On Narrative Approaches to Conspiracy Theory

John Hydrisko

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ON NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO CONSPIRACY THEORY

By
John Stanley Hydrisko

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS
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Approved By

______________________________
Advisor: Dr. Neil A. Manson

______________________________
Reader: Dr. Robert W. Barnard

______________________________
Reader: Dr. Steven C. Skultety
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all my high school English teachers.
This thesis handles narrative approaches to conspiracy theory. It provides an overview of conspiracy theory and narrative before affirming a relationship between the two. It then introduces Fenster’s work on conspiracy narrative before engaging with the considerations therein. After discussing the tradition of visualizing narrative structure, it applies these practices to conspiracy narrative. This application allows for a discussion of recent innovations within conspiracy narrative. By using the QAnon as a case study, the paper investigates the emergence of protagonism and non-narrativism within the genre. Ultimately, this investigation suggests that contemporary conspiracy narrative is both better suited to the modern media landscape and better equipped to overcome the problems that have long plagued conspiracy theories.
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INTRODUCTION

As of writing this, the world seems increasingly aware of the fact that conspiratorial thinking has consequences. Conspiracy theory has profound impacts on conspiracy theorists, their families, our communities, and our societies.\(^1\) Despite this increased awareness, it should be stressed that conspiratorial thinking has existed throughout time and across cultures; it is, in a word, universal.\(^2\) While the aesthetics of conspiracy tend to focus on empirical arguments -- the burning temperature of thermite, the melting point of steel -- conspiratorial thinking is, like many things, an emotional affliction.\(^3\) In this sense, conspiracy is carried by society and reflects the anxieties of the same.\(^4\)

This paper aims to engage with narrative approaches to conspiracy theory, and it will proceed in three chapters. Chapter I will provide a working definition of conspiracy theory and an expedient understanding of narrative. It will then show that we can read conspiracy theory as narrative and that there are strong benefits in our doing so. Chapter II will begin with issues of authorship and readership in conspiracy narrative. It will then attempt to delineate what sort of narrative conspiracy theory is. From there, it will engage with Mark Fenster’s narrative approach to conspiracy theory, paying special attention to issues of agency within conspiracy narrative. This paper will then introduce the tradition of visualizing the structure of conventional narrative before attempting to visualize the structure of conspiracy narrative. Chapter III will use the

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1 Van Prooijen and Douglas, 899-900  
2 Van Prooijen and Douglas, 900-901  
3 Van Prooijen and Douglas, 901-902  
4 Van Prooijen and Douglas, 902, 903
QAnon conspiracy theory as a case study in discussing two innovations within conspiracy narrative: protagonist and non-narrativism.
CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND OF CONSPIRACY AND NARRATIVE

What is conspiracy theory?

The definition of conspiracy theory remains a subject of active debate. For the purposes of philosophy, there are several definitions of conspiracy theory, and each of these fits somewhere within a rough taxonomy. A definition will fall somewhere along a minimalism-maximalism spectrum of logical strength. A definition will be either epistemically neutral or epistemically loaded. A definition may or may not engage with a theory’s opposition to “official” explanations of a given event. Additionally, a definition might center less on “conspiracy theory” and more on “conspiracism”.

A definition of conspiracy theory falls somewhere along a minimalism-maximalism spectrum of logical strength. This is to say that a definition might be: minimalist, logically weak, with few conditions, inclusive, and denoting a large set; maximalist, logically strong, with many conditions, exclusive, and denoting a small set; or anywhere in between these two extremes. Some possible definitions of conspiracy theory — ordered from the logically weak to the logically strong — might be:

\[(P):\text{ an explanation that features a conspiracy among a group of agents as a central ingredient}^{6}\]

\[(P + 1):\text{ an explanation that features a conspiracy among a small group of agents as a central ingredient}^{7}\]

---

5 Pauly
6 Ibid.
7 Keely
(P + 2): an explanation that features a conspiracy among a small group of agents acting with nefarious intent as a central ingredient

(P + 3): an explanation that features a conspiracy among a small group of agents acting secretly\(^8\) with nefarious intent as a central ingredient

As the definition evolves from the minimalist iteration on the list \((P)\) to the maximalist iteration on the list \((P+3)\), it comes to feature additional conditions (viz. smallness of the group, secrecy of the action, nefarity of the intent). Each of these conditions makes each iteration more precise than the last, rendering a definition that is increasingly elaborate but decreasingly inclusive.

A definition of conspiracy theory will be either epistemically neutral or epistemically loaded. This is to say that a definition either: makes no claim about the possibility or probability or plausibility of a given explanation; or makes some claim about the possibility or probability or plausibility of a given explanation. Examples of both sorts of definition might be:

*Epistemically neutral:* an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups . . . [omitted]\(^9\)

*Epistemically loaded:* an explanation for an event or situation that invokes a conspiracy by sinister and powerful groups . . . when other explanations are more probable\(^10\)

In the epistemically neutral definition, the term “conspiracy theory” does not require — or even suggest — that the explanation at hand is less possible, less probable, or less plausible than other explanations. In the epistemically loaded definition, the term “conspiracy theory” requires — or at least suggests — that the explanation at hand is less possible, less probable, or less plausible than other explanations. Epistemically loaded definitions are prevalent within popular discussion of conspiracy theory, and such definitions may be useful in some contexts.

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\(^{8}\) Mandik

\(^{9}\) Pauly

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
A definition of conspiracy theory may or may not engage with a theory’s opposition to “official” explanations of a given event.\textsuperscript{11} This is to say that there is a significant distinction between a conspiracy theory that is compatible with official explanations of a given event and a conspiracy theory that is incompatible with official explanations of a given event. An example of such a distinction might be found in competing explanations of the September 11th attacks:

\textit{Official}: A group of terrorists associated with al-Qaeda conspired to carry out the September 11th attacks.

\textit{Anti-official}: A group of officials associated with the US government conspired to make you believe that a group of terrorists associated with al-Qaeda conspired to carry out the September 11th attacks.

Both the official and the anti-official explanations of the September 11th attacks are conspiracy theories, insofar as each is an explanation that refers to some conspiracy. But the latter is significantly distinct from the former exactly because the latter is opposed to the former. This distinction highlights a condition of many conspiracy theories: an anti-officialness. Such an explanation directly opposes official explanations. This anti-officialness is often summoned in accounts of why one individual is averse to a given conspiracy theory while another is attracted to the same.

A definition of conspiracy theory might center less on “conspiracy theory” and more on “conspiracism”. The term “conspiracism” has been used by different people to describe different things.\textsuperscript{12} Conspiracism might refer to a psychological condition, such as a particular style of paranoia.\textsuperscript{13} Conspiracism might also refer to a political concept, such as the distinction between classic conspiracism (a process that seeks to explain political phenomena) and new conspiracism (a process that does not seek to explain political phenomena).\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Coady
\textsuperscript{12} Pauly
\textsuperscript{13} Pipes
\textsuperscript{14} Muirhead and Rosenblum
When asking what conspiracy is — and when answering the same — this paper attempts not to establish which definition is right but rather to determine which definition will be useful. This paper is concerned with the narrative structure of many conspiracy theories and the implications of such a structure. Accordingly, I will rely on a definition of conspiracy theory that is precise enough to be sufficiently understandable but inclusive enough to be substantially applicable.

This paper will center its definition on conspiracy theory itself. With that said, this paper will at times handle some understandings of the term “conspiracism”. At no point will there be direct handling of “conspiracism” in reference to a psychological condition. But at some point — towards the end of this paper — there will be direct handling of “conspiracism” in reference to a political concept, specifically the distinction between classic conspiracism and new conspiracism.

I will at times evoke the anti-officialness of a given conspiracy theory. It will at times explore those explanations that are in direct opposition to official explanations. It will not, however, exclude discussion of conspiracy theories marked by non-officialness (those explanations that are not in opposition to official explanations) or of conspiracy theories marked by officialness (those explanations that are themselves official explanations). This inclusivity is made, in part because it can be difficult to determine whether a given explanation is anti-official, non-official, or official. For instance, consider the theory that Donald Trump colluded with the Russian Federation to help his campaign during the 2016 presidential election. A sitting president repeatedly said that there was no collusion between himself and Russia, so a person who subscribes to this theory might be taking an anti-official stance. The Special Counsel for the Department of Justice said that he found no evidence of collusion — that no evidence of
collusion could exist because no form of word “collusion” appears in the United States Code — so the same person might be taking a non-official stance. A large number of American lawmakers repeatedly said that there was collusion between Trump and Russia, so the same person might be taking an official stance. The issue of whether that conspiracy theory was anti-official, non-official, or official might affect how the theory took the form of narrative without affecting if the theory took the form of narrative.

I will prefer an epistemically neutral definition of conspiracy theory over an epistemically loaded definition of conspiracy theory. In short, I will not require that an explanation of a given event be less possible or less probable or less plausible than another explanation of the event in order for it to be considered as a conspiracy theory. For the purposes of this paper, accounts of Watergate or the Tuskegee Syphilis Study are explanations that fit my definition. In many ways important to this paper, the process of convincing someone to accept a truth and the process of convincing someone to accept an untruth are not all that different. With that said, an explanation being true and an explanation seeming true are not the same thing. A person who wakes up on June 18, 1972 and tries to convince her neighbor that the Democratic National Committee was burglarized at the behest of the Nixon administration has one explanatory task. A teacher who wakes up on June 18, 1982 and tries to convince his high school students of the same case has another explanatory task. This paper, broadly speaking, will divorce questions of veracity from issues of verisimilitude, except when the former affects the latter.

As previously said, I will rely on a definition of conspiracy theory that is precise enough to be sufficiently understandable but inclusive enough to be substantially applicable. Much of this goal is achieved while determining how minimalist or maximalist the definition should be. We can begin with the logically weak definition of conspiracy theory:
an explanation that features a conspiracy among a group of agents as a central ingredient\textsuperscript{15}

As will be discussed in detail, conspiracy theory tells a story about how power works. This story is one of asymmetrical conflict, in which the “group of agents” is disproportionately powerful. Because the power of any conspirator is far greater than that of the average non-conspirator, the conspirators need not be a large group. In fact, a small group is more exclusive and more selective — more elite — than a large group. The effects of the conspiracy can be massive. The presence of the conspiracy can be vast. The plot might enlist legions of accomplices. But only a few agents can see the whole thing, only a few can pull the strings and call the shots. And so the group of agents is \textit{small}. This small group of agents is powerful, and the conspirators are collected around a shared goal. Their goal, broadly speaking, is to further empower themselves. To this end, the conspirators are willing to disempower others. And so the small group of agents act with \textit{nefarious intent}. Additionally, it seems necessary to include a nefariety condition to preclude benevolent schemes — such as surprise birthday parties — which might not properly engage with literary conceptions of conflict. This small group of agents is capable of managing a tremendous organization with astounding efficiency. An efficient machine loses little energy as heat, and an efficient conspiracy loses little power as information. The conspirators will attempt to obscure their sinister goals, and this obscurement only reinforces their power. And so the small group of agents act \textit{secretly} with nefarious intent. At least, that’s how the story tends to go. For the purposes of this paper, we can arrive at a logically strong definition of conspiracy theory:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
\item an explanation that features a conspiracy among a group of agents acting secretly with nefarious intent as a central ingredient
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
Such is the definition of conspiracy theory upon which I will rely. The definition is maximalist. The definition itself remains epistemically neutral. The paper might at times engage with a theory’s opposition to “official” explanations, but it doesn’t need to. And the paper might discuss some implications of “conspiracism” — especially those related to the political sense of the word — but it will generally center on “conspiracy theory” itself.

What is narrative?

Before discussing narrative, it seems well to draw a distinction between a narrow understanding of narration and a broad understanding of narration. A narrow understanding of narrativity might be “the quality of having a narrator” within a fictional work. A broad understanding of narrativity might be “the quality of relaying a series of events or experiences” within a fictional or non-fictional work. This broad understanding situates narration — along with argumentation, description, and exposition — as a rhetorical mode of discourse.\textsuperscript{16} When discussing narrative or issues of narrativity, this paper is discussing the broad understanding of narration as a rhetorical mode of discourse.

I will work through the four theoretical foundations of narrativity: content, discourse, transportation, and persuasion. Narrative content and narrative discourse are linguistic prerequisites for a text to be a narrative. Narrative transportation is the process whereby a reader’s mental state is “taken somewhere else” while reading with a text. Narrative persuasion is the effect of narrative transportation, whereby the text affects a reader’s attitudes — those towards the text itself or towards the events related therein. For each of these four theoretical foundations of narrativity, I will explain each of these understandings of what narrative is and will later explore how conspiracy theory might fit within them.

\textsuperscript{16} Connors
Narrative content is the first linguistic prerequisite for a text to be a narrative. This condition requires that the content of a text — what things are conveyed in the text — include certain semantics. A narrative must describe a series of events. In each of these events someone does something — or something happens — at some place and in some time, often for some reason. A narrative must describe who did what, where, when, and why. Narrative content is the matter told in a story.

Narrative discourse is the second linguistic prerequisite for a text to be a narrative. This condition requires that the discourse of a text — not what things are conveyed in the text but how things are conveyed in the text — include certain syntax. Gérard Genette argued that this syntax indicates a separation between an event and its narration. According to Genette, such a separation might be identified by the following features: order, frequency, duration, voice, and mode. Order refers to a text describing a series of events in a non-chronological arrangement, which Gennette calls in anachrony. Frequency refers to the options — singular, iterative, repetitive, or multiple — by which a text might describe one or more events; an event might occur once or many times and an event might be narrated once or many times. Duration refers to the difference between discourse time (i.e. how much writing it takes to describe an event) and narrative time (i.e. how much time it would have taken for the event to occur). Voice refers to who narrates a story and from where a story is narrated. Mode refers to the focalization of the narrator — what the narrator can “see” — such as one person’s interior (i.e. internal focalization), or many persons’ exteriors (i.e. external focalization), or everything (i.e. zero focalization). Narrative discourse is the manner in which a story is told.

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17 Chatman
18 Chatman
19 Henderson
Narrative transportation, generally speaking, is the process whereby a reader’s mental state is “taken somewhere else” while reading with a text.\textsuperscript{20} There is still much debate as to what this process looks like and how this process works, but — as I will show — there is no reason that a formulation of narrative transportation should preclude conspiracy theory. For example, one logically weak formulation of narrative transportation might have to do with what attention is paid where. When a person receives and interprets a text, the text excites his empathy and exercises his imagination such that he loses track of physiological reality.\textsuperscript{21} When I read a text, I pay less attention to my surroundings (e.g. the chair I sit in, the air I breathe, etc.). Some of my attention, it seems, is being paid on something else. Some of my attention, it seems, is somewhere else. Narrative persuasion is the effect of narrative transportation, whereby the text affects or attempts to affect a reader’s attitudes — those towards the text itself or towards the events related therein.

\textbf{Is conspiracy theory narrative?}

To show that conspiracy theory can be read as narrative, I will work through the four aforementioned theoretical foundations of narrativity: content, discourse, transportation, and persuasion. For each of these foundations, I will provide examples from typical narrative (a murder mystery) and conspiracy theory. My aim is to show that conspiracy theory can meet these conditions as readily as typical narrative can.

In the same sense that a typical narrative can meet the narrative content foundation, so too can a conspiracy theory. A murder mystery relates a series of events. A conspiracy theory relates a series of events.

\textsuperscript{20} Van Laer, de Reuter, Visconti, and Wetzels
\textsuperscript{21} Van Laer, de Reuter, Visconti, and Wetzels
Who: Colonel Mustard . . .
What: . . . killed Mr. Boddy with the candlestick . . .
Where: . . . in the conservatory . . .
When: . . . during the dinner party . . .
Why: . . . because they were both in love with Miss Scarlet.

Who: Jacqueline Kennedy . . .
What: . . . killed John Kennedy with a revolver . . .
Where: . . . at Dealey Plaza . . .
When: . . . in November of 1963 . . .
Why: . . . because she had been brainwashed by the CIA.

Because both a typical narrative and a conspiracy theory can relate a series of events, it seems that both can meet the narrative content foundation.

In the same sense that a typical narrative can meet the narrative discourse foundation, so too can a conspiracy theory. In support of this, I will provide sets of examples pertaining to the five aspects of narrative discourse: order, frequency, duration, voice, and mode. With regards to order: a murder mystery might describe a series of events in a non-chronological arrangement; a conspiracy might describe a series of events in a non-chronological arrangement. Both a murder mystery and a conspiracy theory can exhibit, as Gennette put it, anachrony.

Anachrony: A murder mystery might describe the clues left at a murder scene before flashing back to the circumstances leading up to the murder.

Anachrony: A conspiracy theory might describe how multiple shooters killed Kennedy before backtracking to why multiple shooters killed Kennedy.

With regards to frequency: a murder mystery has flexibility as to how it describes one more events; a conspiracy theory has flexibility as to how it describes one or more events. In both a murder mystery and a conspiracy theory, an event might occur once or many times and an event might be narrated once or many times.

Singular: He went to the diner.
Iterative: He used to go to the diner.
Repetitive: He went to the diner. [and] I went to the diner.
Multiple: He went to the diner. [and] He used to go to the diner. [and] I went to the diner.
Singular: They tested the drug on mice.
Iterative: They used to test the drug on mice.
Repetitive: They tested the drug on mice. [and] We tested the drug on mice.
Multiple: They tested the drug on mice. [and] They used to test the drug on mice. [and] We tested the drug on mice.

With regards to duration: a murder mystery can cover a short period of narrative time in a longer period of discourse time or vice versa; a conspiracy theory can cover a short period of narrative time in a longer period of discourse time or vice versa.

Covering short narrative time in longer discourse time: In the blink of an eye, the candlestick drew a wide arc, accelerating smoothly until the instant it cracked Mr. Boddy’s skull.

Covering long narrative time in shorter discourse time: Colonel Mustard waited in the conservatory for over an hour.

Covering short narrative time in longer discourse time: Fifty-four one-thousandths of a second were captured by Zapruder film Frame 313.

Covering long narrative time in shorter discourse time: I watched the Zapruder film for hours on end.

With regards to voice: a murder mystery might be narrated in first-person or second-person or third-person; a conspiracy theory might be narrated in first-person or second-person or third-person.

First-person: I was at the crime scene.
Second-person: You were at the crime scene.
Third-person: He was at the crime scene.

First-person: I watched the Zapruder film.
Second-person: You watched the Zapruder film.
Third-person: He watched the Zapruder film.

With regards to mode: a murder mystery might have an internal focalization, an external focalization, or zero focalization; a conspiracy theory might have an internal focalization, an external focalization, or zero focalization
Internal focalization: I wondered if this was the murder weapon.
External focalization: The detective examined the candlestick.
Zero focalization: The detective examined the candlestick and wondered if it was the murder weapon.

Internal focalization: I wondered if the mob was involved
External focalization: He read about the Kennedy’s activities during prohibition
Zero focalization: He read about the Kennedy’s activities during prohibition and wondered if the mob was involved

Because both a typical narrative and a conspiracy theory can utilize the five aspects of narrative discourse — order, frequency, duration, voice, and mode — it seems that both can meet the narrative discourse foundation

In the same sense that a typical narrative can meet the narrative transportation foundation, so too can a conspiracy theory. Although there is still much debate as to what exactly narrative transportation is, I previously provided a logically weak understanding of it. This particular understanding has to do with what attention a reader pays where.

Less attention is paid to: the chair the reader sits in, the air the reader breathes, etc.
More attention is paid to: the sights and sounds of the conservatory, etc.

Less attention is paid to: the chair the reader sits in, the air the reader breathes, etc.
More attention is paid to: the sights and sounds of Dealey Plaza, etc.

If it seems right to say that some of my attention is in the conservatory while reading a murder mystery, then it seems right to say that some of my attention is in Dealey Plaza while reading a conspiracy theory. Immersion within a conspiracy theory does not seem any weaker than immersion within a typical narrative.

In the same sense that a typical narrative can meet the narrative persuasion foundation, so too can a conspiracy theory. We know that conspiracy theory can seem attractive, and we know that belief in conspiracy theory can be consequential. If the current epidemic of conspiratorial thinking is any clue, we might say that conspiracy theory is indeed more seductive than typical
narrative. And, of course, there is a difference between *persuading* and *attempting to persuade*. Even if a conspiracy theory does not actually *persuade* its reader, it certainly *attempts to persuade* its reader. In many understandings of conspiracy theory — and, indeed, in the understanding of classical conspiracism — conspiracy theory aims to prove its own veracity (thus affecting the reader’s attitudes towards the text itself) and its own consequence (thus affecting the reader’s attitudes towards the events related therein). And so, even if a reader completely actively rejects the veracity of a theory or actively disregards its consequences, we still might say that the theory was — in an unintended sense — persuasive.

Conspiracy theory relates narrative content through narrative discourse — a discourse marked by order, frequency, duration, voice, and mode. Conspiracy theory performs a feat of narrative transportation. And through this narrative transportation, conspiracy theory attempts to persuade — and succeeds at persuading — its reader to some degree. Conspiracy theory, then, meets the conditions set forth by the four theoretical foundations of narrativity. Conspiracy theory is narrative.

**Why should we read conspiracy as narrative?**

There is a tendency within academia to approach conspiratorial thinking — and conspiracy theory itself — as a binary. In this binary, a person may either subscribe to official accounts of an event or subscribe to conspiratorial explanations of the same event. This assumption can be seen in the agree-or-disagree questionnaires commonly used to gauge popular belief in conspiracy theories. As an especially insightful study on the psychology of conspiracy theory notes:

> [Many] psychological studies on conspiracy theories have confined themselves to a simple — yet often misleading — paradigm: The assumption that a clear distinction between an official truth and delusive idiosyncratic explanations can be made, and that
Supporters of conspiracy theories must hence be considered as individuals who have lost touch with reality and are in need for clear-cut explanations.\textsuperscript{22}

The study sought to test two approaches to conspiracy theory against one another. The first was the conventional agree-disagree questionnaire. The second was a novel narrative-construction exercise. The researchers then tried to weigh the results of each approach against a measure of each participant’s sense of self-efficacy. The first approach did not yield any significant results. The second approach, however, proved fruitful.

The narrative-construction exercise divided a historical event — the September 11th attacks — into a series of elements. (One such element, for example, was a set of explanations about the conspirators behind the attacks.) In each set of explanations was an official account, a semi-conspiratorial allusion, and a conspiratorial claim. Participants then took one explanation regarding each element and constructed them into a narrative explanation of the event at hand.

While the results of this study are interesting, the methods of this study are most relevant to the scope of this paper. Non-narrative approaches to conspiracy theory often fail to engage with a large swath of conspiratorial thinking. For example, a standard agree-disagree poll found that when presented with the assertion that “[the] September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were carried out by 19 terrorists supported by Al-Qaeda”, only seven percent of respondents called the assertion “false”.\textsuperscript{23} By comparison, this study found that 83.3% of participants constructed narratives in which 33% or more of the explanations selected were conspiratorial. The narrative approach to conspiracy theory is also exciting insofar as it seems a better model of how people actually engage with conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theories are not mere statements with which one agrees or disagrees. Conspiracy theories are, as will be discussed, complex and idiosyncratic orderings of data about the past, present, and future.

\textsuperscript{22} Raab et al.

\textsuperscript{23} Rose
CHAPTER II: APPROACHES TO CONSPIRACY NARRATIVE

Who writes conspiracy narrative? And who reads it?

Issues of authorship and readership differ between fictional and purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narratives. In a fictional conspiracy narrative, it is relatively straightforward to determine authorship and readership. Consider *JFK* as an example: the authors are a set ranging from director Oliver Stone to every party named in the film’s closing credits; and the readers are American moviegoers.

In a non-fictional conspiracy narrative, however, it can be more difficult to determine authorship and readership. In some fictional narratives, authorship is nebulous. Consider the conspiracy theory that many mass shootings in recent years have been staged events — or false flag operations — meant to serve as a pretext for disarming the public. We might see a prominent theorist — such Alex Jones of InfoWars — as a proponent of this conspiracy narrative, but any nameable theorist is one of many individuals who have consumed, modified, and distributed this narrative. In other fictional narratives, authorship is anonymous. The very term “QAnon” refers to the fact that the conspiracy theory was first conceived by an anonymous image-board poster who claimed to have Q-level security clearance within the United States Department of Energy.

In fictional narratives, readership is also complex. Different individuals — anti-gun advocates, pro-gun advocates, the political left, the political right, etc. — read this narrative in different ways. It can be difficult to parse out the intended audience of a purportedly
non-fictional conspiracy narrative. Is the narrative meant to galvanize the political right? Is it meant to destabilize or delegitimize the political left? Is it meant to attract a viewership who might buy Jones’ personal brand of dietary supplements?

A classic example of the authorship-readership issue of conspiracy narrative can be found in *The Report from Iron Mountain*, a 1967 book that presents itself as a report made by a secret government panel. In the book, the panel concludes that war is necessary for governments to maintain their power. The official line is that *The Report from Iron Mountain* was a literary satire of think tanks and a leftist critique of the military-industrial complex. And in 1972, American satirist Leonard Lewin announced that he had written the book as a satire. But conspiracy theorists — who had read the book as a confirmation of their suspicions — rejected Lewin’s announcement as a form of damage control. All this is to say that the very provenance of a given conspiracy theory can become a subject of the very conspiracy theory in question. For the purposes of this paper, I will handle authorship and readership in one way when discussing fictional conspiracy narrative and another way when discussing non-fictional narrative.

**What sort of narrative is conspiracy theory?**

Having shown that conspiracy theory is narrative, it seems well to consider what sort of narrative conspiracy theory is. To this end, I will work off of Mark Fenster’s 2008 monograph *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. In the third chapter, Fenster examines conspiracy theory as interpretation. In the fourth chapter, Fenster examines conspiracy theory as narrative. For now, I will focus primarily on the latter, which examines the narratives of both fictional conspiracy theories (e.g. Oliver Stone’s *JFK*) and purportedly non-fictional conspiracy theories (e.g. Stephanie Caruana’s “A Skeleton Key to the Gemstone File”).

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24 Fenster, 115.
Fenster begins his argument with Frederic Jameson’s assertion that there exist certain data about past or present events, which are “fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational” and thus inaccessible to us.\footnote{25} If we are to engage with these data, they must first be textualized into a history of the past of a commentary of the present or some hybrid of the two. Because we organize data into a causal chain of events — and because we usually adhere to certain assumptions about causality and chronology — these textualizations have a beginning, a middle, and an ending.\footnote{26} Such an organization “embodies a judgment about the nature of the events” and also “demonstrates how it is possible to know, and hence to narrate, the events”.\footnote{27} Each of these textualizations — each “organization of data” — is a narrative.\footnote{28}

More specifically, a conspiracy theory is “a melding of fact and fiction . . . [that] attempts to tell a particular kind of story about the injustice of present conditions through reference to an historical wrong turn initiated by a grand, conspiratorial crime that is ongoing”.\footnote{29} A conspiracy theory “tells stories about the past, present, and future . . . [and] presents an argument in narrative form . . . about how power works”.\footnote{30}

Fenster’s use of the word “argument” is central to a proper understanding of conspiracy theory. A conspiratorial narrative is an argumentative text — a rhetorical text — in a way that many typical narratives are not. The persuasion of a conspiratorial narrative is unique from the persuasion of a typical narrative. When I read Austen’s \textit{Emma}, the text tries to convince me of certain things. It might try to convince me of something about itself: \textit{This book is good}. It might try to convince me of something about the events it describes: \textit{Emma Woodhouse was right to

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{25} Fenster, 120
\item \footnote{26} Ibid.
\item \footnote{27} Ibid.
\item \footnote{28} Ibid.
\item \footnote{29} Ibid.
\item \footnote{30} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
marry George Knightley. It might try to convince me that some normative claim is accurate: *Marriage is good.* It might try to convince me that some subjective prescription claim is correct: *I should get married.* But when I read Caruana’s “A Skeleton Key to the Gemstone File” or some other purportedly non-fictional conspiracy theory, the text tries to convince me of more serious things. It tries to convince me of something about itself: *This source is reliable. (Other sources are not reliable.)* It tries to convince me of something about the events it describes: *There is a vast and dangerous conspiracy afoot.* It tries to convince me that some objective descriptive claim is true: *Event X — which most people do not think happened — happened.* It tries to convince me that some normative claim is accurate: *Actor Y is evil.* It tries to convince me that some subjective prescription is correct: *I should do Action Z.*

As noted earlier, this narrative persuasion is generally thought to be reliant on narrative transportation, the process whereby a reader’s mental state is “taken somewhere else” while reading with a text. But with regards to a conspiracy narrative, this transportation tends to look less like transportation and more like abduction. If we are to set aside the issue of dissonance — the condition in which a person believes both $A$ and $\neg A$ — belief is a competitive marketplace. A person who invests into a conspiracy-theory explanation of a given event tends to divest from non-conspiracy-theory explanations of the same. A person who invests in a conspiracy-theory worldview tends to divest from non-conspiracy-theory worldviews. When a typical narrative takes the reader somewhere else (through transportation) and leaves him there (through persuasion), the narrative has moved the individual away from the world. When a conspiratorial narrative takes the reader somewhere else (through transportation) and leaves him there (through persuasion), the narrative has moved the world away from the person. The persuasion of conspiracy theory can be especially alienating.
Narrative transportation, then, is the strongest indicator as to whether a conspiracy theory will succeed or fail. In order for the reader to swallow the text, the text must first swallow the reader. Fenster writes that a conspiracy narrative — be it fictional or purportedly non-fictional — must be “gripping” and “dramatic”.

Fenster identifies three ways by which a conspiracy theory catches and holds the reader.

First, a conspiracy narrative must be fast-moving. Fenster articulates this fast-moving in terms of “narrative speed”. Here, he directly references Gérard Genette’s concept of duration. By modulating narrative speed, the conspiracy narrative can establish rhythm (thus orienting the reader) or disestablish rhythm (thus disorienting the reader) and accelerate (during the rising action) or decelerate (during the falling action). In both fiction and purported non-fiction, these techniques make the reader more dependent on the text. In the former, the reader relies on the narrative for excitement. In the latter, the reader relies on the narrative for understanding.

Second, a conspiracy narrative must be far-reaching. Fenster articulates this far-reaching in terms of “narrative velocity”. Because a conspiracy “is always already (almost) everywhere, always already knows (almost) everything, and has effects everywhere while appearing nowhere”, the protagonist (in a fictional narrative) or the reader (of a purportedly non-fictional narrative) must continually move to further his investigation. This movement might be across geographic space, into political networks, out of social groups, through various worldviews. Such narrative velocity, according to Fenster, works as a literary device. Because the conspiracy theory is at once everywhere and nowhere, its expansive area can only be measured by sampling a set of points. This sampling is a frantic, manic, near-schizophrenic undertaking that asserts the

31 Fenster, 119
32 Fenster, 133
33 Fenster, 134
34 Ibid.
power of a fictional conspiracy over a protagonist or the power of a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy over a reader.

Third, a conspiracy theory “[attempts] to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate past and present events and structures within a relatively coherent framework”.35 This framework is “a singular plot” — in perhaps more than one sense of the word — and unification is achieved “through the traditional logic of conventional popular narratives”.36 This logic includes “causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals”.37 This causality is “[character-centered] . . . personal or psychological . . . the armature of the classical story.”38 The process of unification in conspiracy, however, is marked by “incessant integrative operations”.39 Such operations are obsessive and compulsive. The conspiracy theorist is left “alienated from an increasingly defamiliarized political and social order”.40 This anti-social experience is most generally manifested as paranoia, as the conspiracy theorist becomes “suddenly vulnerable to extreme danger and violence” — nevermind if that vulnerability is real or imagined.41

Fictional and purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narratives function similarly. As a narrative, a conspiracy theory organizes data into a melding of fact and fiction. This melding is meant to tell a story about how power works. Telling this story effectively requires that the narrative persuade the reader. In turn, persuading the reader requires that the narrative transport the reader. The conspiratorial narrative — like any narrative — seeks to catch and hold the

35 Fenster, 119
36 Fenster, 122
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Fenster, 121
40 Fenster, 124
41 Ibid.
reader’s attention. It does this by throttling narrative movement — in terms of both speed and velocity — and by attempting to unify disparate data of the past and the present.

**How does conspiracy narrative read?**

Through his discussions of “narrative speed”, “narrative velocity”, and explanatory goals, Fenster arrives at his argument:

[Conspiracy theory] attempts to map, in narrative form, the trajectories and effects of power; yet, it not only does so in a simplistic, limited way, but also continually threatens to unravel and leave unsettled the resolution to the question of power that it attempts to answer. In attempting to uncover the plot, the conspiracy narrative reveals a longing for closure and resolution that its formal resources cannot satisfy.  

In support of this thesis, Fenster produces three areas of contention: (1) the role of “individual agency” within conspiracy narrative; (2) the “dynamic” of conspiracy narrative; and (3) the difficulties that arise when attempting to contain a conspiracy narrative within its own resolution.

Conspiracy narrative tells, like most other stories, about a conflict. In one corner is the conspiracy: the small group of agents. These agents, as has been said, have become near-omniscient and near-omnipotent through the institution(s) under their control. The conspirators employ their power with nefarious intent, and they do so in secret. In the other corner is the conspiracy theorist. The conspiracy theorist plays protagonist to a fictional conspiracy narrative and reader to a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative. The goal of the conspiracy theorist is to “recognize what had been secret to [him] and what remains secret to most of the world: the ‘truth’ of the social world in which he lives”. In order to recognize what had been secret, the conspiracy theorist relies on interpretive faculties. It is unsurprising, then,

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42 Ibid.
43 Fenster, 121
44 Fenster, 125
that fictional conspiracy theorists are often professional or amateur brain toilers: intelligence analysts (e.g. *Three Days of the Condor*), journalists (e.g. *All the President’s Men*), attorneys (e.g. *JFK*), novelists (e.g. *The Chancellor Manuscript*). Through cognitive struggle, the conspiracy theorist aims to improve access to agency. Both the fictional conspiracy theorist and the non-fictional conspiracy theorist works to regain his personal agency. The non-fictional conspiracy theorist might also work to reestablish institutions that value personal agency — liberalism, democracy, capitalism, etc. For the conspiracy theorist, utility is best measured in terms of agency.

Conspiracy theorizing, then, is a desirous activity. The conspiracy theorist desires to “[integrate] within a singular plot disparate events that occur across vast temporal and geographic horizons”. In a fictional conspiracy narrative, this integrative process excites the desire of the protagonist and — through the empathetic avenue of narrative transportation — excites the desire of the audience. In a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative, this same integrative process is a fundamental desire of the reader. In either case, the conspiracy theorist is compelled by the process of reading for plot. This is the desire “that carries us forward, onward, through the text”, because narratives “both tell of desire — typically present some story of desire — and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification”. The conspiracy theorist’s desire to understand the world is profound.

Conspiracy narrative tends to be told, like most other stories, across linear time. The dynamic of conspiracy narrative is the way that the struggle for agency plays out over the course of the story. At the beginning of the narrative, the conspiracy theorist is aware of a set of

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45 Fenster, 125-126  
46 Fenster, 141-142  
47 Fenster, 133  
48 Brooks, 37
seemingly disparate events. The conspiracy theorist comes to sense that these events are not actually disparate but vaguely related. Then, at a distinct point, he comes to see the conspiracy. In verse, this shift is called the volta. In prose, this shift is called the “narrative pivot”. Those who first articulated a definition of “narrative pivot” provided the example of the moment in which Oedipus realizes his identity and the implications of his theretofore misunderstood actions.⁴⁹ Fenster identifies this pivot as the key moment in conspiracy narrative. Thereafter, the story accelerates — in terms of both narrative speed and narrative velocity — as the conspiracy theorist races to integrate more data into his theory. This undertaking, as I have said, is often frantic, manic, and near-schizophrenic.

The course of a conspiracy narrative is investigative or — in broader terms — interpretive. The conspiracy theorist attempts to identify evidence and fit it into his worldview. But the interpretation of evidence in conspiracy theory is a strange process. Fenster finds an example of this in the conspiracy theories surrounding the suicide of Vincent Foster, a childhood friend of — and later deputy White House counsel to — Bill Clinton.⁵⁰ Fenster writes that evidence — such as the gun which Foster used to commit suicide, according to official accounts of his death — occupies a strange place within a conspiracy theorist’s case. In one sense, the gun is insignificant. It is nothing more or less than the mise en scène of an apparent suicide. The gun isn’t evidence, because it was planted by the conspirators. In another sense, the gun is significant. It is proof that the crime scene was methodically staged. The gun is evidence, exactly because it was planted by the conspirators. And so the gun’s evidentiary value is best measured in the value of the evidence it obscures. The conspiracy theorist investigates — interprets evidence — in a strange way. He finds a piece of evidence. If the evidence seems in favor of the conspiracy

⁴⁹ Fenster, 135
⁵⁰ Fenster, 93
theory, then he accepts it but immediately seeks the next piece of evidence. If the evidence seems in opposition to the conspiracy theory — seems in support of the coverup — then he rejects its face value, accepts its “deeper meaning” and immediately seeks the next piece of evidence. Everything, at first glance, is either for or against his theory. Everything, at second glance, is for his theory. And nothing, in and of itself, can ever really satisfy him.

Conspiracy narrative struggles to find the resolution that most other stories reach. Here, the distinction between fictional and non-fictional conspiracy narrative is important. A fictional conspiracy narrative centers on a protagonist “who is able to effect change in [himself] and in the world, and who, in so doing, brings about a narrative resolution that appears to be a reasonably happy ending”. In short, a fictional narrative allows for a resolution in which “the hero or heroes arise triumphant through the ultimate defeat of the conspiracy”. But a non-fictional conspiracy narrative must settle for a resolution that “occurs through the prospect and process of illumination (that is, finding evidence and containing the conspiracy within an explanation)”. But either attempt at resolution is problematic. In a conspiracy narrative, the conspiracy theory “is at once explicable as a conflict between a central but secret power and an unsuspecting public, and an incredibly complex phenomenon that requires great skill and expertise to find and explain”. This paradox is not only a problem within conspiracy narrative but also a tension within conspiracy theory itself, as Fenster writes:

   Indeed, this paradox is at work in the name itself: as a conspiracy theory, it is a simplification of a presumptively “complex” reality; but as a conspiracy theory, it is a labyrinthine explanation of that which could be, and often is, more easily explained another way.  

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51 Fenster, 122
52 Fenster, 124
53 Ibid.
54 Fenster, 133
55 Ibid.
This paradox impacts both fictional and non-fictional conspiracy narrative. For the fictional narrative, the paradox can cause aesthetic dissatisfaction. Fenster writes that JFK was criticized for oversimplifying the military-industrial complex and for overcomplicating the more plausible explanation that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.\textsuperscript{56} For the non-fictional narrative, the paradox can cause epistemic dissonance. The conspiracy theorist comes to know the corruption of the order around him, but he also comes to know that he can do little to affect the same. His wealth of mental agency only discovers his dearth of material agency. The conspiracy theorist enjoys perfect knowledge that he endures an imperfect world.

\textbf{What is agency?}

In a fictional conspiracy narrative, the agency of a conspiracy theorist rises over the course of the story. The conspiracy theorist’s mental agency increases as he becomes more aware of the powers that control his world. His material agency increases as he leverages this awareness against the powers that control his world. Ultimately, the conspiracy theorist is able to understand the conspiracy and — what is more — defeat it.

In a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative, the agency of a conspiracy first rises and later falls over the course of the story. The conspiracy theorist’s mental agency increases as he becomes more aware of the powers that control his world. But the conspiracy theorist is unable to leverage this awareness against the powers that control his world. Politically, the conspiracy theorist grapples with efficacy: To what extent can he understand and influence political affairs? Psychologically, the conspiracy theorist grapples with locus of control: To what degree does he — and not some set of external factors — control the outcome of events in his life?

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
What might narrative look like?

Here, it seems well to begin with a discussion of typical narrative ("story"). In any narrative, there is the action ("any events or series of events depicted in a literary work") and the plot ("the arrangement of the action"). Such notions date back at least to Poetics, in which Aristotle describes the action as the "incidents" conveyed in a story and the plot as "the arrangement of the incidents". There is a long history of describing, illustrating, or otherwise essentializing these chains of events.

Aristotle divides the poetic arts into dramatic, lyric, and epic genres. He further subdivides drama into comedy, tragedy, and satire. Of the six qualities that vary between comedy and tragedy — plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, song — Aristotle calls plot "the first principle" and, indeed, "the soul" of the distinction. Aristotle divides plot into three parts:

I. Complication  
II. Turning Point  
III. Unravelling (or denouement)

In this model: "complication" refers to everything which occurs before the turning point; "turning point" refers to the point at which the story begins to move decidedly towards good fortune (in comedy) or bad fortune (in tragedy); and "unravelling" refers to everything which occurs after the turning point. Aristotle’s approach thus captures two aspects of plot. First, excitement varies over the course of a story. Second, the fortune of the protagonist varies over the course of the story. Excitement varies over the course of the story, regardless of whether the story is comic or tragic (Figure 1). In a comedy, the fortune of the protagonist is bad at the

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57 Mays, A9  
58 Mays, A1  
59 Mays, A10  
60 Aristotle, 1.VI  
61 Ibid.
beginning of the story and good at the end of the story (Figure 2). In a tragedy, the fortune of the protagonist is good at the beginning of the story and bad at the end of the story (Figure 3).

Figure 1: An Interpretation of Aristotle’s Excitement Arc

Figure 2: An Interpretation of Aristotle’s Comedic Fortune Arc
One common understanding of plot is provided by Gustav Freytag, who divided plot into five phases:

I. Exposition
II. Rising action
III. Climax (or turning point)
IV. Falling action
V. Resolution (or conclusion or resolution or *denouement*)

Freytag’s approach is similar to the excitement aspect of Aristotle’s approach, although the former slightly differs from the latter. Freytag divides Aristotle’s “complication” into two parts: exposition and rising action. And Freytag divides Aristotle’s “unraveling” into two parts: falling action and catastrophe. Freytag’s approach is often illustrated as a pyramid or a “wave” (Figure 4).

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62 Della Zazzera and Wazer
Figure 4: An Interpretation of Freytag’s Excitement Arc

Another common understanding of plot is provided by Northrop Frye, who divided plots into two basic structures. The first of these is a comic structure. In the comic structure: the protagonist falls into bad fortune; the protagonist experiences a peripety, which is often brought on by epiphany; and the protagonist rises into good fortune. An example of the comic structure can be found in The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

*Fall:* The son leaves home.
*Peripety (Epiphany):* The son realizes he has squandered his inheritance.
*Rise:* The son returns home.

In the tragic structure: the protagonist rises into good fortune, experiences a peripety, and falls into bad fortune. An example of the tragic structure can be found in The Myth of Icarus.

*Rise:* Icarus flies towards the sun.
*Peripety:* The sun melts Icarus’ wings.
*Fall:* Icarus crashes into the sea.

In a comedy, the fortune of the protagonist is good at the beginning of the story, bad in the middle of the story, and good at the end of the story (Figure 5). In a tragedy, the fortune of the
protagonist is bad at the beginning of the story, good in the middle of the story, and bad at the end of the story (Figure 6).

![Figure 5: An Interpretation of Frye’s Comedic Fortune Arc](image)

![Figure 6: An Interpretation of Frye’s Tragic Fortune Arc](image)

Beyond these, many approaches to the taxonomy of plot have been ventured. Some have taken Freudian approaches, as Otto Rank and Lord Raglan did. Others have Jungian approaches, as Joseph Campbell did with his oft-referenced Hero Cycle. Charles Booker suggested that there
are seven basic plot structures.\textsuperscript{63} Ronald B. Tobias suggested that there are twenty.\textsuperscript{64} One approach — asserted by Carlo Gozzi and reasserted by Georges Polti — identified thirty-six “dramatic situations.\textsuperscript{65} It’s not a question of if the comic-tragic binaries offered by Aristotle and Frye can be complicated, but of how much those binaries should be complicated. Kurt Vonnegut figured there were about five shapes that a story could take, and that seems manageable.

In a later-rejected and since-lost dissertation for the University of Chicago’s Department of Anthropology, Kurt Vonnegut proposed that stories could take on one of several shapes.\textsuperscript{66} He repeated this claim throughout his life in lectures and in writing, and he considered it his greatest contribution to the world. He rendered these shapes on a fortune-time graph: the x-axis ranged from good fortune to bad fortune; the y-axis spanned from the beginning of the story to the end of the story (Figure 7).\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fortune_graph.png}
\caption{A Reprinting of Vonnegut’s Fortune Graph\textsuperscript{68}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{63} Booker
\textsuperscript{64} Tobias
\textsuperscript{65} Polti
\textsuperscript{66} Vonnegut, 24
\textsuperscript{67} Vonnegut, 23
\textsuperscript{68} Vonnegut, 27
Vonnegut calls the first shape “Man in Hole” (Figure 8). In this story, “somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again”.  

The shape is identical to Frye’s comic structure. Vonnegut calls the second shape “Boy Meets Girl” (Figure 9). In this story, “somebody, an ordinary person, on a day like any other day, comes across something perfectly wonderful . . . [ruins everything and] . . . gets back up again”.  

Vonnegut calls the third shape “Cinderella” (Figure 10). In this story, somebody suffers bad fortune, enjoys better and better fortune, loses it all suddenly, but later becomes “off-scale happy”.  

Famously, Vonnegut was enamored by the similarities between “Cinderella” and the New Testament. Vonnegut calls the fourth shape “Kafka” (Figure 11). In this story, somebody suffers bad fortune and then suffers even worse fortune.  

Vonnegut calls the fifth shape “Hamlet” (Figure 12). In this story, somebody experiences a series of events but cannot tell if the events are good or bad.  

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69 Vonnegut, 24  
70 Ibid.  
71 Vonnegut, 25  
72 Swanson  
73 Vonnegut, 25  
74 Vonnegut, 27  
75 Vonnegut, 23
Figure 9: A Reprinting of Vonnegut’s Fortune Graph — Boy Meets Girl

Figure 10: A Reprinting of Vonnegut’s Fortune Graph — Cinderella

76 Vonnegut, 24
77 Vonnegut, 25
Figure 11: A Reprinting of Vonnegut’s Fortune Graph — Kafka

Figure 12: A Reprinting of Vonnegut’s Fortune Graph — Hamlet

78 Vonnegut, 26
79 Vonnegut, 27
What does narrative look like?

The aforementioned literary theorists developed their respective understandings of plot by reading actual narratives. Aristotle relied on the works of Aeschylus, Homer, and other Greek poets. Freytag relied on five-act plays. Frye relied on the Bible. Vonnegut relied on oral traditions, folklore, and canon. Some of these theorists invented intricate systems for coding affective phrases, counting narrative shifts, and calculating the arc of plots. But there are obvious limitations to such an endeavor. Each man could only read so many stories, could only perform so disciplined an analysis. As Vonnegut mused: “There is no reason why the simple shapes of stories can’t be fed into computers, they are beautiful shapes”.80

Members of the University of Vermont’s Computational Story Lab set out to do just that. The team relied on a list of over 10,000 English words, each of which is assigned a score on a 1-to-9 scale. The happiest word on the list is “laughter”, with a score of 8.5. The saddest words on the list are “suicide” and “terrorist”, with scores of 1.3. (The word “conspiracy” scores a 3.28.) The team then found a suitable corpus. They selected English-language works of fiction in the Project Gutenberg repository. They further required that the works be between 10,000 and 200,000 words in length,81 that the works feature between 1,000 and 18,000 unique words,82 and that each work had been downloaded at least 150 times.83 The team then worked to plot hedonistic fluctuations across each story and categorize these plots into different modes. 89.7% of the stories surveyed followed one of ten plot structures; 75.7% of the stories surveyed followed one of six plot structures.

80 Reagan et al., 2
81 Ibid.
82 Reagan et al., 2-3
83 Reagan et al., 3
These six plot structures are: “Rags to Riches” and “Tragedy”; “Man in a Hole” and “Icarus”; “Cinderella” and “Oedipus”. In “Rags to Riches”, the story’s pattern is happy-sad; its shape is identical to that of an Aristotelian comedy (Figure 13). In “Tragedy” — the inverse of “Rags to Riches” — the story’s pattern is sad-happy; its shape is identical to that of an Aristotelian tragedy (Figure 15). In “Man in a Hole”, the story’s pattern is happy-sad-happy; its shape is identical to those of Frye’s comic structure and Vonnegut’s “Man in a Hole”, for which it is named (Figure 16). In “Icarus” — the inverse of “Man in a Hole” — the story’s pattern is sad-happy-sad; it’s shape is identical to that of Frye’s tragic structure (Figure 17). In “Cinderella”, the story’s pattern is sad-happy-sad-happy; its shape is identical to that of Vonnegut’s “Cinderella”, for which it is named (Figure 18). In Oedipus — the inverse of “Cinderella” — the story’s pattern is happy-sad-happy-sad (Figure 19).
Figure 13: A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Rags to Riches\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13}
\caption{A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Rags to Riches\textsuperscript{84}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{84} Reagan et al., 5

Figure 14: A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Tragedy\textsuperscript{85}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure14}
\caption{A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Tragedy\textsuperscript{85}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
Figure 15: A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Man in a Hole

Figure 16: A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Icarus

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
Figure 17: A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Cinderella

Figure 18: A Reprinting of the Computational Story Lab’s Fortune Graph — Oedipus

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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
Because Project Gutenberg tracks download statistics, it might be possible to guess which story shapes tend to be more popular among writers and which story shapes tend to be more popular among readers. I have provided the story shapes ranked by frequency in the corpus and by representation among downloads -- adjusted for frequency within the corpus (Figure 19). It thus seems that the Aristotelean tragic shape and Aristotelean comic shape are the most available story shapes, but that the Cinderella-style comedy and the Oedipus-style tragedy are the most successful story shapes. In short, it seems people tend to prefer to read stories with complicated narrative arcs.

Because Project Gutenberg tracks download statistics, it also might be possible to guess which story endings tend to be more popular among writers and which story endings tend to be more popular among readers (Figure 19). It thus seems that comedies are both more available than tragedies and more successful than tragedies. In short, it seems that people tend to prefer to read stories that have happy endings (Figure 20).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Story Shape</th>
<th>Popularity Among Writers (Rank)</th>
<th>Popularity Among Readers (Rank)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rags to Riches</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man in a Hole</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icarus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinderella</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 19: A Table of Popularity of Story Shapes Among Writers and Readers

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90 Reagan et al., 6
Figure 20: A Table of Popularity of Story Shapes Among Writers and Readers, Divided into Happy and Sad Endings⁹¹

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Story Type</th>
<th>Story Shape</th>
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<th>Popularity Among Readers (Rank)</th>
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<td>Comedy</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Man in a Hole</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cinderella</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>Tragedy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Icarus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oedipus</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What might conspiracy narrative look like?

When we combine our understanding of agency within conspiracy narrative and our visualizations of narrative structure, we might render a visualization of conspiracy narrative structure. As has been previously discussed, agency fluctuates differently in fictional and purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narratives. In a fictional conspiracy narrative, the conspiracy theorist’s agency increases over the course of the story. In this sense, a fictional conspiracy narrative follows the trajectory of an Aristotelian comedy and a sad-happy “Rags to Riches” story (Figure 21). In a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative, the conspiracy theorist’s agency increases as he realizes he can understand his world but decreases as realizes that he cannot affect his world. In this sense, a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative

⁹¹ Ibid.
follows the trajectory of a Fryean tragedy and a sad-happy-sad “Icarus” story (Figure 22). With an understanding of conspiracy narrative, we might begin to explore recent innovations made within the conspiracy genre.

Figure 21: The Fortune Graph of Fictional Conspiracy Narrative

Figure 22: The Fortune Graph of Purportedly Non-Fictional Conspiracy Narrative
CHAPTER III: INNOVATIONS WITHIN CONSPIRACY NARRATIVE

What is QAnon?

QAnon — known to its adherents as the Storm or the Great Awakening — is an ongoing conspiracy theory within American rightwing politics. QAnon is often described as a “big tent” conspiracy theory, making it immense and nebulous such that a satisfactory definition is difficult to reach. A decent understanding of QAnon has been articulated by conspiracy theory researcher Travis View, who said:

QAnon is based upon the idea that there is a worldwide cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles who rule the world, essentially, and they control everything. They control politicians, and they control the media. They control Hollywood, and they cover up their existence, essentially. And they would have continued ruling the world, were it not for the election of President Donald Trump. Now, Donald Trump in this conspiracy theory knows all about this evil cabal’s wrongdoing. But one of the reasons that Donald Trump was elected was to put an end to them, basically. And now we would be ignorant of this behind-the-scenes battle of Donald Trump and the U.S. military – that everyone backs him and the evil cabal – were it not for "Q." And what "Q" is is basically a poster on 4chan, who later moved to 8chan, who reveals details about this secret behind-the-scenes battle, and also secrets about what the cabal is doing and also the mass sort of upcoming arrest events through these posts.92

This understanding of QAnon can be framed within the definition of conspiracy theory which this paper uses.

an explanation that features a conspiracy among a small group of agents (“cabal”) acting secretly (“they cover up their existence”) with nefarious intent (“evil”) as a central ingredient

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92 Rozsa
This understanding of QAnon is epistemically neutral in a denotative — if not connotative — sense. This understanding of QAnon does reference that the conspiracy theory is opposed to “official” explanations, such as those made by political and media elites. And, while this understanding is aligned with notions of classical conspiracism, its compatibility with notions of new conspiracism will be discussed later.

While I might have preferred to discuss a less partisan conspiracy theory, QAnon is nevertheless the strongest example of an “innovative” purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative. In this section, I will discuss how QAnon’s centers a protagonist within the narrative and enjoys the advantages of new conspiracism.

What is a protagonist?

We might begin with a literary definition of protagonist as “the most neutral and broadly applicable term for the main character in a work whether . . . heroic or not heroic”.93 Better for our purposes is the term hero, who is “a character in a literary work, especially the leading . . . character, who is especially virtuous, usually larger than life, sometimes almost godlike”.94 The hero is opposed by or in conflict with the antagonist, which might be a character or a nonhuman force.

While literary manipulations of protagonism vary, the protagonist tends to do a few things for the text. The protagonist is a focal point of the story. In a first-person narrative, the protagonist is the narrator. In a third-person narrative, the protagonist is generally at the center of the narrator’s interest. This means that, according to many theories of literary transportation, the protagonist is the primary subject of the reader’s empathy. This might be true irrespective of

93 Mays, A11
94 Mays, A6
whether the protagonist is a hero (as Odysseus is in Homer’s *Odyssey*) or an antihero (as Othello is in Shakespeare’s *Othello*). A protagonist often makes a story more compelling by allowing readers to exercise their empathy.

The notion of antagonism is easily identified in conspiracy narrative: the antagonist of a conspiracy narrative is the conspiracy itself. I have mostly used the term “protagonist” to refer to the conspiracy theorist in a fictional conspiracy narrative, whereas I have mostly used the term “reader” to refer to the conspiracy theorist in a purportedly nonfictional conspiracy narrative. One key innovation of the QAnon narrative is to focus not only on an antagonistic force (the “cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles”, “politicians”, “the media”, “Hollywood”, etc.) but also on a protagonist force (“Donald Trump” and his allies).

It can be difficult to parse what sort of protagonist Donald Trump is, because those who see him as a protagonist see him in different ways. To some, he is an antihero, “a protagonist who is in one way or another the very opposite of a traditional hero”. For instance, many supporters of Donald Trump were drawn to his tell-it-as-it-is rudeness. To others, he is a hero. For instance, many supporters of Donald Trump within the American evangelical movement have reimagined the self-styled playboy as an “especially virtuous” family man. But whether he is an antihero or a hero, Donald Trump is a protagonist to many Americans, including some who are adherents to the QAnon narrative. This paper seeks to investigate how the introduction of a protagonist into a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy theory might affect its structure and its reader.

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95 Mays, A1
How might protagonism affect the popularity of a conspiracy narrative?

Of the six story shapes identified in the previous section, three story shapes have sad beginnings. The first is “Rags to Riches”, an Aristotelean comedy that moves from sad to happy. The fictional conspiracy narrative tends to follow this trajectory. The second is “Icarus”, a Fryean tragedy that moves from sad to happy to sad. The purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative tends to follow this trajectory. The third is “Cinderella”, a comedy that moves from sad to happy to sad to happy.

From these three story shapes, a simple set of observations might be made: a story with a sad beginning will have a sad ending after an even number of fluctuations; a story with a sad beginning will have a happy ending after an odd number of fluctuations. This has been put more elegantly by Orson Welles, who once said: “If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story”. The addition of a protagonist into a conspiracy narrative might allow for the story to be stopped someplace later. The addition of a protagonist into a conspiracy narrative might, in short, allow for a happy ending.

Most purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narratives unfold in two acts. In the first act, the conspiracy theorist increases his cognitive agency as he better understands his imperfect world (Figure 23). In the second act, the conspiracy theorist realizes that he lacks the material agency to perfect the world he has come to understand (Figure 24). The addition of a protagonist allows for the possibility that some other material agent might be able to perfect the world he has come to understand. In QAnon, this material agent would be Donald Trump, a billionaire who had access to the full force of the American intelligence apparatus and the nuclear launch codes to boot (Figure 25).

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96 Chamblin
Figure 23: “You understand that the world is broken.”

Figure 24: “You understand that the world is broken . . . but you can’t fix it.”

Figure 25: “You understand that the world is broken . . . but you can’t fix it . . . but Trump can.”
The effect of this addition is to change the conspiracy narrative from an “Icarus” story into a “Cinderella” story. According to Project Gutenberg statistics, the “Icarus” story is more popular among writers than the “Cinderella” story is. (Of the top six story shapes, “Icarus” is the fourth most common story shape in the corpus, whereas “Cinderella” is the fifth most common.) But according to Project Gutenberg statistics, the “Cinderella” story is far more popular among readers than the “Icarus” story is. (Of the top six story shapes, “Icarus” is the least downloaded story shape in the corpus, whereas “Cinderella” is the most downloaded.) The addition of a protagonist allows for the QAnon narrative to better align with the narratives that people already prefer.

As I have already mentioned, Kurt Vonnegut was enamored by the similarities between the third act of “Cinderella” and the New Testament. This observation is not entirely trivial within the context of rightwing conspiracy theory. First, Vonnegut would later describe the creation stories he studied as an anthropologist — including the Judeo-Christian creation story put forth in Genesis — as examples of the “Rags to Riches” story shape (Figure 26). Second, Vonnegut considered Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament as an example of the “Icarus” story shape (Figure 27). Third, Vonnegut held Genesis and the Old Testament and the New Testament as an example of a “Cinderella” story shape (Figure 28). By extending the purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative into a third comedic act, QAnon accesses notions of saviorism (Figure 29).

97 Swanson
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
Figure 26: “Here is everything for man to enjoy.”

Figure 27: “Here is everything for man to enjoy . . . but he is doomed to sin.”

Figure 28: “Here is everything for man to enjoy . . . but he is doomed to sin . . . but he is saved.”
Whereas “Cinderella” stories are popular among all people, they can be especially important to people of Christian persuasions. It is not particularly surprising, then, that the structure of the QAnon narrative reflects the religious overtones popular among QAnon adherents. While I would not say that Christian Americans are any more prone to belief in conspiracy than non-Christian Americans are, the QAnon narrative overtly (mis)appropriates a Christian style.

QAnon adherents might readily admit that Donald Trump is a “flawed” Christian, but many adherents refer to him — in no uncertain terms — as a “messiah” or “savior” sent by God. Adherents often refer to their core belief set as the Storm (which they often relate to narratives of the Genesis flood and understandings of Judgement Day) or the Great Awakening (itself a reference to several periods of marked religious revival throughout American history). Many adherents stress that Donald Trump’s struggle with the cabal is a battle between “good and evil” or “light and dark” of “Biblical proportions”. Some adherents have gone as far to theorize that the upcoming period of mass arrests, mass suicide, or mass executions of their enemies will serve as a “reverse rapture” that will leave a society ready to be rebuilt according to Christian law. Others have gone to mesh QAnon theology with elements of other conspiratorial theologies, such as those that frame Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton as the Antichrist. And, of course, adherents theorize that the cabal worships Satan (a distinctly Abrahamic antagonist) and kills babies (a thinly veiled reimagining of the blood libel).

In a protagonist-centered conspiracy narratives, the protagonist and the conspiracy theory can exist symbiotically within the narrative. We have already seen how someone might come for the conspiracy and stay for the protagonist. For example, QAnon might find someone as a conspiracy theorist and leave them as a conspiracy theorist and a Trump supporter (Figure 29).

100 Van Prooijen and Douglas
But someone might also come for the protagonist and stay for the conspiracy. In short, QAnon might find someone as a Trump supporter and leave them as a Trump supporter and a conspiracy theorist (Figure 30).

Figure 29: From Conspiracy Theorist to Trump Supporter — “You understand that the world is broken . . . but you can’t fix it . . . but Trump can.”

Figure 30: From Trump Supporter to Conspiracy Theorist — “Donald Trump can make America great again . . . but he is constantly thwarted by the mainstream media . . . but the mainstream media is a cabal of pedophiles who will be killed in mass executions.”

The addition of a protagonist can make a conspiracy narrative more broadly appealing. A protagonist-centered conspiracy narrative attracts not only those who dislike or distrust members of the alleged cabal but also those who like or trust the protagonist. The addition of a protagonist
can also make a conspiracy narrative more durable. The ethos of the protagonist might bolster the logos of the conspiracy theory, and the logos of the conspiracy theory might insulate the ethos of the protagonist.

Beyond this, a protagonist can make for an effective organizing mechanism within a conspiracy narrative that greatly increases the narrative’s explanatory reach. In a non-protagonist-centered conspiracy narrative, the explanatory power of the conspiracy narrative is generally limited to framing events within the motivations of the antagonist.

*Event:* The September 11th attacks happened . . .

*Explanation:* . . . because certain actors within the United States national security apparatus sought to manufacture public support for imperialist wars in certain oil-producing nations.

In a protagonist-centered conspiracy narrative, the explanatory power can still frame events within the motivations of the antagonist.

*Event:* DNC staffer Seth Rich was murdered . . .

*Explanation:* . . . because Debbie Wasserman Schuktz hired MS-13 gang members to kill him in retaliation for his leaking of DNC emails.

But in a protagonist-centered conspiracy narrative, the explanatory power can also frame events within the motivations of the protagonist.

*Event:* Robert Mueller begins his investigation of allegations that the Trump campaign colluded with Russia . . .

*Explanation:* . . . because Donald Trump feigned collusion with Russia so that he could enlist Robert Mueller to investigate crimes by high-ranking Democrats.

In this way, a protagonist-centered conspiracy narrative allows for a conspiracy narrative to explain more events with more flexibility. The narrative can still explain events through the motivations of the antagonists, but it can also explain events through the motivations of the protagonists. While conspiracy theories already exhibit strong resistance to contradictory
evidence (unfalsifiability), the addition of a protagonist means that the narrative has more defenses against contradictory evidence.

The addition of a protagonist allows for happy endings. A happy ending might solve the problems of resolution faced by purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narratives. A happy ending might make the narrative popular among the whole of the public or make the narrative especially popular among certain elements of the public. By marrying the ethos of the protagonist to the logos of the conspiracy theory, the narrative can attract a broader audience and explain more events with greater flexibility.

What is classic conspiracism? And what is new conspiracism?

So far I have examined what the authors of *A Lot of People Are Saying* would call “classic conspiracism”. Classic conspiracism is “conspiracy with the theory”, in which people construct a narrative that “gives order and meaning to occurrences that, in their minds, defy standard or official explanations”. To this end, classic conspiracism “engages in a sort of detective work” whereby all the facts “are scrupulously amassed” to reveal a “pattern of secret machinations”. In this way, “[the] dots are woven into a comprehensive narrative of events” such that — warranted or not — “classic conspiracism is conspiracy with a theory”.

New conspiracism, by contrast, is “conspiracy without the theory”, in which “[there] is no punctilious demand for proofs, no exhaustive amassing of evidence, no dots revealed to form a pattern, no close examination of the operators plotting in the shadows”. In short, new

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101 Keely
102 Russel and Rosenblum, 2
103 Russel and Rosenblum, 3
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
conspiracism “dispenses with the burden of explanation”. The authors see much of Donald Trump’s political rhetoric as emblematic of this trend. Trump’s accusation that “Barack Obama had ordered the FBI to tap his phones in October before the 2016 election” was not followed with any form of evidence. Instead of explanation, new conspiracism relies on “innuendo and verbal gesture” or “bare assertion”. The epitome of this can be found in one of Trump’s tweets — “Rigged!” — which the authors call “a one word exclamation that evokes fantastic schemes, sinister motives, and the awesome capacity to mobilize three million illegal voters to support Hillary Clinton for president.”

New conspiracism is — in the terms of this paper — non-narrative. Trump’s tweet — “Rigged!” — does not involve narrative content. The grammatical fragment does not tell us who did what, where, when, or why. As much as possible, new conspiracism avoids engaging in narrative discourse. Rhetorical weasel wording works to distance the speaker from what he is saying; the things he says are not his claims (“a lot of people are saying”) or even claims at all (“just asking questions”). The speaker aims to remove himself, such that only what he says — only what is said — remains. And so, the linguistic prerequisites of narrativity — the matter related and the manner of relation — are either obliterated or diminished.

**Why does it matter that new conspiracism is non-narrative?**

Conspiracy narratives are reliant on appeals to logic — no matter how faulty that logic may be. A conspiracy narrative, like any narrative, frames events within a causal chain. And so, many

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106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
110 Russel and Rosenblum, 39
conspiracy narratives must at times explain internal inconsistencies. A conspiracy theorist might put forward a conspiracy narrative.

The United States government organized a massive scheme to fake the Apollo moon landings, because it did not have the logistical prowess necessary to land on the moon.

And a critic might identify a possible inconsistency within the conspiracy narrative.

If the United States government did not have the logistical prowess necessary to land on the moon, how did it organize a massive scheme to fake the Apollo moon landings? Landing on the moon is hard, but getting 400,000 people to lie for fifty years is harder.

Of course, not all conspiracy theorists are concerned about internal inconsistencies. There are conspiracy theorists who will say that Princess Diana was murdered in one sentence and that Princess Diana is still alive in the next. But the fact remains that the internal consistency of a conspiracy narrative can be evaluated by a reader of that narrative. This is not the case with new conspiracism. How does one “argue, negotiate, compromise, [or] even disagree” with a one-word, non-argumentative grammatical fragment? How does one begin to fight an atmospheric? How does one contend with a vibe?

Beyond this, conspiracy theorizing can be a rather involved process. Part of the allure of classic conspiracism are the interpretive and interpretive processes that lead the conspiracy theorist to a sense that he understands the world better than his peers do. The demands of such an endeavor can hinder the spread of classic conspiracism. Crafting a conspiracy narrative can be time-consuming, effort-intensive, and — therefore — inaccessible. New conspiracism can mitigate many of these obstacles. It takes less time to write new conspiracism than it does to write classic conspiracism. This means that new conspiracism can react to an event while meeting the demands of a hyperactive newscycle. As Jonathan Swift once wrote “Falsehood

111 Van Prooijen and Douglas, 898
112 Russel and Rosenblum, 7
flies, and the Truth comes limping after it”.113 It takes less effort to read new conspiracism than it does to read classic conspiracism. Because new conspiracism is saying very little — if anything at all — a person can absorb the information quickly. The modern political landscape tends to prize speed and abhor intellectualism. Fast slander that requires little thinking readily exploits these tendencies. And so a major innovation within the craft of conspiracy narrative has been, curiously, to craft conspiracies that are less narrative.

113 Swift, 2
CONCLUSION

Chapter I provided a working definition of conspiracy and described narrative as a rhetorical mode of discourse that relays a series of events or experiences. Narrativity, in this sense, is generally considered to have four theoretical foundations: content, discourse, transportation, and persuasion. Narratives must meet the linguistic prerequisites of content and discourse. Narratives then temporarily alter a person’s mental state through transportation. Narratives -- by way of transportation -- perform or attempt to perform feats of persuasion. By comparing a typical narrative to a stereotypical conspiracy theory, we can see that both have equal access to narrative foundations -- content, discourse, transportation, and persuasion -- supporting the assertion that conspiracy theories are narrative works. Psychological research has indicated that narrative approaches to conspiracy better model the phenomenon than analytical approaches can.

Chapter II set off with a discursive handling of conspiracy narrative, paying special attention to issues of authorship and readership. It then worked off Mark Fenster’s 2008 monograph *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* to explore how conspiracy narrative functions. For Fenster, conspiracy theory tells a story about power and how it works. In this sense, conspiracy theory intends to transport and persuade its readers. Accordingly, conspiracy theories must be fast-moving and far-reaching, and they should attempt to explain a wide range of seemingly disparate events. Fenster then claims that conspiracy theories center matters of individual agency, maintain an accelerating dynamic, and often struggle to reach a resolution. In a fictional conspiracy narrative, the conspiracy theorist’s agency
increases. In a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative, the conspiracy theorist’s agency first increases and then decreases. Notable analyses of narrative structure have been offered by Aristotle, Freytag, Frye, and Vonnegut. A more data-driven approach has found six story shapes: Rags to Riches, Tragedy, Man in a Hole, Icarus, Cinderella, and Oediupus. The arc of a fictional conspiracy narrative resembles that of a Rags to Riches story. The arc of a purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative resembles that of an Icarus story.

Chapter III began with a discussion of QAnon, a “big tent” conspiracy theory. QAnon is innovative in two ways. First, QAnon centers a protagonist in the form of Donald J. Trump. The addition of a protagonist who possesses the material agency needed to defeat a conspiracy offers a happy ending to the purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative. In this way, the arc of the purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative moves from the two-act Icarus model to the three-act Cinderella model. It follows that the addition of a conspiracy theorist can solve the problems of resolution that beleaguered purportedly non-fictional conspiracy narrative. And, as was discussed, the Cinderella model positions the protagonist as a savior archetype who enjoys great traction within certain confessional groups. In a protagonist-centered conspiracy narrative, the narrative might enjoy a broader success; it appeals not only to those who dislike the antagonist but also to those who like the protagonist. The addition of a protagonist might offer a conspiracy narrative greater organizational coherence and explanatory power, in the sense that the theory can explain more events with more flexibility. Second, QAnon engages with Russel and Rosenblum’s conception of new conspiracism, a sort of “conspiracy without theory”. If classic conspiracism is a Boschian hellscape -- ornate, intricate, and terrifying -- is like a Boschian hellscape, then new conspiracism is more like throwing paint in someone’s face. New conspiracism is, in many senses, non-narrative. This means that new conspiracism need not
marshall evidence or aspire to coherence in the ways that classic conspiracism must. New conspiracism can be produced, distributed, and consumed far more efficiently than classic conspiracism can. Accordingly, new conspiracism is perhaps better suited to the fast-paced and anti-intellectual media landscape than classic conspiracism is.

Narrative approaches offer a more accurate conception of what conspiracy is and render a more precise understanding of how conspiracy theory works. They help illuminate the relationship between conspiracy theory and conspiracy theorist. Many of the problems that face conspiracy theory are narrative in origin, and many of the solutions leveraged by conspiracy theory are narrative in form. In a literary sense, conspiracy theory is an evolving genre. The struggle between conspiracy theory and conventional thinking has been waged -- and will be waged -- at the level of story.
Aristotle, *Poetics*.


Henderson, Brian. "Tense, Mood, and Voice in Film (Notes after Genette)." *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1983): 4-17.


