Article

Authoritarian Politics and Conspiracy Fictions: The Case of QAnon

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Abstract: The hypothesis of this article is that, for its adherents, QAnon is truthful, rather than true; that is, it captures their perception of the way things typically happen, rather than picturing what really has happened—and it does this in a way that seems more vivid and complete than actual experience. Why that is the case can be explained in terms of the peculiar nature of fictional representations, combined with the capacity of imaginary worlds, to symbolize real-world concerns in ways that resonate with prejudices and preconceptions but escape direct censure. After reviewing the literature on the conspiracy movement, we argue for QAnon as a conspiracy story, rather than a conspiracy theory, and interpret that story as "structured like a fantasy", giving imaginative expression to a set of social feelings and normative grievances that would otherwise not dare speak their own names. We conclude that QAnon is an authoritarian fiction centered on anti-Semitic conspiracy beliefs that disturbingly reprise key themes of fascism, but that it presents this within the symbolic disguise of a fantasy scenario that is calculated to attract alienated white, middle-class and working-class, individuals. This argument helps explicate adherents' resistance to the falsification of Q claims and predictions.

Keywords: QAnon; conspiracy theories; authoritarianism; fascism; anti-Semitism; critical theory

1. Introduction

The effect of art, the immersion of the recipient in the action of the work of art, their complete penetration into the effect of the special "world" of the work of art, results from the fact that *the work by its very nature, offers a truer, more complete, more vivid and more dynamic reflection of reality* than the recipient otherwise possesses. (Lukács 1970, p. 36 emphasis in original)

Despite the 2020 electoral defeat of former American President, Donald Trump, the QAnon conspiracy-theory movement remains influential worldwide. Its ongoing evolution, which converges on right-wing authoritarian political mobilization, and even domestic terrorism in the USA, continues to be of concern to researchers working on the future of democratic politics. We are literary studies researchers with an interest in exposing authoritarianism and discrimination in fiction, and we think that some insights from the study of literature can throw important light on how adherents relate to conspiracy narratives. These insights into the peculiar nature of beliefs about truth in fiction, how imaginary worlds express structures of feeling and ideas about normative rightness, and how racism and sexism can be represented symbolically in disguised ways may be helpful to researchers working on political authoritarianism and conspiracy theories. They also illuminate, albeit from a negative angle, why literature matters, and how the study of narrative can contribute to the cultural literacy that is an essential, yet too often invisible, component of democratic citizenship.

The QAnon movement is a completely groundless conspiracy belief that has sparked a significant mass mobilization, one whose core belief is that a global elite of Satanic

pedophiles, with links to the Democratic Party (USA) and some high-profile Jewish figures, secretly controls a "Deep State" in the USA, and perhaps elsewhere. A "Great Awakening" to this alleged ethico-political truth is urgently necessary, particularly since "The Plan", ex-president Donald Trump's bold supposed plan to prepare "The Storm", a military dictatorship, followed by the arrest and execution of the global elite, now seems to have been a failure. In the wake of Trump's electoral defeat, the movement, which is strongly, but not exclusively, linked to the fortunes of the Republican Party (USA), has polarized between doubt and despair on the one hand, and a recalibration of expectations with religious overtones on the other, but it has most certainly not dissipated (Kishi et al. 2020). It is not surprising that the FBI has linked the QAnon movement to domestic terrorism in the USA because its central premise, that democratic politics in the USA would be suspended while liberal and Jewish "enemies domestic and foreign" were summarily executed, has rightly been described as a "fascist fantasy" (Rothschild 2021, p. xvi).

In preparing this article, we accessed the complete Q texts (from "Q Drop #0", 27 October 2017, to the final "Q Drop #4952", 8 December 2020) on The Q Origins Project's comprehensive archive of Q material (George Smiley 2021) and a self-published book by QBakers (CBTS 2018). The /pol/ archive in its entirety can be found online in the "archive for plebs" (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/ accessed on 27 January 2022), which we consulted for Q-contexts around some initial Q texts. We also accessed Donald Jones' self-published "guide to understanding" and Michael Quinn's "objective guide", two of many Q-propaganda works available online that purport to be critiques (Jones 2020; Quinn 2020). We treat this material as a textual archive for analysis, in keeping with the methodologies of literary studies; while we acknowledge that the impact of QAnon is ongoing, this archive has established the fundamental nature of the phenomenon and is, therefore, appropriate material for our purpose. We developed our views about the history and nature of the movement from this 'Q archive', in combination with the fine investigative journalism done by Adrienne La France (LaFrance 2020), Cullen Hoback (Hoback 2021), Mike Rothschild (Rothschild 2021), David Niewart (Niewart 2018, 2020), Van Badham (Badham 2021) and the journalists' collective, Bellingcat (Bellingcat 2021; Bevensee and Aliapoulios 2021; The Q Origins Project 2021; Xavier et al. 2021). We also consulted many journalists' reports, such as those by Melissa Grant (Grant 2021), Kerry Howley (Howley 2021), Kevin Roose (Roose 2020a, 2020b) and Charlie Warzel (Warzel 2020), plus others detailed where relevant in this article. We consulted reports from counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism research institutes (Allington 2020; Kishi et al. 2020; PERIL and NCRI 2020). Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko's scholarly book combines expertise in countering violent extremism with psychiatric knowledge and provides insights into the way that "QAnon's rise can be viewed as a symptom of a mass mental health crisis" (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, p. 138). Ethan Zuckerman's paper on the way that the referent of QAnon's digital storytelling is not social reality but "the Unreal", a "closed circle of . . . mutually reinforcing interpretations" (Zuckerman 2019), was helpful in pointing towards the fictional nature of Q-narratives. We also consulted numerous scholarly research papers on conspiracy theory, detailed in the relevant discussion in this paper.

The roadmap for this article is that we propose first that the Q archive can be usefully considered as a conspiracy *story*, rather than a theory, before pointing to its strong affinities to fantasy fiction. We justify this approach with reference to current research into the QAnon conspiracy framework. This research demonstrates, we propose, that conspiracy beliefs in general, and QAnon in particular, involve speculative representations that fuse ideas about how the world works with normative grievances and with feelings of powerlessness and exclusion. This fusion of cognitive, normative and affective elements into an imaginative presentation of possible experience is a key characteristic of fictional narrative discourse. Perhaps not surprisingly, literary scholars and creative writers, such as Umberto Eco, have discussed the origins of historically influential conspiracy texts, such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Accordingly, considering conspiracy beliefs as originating in speculative narratives makes sense, and it helps explain why QAnon beliefs are notoriously resistant

to de-bunking and de-radicalization strategies that treat them as false cognition, rather than a compelling story. We show that interpreting the Q texts as if they were narrative fictions can generate a strong account of their appeal to the constituency where Q has been most successful—white, middle-class Baby Boomers—in light of current research. From the formal, structural perspective, QAnon should be thought of as a kind of consensual fiction, in which seemingly bizarre speculations about society and politics express, in a symbolic, disguised form, ideas that otherwise would not dare speak their own names. It articulates normative grievances and feelings of alienation, connected with white privilege, as if these were a redemptive mission within a supernatural war between good and evil, and not a restoration of racial injustice, sexual oppression and social hierarchy.

Just to be clear, though, right from the outset, we want to confront the obvious objection to our interpretation, even before laying out the case for it. That is the following: that in treating QAnon as a speculative fiction, we miss the fact that believers take it literally. "By thinking about QAnon as make-believe", an objector might say, "you transpose the cynical distance of the professional researcher onto the gullible consciousness of political neophytes, swept up in a proto-fascist enthusiasm, and thereby trivialize its social danger and aestheticize its tragic consequences". We do not. The claim is not that fundamentalist believers—those who take it literally—are secretly engaged in make-believe. The claim is that the moral outrage and feelings of alienation expressed through QAnon are narratively structured in ways that strongly resemble fiction in general, and, more specifically, fantasy fiction. We maintain that this throws light on why predictions can be falsified, and the identity of Q can be revealed, yet it makes not one iota of difference to the fate of the movement. Believers relate to the "truthfulness" of the narrative, that way it captures (in their estimation) "what typically happens", not the truth of individual propositions. Fundamentalist believers, convinced that a truthful narrative must also be the literal truth, then simply deny reality when confronted by falsifications. QAnon is a *deception*, originating, we think, in a deliberate fraud that aims to promote proto-fascist ideology. It is a set of representations whose structuration through the techniques of speculative narrative makes it particularly appealing to individuals with a specific sense of disenfranchisement and disorientation. That people believe in the story is tragic, even before its murderous and destructive consequences.

2. The QAnon Movement

As is by now reasonably well known, the QAnon movement consists of a mass base of anonymous participants ("Anons") whose efforts to decode the mysterious posts of the "Q Clearance Patriot" ("Q") are informally guided by a circle of interpreters. These QBakers and QTeachers, that is, people who interpret Q's posts, have a transient influence that depends on the movement's reception of their interpretations as authoritative (Bellingcat 2021; LaFrance 2020; Roose 2020b). Some credible efforts have been made to determine the identity of Q, with the most probable inference being that Q is the moniker adopted by several persons, at different stages of the movement's evolution. It would seem highly likely that /pol/ moderator Paul Furber, together with Coleman Rogers and Pam Rogers, originated Q, but that then Ron Watkins, an internet libertarian with authoritarian political views, took over the Q identity (Rothschild 2021, pp. 23–40). This speculation is corroborated by recorded evidence of Coleman Rogers posting as Q (Rothschild 2021, p. 145), Ron Watkins' slip-of-the-tongue admission to Cullen Hoback (Hoback 2021, Episode Six), and image metadata from Q's posts that support Hoback's hypothesis (Xavier et al. 2021). It is important to note, however, that it is not just Q's enigmatic posts, but also the QBakers and QTeachers, many of whom originated in the authoritarian political milieux of 4chan and the /pol/ Reddit, who provide significant guidance to the movement's politics (LaFrance 2020; Roose 2020b). It is also important to note that the QAnon conspiracy is crowd sourced and perpetually mutating, with the capacity to assimilate adjacent conspiracy beliefs into its evolving narrative, because of the dialogical relation between QAnons and QBakers (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, pp. 19–41). Finally, the links between the growth of the

QAnon movement and the global SARS-2-CoV pandemic, which has sent hundreds of millions of people online for prolonged durations, should be noted, as should the tendency of the movement to colonize counter-cultural lifestyle movements that have polarized because of COVID-19 (Allington 2020).

The emergence of QAnon after October 2017 was initially greeted with bewilderment by journalists and commentators, followed by intense dismay at its rapid growth and its manifestly authoritarian politics combined with its disregard for evidential protocols and reasoned argument (Roose 2020a; Warzel 2020; Wong 2018). On the surface, the core beliefs are bizarre (the Satanic pedophiles claim) and so authoritarian as to be openly anti-democratic (the plan for martial law and mass executions). That is something that is not helped by the presence of the sorts of ideas that are normally presented from beneath the protection of a tin-foil hat (lizard people lurking within the human population, 5-G towers triggering coronavirus, Jewish laser beams from outer space, etc.) (Jones 2020, loc.'s 1121, 238, 263, 319, 408–39, 543, 581). What is perplexing about this phenomenon in its country of origin, the USA, is that these beliefs, taken to their logical conclusion, require potential converts to abandon the core conviction held by most US citizens in the Constitution. The "Storm" is completely inconsistent with democratic government and the right of a fair trial under the rule of law. Perhaps this is why the movement's initial successes have been with counter-cultural movements and lifestyle alternatives, through adopting elements of their beliefs about what is wrong with current social arrangements, and synthesizing these with its own special concerns (Melzer 2021). Once described as "conspiracy without the theory", it is now widely accepted that QAnon is a sort of "conspiracy singularity" where adjacent conspiracy stories are fused with the core belief into an exceptionally dense region of conspiracy thinking. However, it is worth noting that its capacity to narratively assimilate these concerns strongly depends on a background of rising social inequality. This is especially characterized by declining mental health services, revelations about institutionalized child abuse, histories of state deception and surveillance, and a significant disconnect between political parties and the popular classes (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Fuchs 2017, 2018). Something is rotten, in other words, in the state of Denmark, and this is not the first time in history that the stink of regime decay and social neglect has been mistaken for—or deliberately confused with—a Satanic whiff of sulphur.

Certainly, despite a series of political setbacks and failed predictions, many adherents to QAnon beliefs are notoriously resistant to demonstrations that these beliefs are false, preferring instead to integrate disconfirmation into the narrative as a supposed demonstration of a deeper logic (Howley 2021; Kishi et al. 2020). The failed predictions and conjectures are spectacular: that Hilary Clinton, along with masses of Democrats, was about to be arrested on charges of child trafficking between 3 November 2017 and 15 November 2017; that the Republicans would sweep the 2018 midterms, and then that Trump would have a landslide victory in 2020; and, that the revelation that Angela Merkel is the granddaughter of Adolf Hitler would "shock the WORLD" (Q 2021, Drop #928). We think that this attitude—of choosing the "truthfulness" of the narrative and its personae, over the truth of its predictions and theories—can be explained by supposing that believers relate to the Q conspiracy in a way similar to how readers relate to a fiction. A fiction is "truthful", not because it reports facts accurately, but because it represents how its readership thinks things typically happen in human action. We explore the nature of conspiracy beliefs and the QAnon resistance to de-bunking further below, before expanding on this argument and its implications.

3. Challenging the Cognitive Account of Conspiracy Beliefs

Explanations for the formation of conspiracy beliefs that are exclusively grounded in the cognitive claims of the conspiracy theory have, in light of the limitations of cognitive debunking strategies, recently been supplemented by normative and expressive accounts. That is not surprising, because, as Karen Douglas and co-thinkers demonstrate in their comprehensive review of the research on conspiracy theories, compelling cases can be

advanced not just for "epistemic motives" in conspiracy belief formation, but also for the role of social motivations and existential factors (Douglas et al. 2017, 2019). In what follows, we adopt their terminology, according to which a "conspiracy theory" is an effort to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events with reference to secret joint action by powerful agents. As they note, "while a conspiracy refers to a true causal chain of events, a conspiracy theory refers to an allegation of conspiracy that may or may not be true", and we would add that a "conspiracy belief" refers to a persistent conviction in the veracity of a conspiracy theory, irrespective of its debunking (Douglas et al. 2019, p. 4). We are interested in conspiracy belief, that is, a set of convictions about the existence of a conspiracy that are, by definition, epistemologically defective. The work of Douglas and co-thinkers is worth citing in this connection:

> Our analysis suggests that conspiracy theories may satisfy some epistemic motives at the expense of others—for example, by shielding beliefs from uncertainty while being less likely to be accurate. The epistemic drawbacks of conspiracy theories do not seem to be readily apparent to people who lack the ability or motivation to think critically and rationally. Conspiracy belief is correlated with lower levels of analytic thinking and lower levels of education. It is also associated with the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events and the tendency to perceive agency and intentionality where it does not exist. (Douglas et al. 2017, p. 539)

What we think is that conspiracy beliefs form because conspiracy theories do not solely address cognitive claims (or epistemic motives), which would explain why conspiracy beliefs can be so resistant to correction in light of epistemic argument and factual evidence (also known as cognitive de-bunking). For instance, despite media reports on the falsity of QAnon and the failure of the 6 January 2021 insurrection, many QAnon adherents maintained their "trust the plan" stance. The true believers of the QAnon conspiracy theory—which Sophia Moskalenko and Mia Bloom refer to as "Diehards"—number about *36 million Americans*, or 20% of the adult population (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, p. 120). This is evidently not a marginal phenomenon, and it emerges from a vast background of ignorance about conspiracy beliefs: 6 out of 10 Americans, or 120 million people, cannot correctly identify four or more conspiracy ideas as false (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, p. 120).

Now, the bulk of research into QAnon has assumed it presents a defective *theory*, that is, a false explanatory account, or cognitive mapping, of social reality, one that is based on scientifically and sociologically untrue statements. Journalistic notions of the Q conspiracy as "misinformation" (and even "lies") are based on this assumption, as is commentators' bewilderment about these "bizarre" claims and their speculations that "cognitive dissonance" must be involved in maintaining these beliefs (Wong 2018). An approach which simply inverts this assumption suggests that every conspiracy belief has a "kernel of truth" in a provable allegation, which is then distorted and inflated into a global explanation for most social events (Raab and Ortlieb 2013). Scholarly discussions of conspiracy belief have tended to accept multi-factor causal models of what propels individuals into accepting conspiracy theories, but they have nonetheless focused mainly on "epistemic motives" to do with coping with uncertainty (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). The problem with this approach is that its *exclusive* insistence on the cognitive aspect of QAnon has not successfully explained how it recruits members and sustains momentum.

It is significant that normative explanations are often supplemented by what we call "expressive" accounts of QAnon. Expressive accounts point to the idea that the conspiracy narrative expresses a structure of feeling, as much as it presents a picture of reality or constitutes an invitation to participate in a righteous community (van Prooijen and Douglas 2018). The emotional charge of QAnon springs not just from disgust at child abuse, and dismay at the failure of officials, but also from feelings of outrage at having been excluded (as believers see it) from the life of the nation, and from anxiety about dislocation (Badham 2021, pp. 354–57). This description of a motivation for conspiracy belief in "expressive"

concerns overlaps with Douglas' and co-thinkers' category of "existential needs" (Douglas et al. 2019). They describe these concerns in terms of alienation from the political domain and personal anomie, both linked to control over uncertainty and the unknown. We think that this can also be described in terms of a structure of feeling involving alienation, anomie and rage at perceived exclusion.

What these considerations suggest is that the narrative at the heart of QAnon should not be thought of as a "theory" at all, but rather, as a set of representations that combine—fuse—cognitive, normative and affective components in a way that believers find extremely persuasive because they are plausible to group members. Verisimilitude, truthfulness, makes reference to group-specific beliefs about the way things happen. When these group-specific beliefs are discriminatory, then narratives that confirm prejudices will seem truthful. When these group-specific beliefs are paranoid, then conspiracy narratives will seem plausible. By "plausibly", then, in a way we really mean both "prejudicially" and "paranoically". This connects with research showing a correlation between holding prejudices, paranoid ideation and entertaining conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al. 2020; Hart and Graether 2018). Conspiracy beliefs that may seem bizarre to wider audiences can appear to be truthful—because they seem plausible—within specifically prejudiced and paranoiac groups. Approaching the QAnon phenomenon as one produced by a conspiracy *story*, rather than a conspiracy theory, helps explicate the durability of this persuasive plausibility. Next, we consider the production and nature of the Q archive and how it is read, before turning to some specifics of the structure and content of the conspiracy story that it tells.

4. Thinking about QAnon as a Conspiracy *Story*

In her influential communicative theory of narratology, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan proposes that narrative is a representation of a succession of events, by a narrating agency, in which the intentional action of agents is included in the causal factors that present the events as connected (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, p. 2). In line with widely accepted distinctions, she proposes that the narrating agency presents "texts" in which a succession of events can be inferentially rearranged into a causal chain (or some other connective process) that constitutes the "story" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002, p. 3). Jürgen Habermas also draws on a communicative approach in suggesting that texts use poetic language to fuse complexes of cognitive, normative and expressive validity claims, which leads him to hint at a pragmatic position on the difference between fictional and factual narration (Habermas 1998, pp. 383–401). From that perspective, a story is always different to a theory, because, while the theory must present causal connections explicitly, a story is partly the result of inferences about causal connections from imagery and language. According to Geoff Boucher's reconstruction of this approach, fictional stories (and therefore the fictional texts that present these imaginative narratives), therefore, have a peculiar property of "equivocal reference" (Boucher 2021, pp. 129–33). Their referential world is imaginary, i.e., unreal in the Sartrean sense, but their relevance to the real world can be estimated by judgments about resemblances, so that although fictions lack truth, they nonetheless have verisimilitude. In the context of QAnon, what this means is that although the succession of events described in the Q-Drops seems like a narrative presentation of the conclusions from a falsifiable theory, it is nothing of the kind. Instead, it is a narrative presentation of a succession of events which resemble aspects of social reality without referring to real events in any theoretical way. That satisfies the criteria for an imaginative narration of a fictional story, but for the sake of readability, we will use the terms "narrative", "fiction" and "story", without qualifiers and interchangeably, from this point forward.

Against this conceptual background, we want to begin with some genetic reasons for thinking about QAnon as a *conspiracy story*. There is considerable evidence for the argument that the QAnon narrative developed from deliberate efforts to mainstream a set of right-wing authoritarian views about what then-President Trump's agenda should be, centered on crushing social justice movements and suppressing the Democratic Party (Badham 2021, pp. 167–99; Beverley 2020, loc. 926–1024; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021,

pp. 6–21; Rothschild 2021, pp. 17–39). Those efforts were undertaken by Paul Furber and Coleman Rogers, excellent candidates for being the original Q and highly active in the right-wing troll world of the website 4chan, by (successfully) approaching right-wing media celebrities, Jerome Corsi and Alex Jones. Before the metastasis that this provoked, according to the investigation of the Bellingcat international collective of researchers and journalists, QAnon emerged from the right-wing authoritarian /pol/ section of libertarian image board 4chan (Bellingcat 2021). Absolutely central to the /pol/ milieu was the practice of "LARPing", engaging in Live Action Role Plays, in which anonymous posters claimed to have secret knowledge about news events. QAnon, in other words, most likely originated from a LARP, which involves a kind of consensual fiction that hovers on the threshold of believability without ever quite becoming a true report (Badham 2021, pp. 170–85, 221–25; Beverley 2020, loc. 1144–214; Rothschild 2021, pp. 196–97).

As it happens, "Q Drop #1", reporting Hilary Clinton's detention (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146981635/#q147012719 accessed on 27 January 2022) is in fact a continuation of an initial claim, "Q Drop #0" predicting her imminent arrest (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146981635/#q147005381 accessed on 27 January 2022), perhaps by another anon, but probably by Q (The Q Origins Project 2021), that was denounced by the /pol/ milieu with a satirical gif, the "dance of the LARPer", and the comment, "oh god, not another one" (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146981635/#q147006341 accessed on 27 January 2022). However, as Q's apocalyptic predictions and cryptic lists of rhetorical questions slowly gained a following—with, for instance, a Q post about Barack Obama getting the response, "fucking five star bump because even if LARP, my almonds are activated" (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147433975/#q147440216 accessed on 27 January 2022) —the /pol/ milieu began to swing behind Q. Considering that by 15 November 2017, only 20 days into the Q phenomenon, Q's major prediction around which the entire narrative was constructed, had been spectacularly falsified by the complete absence of arrests of any leading Democrats, it is worth asking why. The consensus theory amongst Q researchers is that Q was preaching to the converted, telling the /pol/ milieu what they wanted to hear, so that even if the narrative was false, it was also somehow true (Badham 2021, pp. 167–99; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, pp. 6–21; PERIL and NCRI 2020, pp. 2–5; Rothschild 2021, pp. 17–39).

"Q's origins can't be divorced from the culture of /pol/, which was a rich slurry of racism, anti-Semitism, and (especially relevant here) right-wing conspiracy theories", writes Bellingcat. "QAnon was both an outgrowth and an evolution of /pol/ culture: not only were many of Q's claims already popular on /pol/, but Q borrowed key themes and ideas from predecessors" (Bellingcat 2021). Q's targets, Hillary Clinton as archfiend and offender (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146981635/#q147023341 accessed on 27 January 2022), George Soros as billionaire enabler (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147075091/#147109593 accessed on 27 January 2022), and Barack Obama as the Deep State's secret ambassador (https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/147433975/#147440171 accessed on 27 January 2022), had already been delineated as the unholy trinity within the /pol/ milieu, and their group belonging—a woman, a Black and a Jew—identified, in hate-filled posts, as marking them as deserving death. Q, then, was playing to their audience, and part of the game that they were playing was to re-present right-wing commonsense from an even more authoritarian perspective. "In other words, Q—far from leaking top-secret information to the Anons—simply repackaged what right-wing media (and therefore the Anons) were already discussing" (Bellingcat 2021).

The Bellingcat investigation concludes that what Q had, that other LARPers in the /pol/ environment lacked, was neither a list of accepted targets nor a new method of presentation, but a compelling *narrative* to connect these other two things up with. The other LARPs, also by high clearance secret figures, such as "FBI Anon", "CIA Anon", "High Level Insider" and "White House Insider", were:

> missing two key ingredients: storyline and storyteller. There was no overarching
> story to keep the Anons engaged, and even if there had been, [the others] weren't

the right persons to tell it—[their] threads were constantly derailed by outsiders coming in to make fun of [them]. Why did Q succeed where so many had failed? One reason is that Q had the right idea at the right time. Q also had the right style at the right time, often relying on long lists of leading questions. Other LARPers acknowledged as much—in 2017, MegaAnon, who was perhaps the most successful active LARPer when Q first appeared, wrote that Q was "doing a fantastic job" of "breaking down a ton of detail in a more /pol/-friendly format" than she'd ever been able to. (Bellingcat 2021)

In literary studies terms, this account and our reading of the Q archive suggest that we are dealing with genre fiction (such as, although not exclusively, fantasy) in which familiar tropes, themes, motifs and narrative structures—that is, conventions—are recombined. There is no need or desire for originality but rather a pleasure in the repetition of the expected akin to that of reading popular genre fiction (McCracken 1998). Genre, however, is not merely a set of texts that combine and re-combine conventions (although this typically happens in fiction, as we return to below), but "a set of constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning" which "shape and guide" to discourage some possible meanings and support others (Frow 2005, p. 8). For readers of /pol/, Q offers a powerful re-combination of the familiar that, crucially, *makes sense* within the context of the /pol/ genre of writing and reading. In that context, dominant reading practice of Q posts quickly became interpretation *as though they were true*, even when readers (occasionally) acknowledged that they may not be. The dominant interpretive practice of /pol/ enabled, even required, new material unrelated to the core strand (5G towers and so on) to be assimilated into the overarching narrative. Not all QAnons, of course, are denizens of /pol/, but that context is critical to the early stages of the phenomenon that point to the ways in which it functions as a conspiracy *story*.

While the LARPing element of QAnon and its use of social media to crowd-source conspiracy elements is new, the strong probability that it originated as a hoax, emanating from a single source with a right-wing authoritarian agenda, is dreadfully familiar. The link between fictional narratives and conspiracy theories is well established, as a glance at the reception history of another (but related) conspiracy theory, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, indicates. The Protocols were a deliberate forgery, constructed in part through plagiarizing nineteenth-century anti-Semitic popular fiction, which was then popularized by, for instance, re-publication by Henry Ford and repetition by Adolph Hitler (Bronner 2019; Cohn 1967). As noted already, several researchers have pointed to the disturbing proximity of the Q conspiracy to the *Protocols*, for the narratives of the Deep State and Satanic pedophilia resonate with the notions of the Zionist world government and blood libel that drove hate ideologies in the 1920s and 1930s. The most straightforward way to understand that convergence is to recognize that the leading authoritarian narrative on the extreme right in the USA today proposes the existence of a "Zionist Occupation Government" as the true nature of the Deep State, with Jewish people supposedly engaged in fostering racial miscegenation and multicultural polities in order to weaken the "white race". What QAnon does is to add child trafficking and Satanic ceremony to the white supremacist narrative, which brings it closer to, not further from, the blood libel form of aversive anti-Semitism.

In an analysis of the affinities between fiction and conspiracy that focuses on the *Protocols*, Eco argues that quite ordinary techniques of narrative construction mean that fictions are "structured like conspiracies" and that conspiracies are "structured like fictions" (Eco 1994, pp. 117–39). Fictions are often a profound simplification of reality, which present an historical society through the actions of a limited number of agents, whose decisions and relations make a difference to what happens in that world. In this respect, it is extremely difficult to differentiate on solely formal grounds between a fictional passage and a conspiracy theory. This indeterminacy is evidently maximal in the case of the *Protocols*, which were a fictional conspiracy, but it is important to remember that for contemporary actors, the status of the *Protocols* was somewhat more ambivalent. Indeed, perhaps the most

important thing to notice about the *Protocols* was the way that its affinities to fiction made it almost completely resistant to cognitive de-bunking. Right from the start, the *Protocols* were exposed as a forgery, but this made virtually no difference to its social and political impact (Bronner 2019, pp. 83–109). In a very similar way, exposure of the origins of QAnon in right-wing authoritarian LARP environments makes as little difference to adherents as the revelations about plagiarism in the *Protocols* made back then. We think that one of the things that this means is that adherents read conspiracy stories through the same epistemological lens that they read fictional narratives: they read for its truthfulness, not its truth. Against this background, we now turn to conspiracy research, which also suggests that such phenomena should be treated as stories, not pseudo-science.

5. The Role of Narratives in a Multidimensional Account

Thinking about the salient role of narratives in the QAnon conspiracy milieu can clarify the fusion of cognitive, normative and expressive components that is present in QAnon beliefs. By reformulating QAnon as a particular practice of storytelling, it becomes possible to say why this is peculiarly resistant to reality testing, moral argument or the moderation of feelings. Finally, consideration of the symbolic structure of the Q conspiracy makes it possible to bring insights from the study of other speculative narrative genres to bear on QAnon.

The importance of narratives in conspiracy thinking in general has been noted by Mark Fenster, who maintains that "the gripping dramatic story is ultimately at the heart of conspiracy theory" (Fenster 1999, p. 106). A forthcoming collection edited by Ben Carver, Dana Cracium and Todor Hristov, *Plots: Literary Form and Conspiracy Culture*, also promises to develop this argument, although it does not deal with QAnon (Carver et al. 2022). However, the work of Timothy Tangerlini and co-thinkers does develop a narrative model of QAnon, proposing that how conspiracy stories evolve is not unlike what happens in folklore contexts (Tangerlini et al. 2020). Specifically, conspiracy stories provide plastic narrative frameworks that can support intrusions of special agents ("legends") across domains, as a way of aligning domains connotatively. This aims to explain:

> the ability of conspiracy theories to link and integrate seemingly disconnected realms of discourse, and second, their totalizing nature, aiming to concatenate disparate domains of knowledge into a single domain, through the intervention of an explanatory meta-story. The alignment of multiple domains, rather than the intersection of domains, is the main invention of the conspiracy theory, in effect eliding the previous limits separating discourses. Instead of challenging the existing cultural ideology of the group within which the conspiracy narrative circulates, by breaking through domain boundaries, as the legend does, the conspiracy theory attempts a grand unifying gesture by aligning all of the different domains, developing an overarching metanarrative as a means for normalizing the otherwise jarring intrusions of legends. (Tangerlini et al. 2020, p. 5)

QAnon's legends are figures such as Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, Barack Obama and George Soros, as well as crypto-institutions such as the global child sex-trafficking ring and the elite cabal. The conspiracy metanarrative is the antagonism between "the Storm" and the "Deep State", which creates a Manichaean confrontation between good and evil. The intrusion of a legend from the metanarrative into any new domain—for instance, COVID-19, 5G telecommunications, the Prism project, Area 51, Black Lives Matter, etc.— polarizes that domain and aligns its poles within the global antagonism. They all become, as it were, theatres of operations in the great war between good and evil, characterized by a militarized logic of confrontation and camouflage. However, what they do not become— they do not even resemble it—is a theoretical totalization that seeks to grasp a segment of social reality in a coherent model.

Against this conceptual background, we want to return to the idea that conspiracy beliefs also benefit from a peculiar property of literary representations, which is that they *fuse* cognitive, normative and affective aspects of a state of affairs into a unified

presentation of a possible experience, where "the whole is greater than the parts". What this means is that the separation of cognitive, normative and affective components of the representation into specific testable claims misses something essential about how and why the representation impacts the reader. In the context of a communicative theory of literary fictions (Habermas 1998, pp. 383–401), the idea here is that this property works through resemblance and brokers identification. Narrative presentations do not get tested like scientific claims—rather, they "truthfully" resemble the world when they represent typical patterns of human action in ways the reader finds plausible. The problem with verisimilitude, or "truthfulness", though, in the current context, is that what is implausible from the perspective of social consensus can, nonetheless, be completely plausible from the perspective of prejudice. For instance: "*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, pretty accurate, whether a forgery or not" (Rothschild 2021, p. 51 8kun anon quoted). As Peter Deutschmann notes, the narrative communication of conspiracy beliefs generates antagonistically aligned reception communities where the "interpretive process involves a significant amount of trust" (Deutschmann 2020, p. 27). Furthermore, the narrative representation of possible experience can take advantage of the circular form of self-confirmation proper to literary identification. Literary representations, which consist of imagined experiences, provide new opportunities for possible experience because they constitute a "truth potential" that is realized, not discursively or argumentatively, but by living out the narrative fiction. That happens when the reader identifies with the worldview presented by the narrative and modifies their attitudes, beliefs or personality accordingly (Gerrig 1993). Accounts of individuals' fall "down the rabbit hole" that follow being "Q-pilled", involving massive shifts in attitudes and behavior, friendships and relationships, and location in society and politics, are an eloquent, if terrible, testimony to this phenomenon (Badham 2021, pp. 311–28; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, pp. 86–112; Rothschild 2021, pp. 91–94, 105–21).

Narrative discourse discloses anew a familiar reality in an "eye-popping" way, which accounts for readers' perceptions that the story is "truthful". This also provides a possible *experience*, something which has a "potential for truth" when integrated into the life history of the individual (Habermas 1998, p. 388). Those who find the story truthful, in other words, may be tempted to live out its possible experiences in their own lives—and those who do find that the story was "true" because they made it so. That can be described analytically in terms of the combination of the perceived "truthfulness" of a narrative with its "potential for truth": narratives seem truthful to readers because they plausibly represent not exactly what happened, but what happens typically. By adopting the existential and social attitudes implied by the narrative discourse as actual, lived social practices, however, the readership community transforms a "potential for truth" into a true representation of what *does*, in fact, happen. That might explain how, in any particular representation, the feeling of how things typically happen and the practical community that provides an alternative are at least as important to the plausibility of the narrative as any cognitive prediction about an event. We do not see this account as conflicting with our description of QAnon as situated within a genre, but rather as cognate to it in a common reflection of the structures of narrative construction and interpretation.

6. The Q Texts as a "Literature of Subversion"

QAnon, then, can be understood as a conspiracy story that emerged within a genre reading community that already employed reading practices which encouraged the acceptance of its truthfulness because of pre-existing (conventional) beliefs about the nature of the world and specific actors within it. This is not to suggest that QAnon merely appeals to those already inclined to believe ill; its extraordinary speed and scale of growth renders such a claim facile. To this point, we have offered insights from literary studies into how a great variety of bizarre claims have been assimilated into the QAnon conspiracy story, and why demonstrable (and demonstrated) falsehoods have no effect on believers. In this section, we consider some of the specific outlandish claims as features rather than

bugs in the QAnon story and suggest that they function to make it more, rather than less, believable.

Rosemary Jackson's significant and still-influential interpretation of fantasy fiction identified a particular kind of fantasy literature as a "literature of subversion" (Jackson 1981). The specific texts she was talking about belong to the region known as the "fantastic", as theorized by Tzvetan Todorov (Todorov 1975). These narratives are characterized by uncanniness and uncertainty, produced by the equilibrium between mimetic (or "realistic") and marvelous (or "magical") elements in the representations. This balancing act means that the reader epistemologically hesitates between an explanation of the action in natural terms and in supernatural terms. In a paradigmatic work of the fantastic, such as Henry James' ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw*, for instance, the reader is never certain whether the ghosts in the tower exist or are the product of the governess's disturbed state of mind. Q is not a fantasy novel nor a ghost story, but it does involve a deliberately induced epistemological hesitation between the supernatural reality of Satan and the naturalistic explanation that some people believe in Satan.

If this sounds bizarre, it is worth remembering that QAnon's terrorist actions and kidnapping plots have involved adherents who really believed that they were participants in a battle against supernatural evil, or that they were rescuing children from Satanist pedophiles (Rothschild 2021, pp. 107–9, 112–19). Whether an individual believer comes down on the side of the metaphysical Satan or the psychological explanation that "the elites" worship Satan is irrelevant, of course, but this is exactly the point. Likewise, it does not matter whether 'Q' (as individual or collective) believes in Satan as a metaphysical reality or uses such references to symbolize evil. When Q asks rhetorically, "Does Satan exist? Does the 'thought' of Satan exist?" (Q 2021, Drop #18) they deliberately stoke uncertainty, inviting believers to puzzle out the precise nature of the connection between Satan, or "Satan", and the elite. This is the kind of smoke that "proves" there must be fire somewhere.

The narrative strategy of the Q texts, then, is highly reminiscent of the technique of the fantastic, with the reader uncertain of whether the struggle between light and dark is to be interpreted as a political metaphor or as a metaphysical reality. This elemental form of epistemological hesitation then informs the other kinds of epistemological problems that the texts set up, such as the proofs of Q's existence, the causal relation between events, and the question of whether a statement is disinformation or not. For QAnon believers (such as many Evangelical Christians) who *do* believe in Satan as a metaphysical reality, other fantastic elements may serve the same purpose (and reinforce it to those who do not); for example, the claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin had revealed that most world leaders were shapeshifting reptiles rather than humans.

Many discussions of the Q texts focus on the mimetic elements, such as the "encrypted communiques" that are modelled on spy thrillers, and on the pseudo-reference to real world events that this facilitates. It is indeed a striking thing about the universe that emerges from the Q texts is that it is formed around a right-wing news digest, re-presented through the conventions of popular-fictional representations of military-intelligence communications, and then relayed through "politically incorrect" chan-speak. In many respects, in its efforts to construct an insider's diagram of the Deep State, what it actually achieves is just a meta-political commentary on the media-driven melodrama that happens within the Washington Beltway. This is then larded with terminology from the 'chan' troll websites, meme culture, Breitbart articles and references to Youtube videos and desultorily sprinkled with allusions to biblical themes, fairy tales and popular culture. The kinds of shattering disclosure (with overwhelming evidence) achieved by Edward Snowden or Bob Woodward are entirely absent; in its place is a pattern of innuendo framed by a series of refrains, which Rothschild describes as "thought terminating cliches" (Rothschild 2021, p. 222). Q's news digest is used to launch a raft of speculations, framed as rhetorical questions, which always lead to the same conclusion: military dictatorship, vast numbers of arrests, extra-judicial trials and mass executions. Here is an excellent example (Q 2021, Drop #35):

Anonymous ID:pGukiFmX Thu 02 Nov 2017 00:54:52 No.147581302

Military Intelligence.

No media.

No leaks.

How many MI generals have been in/out of WH in the past 30 days?

Focus on Flynn.

Background and potential role.

What is the common denominator in terms of military backgrounds close to POTUS?

Why did Soros transfer the bulk of his 'public' funds to a NPO?

Why is this relevant?

Who owes a lot to very bad actors?

How can she repay as payment was made under promise of victory.

What cash payments occurred by BO during the last 90 of his Presidency to foreign states and/ or organizations?

What slush fund did AG Sessions (through DOJ) put an end to?

How does Soros, Obama, Clinton, Holder, Lynch, etc all net many millions of dollars (normally within a single tax year).

What was negotiated on the tarmac between BC and Lynch?

Remember it was expected HRC was going to win during this time period.

What if the wizards and warlocks tipped off a local reporter as to the supposed unscheduled stop?

What if the NSA under the personal direction from Adm R had this meeting miscat and logged under a false identity to prevent bad actors from locating while also verifying to said players all was clear_no logs.

What really happened when the wizards and warlocks revealed what they had?

Was Comey forced into the spotlight shortly thereafter not by choice? Right before the election no doubt which would cast suspicion?

These are crumbs and you cannot imagine the full and complete picture.

If Trump failed, if we failed, and HRC assumed control, we as Patriots were prepared to do the unthinkable (this was leaked internally and kept the delegate recount scam and BO from declaring fraud).

Dig deeper—missing critical points to paint the full picture.

There is simply no other way than to use the military. It's that corrupt and dirty.

Please be safe and pray for those in harms way as they continually protect and serve our great country.

Notice that the only "revelation" in this entire post is the reference to the meeting between Bill Clinton and (then) Attorney General Loretta Lynch on the tarmac in Phoenix, Arizona, on 27 June 2016, as detailed in Mike Horowitz's report (released 15 June 2018), which Trump supporters regarded as evidence of collusion between the Obama Administration and Hilary Clinton's election campaign (Timsit 2018). By November, that was old news, but its exemplary status functions as a "proof point" that informs the raft of suspicions surrounding it, adding up to the unimaginable "full and complete picture". That picture then justifies the resort to "do the unthinkable"—"there is no other way than to use the military"—which, however, represented Q's *first*, not *last* resort, since it was the main theme of the frenzied 5 initial days of 32 posts, leading up to Q's address to their "fellow Americans". Predicting the installation of martial law under Trump's direction on 3 November 2017, including the lifting of restraints on the military's use of force against domestic and foreign enemies, Q promised waves of arrests, military control and special

operations (Q 2021, Drop #33). In the lead up to the 2018 midterm elections and then the 2020 presidential election, the same narrative strategy opposed a coalition of the military, militias and Anons, to "the no borders, pro pedo, destroy ICE, socialist movement—Antifa (arm of Democratic Party)" (Q 2021, Drop #1741).

Right at the heart of this rhetorical strategy of spy thriller-style coded drops about impending civil war, however, is a fantasy narrative about POTUS versus the servants of Satan. Their plenipotentiary is "Godfather III", George Soros, the Jewish billionaire philanthropist [72 posts], and their exchequer is the Rothschild bankers, a Jewish family [15 posts]. Their base of operations is Saudi Arabia [275 posts]. While this may sound out-landish, it must not be forgotten that one of the first reforms by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was to align the House of Saud [17 posts] with recognition of the right of the Jewish people to their own nation state (Goldberg 2018). This narrative strand is where the lurid inventions regarding child trafficking, Satanic rituals and pedophilic abuse are located. It is also where Satan Himself lives [5 posts]. On 11 November 2017, introducing this theme, Q invoked no less an authority than Vladimir Putin to authenticate their claims, while setting forth what would become a characteristically ambivalent invocation of both the natural and the supernatural interpretations of Satanism (Q 2021, Drop #18):

> Q !ITPb.qbhqo ID:gO/UntOB Sat 11 Nov 2017 23:29:35 No.149063235
> Hard to swallow.
> Important to progress.
> Who are the puppet masters?
> House of Saud (6+++)—$4 Trillion+
> Rothschild (6++)—$2 Trillion+
> Soros (6+)—$1 Trillion+
> Focus on above (3).
> Public wealth disclosures—False.
> Many governments of the world feed the 'Eye'.
> Think slush funds (feeder).
> Think war (feeder).
> Think environmental pacts (feeder).
> Triangle has (3) sides.
> Eye of Providence.
> Follow the bloodlines.
> What is the keystone?
> Does Satan exist?
> Does the 'thought' of Satan exist?
> Who worships Satan?
> What is a cult?
> Epstein island.
> What is a temple?
> What occurs in a temple?
> Worship?
> Why is the temple on top of a mountain?
> How many levels might exist below?
> What is the significance of the colors, design and symbol above the dome?
> Why is this relevant?
> Who are the puppet masters?
> Have the puppet masters traveled to this island?
> When? How often? Why?
> "Vladimir Putin: The New World Order Worships Satan"
> Q

By 29 June 2020, Q felt the need to alert the President directly to this metaphysical possibility. In the context of proposing that pandemic regulations and civil disturbances

represent an uprising, and imploring President Trump to respond with "legitimate repression", Q identifies the "Invisible Enemy" with both the Deep State and a minority group in the human population. "In recent months we have been witnessing the formation of two opposing sides that I would call Biblical", Q announces, "the children of light and the children of darkness" (Q 2021, Drop #4541).

> The children of light constitute the most conspicuous part of humanity, while the children of darkness represent an absolute minority . . . [yet] hold strategic positions in government, in politics, in the economy and in the media. . . . These two sides, which have a Biblical nature, follow the clear separation between the offspring of the Woman and the offspring of the Serpent. . . . It is a spiritual battle, . . . [where] these two opposing realities co-exist as eternal enemies, just as God and Satan are eternal enemies.

Now, in light of the postulated links between Jewish finance and the Deep State, this representation of the spiritual stakes in the struggle against darkness can have only one interpretation. The idea that an "absolute minority" of the human population is actually the spawn of Satan can be nothing other than a presentation of the "two seed" theory of Christian Identity (Barkun 1997; Kaplan 1997). That belief system is the most important source of religiously-inspired terrorism in the USA today and it implies that the "Satanic", Jewish-backed Deep State is none other than the "Zionist Occupation Government" of the neo-Nazi imaginary (Barkun 2018; Kaplan 2018; Michael 2009). Q insists that "patriots have no skin color" (Q 2021, Drop #4426), but they certainly do have religious preferences, and these allegiances preclude Jewishness or Judaism. Although the Q text, consisting of 4,953 drops comprising 201,275 words, represents an epistolary fiction, as many commentators have noticed and as we gesture to above (Badham 2021; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Rothschild 2021), its vision is inspired by the worldview represented by that other incredibly successful fraud, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The mix of spy-thriller speculation and claims, then, may be either literally or symbolically true—or both—in the meaning-making process that is QAnon. The questioning style of the posts quoted above re-creates a foundational epistemological uncertainty. Whether Satan (or another potentially supernatural element) is understood as a metaphysical reality or political metaphor by an individual adherent, any statement in a Q drop is open to interpretation literally, symbolically, or in combination. As we have noted above, conspiracy beliefs that seem bizarre to non-adherents can seem truthful to believers because they are plausible (in a paranoid and prejudiced worldview). This can be the case even when the narratives seem "mythological"; that is, they take place in an imaginary universe that merely symbolizes, rather than directly represents, the real world, and they concern larger-than-life actors who personify discriminatory stereotypes. The proximity of QAnon to messianic discourses, especially messianic discourses of right-wing extremism in the USA, is noticeable at this point. When predictions do not come true, claims are de-bunked and so on, the *truthfulness* of the QAnon narrative is not *just* that "x is typically true" but that "x is *symbolically* true"; this or that instance may not have taken place as predicted, but in the space of mythology, an imaginary universe that symbolizes rather than directly representing the world, claims and predictions are more real than reality. Without the presence of the 'fantasy' element, the QAnon narrative would not have this symbolic dimension that opens up a second layer of 'truthfulness' for falsified and falsifiable statements and claims.

7. Conclusions: Structures of Feeling

The normative account of QAnon points to a space in social recognition, as that concept is theorized by Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Social recognition means the reciprocal expectations of mutual respect and mutual esteem, which inform rights and status, respectively. The point made by recognition theorists which is important here is that respect and esteem can involve *asymmetrical*, as well as symmetrical, expectations, that is, *differential* rights and *superior* status for some groups, depending on the society. Moreover, this is precisely the case with American society up to the recent

historical past. Not surprisingly, then, the recognition space of white middle-class America has recently been described in the sociological literature on authoritarian populism as one characterized by "cultural backlash" (Inglehart and Norris 2017, 2019). In brief, this has to do with the entitled grievances of relatively privileged strata, who are opposed to substantive, rights-based justice and to dismantling the forms of cultural denigration. The core of this grievance is that the compensatory privileges (such as race-based and gender-based privileges), which formerly made the social existence of certain social strata seem tolerable, have been partially dismantled in the last 30 years. The "cultural backlash" behind authoritarian populism is opposed to the extension of rights, substantive equality and dismantling denigration that have achieved this social change. Authoritarian populists describe these changes as the alien agenda of "social justice warriors" who constitute a "thought police" intent on imposing "political correctness" on the "silent majority". In general terms, the conspiracy theories that arise against the background of progressive social change tend to have the form of nostalgic narratives about the shadowy forces who have stolen a golden past (Gabriel 2021). Accordingly, the normative orientation behind QAnon belief, grasped as a practical, not a theoretical, relation, can be interpreted as aimed at building a counter-culture within which recognition relations would function as they did before the 1970s.

This account of QAnon points to the way that the often-reported-to-interviewers experience of "no longer feeling at home in my own country" is the motivational correlate to the conspiracy narrative's normative orientation (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, pp. 83–86). QAnon adherents report being motivated by rage (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021, pp. 97–98), which is a "justificatory" emotion—rage is the emotion that corresponds to a feeling of having suffered egregious wrong (Fischer et al. 2018). The wrong is, of course, that their differential rights and superior status have been taken away by an egalitarian conception of mutual respect and mutual esteem. It is worth observing here that a feeling of injustice (whether real or perceived) has been identified as a consistent element in varied pathways of radicalization to violent extremism (Jensen et al. 2020). At the same time, QAnon adherents also report feeling ashamed and humiliated by the denigration that they perceive themselves to have experienced from mainstream politicians, the liberal media and public intellectuals. A good example of this is the fury that Hilary Clinton's comment, that Trump supporters were a "basketful of deplorables", aroused. The expressive motivation informing conspiracy belief, grasped as involving rage at humiliation, involves smashing what adherents perceive as "political correctness" (which is why QAnon originated on a Reddit called "politically incorrect", or "/pol/". Having dismantled the "thought police", they will then be able to express feelings of being owed extra respect and belonging to a superior racial and cultural group, without fear of being called to account for it.

Approaching the Q archive as telling a story rather than espousing a theory, as we have argued for here, makes it legible as an affective script that takes up, validates and legitimizes such pre-existing feelings on multiple levels. Displacing the hatred produced by racism and misogyny, and the rage at being unable to express it fully and freely onto symbolic 'evil' actors, justifies those feelings even as it lends cover to them in the eyes of mainstream society. Once its claims are understood as truthful (even if at some points falsified), then the Q story demands not only righteous rage but righteous hate—and offers targets: liberal elites, Jewish people, the media, etc. The narrative, with its core tale of powerful evil preying on the powerless, justifies and intensifies feelings that already exist (and have been actively stoked by conservative politicians and media since at least the 1980s). It is truthful, for adherents, because it *feels* true in its (to them) plausible explanation of reality. The narrative makes meaning, and thus creates affect, through questioning rhetoric and epistemological hesitation (which is not the same as cognitive dissonance) that requires active interpretation, even as the community of readers limits possible understandings and, therefore, feelings.

We are not experts or practitioners in countering radicalization, and our aim in the article, therefore, has been to offer new ways of understanding the nature of QAnon rather

than practical methods for countering its power. Our arguments here do point to significant conclusions that may usefully inform action, however. If QAnon is a "feeling machine" that narratively generates grievance, rage and hate through a combination of content, rhetoric and genre, falsification on cognitive grounds (x did not happen, pointing out internal contradictions or absurdities, etc.) is unlikely to produce desired results. Rather, alternative or counter-narratives must have affective and symbolic resonances for people who are outraged about what they see as loss of social place and power.

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