructuralism in general, have been critiqued as nihilistic, based, in part, on their radical epistemic relativism and the subsequent real world exploitation of "semantic indeterminacy" by powerful social actors (Hirsch's (1988, p. 334) critique of Paul de Man's Nazi writings are polemical but revelatory; c.f. Hoy 1985; Milichar 1988).[13] As midwife to the "death of truth", deconstruction affords a space for the bad faith actions (they are, after all, not deconstructionists) of authoritarian populists (Kakutani 2018) and their strategic conspiracy narratives (Madisson and Ventsel 2021).

How far we can say that the loss of the secret equates to a loss of signification and meaninglessness is countered by semioticians like Massimo et al. (2020) who argue that conspiracy theories are meaningful on three levels: modeling and interpretation; theory as verbal or visual representation (text, reception, and context); identity construction (p. 44). Nowhere in this schema is the authoritarian encoder of the conspiracy theory considered and it is at this level that the conspiracy is reduced to the level of propaganda, meaning that its function is not representative of anything (except the models of conspiracy) but the acquisition and/or retention of instrumental state power. Beyond its pure utilitarianism, authoritarian use of conspiracy is purely post-Derridean; recalling Joy quoted above, it is a discourse lacking any presence. That the conspiracies will be meaningful to some people is not the point. The observations of Giry and Gürpınar (2020) on the authoritarian use of conspiracy are instructive: "[F]ascism obdurately needs (new) enemies to persevere—it would be pointless and indefinite in the absence of perpetual enemies. These enemies—whether real or imagined—need to be connected and amalgamated. For those reasons, conspiratorial thinking is a constitutive component of fascism, serving as ersatz ideology or semblance of ideology. . ." (p. 317; c.f. Arendt [1951] 1986). Victor Orban's use of the George Soros puppet master conspiracy as a tactic in his construction of an illiberal state is one example, while Donald Trump's supposed battle with the "deep state" is another.

As such, this paper's uses Derrida's potential nihilism of the non-secret to denote the practice of authoritarian strategic conspiracy theory which subverts the promise of the meaningful secret with conspiracies that signify nothing and actively seek to destroy all normative epistemologies and heuristic techniques for constructing a shared reality.

4. A Survey of the Role and Function of the/a Secret in Conspiracy Theory Practice (Or the Rumpelstiltskin Problem)

Having established the basic parameters and genealogies of the/a secret, the later section of this paper is concerned with some aspects of their role, function, and subsequent ideological configuration within conspiracy texts and practices.

We can begin with the most pragmatic element: secrecy helps conspiracists explain the dearth of data that they can bring to prove their theory. It also justifies their use of heterodox epistemologies (stigmatized knowledge) since other domains of knowledge production like science, healthcare, universities, and government-funded agencies are all (potentially) part of the conspiracy and cannot be trusted; likewise, these institutions' research methods are clearly inadequate to reveal such a successful clandestine scheme. The nature of data is, of course, an epistemological issue, and Matthew Dentith's critique of conspiracy theory analysis provides a slight fig leaf to conspiracists with his observations that normative methodologies and data selection within the social sciences are not greatly dissimilar from conspiracists' own research; he buttresses this by noting the evidence of real conspiracies to conceal evidence by government agencies exists (2019, p. 6). While this approach is an important consideration, it is hamstrung by his reduction of conspiracy practice and texts to philosophical and communication categories. Analysis of conspiracies in practice suggest there is overlap via parody and allusion to normative research but not substantive adoption (Shahsavari et al. 2020).

More substantially, there are two elements to the paradox of the secret at the level of the secret organization. The first is that seemingly all of the organizations are somehow known and enunciated by the experienced conspiracy researcher (and subsequently the novice consumer and later (re)producer). One example and tent pole of conspiracy for several centuries is the previously introduced Illuminati. Clearly, the Illuminati is not a secret at all, and yet it is treated as a key motif within a larger functional space reserved for the diachronic secret organization.[14] The history of perpetuating the legend and conspiracy theory of the Illuminati is linked to John Robison's (1797) *Proofs of Conspiracy* and Augustin de Barruel's *Memoires pour Servir a l'Histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797–1799) but cements itself in the North American consciousness during the late 18th and early 19th century Illuminati panic in America which was led by several luminaries of American society and set within the context of mundane political machinations and the subsequent instrumental use of the conspiracy theory to smear the Federalist party (O'Donnell 2020; Johnson 1983). In this case, the nature of the secret is linked to Knight's observation that conspiracy theories are a general theory of history and diachronic change; as such, the vernacular theory embedded in conspiracism suggests that this process requires an organization that likewise persists across time: "According to this kind of view, conspiracy theory is more than just the odd speculation about clandestine causes; it is a way of looking at the world and historical events that sees conspiracies as the motor of history" (2003, p. 16). What Knight omits from his observation is that within the worldview of conspiracists, events that are the result of conspiracy take place at the level of the interpersonal rather than diachronically systemic: people make change, not structures. As such, conspiracy theory is a wholesale rejection of post-Marxist sociologies of history and the social sciences. Since conspiracism excludes structural persistence over time it requires a device for carrying interpersonal change through time, which is the secret organization. Other organizations like the Roman Catholic Church, the fictional Elders of Zion Jewish leadership in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, or dynastic families (antisemitic conspiracies about the Rothchilds) may also occupy this functional space. The interpersonal, unmediated, and Newtonian mechanical ethic and narrative aesthetic of conspiracist worldview also partially explains their incorporation of

traditional narrative features, characters, and motifs from folktale and legend, which take place in a world where change occurs through a series of intimate, interpersonal actions.

As Fan and Christensen said of transparency itself, the twinned act of enunciating and revealing the secret plotters is largely performative and the social role individuals take on is what Howard Becker (1963) has called, "the moral entrepreneur": individuals who become rule creators or enforcers to cure a recently identified social ill. These "social ills" are generally accompanied by the construction of "folk devils," a form of scapegoating, which, in our case, comprise secret plotters (Cohen 1972). Common features of the moral entrepreneur include positioning themselves as experts and the use of their crusade to accumulate economic and social capital.

Three cases across roughly 250 years demonstrate the partial utility of considering secrecy and revelation as motifs, and individuals engaged in exposing conspiracy plots as performing social roles. During the Illuminati panic, the preacher Jedidiah Morse (1761–1826) was reported to have stood at the pulpit clutching a sheaf of papers declaring "I have, my brethren, an official, authenticated list of the names, ages, places of nativity, professions, &c. of the officers and members of a Society of Illuminati" (Johnson 1983, p. 61). In 1950, at a speech to the Republican Women's Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, Joseph McCarthy (1908–1957) would likewise theatrically wave papers upon which he claimed were the names of 205 secret communists working in the State Department. Lastly, as was widely reported in reviews of her new book, Cassidy Hutchinson recounts that on 6 January 2021: "I find Rudy [Giuliani] in the back of the tent with, among others, John Eastman. The corners of his mouth split into a Cheshire cat smile. Waving a stack of documents. . . 'We have the evidence. It's all here. We're going to pull this off'" (qtd. in Pengelly 2023). The fact that the revelation is a hoax or even earnestly believed misinformation, demonstrates the power of the motif of revelation and its associated constellation of metaphors of meaning.

The role of the moral entrepreneur, like that of the conspiracy practitioner, is clothed in messianic positive identity which traces a similar genealogy as the traditional secret itself; the knight's quest for the holy grail is a lazy analogue but fits many theorists' self and group perception (see Figure 1). Those who reveal the truth, like Christ, will suffer persecution and only a small minority of followers will accurately perceive the truth. As commonly, American popular culture re-creations of Campbell's (2008) "heroes' journey" are also used as self-identity models; for example, Neo from The Matrix (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999) combines both the Christ feature and the pop-culture masculine hero motifs (Beres et al. 2020–2023, Episode 33: "Manipulating the Hero's Journey"). In the vast majority of popular culture movies, the secret and its revelation are pre-Derridean traditional notions that depth exists and revelation exposes the truth behind the façade: Neo's red pill reveals the truth; In *The X-Files* TV series (Carter 1993–2002), Agent Mulder's investigations reveal (to the audience but not within the narrative) the truth; The *Da Vinci Code*'s (Howard 2006) Robert Langdon doggedly uncovers the truth, etc. Only (and predictably) Umberto Eco's (1989) *Foucault's Pendulum* imagines conspiracy as a set of texts whose revelation exposes only recursive layers of discourses.

One well-known example of the brave action hero/researcher is Alex Jones' documentary (Jones 2000) on the Bildenberg Group's annual meetings at Bohemian Grove, California where he infiltrated the compound on 15 July 2000. In the scene, he is depicted as a brave action hero, risking his life for the truth, and barely escaping the members of the secret society. At the time Jones had recently been fired from his Austin radio call-in show and had not yet established his website as a broadcasting format (Williamson and Steel 2018). However, in subsequent years, his exploitation of the Bildenberg group (encouraging and attending protests) and related New World Order conspiracies would help make him the richest and most successful conspiracist in America (Devereaux 2012). Jones' one-time interviewee on his show, Donald Trump, is also capable of assuming a similar role as truther, posting the day after his impeachment on 19 December 2019 a picture of himself in black and white with the text "They're not after me, they're after you". This was originally a pro-Trump meme that included the concluding phrase "And I'm in the way" (Figure 2).

Figure 1. A common meme in various Facebook groups and a conspiracy webpage.

Figure 2. Common pro-Trump meme, a version of which was forwarded by Trump.

In all cases, revelation is not merely a practice but an identity (see Figure 3). In Etic contexts, this identity will be more performative of core group and personal norms, while in emic contexts, like online conspiracy communities, identity and social capital are based on subculture sociologies of participation, engagement, and reciprocity within the techniques of socio-technical networks. For example, in QAnon forums, one does not declare that "Q sent me," since it is an identity and role displayed to outsiders; insider shared identity as truthers, researchers, saviors, etc., is tacit and displayed through shared labor on group projects.

Figure 3. Jacob Chansley, aka "QAnon Shaman".

Conspiracists' role in exposing the truth is also present when the organization or institution is known but its plot is secret. The 20th century apocalyptic tradition which identifies all transnational institutions (League of Nations, United Nations, World Health Organization, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc.) as examples of a New World Order (NWO) or One World Government (OWG) as harbinger of the end times is well known (Bodner et al. 2021; O'Leary 1994). The revelation here is of two kinds: first, there is an epistemological transference whereby the organization's overt meaning (the WHO's promotion of public health, for example) is transformed into one of conspiracy. For example, from an American anti-lockdown Facebook page on 19 April 2020:

> What?!? Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, a member of the Gates Foundation Leadership Council, is alleged to have paid the Chinese Communist Party $3.7 million worth of US taxpayer's money to develop the CV in a Wuhan lab during the Obama administration? But wait, isn't he the Director of NIAID, part of the National Institutes of Health, who predicted there would definitely be 'a surprise outbreak' during the Trump administration, long before the crisis arose?... Isn't Fauci responsible for the US adopting the skewed WHO contagion model, which includes ALL DEATHS NO MATTER WHAT THE CAUSE and was dumped by the Surgeon General last week?... Is this a genuine viral pandemic or a globalist manufactured scamdemic, engineered to impose mandatory vaccinations upon us all and to make Bill Gates a trillionaire in the process?

The second form of revelation is part of the antisemitic "puppet master" tradition where the institutions are known but not the people and organizations pulling the strings behind the organizations (ADL 2020). The classic puppet master was the Rothschilds family but during COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter protests, George Soros became (thanks to a decade of similar vilification by Viktor Orban and Fedesz in Hungary) the preeminent folk devil.

There is a subclass of international organizations that are not at all secret but are not widely known. Their novelty and previous relative obscurity allow them to be framed by conspiracists as "discovered" and "exposed". During the pandemic, the World Economic Forum (WEF), and founder Klaus Schwab, became just such an organization. Despite existing since 1971, the organization was "discovered" by conspiracists following the release in June 2020 of WEF's "The Great Reset Initiative," a post-COVID-19 sustainable economic

action plan that was interpreted by conspiracists as another example of a NWO initiative. In the Canadian context, the discovery of the organization led to further discoveries of ties between the WEF and members of the governing Liberal Party (see Figure 4 depicting Trudeau and Deputy Prime Minister Christina Freeland). The revelation here is not merely discovering the WEF but also exposing the secret web of influence and elite globalist infiltration. Despite all the "revelations" originating from open access information, this practice of announcing a "discovery" was widely adopted in the online Facebook conspiracy communities I followed. Despite its dubious provenance, when reframing is successful, a secret can be manufactured from previously unknown but knowable organizations. Thus, the general shape of the conspiracy project can continue.[15]
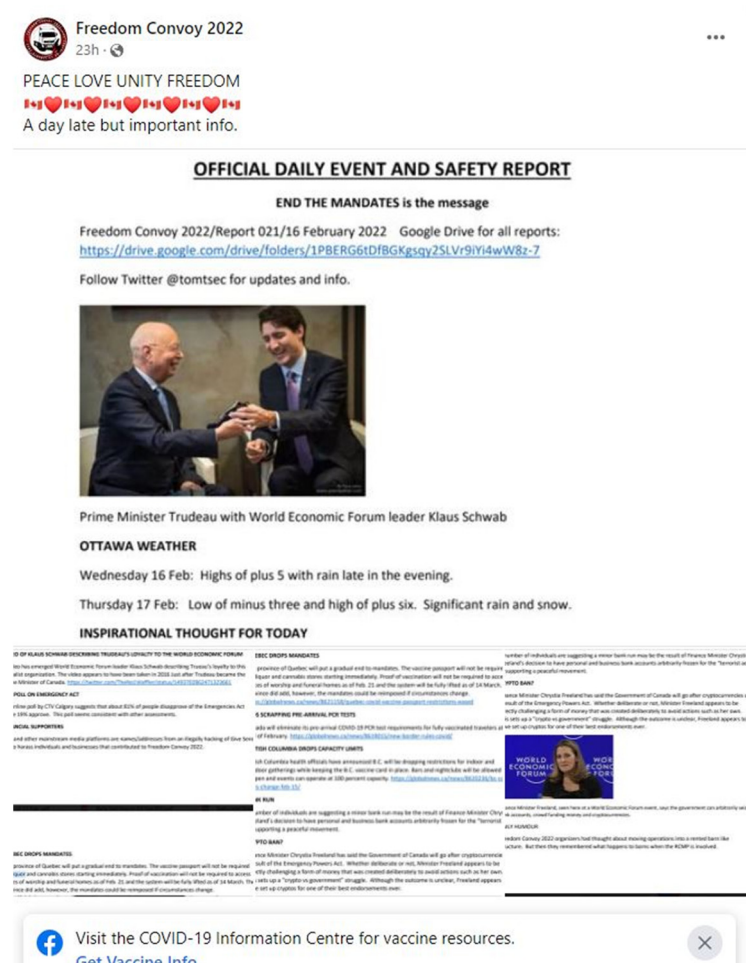

Figure 4. Example of material linking WEF to various governing Liberal politicians.

A key shift in the type of secret conspiracies, and in notions of secrecy, in the latter third of the 20th century is from the secret machinations of the "enemy outside" (Barkun 2013) to a country's domestic elite or "enemy above" (Campion-Vincent 2005).[16] As I noted, QAnon is a rare form of "benevolent conspiracy" where Donald Trump is battling the deep state specifically and the elite cabal generally—both of which are forms of the "enemy above". It is notable that some elements of the enemy outside are retained by linking the deep state to either hostile powers (Prime Minister Trudeau in league with China) or traditional OWG (Trudeau is bankrupting Canada so it can be taken over by the U.N.). The deep state hypothesis parodies "captured state theory" which is a normative school of analysis within political science. The deep state is first utilized in Turkey to explain how the illiberal democracy functions (Gingeras 2019) and it found a fertile home in America given a long history of fears over state capture or general government distrust (Eisenhower's

admonition of the military industrial complex; leftist critiques of a government by elites; black Americans' experience with government violence, etc.) The utopian theme within QAnon was that Trump would expose the cabal and usher in "the storm".

The deep state hypothesis, unlike other conspiracies we have discussed thus far, is more pragmatically corrosive to liberal democracies since, like the Red Scare and McCarthyism, the fictious plot can be leveraged for multiple purposes: first, the use of the state to punish perceived enemies (blacklisting in the case of McCarthy); second, the actual seizure of branches of the governments under authoritarian control. The former point is addressed by Tom Warrick and Andy McCabe when defining the aims of a second Trump presidency:

> [P]urging the FBI of "the deep state" has gone from an unserious Trump refrain to a mainstream GOP position. They fear the bureau will be used for revenge. 'You will see them cock the weapon and aim it at a new target', explained Tom Warrick 'I assume we are going to see the invention of domestic terrorist enemies'... Warrick predicted political opponents would be harassed under the guise of counterterrorism—'one of the scariest aspects of what a 'Trump Two' would bring into office'.
>
> (Taylor 2023)

The latter point is covered by Bess Levin (2022) who quotes Trump's words from a March 2023 rally: "We will pass critical reforms making every executive branch employee fireable by the president of the United States," he told a crowd in South Carolina, "The deep state must and will be brought to heel". Levin goes on to note:

> Well-funded groups are already developing lists of candidates selected often for their animus against the system—in line with Trump's long-running obsession with draining "the swamp." This includes building extensive databases of people vetted as being committed to Trump and his agenda. The preparations are far more advanced and ambitious than previously reported.
>
> (2022)

The incorporation of "elites into the wider QAnon ecosystem initially appears somewhat formless since it did not include the deep state, which was then (2017–2019) confined within the QAnon conspiracy to government operatives; however, as QAnon became a sprawling conspiracy theory incorporating and coopting independent conspiracy traditions of all kinds, "elites" became a supple functional category. The term has the utility of encapsulating a core animating principle of conspiracy, that is, asymmetrical power relations, while retaining the scapegoat/folk devil sociology of blaming those outside of our perceived emic unit. Conspiracy by elites also taps into and partially explains the amalgamation of disparate ideological groups into joint conspiracy activism that was noted by several researchers during the pandemic (Ottawa Occupation; Anti-Lockdown protests in the USA; Querdenken in Germany, as examples) (Hume 2020). Briefly, this amalgamation is made possible because belief in a conspiracy by elites to seize the state is shared by both populist leftist and rightist traditions dating back in North America to the early 20th century, as well as the way a more complex ideological belief matrix reveals hidden affiliations across left–right distinctions (Peng 2022).

The revelation of who these elites were and the crimes they committed are predictable and briefly sketched here. Following the work of Jeannie Banks Thomas (2022; Stack 2017), what we find is that conspiracists identify leaders of plots and schemes who are already famous or well known: Hilary Clinton, Bill Gates, Anthony Fauci, Tom Hanks, Oprah, Jeffrey Epstein, etc. No conspiracy has ever named the Canadian Assistant Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Export Promotion. Rather, "stars" are incorporated into various conspiracy narratives, which, in the case of "elites," tapped into a history of legends and conspiracy around Hollywood and the culture industry (on antisemitic roots of blaming Hollywood, see Byford 2011). "Stars" are also configured within conspiracy narratives in a similar fashion to characters within folktale and contemporary legend: role-based characters who are defined by their function within a plot, wholly lacking in modern con-

ceptions of character as mimetic proxies of psychological realism, and often predicated on or constituting aesthetic and moral signifiers of various cultural stereotypes. For example, the beautiful protagonist and ugly antagonist of folktales, or the sexually imprudent couple in contemporary legend (Lüthi 1986; De Vos 2012).

During the pandemic, QAnon increasingly overlayed the 1980–90's satanic panic onto the elite enemy architecture to argue that various stars were adrenochrome consuming, child trafficking satanists (Figure 5) (Campion-Vincent 2021). The elites conspiracy is dovetailed into the deep state conspiracy largely through this satanism narrative whereby all deep state actors are also satanists: a turn anticipated by the like of Alex Jones in 2016 claiming that Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton smell of sulfur (Media Matters 2016) which, within the benevolent conspiracy, allows Trump to be a national, rather than narrowly political, savior figure. Satanism within QAnon returns us to the powerful motif of the secret society but transforms the position of the first satanic panic plotters of the 1980s and early 90s from "enemies within" (neighbors, daycare workers) to enemies above (elites). In some cases we are assured that these hidden satanists can be revealed through clear signs (Figure 6), again a key motif in the first satanic panic where moral entrepreneur "experts" produced training manuals to help police identify satanic activity (Ellis 1990), and a continuation of St. George's finding on Puritan beliefs that we can and will find the truth in the correct apprehension and interpretation of the sign(s).

Figure 5. Common adrenochrome conspiracy meme common during early pandemic 2020-1.

The use of the pronoun "They" deserves brief mention because of what it exposes of the complexity of conspiracy practice. Pragmatically, within storytelling contexts it may be used to save time and effort within esoteric and emic groups with deep knowledge of the narratives. In this case, the narrator, if asked by a less experienced member or outsider for more information, is capable of supplying it. Conversely, "they" may be used by incompetent or less talented performers. Persons like this will be incapable of producing a convincing or detail-rich conspiracy narrative when asked to elaborate. Prior to socio-technical networks, these failed performances would be lost due to the ephemeral, rejected, or the collectively repairing nature of conversational oral performances; now, the traces, emergent and literal bits-and-pieces of all types of narrative units can be

preserved and analyzed by scholars (Brodie 2015; McNeill 2020); however, within active socio-technical networks like the large Facebook groups I studied, participants tended to treat the multimedia-based environment as ephemeral and thus the process of conservative correcting of traditional narratives was perpetuated: failed narratives were forgotten or repaired and, if acceptable to the community, preserved and reproduced at a later time. Thus, a traditional canon is created, and with it a social unit (the folk group), who produced it in the first place and will henceforth use these cultural texts to reproduce themselves (Ben-Amos 2020).

Figure 6. Example of supposed satanic sign used by Dr. Anthony Fauci during covid briefing.

"They" is also the purest functional form and social logic within the moral and political imaginary of conspiracy communities. "They" are the perfect secret: known only via their relational position in the Manichean worldview; the harms done to "Us"; and their function within diverse conspiracy narratives. As a placeholder for a hopefully later revealed and named threat, they are the undiluted threatening figure (Widdowson 1977) whose unmarked category opens up to endless ecotypification and oikotypes allowing for the inconsumable stream of narrative production according to diverse cultural logics and the needs of performers.

I began this paper outlining the various genealogies of the secret and some of their traditional forms. By way of conclusion, I return to a second motif and tale type that underpins much of the project and the hope of revelation: dispelling. In Rumpelstiltskin (ATU 500), the miller's daughter must free herself from the bargain of her first born in exchange for Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold. The tale turns on motif C432.1, "guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over it". That power, in this case, is to

dispel (D772) or defeat the creature. A constant complaint in the conspiracy communities I study is that they have named, revealed, and exposed the truth and yet the monster is not dispelled. Failure of reality to conform to the traditional motif and larger beliefs is explained in several ways: mundanely, conspiracists argue that the elite control the media and therefore the truth isn't revealed; they also blame the purposefully unconscious masses, which are denigrated with terms like "sheeple". However, within QAnon, under the title "The Great Awakening"[17], the apocalyptic tradition is used to explain why the truth does not set us free: until a critical mass of people awaken, they will not be able to acknowledge, let alone comprehend, the truth. Thus, the larger calling of conspiracists is to wake up the world. Only then will the ogre be dispelled in a storm of redemptive violence. However, so long as the monster is not dispelled, it is a constant crisis within conspiracy communities and, darkly ironic, it ensures the inexhaustibility[18] of conspiracy practice itself, and with it, the need to create, preserve, and perpetuate the truther community.

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Notes

1   Quoted in Christopher Hood's "Transparency in Historical Perspective" (p. 9).

2   As opposed to fellow authoritarian actors like propagandists for hire: The Internet Research Agency, Lazarus Group, PLA Unit 61398, and other disinformation actors.

3   It is clear from our and other's writing that QAnon was part of an authoritarian disinfomation campaign in support of Trump (Bodner et al. 2021); however, its success lay in becoming accepted by various folk communities, who then reproduced myriad iterations of QAnon narratives from countless hours of free labor—labor no propagandist, however well resourced, could accomplish. Where conspiracy theory, insofar as it lies within the orbit and shares key characteristics of the belief genre legend and rumor, affords the audience and performer endless points along the continuum from absolute disbelief to absolute belief (which legend scholars have long pointed out) affords myriad transmission modalities for these narratives (Tangherlini 1990; Bennett 1988).

4   While the dynamic nature of re-creating and transmitting folklore is well understood and theorized within the discipline (Bronner 2000, 2019). I am indebted to St. George's list of specific techniques within the macro process since it affords a more microscopic tool to see how meaning is accessed, encoded, and rewoven out of constituent elements: "metaphoric compression, symbolic condensation, and symbolic diffusion" (p. 5).

5   The phrase is borrowed from Doreen Massey (2005).

6   We have also argued elsewhere that secrecy in the contemporary period produces a subset of conspiracy theories that speak directly to the earlier generation of anomie and alienation hypothesis in the social sciences (Durkheim [1893] 2013; Merton 1938) but, in their contemporary configuration, comment on the impersonal bureaucracies and diffused but persistent asymmetry of power relations that permeate all aspect of modern life (Bodner et al. 2021).

7   Motifs and tale types that will not be covered in detail include: E231 return from death to reveal murder; Q211 murderer punished; E633 "bones made into dish, these speak"; AT720 my mother slew me and my father ate me.

8   There are, of course, a number of tales that document ill chance, injustice, and the perversity of life (Garry and El-Shamy 2005, pp. 445–50).

9   I am using the concept of ostension--in its simplest configuration--to mean the acting out of a legend narrative: "Through ostension, cultural traditions may function like a silent conspiracy that motivates similar acts in widely separated locations. That is, if a narrative is widely known through oral or media transmission, individuals may become involved in real-life activities based on all or part of that narrative, even if there is no organization that is physically coordinating these people's actions" (Ellis 2000, pp. xviii–xix; c.f Ellis 1989).

10   Online cataloguing of QAnon-related criminal acts including kidnapping and murder lists dozens of incidents. If one were to include the 6 January insurrection, that number would reach beyond one thousand (Jensen and Kane 2021; Timeline of Incidents Involving Qanon 2023, November 12).

11   The charges of capturing, sexual assault, and consumption of children were leveled at Christians by Romans; however, for the last two millennia, the legend and ostensive practices are clearly the providence of Christian charges against Jewish communities.

12   The use of popular culture to introduce and demonstrate the reach of Derrida is neither naïve nor trite since, as I will demonstrate, most contemporary conspiracy practitioners access the various traditions (both folk and academic esoterica) through the bricolage of popular culture. The centrality of *The Matrix* (1999) on conspiracy theorists' liberatory individual and group identity, as well as source material for esoteric terminology (e.g., red-pilled) is but one example. The movie's link to and incorporation of critical

theory is also overt in the film since the hollowed out book Neo secretes his external drives in is Jean Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacra*. On the intersection of folklore and popular culture see: (Narváez and Laba 1986).

13 I am not asserting an absolute critique of deconstructionism which has its persuasive champions in an ongoing debate. What I am suggesting here is that there is a seam of nihilism lurking within the privileging of texts over praxis and semantic indeterminacy over events themselves which affords a host of techniques to authoritarian regimes, one example of which is Kellyanne Conway's explanation that Trump was merely using "alternative facts" (*Meet the Press* 22 January 2017).

14 The limitation of motif as a near-scientific cataloguing system are well understood (Dundes 1997); however, they remain a clear narrative unit within traditional narrative. The notion of "functional space" is derived from Vladimir Propp's thirty-one functions (narrative units, narratemes) of the folktale (Propp [1928] 1958). At the time of writing, no scholar has employed Propp to understand conspiracy theory; however, his key idea that there is a linear but finite set of narrative units which are understood by a community of tellers and anticipated as part of a story structure is useful; for example, Tangherlini et al.'s work (2020) with Dundes' allomotif and motifeme as building blocks in big data mapping of conspiracy theories is a similar project to my own here.

15 This technique is hardly unique to conspiracists and is a staple of alternative health claims about the discovery of a lost food. Likewise, it is commonly employed by commercial interests in folklore-related materials. For example, the common trope of the "lost" folktales or songs of collector X. To professionals, this material is rarely "lost"; rather it is merely less accessible because it rests in archives and/or demands special knowledge or social position to access it; however, it is certainly knowable and is not a secret. Other relatively obscure institutions were likewise "exposed" during the pandemic. For example, the "vaccine court" which is the American Vaccine Injury Compensation Program was labeled as a secret that undermined the government's assurance of vaccine safety.

16 Campion-Vincent (2005) and others note that this shift coincides with neo-liberalism creating greater inequality, augmenting the power of the 1%, and destroying the middle class. The immiseration hypothesis which seeks to explain the rise of QAnon and the subsequent storming of the American Capital by Trump supporters has its critics who point out that most of the people charged in the 6 January attack would be classified as middle class and small business owners. The debate remains as unsettled as its predecessor arguments around the role of immiseration and small business owners in the rise of Nazism (Tipton 1979).

17 Within the American Christian tradition, the periods of evangelical religious revivalism of the 18th and 19th centuries share the same term and they and, especially the apocalyptic tradition, were the scaffolding that much of QAnon was/is built upon (Barkun 2013; Ahlstrom 2004).

18 Tangherlini et al. (2020, p. 61), following Ellis, see the conspiracy project as endless because of its need for completeness and hermetic containment; however, focussing on the/a secret suggests that the logic of conspiracy rests partially within the genealogy of the secret and its particular reconfigurations in contemporary performances, conspiracy contexts, and emergent community needs.

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