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INTRODUCTION
CONSPIRACY/ THEORY

The twenty-first century has dawned as an era of generalized epistemic crisis, an age of propaganda, of wall-to-wall psyops, disorientation campaigns, and attentional hacks. The narrative techniques being drawn on stem from ancient practices as well as from technological revolutions in digital communication of all kinds. Social media and smart phones deploying novel product designs based on the latest algorithms and theories of subjectivity have become pervasive and highly efficient in capturing, controlling, and directing attention. As the weaponization of the infosphere intensifies, individuals being targeted for influence are left to their own evaluative capacities and are challenged to explain to themselves a world that abandons and obfuscates, misinforms, and routinely injures and kills. The origins of this distributed, direct, and indirect violence must be understood in terms of how information technologies are used to organize and narrativize the ways we apprehend problems, turning the sensory regimes and mass-mediated experiences of life into arguments about what hurts and why, about the potentials and dangers of the moment, and about the prospects of creating some kind of collective future. The response of mainstream journalists to this situation of intensified epistemic precarity has mostly been to declare the arrival of a new "golden age" of conspiracy theory.

Obscured by this blanket characterization is the fact that conspiracy theories come in many varieties, and they appeal unevenly and in different ways to whatever audiences they successfully hail. Most generally, a distinction can be made between speculative narratives that are demonstrably preposterous (that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global hoax) and those that are more or less plausible because, for example, they speak to

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long-standing structural inequalities or can be proven, in retrospect, to have been true (such as racist redlining in housing). Plausible narratives are undergirded by what Hannah Arendt (2006a, 218) calls "factual truths," which are by no means self-evident but are subject to communal, public adjudication. For Arendt, politics takes place within a domain of plural, contingent opinions, presupposing an understanding of freedom rooted in an appreciation of the human capacity for speech and other kinds of action, and where the establishment, maintenance, and constructive disputation of what counts as a fact are all important parts of sustaining political life. Facts, although vulnerable, are also stubborn, according to Arendt, so that airbrushing Trotsky out of Soviet images of the Russian Revolution did not render him a nonparticipant in its history.

Arendt tells us that the exercise of sound political judgment depends on people acting together in the inevitably messy world of human opinion and sharing a common world, which the erosion of a fact-based discourse undermines. However, even in a world of too much information, often the facts are not available or are subject to the distortion of a globalized economy, a planetary scale environmental disruption, or the compounding effects of covert institutions and activities. To think collectively in this current era requires the cultivation of new practices of attunement that simultaneously disrupt status-quo conventionality and induce solidarity across existing fault lines. Addressing others who may be very different from oneself suggests opening up styles of thinking that embrace ambiguity and foster curiosity, regenerating what Kant called a "sensus communis" or "common sense." This *sensus communis* is always contingent, indeterminate, open to revision, and a product of ongoing exploration and disagreement. But admittedly, a Kantian-Arendtian common sense is often not nearly enough; individuals can live in siloed communities, not sharing basic orientations toward politics, factual evidence, or concepts of agency within a broader public. There are also ontological differences in worlds, based on historical experience, religious viewpoints, and radical differences in obligations to land, environment, and futurity (e.g., see Jackson 2008; Turner 1993). So, in the contemporary moment of intensifying wealth consolidation, dirty wars, and new expressions of right-wing populism, individuals feel the need to activate other sensibilities as well, modalities of thought that are intuitive, anticipatory, and skeptical and that employ modes of serious speculation often as techniques for basic survival.

Conspiracy/Theory interrogates—despite real and consequential differences, as noted above—the elective affinities between *aspects* of conspirato-

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rial thinking and our intellectual practice of critical theory, an acknowledgment of the ways in which people—in their individual capacities as experts, theorists, and/or ordinary citizens—are motivated to find patterns, uncover what is hidden, and attend to dimensions of life that might be hiding in plain sight. Both plausible and not-so-plausible, offensive and admirable explorations of events and issues depend on "connecting the dots." It is by rendering complex and confusing appearances coherent, or by revealing logics that have hitherto eluded big-picture scrutiny, that patterns are perceived. Not all these activities and accounts are equally salutary, of course, and some are surely pernicious for politics, but they are nonetheless symptomatic and indicative of current conditions.

Although much has been made of digital forms of "surveillance capitalism" in industrial and postindustrialized spaces (Zuboff 2019), our interest here is more on the ways in which the practice of questioning the terms of a shared reality appears in the form of efficacious and at times highly profitable social media enterprises, which has implications for the exercise of political judgment and the attention evaluation requires. Put differently, the multiplatform social media revolution since the advent of the twenty-first century has worked to democratize psyops—allowing individuals across the world to influence perceptions on a population scale in a way that was formerly possible only for large corporations and nation-states (see Donovan et al. 2021).[1] This means that for every progressive activist working to advance the common cause, other players, both foreign and domestic, are waging sophisticated disorientation campaigns, some of which are overtly designed to attack the very possibility of collectivity itself, with the effect of stalling, confusing, or preventing action on a vast array of unfolding problems that we do share in common (Curtis 2016).

The informational practices democratizing psyops, perhaps counterintuitively, are highly conducive to new forms of authoritarianism and to intensifying strains of authoritarianism in democracies. They operate by fomenting competing and irreconcilable framings of reality, by disputing recorded facts and documented actions, and by committing explicitly to speech as a dedicated form of information warfare. As a consequence, theorizing contemporary conditions requires a combination of judgment and intuition if we are to cut through the informational distortion fields and find both refuge and allies in the search for positive collective futures.

We know from concrete examples that authoritarian regimes are able to enforce obedience not only or even necessarily by cultivating belief but also by using information technologies to sow confusion and paralysis

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among some citizens, to polarize others, and to generate widespread political despondency by forcing people constantly to address the very thing they want to dismiss. The atmosphere of epistemic murk we find in authoritarian systems today works by generating conditions of uncertainty that make political judgment all the more difficult. To keep up with the barrage of information and misinformation coming at them, people toggle between belief and unbelief, and between regimes, states, cultural producers, and civil society organizations, undergoing micropolitical encounters inside an affective environment that complicates the fundamental binary between belief and unbelief, such that one can know something and not know it at the same time, just as one can feel something and know something else. Apprehension, not only in the sense of anxiety but also as information comprehension and capture, is part and parcel of authoritarian politics today; it helps shape and intensify the attraction of conspiracy theorizing (see Wedeen 2019, and this volume).

These modalities of control, labeled authoritarian, are not confined to autocracies, of course, as our examples of social media and our theoretical positioning make clear. The US national security state functions more-or-less openly by manipulating perception, emotions, and imaginations. It does so in large part by fomenting images of dangerous others that require and enable a vast range of political and military projects which could not be otherwise pursued through formal democratic means (see Masco 2014, and this volume). Indeed, the United States rides on the foundational contradiction of being a country that formally espouses democratic principles and equality while officially pursuing permanent warfare, white supremacy, and radical class consolidation (see Rana 2010). The daily structure of democratic discourse and practice in the United States involves negotiating this split not only at the level of policy but also at the level of imaginations and affects. Historically, this structural contradiction has been managed by undertaking covert military actions abroad and by engaging in democracy-reduction techniques at home (Singh 2017; C. Anderson 2018)—both of which depend on social mechanisms to silence voices, induce amnesia, or render valid critiques a form of unreason.

Given the inequality with which social orders are generally afflicted, anticipation, intuition, skepticism, and suspicion have become necessary modes of attention for dealing with the unpredictable daily "weather," as Christina Sharpe (2016) might say of racism; they are ways of navigating long-standing and explicit forms of structural violence that can erupt

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at any moment with ferocious intensity. In the twenty-first century we are seeing powerful recursive interactions among militarism, corporate financial interests, environmental destabilization, and revolutionary information technologies that attack perception itself in the pursuit of profits. In the United States, foundational violences in the forms of anti-blackness, indigenous dispossession, immigrant exclusion, and predatory whiteness meet in the twenty-first century with the rebounding effects of industrial capital (Who lost their job or home today because of global finance?), militarization (What drone attack or police intervention took a child's life today?), and corporate forces opposed to addressing climate change (Who, at the moment, is experiencing fire, flood, storm, or drought?). These compounding conditions add new forms of collective stress and injury to long-standing inequalities, the effects of which are felt on enormous collective scales with highly variable temporalities and local intensities. What is the right language for the imbrication of these forces and their consequences for any individual? And who is so confident, or comfortable, in their everyday life that they are not pressed to theorize a current state of being?

THE POWER OF PLOT

As a term, *conspiracy theory* has a surprisingly short history in the English language, originating in the context of Cold War politics in the mid-twentieth-century United States. Despite its short existence, however, the term has played an outsized role in policing what counts as acceptable modes of political discourse (see Melley 2000, and this volume). As an accusation, a mode of dismissal, conspiracy theory has proven key in maintaining and regulating inequality, militarism, white supremacy, and geopolitical hegemony. The CIA, for example, advised all its branches to designate those criticizing the Warren Report or other federal judgments as "conspiracy theorists"—deploying the term from 1967 on as a method of patrolling speech and undermining critics (see deHaven-Smith 2013). Since then, conspiracy theory has also become a literary genre, appearing as a narrative form with entertainment value across print, film, radio, and the internet. And it operates in support of multimodal forms of information warfare, a means of spreading disruptive information for political advantage or, in today's commitments to online lulz, for subversive counterinstitutional individual pleasure (Coleman 2014) or for political or

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financial profit (e.g., Rush Limbaugh's or Glenn Beck's radio shows or Alex Jones's online *Infowars*).

Here it is important to note how politically vulnerable media platforms have become to misinformation campaigns in the twenty-first century. One of Vladimir Putin's first acts as president of Russia in 2000 was to take control of television networks, allowing the Kremlin, as Peter Pomerantsev writes (2014, 231), to finally master "the art of fusing reality TV and authoritarianism to keep the great, 140-million-strong population, entertained, distracted, and constantly exposed to geopolitical nightmares, which if repeated enough times can become infectious," and thus enabling conspiracy theories to overwhelm any possibility for citizens to maintain a stable view of the world. The goal of authoritarian conspiracy theory is to create a world not where truth does not exist but where finding it is too exhausting for the individual, thus encouraging a relinquishing of judgment to the state or to a particular site's seductive narrative, a project that is familiar to us today from Orban's Hungary, Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Trump's United States. Trump's presidency was supported by Fox News and a network of reinforcing radio and internet programs, but it was enabled by Twitter and Facebook, which allowed him to have direct communication with his supporters. Only on these social media platforms could Trump bypass fact-checking reviews, demonize opponents, test messaging for affective appeal, and construct an alternative political narrative, all while raising money.

That said, for generations, to be accused of being a "conspiracy theorist" was to have one's perspective devalued, relegated to the unserious, the deranged, the untrustworthy, even the pathological. But pause here for a moment to consider how often you as a reader have had access to all the information needed to evaluate collective conditions across economy, politics, and environment. A more complex infosphere has come with more narrowly specialized experts, yet each of us is in some sense responsible for judging the whole, for discerning truths and dangers, who to be with and which encounters to avoid. This is not to deny the distinction to be made between rigorous theoretical discourse that is consciously based on some substantial empirical exercise and the profusion of conspiratorial assertions devoted to demonizing the political opposition (for profit or for control or both) that attempts to displace possibilities for substantive intellectual interrogation.

What we *are* suggesting is that the array of epistemological conundrums to be identified makes it often difficult to find the appropriate in-

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terpretative voice to engage the local effects of global political problems. Anthropogenic global warming—a consolidated effect of a century of petrochemical capitalism—was well understood by Big Oil as a cost of their industry as early as the 1980s. Exxon, Shell, and other oil companies made corporate decisions in the early 1990s to gaslight on a planetary scale; to obfuscate the environmental science their own research teams had produced; to find people with PhDs for hire, some of whom hailed from fields with no relation to the environment, and to deploy them to dispute the findings of climate scientists. A well-funded and substantial enterprise has been responsible for setting up think tanks and sophisticated information warfare operations to convince various publics that virtually the entire population of working environmental scientists do not know what they are talking about (Oreskes and Conway 2010). This is an explicit petrochemical program to protect profits—literally at the cost of the planetary biosphere—a corporate conspiracy against collective life and the very idea of environmental governance.

Or, from another angle, how should citizens understand current messages from the US security state in light of previous histories of disinformation? The George W. Bush administration's 2001–3 domestic psyops campaign (in which then-Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was held responsible for the suicide-hijacker attacks on 9/11 and was allegedly in possession of illegal weapons of mass destruction with which he intended to imminently attack the United States) is one dramatic example of an all-too-familiar system of strategic lying in international politics that transformed both domestic and global worlds in the process. These particular falsehoods were orchestrated directly from the White House and disseminated through the United States' most reputable news media (the *New York Times, Washington Post,* CNN), with the effect of converting a real and devastating attack on US citizens into an illegal assault on a completely uninvolved state, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, with millions more displaced throughout the region. The Bush administration's hoax was a foundational act in what became a global "war on terror," with its attendant practices of US torture and illegal detention. And it involved a vast domestic surveillance system that depended on the complicity of most of the major information technology companies in the world (AT&T, Google, Facebook, Microsoft). What, exactly, is the appropriate analytic stance toward politics in the aftermath of such consequential revelations of governmental mendacity, domestic psyops campaigns, officially sanctioned illegality, and commercial tech giants' complicity?

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Isn't the stance of the caricatured conspiracy theorist—the one worried about government surveillance, public deception, and the disruption of ordinary life by state and corporate entities—closer to the truth than that of the normative political subject who doubts that such things are done, but, if they have been done, trusts it must have been "necessary," that is, a subject who chooses to refuse to question, let alone judge?

These conundrums raise the question of how one disagrees with the ideological recruitment techniques of the moment, how one challenges the veracity of governmental actions that are cloaked by national security protocols, or how one challenges corporate programs that stack the scientific debate to get the answer that is most profitable. For example, in the late 1990s, Purdue Pharma marketed its new prescription drug oxycontin as a nonaddictive form of pain relief. It was touted as a major medical breakthrough that offered a safe medication for people enduring terrible suffering. But rather than relieving pain, oxycontin produced an opioid epidemic in the United States that has claimed well over half a million lives since 1998. How is one to act in a world where government-approved drugs, prescribed by credentialed doctors to treat real pain, produce a cumulative domestic death rate greater than the number of US soldiers who died fighting in World War II?

Or, to put this differently: calling a given line of thought a conspiracy theory opens a complex rather than self-evident political field. The term has been weaponized for generations to discount, dismiss, and contain people's expressions of what they are actually experiencing in their lives and what they, based on limited information at hand, are trying to understand. The charge has been used to dismiss those who claim the state is using its powers to surveil citizens, misdirect debate, and kill with impunity, even as the state does so. Many conspiratorial narratives remain at the margins because practices of state secrecy create a de facto alibi for antidemocratic actions, for imperial and police violence, for financial corruption and lousy policy. Because individuals lack substantial documentation, the appropriate credentials, and authorized legal standing, they wind up disempowered, cast as irrational subjects. Thus, for every antivaxxer who denies the value of biomedicine and for every 9/11-truther insisting that the United States or the Mossad bombed the World Trade Center to unlock a new world order—views presumably few readers would embrace without convincing evidence and more questioning—there is a vast section of the population experiencing material and psychic distress and working to survive in a violent world while not able to

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trust officials who are known to lie, or experts who are frequently bought, or mass media that all too readily propagandize for profit.

It is not at all a simple thing in the twenty-first century to assess or locate the origins of harm within a globalized, mass-mediated, late-industrial society that is proliferating violences that are both fast (i.e., warfare, police oppression, gun violence) and slow (poverty, pollution, climate disruption) and that operate with a wide range of intensities and concentrations (see Nixon 2011). How can or should one orient oneself from within complex global networks and systems that are both emergent and experimental as well as frequently occluded (either secret or privatized), while also being recursive to one another and unpredictable in their interactions? What, for example, are the foundational conditions for the figure of the "climate refugee" today? Is the primary force behind this monumental displacement of vulnerable people industrial, financial, military, or the historically complex imbrication of all three? And who, as a displaced person, is in a position to correctly diagnose such a problem, let alone address the foundational structures that created such radical inequalities and occluded forces?

Perhaps the most popularized conspiracy theorists in the West are the UFO believers. In Susan Lepselter's chapter, we encounter the figure who sees lights in the night sky, casts them as from another world, and worries about their intent. The public anxiety about lights in the night sky was amplified by the Cold War arms race, which rehearsed the idea of missiles coming over the horizon without warning as a perverse form of nation-building (see Masco 2014). That alone might be enough to explain the ongoing public fascination with and worry about UFOs. But then, consider the post–Cold War confession of CIA agents admitting to generating media stories about UFOs to provide cover for secret US aeronautical research, fabricating tales of extraterrestrial visitors to explain away the anomalous things people were actually seeing in the sky, seeking to cultivate an inchoate brew of Soviet nuclear aggression and extraterrestrial invasion in the service of strategic misdirection.

Some religious doctrines function very much like conspiracy theories. The teleological modes of thinking characteristic of evangelical Christianity, for example, claim to understand how the world ends, which makes the present an occluded field in need of analytic interpretation, and the construction of one's current status and position in relation to the inevitable end (see Stewart and Harding 1999). While differing in some ways from classic conspiracy theory, this mode of the anticipatory shares with

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conspiracy theories a subject position in which an ego "in the know" is tasked to read the signs of everyday life as landmarks in the inevitable path that only some can see clearly (Stewart 1999). In this way, conspiracy theory can be an ego-trip, a powerful mode of self-fashioning, one that frequently recruits those at the margins of society to assume the position of expert. To cultivate such a point of view, regardless of the veracity of judgment, can thus be satisfying, empowering, and even a mode of resistance.

KEY TERMS

This volume seeks to align this complex political field with the no less complicated but much less maligned field of critical theory. We realize this may appear as our own effort to connect disparate dots, to indulge in a scholarly apophenia (see Lepselter, this volume), but historically the two terms actually share important parallels. The Ngram citational study from Google Books shows that the appearances of the term *conspiracy theory* emerge together with *critical theory* as textual concerns in the 1960s, mirroring each other as modes of interpretive assessment.[2] This book seeks to understand why that is. We want to account for the elective affinities between the two ideas while moving beyond what Paul Ricoeur (1970) powerfully identified as a "hermeneutics of suspicion," which puts the analytic focus on the relation of surface to depth. Looking back on more than thirty years of critical theory, Eve Sedgwick saw in Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion a "paranoid style of reading," for it assumes that distrusting surface forms in favor of excavating the depths leads to greater truths being revealed—an inherently conspiratorial approach to social life and meaning. Sedgwick sees paranoia in critical thought as a kind of anticipatory politics:

> Whatever account it may give of its own motivation, paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure. Maybe that's why paranoid knowing is so inescapably narrative. Like the deinstitutionalized person on the street who, betrayed and plotted against by everyone else in the city, still urges on you the finger-worn dossier bristling with his precious correspondence, paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though

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> its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known. That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility. It's strange that a hermeneutics of suspicion would appear so trusting. (Sedgwick 2003b, 138)

In university circles these interpretive logics inform what is still called "critical theory"—designating a mode of professional practice seeking to move beyond mere appearances to discern the structure of politics, economy, and communication in an effort to render them less conducive to structures of oppression across the lines of race, class, gender, or geopolitics. In Walter Benjamin's (2007, 257) terms, to carry out interpretation of this type is to "brush history against the grain," revealing how normative structures of inequality inform peoples' understandings of history, politics, and economy. The "critical" aspect of theory in this formulation lies then in the imperative to activate readers, mobilizing an analytic narrative to reveal the structural inequalities within an existing social order in the hope of altering its future condition. The implicit assumption of critical theory is that the most powerful forms of violence are loaded into the everyday, built into infrastructures of production and consumption, language, governance and media, institutions and identarian categories; and it is in this way that they are rendered naturalized and occluded, made into powers that determine people's prospects from behind the scenes. Their effects are intense but also hidden, networked, and powerful, which is to say, properly conspiratorial.

So, to say the least, *Conspiracy/Theory* addresses a moment when what people know or think they know about public life, the utility of theory, and the logistics of conspiracy touch directly on the kinds of collective worlds individuals can recognize in common and want to live in. The book also attempts to forge a shared diagnostic understanding of the worlds people actually find themselves inhabiting. Thus, the project is comparative in both a historical and ethnographic sense, a concerted effort to break out of the narrow framing of conspiratorial reason and to avoid allowing the US framing of the problem to dominate discussion. In this spirit, it is worth exploring in greater detail some key terms.

Conspiracy refers to a subversive act undertaken by people for some kind of gain—literally to plot with others an alternate future. While it is commonly marked as illicit or criminal behavior conducted in secret

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and, thus, appears predominantly in contemporary discourse as pejorative and antidemocratic, conspiracy also describes any activist project attempting to improve the world. Etymologically, conspiracy simply means to "breathe together," which puts at its core some notion of an activated, engaged solidarity. As a political practice, conspiracy has an ancient history and, as Demetra Kasimis reveals in her chapter, informs foundational debates about democracy itself. Conspiracy has appeared in well-documented forms across the political spectrum, making it something revolutionary insurrectionists have in common with the covert government agents opposing them, and something that is shared by both with criminals. The list of high-order state and corporate conspiracies runs deep and goes on, linking "black" operations conducted by military states, to democracy-reduction techniques pursued by oligarchs, to the user agreements on social media platforms that infotech giants rely on to relieve themselves of liability while misleading consumers as to how their data are actually being used.

Nevertheless, as Kimberley Ban (2019) argues, and as our invocation of "breathing together" suggests, conspiracy also has an inherent, undeniable, element of fugitivity. It entails departing from a social code or norm, regardless of the reasons or motives for undertaking such a departure. From this point of view, a world without conspiracy is one without the possibility of liberation, without the possibility of reimagining new potentials and possibilities, without justice. This is not to ignore the formal criminal connotations of the term, whether in standard legal definitions (such as the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act [RICO] devised to prosecute the Mafia) or in singular institutions like the Nuremburg Codes, but to underscore that collective action is impossible absent some sort of shared fugitivity. Any collective pursuing change is going to be working to some extent outside the norm, the public eye, or formal governance.

Conspiracy is thus a fundamental point of origin for world-making, a condition of responding to imperialism, white supremacy, indigenous dispossession, dictatorial rule, and systemic forms of global inequality. As Tim Choy (2021, 251–52) defines it: "To conspire is to avow embodied complicities and intimacies, both those activated in breathing together and those circulating as the surround. It is to pose historical and future-oriented questions of the conditions that sustain or deplete you: What conditions the differential distribution of the difficulties or impossibilities of breath for particular forms of life here in the atmosphere?" For Choy, the necessary affirmative project of twenty-first-century conspiracy

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calls for assembling all breathing life forms, bound as we all are by the distributed deadly effects of industrial pollution, to create a less toxic, more verdant biosphere in support of all life. To recover and acknowledge a robust notion of conspiracy in this sense is one commitment of this volume.

Theory advances propositions about the social or material structure of things. In the form of critical theory, it draws on Marxism and psychoanalysis to unpack the psychosocial order of political economy. Adopted initially by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, the term has come to connote a wide range of analytic approaches (Marxist, psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, new historicist, deconstructionist, feminist, critical race theoretical, affect theoretical) that work with differences between surfaces and depths to unpack social practices, texts, and mass-mediated forms. Critical theorists, to varying degrees, assume that truths are hidden, often in plain sight. Critical practices attune us to what we already know, or they make visible what has been masked. Across profound and generative disagreements, the core concepts are those of analytic reason and immanent critique, so that close readings, combined with an account of structural oppression and attention to the minute and contradictory aspects of social and textual practice, hold the promise of at least a diagnosis and perhaps even move toward political transformation and social justice. Critical theory has always promised that authoritarian and imperialist formations can be understood, if not necessarily avoided, via critical assessment and public exposure. Critical theory also demonstrates both the subversive power of mass mediation and popular susceptibilities to fascistic recruitment (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Marcuse 1955). The terrain that matters for critical theory arguably ends up being reason itself, a commitment to the analytic value of denaturalization, temporal dislocation, alternative genealogies, and alienation for purposes of revealing the constructedness of social life and, consequently, opening up possibilities for life to be otherwise. The speculative nature of critical theory is thus modulated by analytic rigor, intellectual intensity, and the assembling of evidence as well as, foundationally, by the rejection of any association with its necessary twin-other: conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theory is similarly an analytic, a mode of speculative appraisal seeking to understand current conditions in the absence of access to all the necessary data. Sometimes the data exist but are kept secret. And sometimes data are lacking because the situation is unknowable or redacted. Whatever the conditions of the not known, however, conspiracy theory has at its center elements of intuition, anticipation, projection, and

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investment. In current usage, it merges hyperbolic modes of fantastical narration with the considerable set of survival skills needed to navigate a permanent warfare, plutocrat-dominated, and climate-disrupted world. Staying ahead of the curve—seeing the violence coming and gathering those you care about to get as far out of the way as possible—requires intuition, anticipation, and a theory of how the world works (see Thomas and Masco 2023). As a mode of thinking, conspiracy theory can be wrong in its interpretive conclusions, but it remains a way of animating analytic capacities in a world that is ambivalent to, or that actually embraces, *longue durée* oppressive practices, distributing them in ways that reinforce (settler-)colonial, racist, sexist, homophobic, and antidemocratic worldviews.

After the 9/11 attacks, for example, citizens in the United States and elsewhere who attempted to raise concern about the emergence of a new digital COINTELPRO, or the negative global implications of the USA PATRIOT Act, found themselves accused by government officials of dealing in "conspiracy theory," in the now iconic usage designed to deauthorize claims by processing them as a degraded form of reason, a half-step above madness, and verging on the pathological. Given the now verifiable truth behind their warnings (as documented by Edward Snowden and Wikileaks, among other whistleblowers), it is important to pause and ask about the terms of veracity and truth-telling that are accepted at any given historical moment as well as about the modalities of deauthorization that prevent those insights from being acknowledged. In other words, the accusation of conspiracy theory is overloaded today precisely because it is so politically useful. It is useful to states as a means of denying secret operations and limiting modes of critique. It is efficacious to corporations because it helps them avoid accountability for their toxicity by hiding behind plaintiffs' lack of perfect documentation of injury. It is instrumental for intelligence agencies because it disrupts the terms of domestic discourse and allows plausible deniability. And it is useful to unscrupulous individuals who make their livelihoods on social media by spreading outrageous claims or who just enjoy seeing their fictions go viral. The connecting element here lies in how conspiracy theory seeks to activate attention, to recruit others into an interpretive frame, to see the world differently, and to overcome the opacity and historical embeddedness of powerful entities. Given these powerful dynamics and institutional commitments that seem devoted to destabilizing the contemporary order, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that conspiracy theory is also a survival tactic, a mode

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of deliberation and intuition that for those not in power is frequently a necessary form, a way to break free of normative political imaginaries and to foment new futurities.

If the substantial overlap between conspiracy theory and critical theory as genres of contemporary thought is obvious, there is still a powerful policing of the boundary between the two. Conspiracy theory is frequently portrayed as misguided and untrustworthy, while critical theory is authorized and professionally sanctioned. A lot of intellectual energy goes into keeping the respectable form from being contaminated by its other—a project that this book seeks to unpack and expose.

Conspiracy/theory is helpful as a concept in our effort to explore the analytic overlap between critical theory and conspiracy theory. The slash in *conspiracy/theory* is meant to work as an invitation to consider the terms not only separately but also as imbricated in each other. It is designed to focus attention on the overlap as an epistemological dilemma, providing a standpoint from which we interrogate the analytic challenges of life in a mass-mediated and hyperviolent society that has normalized powerful forms of exclusion, dehumanization, and environmental destruction and that denies doing so. The concept *conspiracy/theory* offers an opportunity to review and refine a number of prevailing assumptions found in both academic discourse and political life, and to consider how narrative frames and specific forms and agendas of world-making are reciprocally constitutive. Exploring the conditions for knowing in a world beset by too much and too little information at the same time, this book asks how and when characteristics such as intuition, viewpoint, experience, and anxiety become marked as either conspiratorial or theoretical. When is it impossible to separate what the two terms reference, and when are they synonymous? Understanding the affinities between conspiracy and theory, while appreciating the seductions of each, the chapters in this book engage, from different historical and regional perspectives, the theoretical in conspiracy and the conspiratorial in theory, grappling simultaneously with the ways in which suspicion, opacity, networks, uncertainty, silencing, judgment, affect, and mass-mediation function.

In adopting such an approach, this volume is radically at odds with the conventional split between conspiracy and theory made famous in Richard Hofstadter's 1964 essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Hofstadter takes as his object a "style of thought" based in "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy" that is devoted to defending a "way of life" perceived to be under attack. Focusing on

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far-right movements in the United States, he identifies the paranoid style of thinking as a long-standing aspect of American thought, while also diagnosing it as a pathological formation of the liberal order. Hofstadter's essay has been essential reading about US public intellectual life for over half a century; it has been cited on an almost weekly basis in mass media to explain the Trump phenomenon, the popularity of alt-right media sites, and new authoritarian movements. The popularity of Hofstadter's essay today, however, says more about its political utility for normative power structures than about its analytic reach (see also Marasco 2016). Hofstadter marks conspiracy thinking as excessive and irrational, a pathology to be excised from public life. In his hands, the "paranoid style" is a political theology, a modern form of superstition or the supernatural, a collection of beliefs that should be eliminated in favor of serious political discourse and modernist rationality. And crucially, he knows exactly where to draw the line.

Consider, however, the era in which Hofstadter was writing. The formal objects of his study were McCarthyism and the rise of the John Birch Society, both of which rallied public passions against global communism as a multifaceted conspiracy against American life, a force behind every welfare-state initiative and civil rights mobilization. McCarthy's exaggerated allegation that the US government was filled with communists is now foundational to the public conception of conspiracy theory as a damaging and socially corroding form. It also provided direct rhetorical resources to Donald Trump, who declared—long before he was in office—the presence of a "deep state" set against his future administration, seeking to turn every investigation of his behavior into an illustration of a corrupt and occluded center of power (which became a centerpiece of the QAnon movement). By focusing on such forms, Hofstadter conjures and then dismisses the paranoid style as an abjuration of the democratic form. But Hofstadter was writing at a time of accelerating US covert actions around the world, repeated nuclear confrontation and explicit overt and covert efforts to manipulate public life and opinion in the service of mobilizing support for the project of the Cold War. It was the era in which Frank Wisner, head of the political warfare unit at the CIA, could describe controlling US media like a "mighty Wurlitzer" organ, as it was capable of "playing any propaganda tune he desired" to the listening American public—even while his agency was legally prohibited from conducting operations inside the United States (Wilford 2009, 7). Hofstadter's essay came after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, which alerted the world

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to the plague of invisible and unregulated industrial pollution—showing how deadly privatized profits, marketed as modernist achievements in chemistry, can be. And it came just after the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963, with an emerging antinuclear movement joining with environmental activists to resist a military-industrial world committed to death on a new kind of scale. The essay appeared before the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a vital first step in addressing systemic voter suppression and racism in the United States. Yet the essay includes no discussion of the Jim Crow system or the logics of indigenous dispossession or anti-immigration campaigns. Hofstadter first presented the paper at Oxford the very month President John F. Kennedy was shot, one of a series of political assassinations in the 1960s involving civil rights activists (Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King) and other politicians (Robert Kennedy), alongside church bombings by the KKK (the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama) that fundamentally confirmed the deadly reality of conspiracies.

In short, Hofstadter gave no consideration to the possibility that contemporary political, environmental, military, and financial conditions might call for something more than idle suspicion from the citizen-subject. Similarly, the liberal "we" implicitly evoked throughout the essay takes no account of the foundational histories in the United States of settler-colonial and anti-Black violence. At the time Hofstadter wrote, basic rights of citizenship were still being hard won on paper for many who continued to live with no assurance of personal safety or fairness in their everyday interactions with police, courts, housing, and employment (Martinot and Sexton 2003). Given the magnitude of contextual omissions in the essay, it is no mystery why Hofstadter remains the go-to expert on conspiracy theory to this day: he authorizes the dismissal of paranoid reason as pathological and uninformed, even as consequential conspiratorial projects stack up in all directions. The point here, considering structural constraints and global conditions, is that a paranoid style of thought might just be for many a necessary skill set—even a basic survival strategy—for those living in political orders committed to maintaining extreme inequalities.

Conspiracy/Theory moves beyond Hofstadter's comfortable defense of liberal reason; its contributors are willing to sit with the uncomfortable reality that people narrate the world and might not always have the best factual evidence or perspective. The book also moves beyond a US focus by thinking in multisited and implicitly comparative ways about the

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myriad conspiracy theories in circulation today—some constrained by incomplete data; some requiring speculation on the unknowable; some in the service of stabilizing military, imperial, and/or authoritarian projects; and some as a way of surviving such conditions or encouraging a revolutionary otherwise to contemporary politics. *Conspiracy/Theory* demonstrates across historical periods and state projects the vital place of speculation in both making and evaluating collective conditions.

OVERVIEW

Part I. Organizing Fictions

Walter Benjamin (2007, 257) argued that the "tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule," underscoring the power of historical narrative as a means of consolidating social power and establishing a false promise of "progress." Part I of *Conspiracy/Theory*, "Organizing Fictions," explores the psychosocial necessity and force of narrative, accepting our inherent human reliance on storytelling to shape, craft, and engage social reality. George Shulman frames this dynamic via a forceful critique of Hofstadter's essay, arguing that its quick dismissal of paranoia and its identification of the conspiratorial as primarily a right-wing seduction is a fundamental misreading of human nature and of American politics. Turning to Melville and Pynchon for guidance on grappling with unavoidable paranoia in everyday life, Shulman argues for the power and necessity of organizing fictions in "political culture." The necessary response to an authoritarian moment, for Shulman, is not to be found in the simple recitation of factual evidence. To trust that facts alone can redirect political energies is to ignore the power of affect, fantasy, fear, and cathexis in politics. Factual claims are never enough to create social investment, cohesion, and collectivity. Shulman argues that the establishment of counternarratives elevating different values and different understandings of collective life is not only essential, but the only way to create a political culture that is more equal, less violent, and more democratic.

A central insight of "Organizing Fictions" is that expert knowledge is never enough to mobilize social commitment. But in that case, how do people come to know the origins of calamities such as a monumental outbreak of infectious disease? The COVID-19 pandemic radically and

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suddenly altered the terms of life and death in December 2019, producing a vast range of reframings and resistances to public health expertise. Looking back at the origins of another global infectious disease outbreak, that of HIV/AIDS, Lochlann Jain questions the existing biomedical expert consensus that the virus jumped from animals to humans in Africa via meat consumption, thereby initiating an unavoidable local zoonotic outbreak that led to a global infection. Tracking an alternative hypothesis, which is extensively investigated in Edward Hooper's *The River* (2000), Jain asks how biomedicine polices its own narrative. Jain explores an evidentiary chain of events before the emergence of HIV/AIDS, connecting medical experimentation on subaltern populations to a global movement of blood plasma and the search for novel vaccines. Interrogating a historic moment of loose ethical controls but globally expansive experimental circuits, Jain seeks to understand how medical logics and experimental practices as well as the availability of certain subjects became globally linked in ways which just might have inadvertently produced a novel and deadly global infection. In his larger research on what he calls the Wet Net, Jain's consideration of why Hooper's book was preemptively dismissed without serious review by the Royal Society—despite its voluminous presentation of evidence—reveals the threatening power of a counternarrative, one that requires medical experts to recognize their historical use of dangerous experimental practices. In Jain's telling, the counternarrative calls on experts to consider their complicity not simply in preventing, treating, or creating disease but in exploiting vulnerable humans and nonhumans to do so.

Responsibility for violent global outcomes is also the subject of Joseph Masco's chapter, which tracks how the duplicity of authority is constitutive of US politics. Working with Michael Rogin's notion of political demonology and the logics of WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) wrestling, Masco explores how oppositional structures and affect mobilization create a psychosocial space of projection and misrecognition. Unpacking "national security" as a set of projections, orchestrated appearances, and self-deceptions, Masco asks how it is that imperial projects proceed alongside loudly voiced democratic commitments. Misdirection, deception, and fantasy are essential to such a project, constituting a reliance on "false flag" operations. Masco argues that an inherent danger in American life is the call to flatten out experience into a simple for-or-against political framework along the lines of WWE wrestling—as Donald Trump (and before him George W. Bush) demanded. These mechanisms of

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polarization have historical depth in the United States and are today amplified by both siloed social media publics and the secrecy of the security state. One consequence of these forms, Masco shows, is that people now find themselves constantly subject to recruitment into a style of thought that reduces the complexity and quality of judgment, of conspiratorial reason itself, to friend/enemy distinctions functioning primarily to enable affective and imaginative capture.

This question of how to assess collective conditions in the absence of coherent memory is at the center of Elizabeth Anne Davis's chapter on "conspiracy attunement" in Cyprus. Davis considers the epistemological problems that arise for subjects in a historically contested place, attached to competing Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot national narratives, riven by the multigenerational psychosocial consequences of unsettled atrocity, all while navigating the untrustworthiness of mass mediation in an era of global money-laundering on the island—with the latter relying precisely on the uncertainty of jurisdiction in Cyprus. Davis focuses on the narrative forms called forth in the attempt to explain contemporary conditions—narratives that involve the CIA, KGB, global bankers, oligarchs, and drug dealers—attuning us to the expert judgments that go into conspiratorial interpretations. Here, conspiracy attunement is not only a basic political skill, a way of judging the motives behind political narratives, but also an aesthetic form. Davis's narrative allows us to appreciate the terms, logics, and qualities of thought that promote an explanatory form without necessarily believing in any one story. Davis shows us how a sophisticated conspiracy attunement operates in Cyprus, hard-won via war, atrocity, and geopolitical manipulations of local politics. Her portrait is at once a sophisticated assessment of political consciousness in Cyprus and an example of a mode of interpretation that *Conspiracy/Theory* argues is increasingly ascendent in the contemporary world. Davis deftly shows how conspiracy attunement can be a mode for engaging the complexity of the world rather than for flattening it out, offering a highly self-conscious approach to the power of plot, the techniques of propaganda and their implications for political judgment, the workings of finance capital, the constant pull of misrecognition, and desires for a better world.

If doubt is now a strategic achievement, the intended and unintended work of social media networks, intelligence agencies, corporations, political parties, and dedicated individuals, then how is the democratic form, based at least in part and in principle on transparency and trust,

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to operate—let alone thrive? Timothy Melley addresses this question directly in his chapter on the "post-truth" public sphere in the Trump era. Building on his important study of a "covert sphere" in US politics after World War II (see Melley 2012), Melley traces the ideological development of the term *conspiracy theory* in the United States since 1945. He focuses on how the paranoia of the Cold War system infiltrated interpretive realms in multiple registers, linking the fiction-making of novelists and Hollywood filmmakers to the security state itself. The resulting public understanding that the government is keeping secrets has a dual effect of creating a will to know and a distrust of all available information. He concludes with a discussion of Donald Trump's strategy of running for elected office in 2016 while declaring that all elections are rigged, via fake media, against him. A commitment to a "post-truth politics"—that is, the willful constitution of an instrumental alternative reality—rides on the achievements of security state media projects that go back for generations now, in an ongoing effort to artificially craft politically efficacious realities. Melley shows how this strategy has become literally infectious in the twenty-first century and now poses serious problems for civic judgment.

Part II. Atmospheres of Doubt

The Latin roots of conspiracy—*con* (with or together) and *spirare* (to breath)—show why it is essential to any project of social change as a marker of shared space, conversation, strategic thinking, and collective dreaming. Part II, "Atmospheres of Doubt," explores the multivalent possibilities of breathing together, from the utopian possibility of remaking the world to reactionary mobilizations against any such project. Both are equally conspiratorial. Frantz Fanon (2004) articulated the complexity of this dilemma in his theorization of the psychosocial effects of colonization, showing how imposed hierarchies are embedded not just in social institutions, behaviors, and language but in self-images and ultimately in desire itself. Thus, for Fanon, a project of liberation is at once political and libidinal, and he sought to authorize readers to demand not simply a modification of existing conditions but an entirely new world, fomenting a conspiracy on a global scale. But we should note here how often liberatory moments have been converted into new modes of policing, into a defense of property and hierarchy that undercuts the idea of actual liberation while acting formally in its name—mobilizing revolutionary energies against revolution itself (see James Siegel 1998; Benjamin 1978).

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Breathing together, in other words, sounds self-evident, but it is always highly challenged, contested, and fraught. In her chapter, Lisa Wedeen investigates the "conditions of generalized uncertainty" that work to polarize some communities while blocking judgment in others during the 2011–14 revolutionary mobilizations in Syria. Analyzing systemic distortions in news media, Wedeen considers the risks of political judgment and the techniques of mystification in a world of complex social media and multifaceted disinformation campaigns, ones that raise the stakes of radical speech and (other forms of) action to an all but impossible level. The questions around the alleged killing of a Syrian singer are considered against the work of a politically oriented Syrian film collective and a terrifying chemical weapons attack, which was globally contested in terms of authorship but frequently attributed to the ruling regime in Syria. While then President Obama was drawing and then erasing red lines about chemical weapons attacks, threatening what for some Syrians would have been welcome US intervention (and for others a new catastrophe), Syrians and global actors alike were obliged to navigate the uncertainty of attribution for the use of the weapons. Was it the Syrian regime, a rival revolutionary faction, or an outside party? In dealing with these life-and-death circumstances of epistemic insecurity, Wedeen posits—following Arendt—the frightening loss of a "common world," meaning that the basic coordinates for collective life have been undercut by the absence of a shared informational circuit capable of coordinating both understanding and action. All people then have to work with is their intuitive interpretation of events, as they are constrained to convince others amid a surplus of information that is more confusing than it is clarifying—or what is generally disparaged as conspiracy theory.

The resources for such counternarratives are all around us. Here, Susan Lepselter's focus on the power of apophenia—or the making of connection between seemingly unrelated things—shows how connecting the dots is not simply a game of perception but of both world-making and judgment. Her interlocutors navigate not only traumatic forces in the US West but also the fragility of social orders, thinking from the margins about how to make sense of what has already happened and how power operates. Following people who believe they have been abducted by extraterrestrial beings, Lepselter tracks the uncanny resonances that endow autobiographical narrative with the possibility of both recovering lost histories and recalibrating contemporary life. Many of Lepselter's interlocutors feel their economic marginality from the position of settler-colonial

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whiteness in the 1990s, a moment that Lepselter notes falls between the Cold War and the war on terror but that remains filled with fears of invasion and capture. This constellation of after-ness and not-yet-ness opens up a conceptual space that, for some, requires narration. From Texas to Nevada, individuals look up into the night sky and not only see the marvel of a bigger universe of nonhuman possibility but also generate a narrative understanding that something out there might literally be coming for them.

Public perception is a dedicated target of political manipulation, and the liberal democratic form, as ideal type, is always subject to attempts to shape collective understanding, whether by persuading people to support some political projects as opposed to others, or by trying to dismantle the possibility of collective understanding. Demetra Kasimis suggests in her chapter that democracy itself, in its primary formation, has always been constituted by and in relation to conspiracy. Reading Plato's *Republic* as a conspiratorial text, Kasimis finds evidence of conspiracy in the whisperings of those in power, whose multiple fears of rebellion erode notions of public trust and the capacity for judgment. Drawing out the implications for a post–Cold War retheorization of Athenian democracy, Kasimis shows that the conspiratorial is not a pathology to be excised from the public sphere but a constant presence within it, infusing as well as imperiling the democratic project. Secrecy, rumors, and plots abound in the *Republic*, both cultivating democracy and threatening its demise. Kasimis establishes a foundational conspiratorial dimension within political theory: in other words, speaking in the hypothetical about social order is simultaneously a way of making future worlds and establishing their very boundaries, defining the limits of both thought and political desire.

The forms of political manipulation that the chapters in this part lay bare are, in Nadia Abu El-Haj's chapter, keyed into the conspiratorial terms of US warfare. Exploring the psychosocial mechanisms of displacement and erasure for soldiers suffering the mental aftereffects of combat, Abu El-Haj shows how victimization and sacrifice have been rescripted in the twenty-first century in ways that thwart accountability, allowing US forever wars to continue unimpeded by ethical review. The campaign to forestall public critique of militarism, ascendant since the first Gulf War in 1990, has now been consolidated into a gestural civilian "thank you for your service" to soldiers. Abu El-Haj reads this reflex as a way of supplanting critical judgment, with the effect that American responsibility for its violence around the world is avoided, a theme central

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to this part's concerns with judgment. This automatic "thank you" for unexamined activities preempts any discussion about the legitimacy of US wars and ignores whatever crimes any given soldier may have perpetrated. After decades of US covert and overt warfare, and despite public knowledge of atrocities committed by soldiers against civilians accumulating in the course of failed military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia (to name a few examples), one might have expected a political debate about US militarism. Abu El-Haj details how it has been short-circuited. But her concerns are not only about judgment. They also highlight the co-implication of militarism with the logics of enmity more broadly, examining how the psychiatric sciences, in tandem with imperial power, create political conditions conducive to the reproduction of global conflict by reconfiguring warfare as an injury—not to citizens of other countries being killed or displaced but to soldiers tasked with violence. She chronicles the emergence of a new diagnostic category of "moral injury," a pathology related to but different from post-traumatic stress disorder. Abu El-Haj, in this way, demonstrates how soldiers who have killed civilians in the war on terror have come to be constituted as victims for having been ordered to do it, rather than as subjects to be held accountable for the violence they visited on civilian others. To limit recognition of suffering to the morally injured soldier is to fundamentally recast the citizen-soldier relationship in the United States by disqualifying concern for non-American victims, amounting to a profound nationwide conspiracy against both self-assessment and the very possibility of peace.

Part III. The Force of Capital

To *speculate* is at once to imagine and to place a bet on a future outcome, linking expertise to theorizing to magical thinking to just plain dumb luck. Or, on this critical world-making point, we might consider the proposition of Peter Thiel (a cofounder of PayPal, a first investor in Facebook, and creator of Palantir—the controversial data analytics company built with CIA start-up money to generate tools for predictive policing, counterterrorism, and immigration control), who tells his readers that a great business is nothing less than "a conspiracy to change the world" (Thiel 2014, 93). For Thiel, the corporation is a world engine, perhaps *the* world engine, a way of shaping the social order as well as consolidating financial and political power. His corporate conspiracy relies on what Adam Smith

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famously called the "invisible hand," that elusive force that orchestrates wealth, possibility, and ruin in the economy. Since the 1980s, the globalization of financial capital has vastly remade labor conditions around the world, creating ever more unstable local conditions, as corporations chase the cheapest labor by arranging ever more complicated supply chains and take advantage of tax-evasion schemes wherever they can. Part III, "The Force of Capital," brings together assessments of market violence, interrogating the "profit motive" as a conspiratorial modality that provokes its own response in the form of vital intellectual efforts that have coalesced to locally diagnose, account for, and intervene in the disruptive forces of globalized finance.

Rosalind C. Morris explores value and loss in her ethnographic consideration of gold miners in South Africa, where groups of refugees from neighboring states find their way into informal settlements. Speaking no common language but what they concoct in the mines, they are brought together by their hopes of recovering valuable residues in mined-out shafts long abandoned by the companies that created them. Here, the lure of gold, that primary form of value, is theorized against all the missing aspects of state provisioning—water, electricity, security, and health—creating a zone of highly charged attention to the details of everyday life. Mining the residuals of corporate extraction, in Morris's hands, is conceptual as well as material, a problem of value as well as of interpretation. The assembled miners, known as the *zama-zamas* and drawn from difficult conditions across the hemisphere, work to craft a life from within the dangers of underground extraction, experiencing simultaneously the abandonment of the state and the conflicting political and linguistic spaces of nation, tribe, gender, and sexuality. Morris interrogates the historical conditions that generate the necessity for so many of informal gold mining's practices (often illegal and always dangerous) while also acknowledging the conceptual pull of gold. Gold is frequently the object of conspiratorial thought and a dynamic part of a global system of exchange. The logic of buried treasure thus posits a survivalist outside, enabling a fantasy of pure escape, as the gold becomes an agreed-upon form that can seem to make coherent the fantastic diversity of people, cultural practices, and languages that meet in the dark tunnels miles underground to chip away at the rock face. In this way, Morris considers how much the conceptual universe of the *zama-zamas* offers a compelling version of life in the twenty-first century, where the objects of desire, the

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conditions of social life, and the mercilessness of the market define in ways difficult to fully account for—even in the minute-to-minute search for gold—the terms of living and dying, of hope and misery, and of collectivity and profit.

The commitment to growth, Joseph Dumit shows in his interrogation of the corporate logics of Big Pharma, Big Oil, and Higher Education, is antihuman. For what does it mean that human society is organized around an institutional form—the corporation—that is concerned solely with its own expansion, that is willing to destroy health, education, and the planet in the endless pursuit of profit? Dumit exposes, at the center of the modern world system, a conspiracy against life, one that is unintentional and headless but still all pervasive. The pharmaceutical companies, which treat health risk rather than symptoms as a way to increase the number of drugs prescribed per person, meet in his assessment with the global project of Big Oil, committed to petrochemical extraction in all its forms despite rising sea levels and a destabilizing climate. The corporate imperative to grow seamlessly and endlessly works to convert healthcare into its opposite, even as Exxon's climate scientists measure, while its publicists deny, the catastrophe of anthropogenic climate change that it is producing. Dumit asks a profound question about large-scale institutions like health care, energy, and the university: are they inherently conspiratorial? But even more, he asks where such conspiracies are located and considers how such violent forms are normalized, loaded into individual nervous systems as modes of desire and habitual relations that ensure the destruction of the world. On this point he turns to the philosopher-artist Adrian Piper, who assesses the way the university functions as a corporation, tracking how claims about sexual and racial harassment are naturalized as a form of bullying, requiring heroic self-sacrifice on the part of anyone who would call out the system or demand structural change. In this way, Dumit, via Piper, considers how race and capital are intertwined conspiracies fomenting vast scales of self-destructive social behavior, and he ponders an alternative, life-affirming conspiracy—that is, the one informing demands for an entirely different world.

The corporate naturalization of growth at the expense of the world has many precursor forms that link the colonial era to racialized labor forces to imperial projects of extraction. The foreigner who shows up to "help" is the central concern of Louisa Lombard's chapter on humanitarian profiteering in the Central African Republic. International peacekeeping, global health, counterterror, and global finance now all have a "boots on

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the ground" logic of intervention, proliferating self-constituting caring experts who arrive with missionary zeal to improve local conditions. These multifaceted organizations and projects ride on the long legacy of colonization and missionary work, which cloaked a desire for control in the guise of dispensing aid. Becoming a site for raiding by Muslim polities to the north in the nineteenth century, the Central African Republic was subjected to colonization and ruthless resource extraction in the first half of the twentieth. Since independence in 1960, its fortunes have only declined. Armed groups have taken on larger roles in the country's politics. Since 2013 they have controlled most of the country's territory, while a class of government officials get rich from the perquisites of statehood, and everyone else lives off humanitarian handouts. Today, the international community labels the country a "humanitarian crisis." In the context of over a century of colonial, postcolonial, Cold War, and war on terror interventionist projects, the flooding of the Central African Republic with humanitarian workers after 2013, involving thousands of foreigners representing more than one hundred organizations, raises obvious epistemological questions for a divided and warring public. Lombard examines the rumors about theft, tracking the diagnostic practices of locals who see in these foreign projects not a helping hand but the latest round of extraction. Crucially, Lombard also raises the question of who is allowed to have conspiracy theories in a postcolonial state—reinforcing how the term *conspiracy* can function in the twenty-first century as a way of foreclosing both thought and debate. The emblem of local concerns about peacekeeping profiteering, Lombard shows, is perhaps the new modernist high-rise tower built in the capital for aid workers—providing high-end housing to those who have moved from distant shores into the conflict zone. The glass and steel structures offer a constant visual provocation to locals about the goal of foreign humanitarian intervention. For how exactly is it that a country so spectacularly rich in gold and diamonds remains, generation after generation, so ferociously locked in poverty?

To be accused of being a conspiracy theorist, as we have argued, is often to be dismissed as illegitimate, irrational, or corrupt. But what happens when the accused conspiracy theorist is correct and, in fact, blowing the whistle on an unfolding disaster? In his chapter on the financialization of higher education, Robert Meister walks us through his experience as the head of the faculty union at a major public university at a moment of unannounced corporate restructuring. Publicizing the surprising use of

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total tuition revenue as collateral for bonds to fund other projects, Meister attempts in real time to draw attention to the conversion of students into debt vehicles—a fundamental shift in the logics of higher education. This linkage of tuition to debt explains in part the fantastic rise in tuition over the past decade, as student fees are converted into collateral for ever greater indebtedness. For Meister, the vociferous official denial of his claim (that tuition was being raised to fund construction projects via student debt financing) reveals how powerful the conspiracy theorist allegation can be in shutting down debate and demonizing those who challenge institutional power. The episode raises, for him, fundamental questions about the fate of the contemporary university, the veracity of public debate, and the normalization of financialization to hide radical structural reform. The "invisible hand" of the market here positions students as a source of cash to be massively leveraged for projects other than education. As Meister shows, the steady financialization of higher education means that even the public universities that were once tuition-free and committed to expanding social access now function more like hedge funds, profiting off the escalating debt load of students—a conspiracy against all future generations and a fundamental code-switch in the mission of the university from education to profit.

Part IV. The Politics of Enmity

If there is a primary conspiracy against the world, many would identify it as racism, a foundational violence that continues to organize capital and politics in the twenty-first century. W. E. B. Du Bois (1935, 714) theorized what he called the "propaganda of history" in his assessment of the techniques of white supremacy after the Civil War, linking a project of false memory to a wide range of material forms of voter suppression and physical coercion. In doing so, Du Bois showed how organizing fictions and direct repression could be fused, creating the terms of a counterrevolutionary everyday coded by those in power as normal. In the course of his work in Philadelphia, for example, Du Bois kept track of the laws regulating Black bodies, including one making it illegal for Blacks to "carry arms without special license" or for four or more "to meet together without lawful business of their masters or owners" (Du Bois 2007, 287). Similarly, in her theorization of surveillance as a historic form of anti-blackness, Simone Browne (2015, 25) assesses the "lantern laws" in New York City, which required all nonwhites to carry lanterns at night "so that they could

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be seen," an early precursor form to "stop and frisk," in which policing is based explicitly on race. We can see in such laws a fundamental elite white fear of the conspiratorial agency, communication, organizing, and potential stealth of the subaltern. For this reason alone, it is important to attend to how accusations of conspiracy function ideologically in any historic moment or social context.

Part IV of *Conspiracy/Theory* examines conspiracy's implications in the politics of demonization, a theme threaded through several of the volume's contributions, but which comes into bold relief in analyses of racist thought. This part tracks racism's psychosocial dynamics, narrative recruitments, and willful misrecognitions. "The Politics of Enmity" considers how the politics of "othering" creates forms of social reproduction in which the powerful self-represent as perpetually injured and in danger, warranting violence—physical, emotional, exclusionary, preemptive—of various sorts.

Faith Hillis, in her chapter on Russian efforts to hack liberal democracy, explores the historical force of a global miasma of disinformation. In light of the widespread accusations that the Russian state manipulated US and British elections in 2016 (leveraging the surprising British vote to leave the European Union and the equally surprising Trump presidency), Hillis focuses on a precursor form from the late nineteenth century, one that continues to have influence today. Like the Russian FSB and the hacking accusations in 2016, the Okhrana, the nineteenth-century Russian secret service, sought in the 1880s to promote the tsarist state across Europe by discrediting its critics. Planting stories demonizing revolutionary subjects led eventually to the invention of an elaborate narrative of a Jewish conspiracy to overthrow the Russian state. This propaganda technique would be repurposed by many states across the twentieth century. Hillis tracks the evolution of specific disinformation campaigns in France to cast Russian émigrés as subversives, leading up to the production of one of the most consequential conspiratorial texts of the twentieth century, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which first appeared in a Russian newspaper in 1903 and which has been in global circulation ever since. Hillis not only considers the political production of this notorious forgery but also the ways in which the tactical propaganda products of a specific historic moment endure, creating resources that link the *Protocols* to later racist projects (e.g., in Nazi Germany and in subsequent texts like *The Turner Diaries*; see Belew, this volume). The counterrevolutionary project of demonizing activists via deception has a life cycle worthy of serious scholarly review,

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Hillis suggests, and in the case of the *Protocols*, unfortunately, more than one.

The politics of terror, and the reactionary formations that can be organized around that label, is also the subject of Darryl Li's chapter. Li carefully unpacks the production of a legal fiction, one that by now has accumulated a high body count around the world as well as a set of "experts" willing to testify to its veracity. At stake is the original designation of al-Qa'ida as a global conspiracy, responsible not only for the suicide-hijacker attacks in the United States in September 2001 but also for actively coordinating violence around the world. This now commonplace claim—the very basis for the constitution of a US counterterror state apparatus and global military mobilization—resides, in large part, in a set of legal documents of curious origin and disposition. Li tracks a set of handwritten documents in Arabic, found in Bosnia in 2002, that were used in US federal court to establish the origins of al-Qa'ida and to link seemingly disparate acts of global violence (going back to the 1980s) to the organization. Li examines the legal trajectory of the file itself, a proffer that was never accepted as evidence in court and that has never even been completely translated, but which has nevertheless been invoked repeatedly in mass media, legal hearings, and national security debates to assert claims about al-Qa'ida's origins, goals, and global history of violence. Tracking the conspiratorial details of a legal case formally detailing a global conspiracy, Li lays bare the production and deployment of a national security fiction, one that has been used to justify a US counterterror response across the Middle East and Africa. As Li shows, a crucial aspect of this project was the testimony of "terrorism experts," sometimes with no Arabic language skills or regional experience, who would cite the proffer documents on television or in court as definitive proof. Thus, the circuit of projections and misrecognitions is completed when unverified documents become the de facto basis for war, predicated on the statements of self-styled experts with no understanding of the communities they are targeting. Here is a conspiracy of the state in action—one in which national defense rides on the production of fictions, which accrue power over time simply via citation, rather than on the basis of intellectual curiosity, factual veracity, or cross-cultural understanding.

While the US war on terror seems to suggest that the configuration of these concerns is contemporary, Hussein Ali Agrama finds them operative across the twentieth century, linking British Imperial politics to the current reliance on military authority in Egypt. Finding a conspira-

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torial core in the logic of the modern liberal state, Agrama interrogates the ever-present but undertheorized reliance by state actors on secret knowledge and the ways in which that knowledge is deployed to create a collective social imaginary. Crucially, this power has been used to demonize a vast and diverse global Muslim population as inherently threatening. Concerned with the foundational contradictions within the liberal state form, Agrama chronicles the ease with which claims for inclusion and transparent political processes ride alongside the machinations of intelligence agencies, including the force of espionage, plausible deniability by state actors, and covert actions. Considering a specific kind of racism that is marked in Europe and the United States as "Islam," Agrama demonstrates how political demonology works by equipping political commitments with the elements needed to undermine religious and social movements by coding them as inherently other. The "Muslim," rather than designating an individual, becomes a category that carries an existential threat to the liberal democratic form, one that when exposed undoes the claims of the liberal state to authority and legality. Agrama questions the basis for such generic (and consequential) suspicions and argues that the growth of covert intelligence agencies over the past century is co-implicated in the production of such enemy formations. This co-constitution of a dangerous other and an intelligence agency devoted to fighting it in perpetuity raises a fundamental challenge to the liberal idealizations of law, security, and authority.

If manufacturing enemy formations is a key to imperial state power, then what narrative practices support violent domestic counterformations, those devoted not to a collective future but to racist purification? The white power movement in the United States has long been a source of violent conspiratorial modes of thinking, attributing malicious intent to fictional organizations and promoting race war to purge the United States of nonwhite others. In her chapter, Kathleen Belew examines *The Turner Diaries*, a core white power text, showing how a poorly written science fiction set in the year 2099 has been deployed since the 1970s as a guidebook, an inspiration, and a coordinating device for the present-day racist revolutionary movement. In depicting the final war for America, *The Turner Diaries* details in fictional terms how to run an insurgency, organize cell groups, master sabotage techniques, and destabilize a political order. Belew tracks its production and reception among white power groups, detailing its influence on perpetrators of violence against banks, state institutions, and citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Most prominently, Timothy

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McVeigh had a copy on him when he was arrested for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Belew shows how *The Turner Diaries* collects conspiratorial ideas from different periods, playing on feelings of antisemitism and anti-blackness to constitute an idea of the political order as a system that needs to be destroyed in order to be saved. Here, revolutionary thought is connected to end-times thinking, with accelerationist aims—that is, the goal is to reproduce the idea of America through mass violence, an idea that is as long-standing in American popular culture as conspiracy is itself. If *The Turner Diaries* offers a blueprint for insurgency and violence, Belew unpacks how its narrative form—its clumsiness and fictional character—has also allowed agencies like the FBI to discount the seriousness of the white power movement, treating it as a set of not very sophisticated lone individuals rather than as a highly organized group utilizing cell structures with a specific project of waging war on the federal government. Belew explores the power of whiteness in American life, often identified as the unmarked social category, but transformed via *The Turner Diaries* into an enduring invitation to would be terrorists/revolutionaries to embrace the very end-game of politics.

Conspiracy/Theory concludes with an epilogue focused on the stakes of conspiratorial reason in the twenty-first century. Considering the range of conspiratorial practices that infused the violent insurrection against the certification of the 2020 presidential election on January 6, 2021, in Washington, DC, it argues that developing a sophisticated reading of conspiratorial thought is vital to contemporary politics. Separating the authoritarian ambitions from the political disinformation projects, the white supremacy militarism, the money-making schemes, and the QAnon mythmaking allows different modes of accountability as well as an appreciation of the range of preexisting aggrievements that were so successfully mobilized in the attack on Congress. Powerful narratives—of a stolen election, a deep state, a race war—were powerfully merged in the service of an attempted authoritarian coup d'état. Understanding the informational tactics and histories behind the violence on January 6 is also a map of a politics of enmity in which political rivals are cast as evil, rage is cultivated, and existential danger is felt as the central motivating political strategy. To assume that simply branding these forces as unreason is enough to blunt their power in the contemporary world is to miss the argument of this book, which has asked for a careful evaluation of psyops campaigns as well as of individual efforts to theorize what they are experiencing in everyday life. In short, *Conspiracy/Theory* argues that

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careful attention must be paid to the reality-making power of narrative, in order to allow a broader and richer space for collective assessment and the testing of claims and evidence, all while acknowledging the proliferation of multifaceted disinformation campaigns that seek to recruit and activate all those who are able to hear the call.

NOTES

1 For a detailed engagement with contemporary online misinformation campaigns, see Joan Donovan's *The Media Manipulation Casebook* project at https://mediamanipulation.org/definitions/media-manipulation (accessed February 23, 2023).

2 See the Google Books Ngram Viewer's citational rate comparison of "conspiracy theory" and "critical theory" from 1900 to 2019, available at https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=conspiracy+theory%2Ccritical+theory&year_start=1900&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3.

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