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Witnessing Conspiracy Theories: Developing an Intersectional Approach to Conspiracy Theory Research

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Media Studies

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes an intersectional approach to conspiracy theory research that engages conspiracy theories and conspiracy theorists by considering their proximity and affiliations with hegemonic power structures. Against challenges to conspiracy theories based on their lack of empirical legitimacy (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019) and building on arguments that propound their status as “subjugated knowledges” (Bratich 2008), this dissertation argues that conspiracy theories can be vectors of anti-oppressive resistance against systemic forces that disenfranchise racial, gender, and class minorities. Conspiracy theories are not a homogenous phenomenon; they are particular instances of potentially generative suspicion against powerful forces. The dissertation deploys Kelly Oliver’s (2001) concept of “witnessing,” a form of listening that accepts that there are some truths that are not universally knowable to everyone and works to support the experiences of the person testifying, as a method for discerning the specificities of conspiracy theories. It performs a case study of conspiracy theories in the rap music of Immortal Technique, KRS-One, and Lauryn Hill to highlight how conspiracy theories can be heuristic tools to identify and make tangible otherwise systemic, and therefore often opaque, forms of oppression. An intersectional approach to conspiracy theory research is necessary to distinguish conspiracy theories that intensify and contribute to oppressive structures from those that call attention to and challenge those same structures.

Keywords

Conspiracy Theories; Jack Z. Bratich; Feminism; Critical Race Theory; Hip Hop

Summary for Lay Audience

This dissertation argues that some conspiracy theories can express forms of oppression experienced by marginalized people. Developing the work of Jack Z. Bratich (2008), the dissertation draws on Kelly Oliver's (2001) concept of "witnessing," a form of listening that accepts that there are some truths that are not universally knowable to everyone and works to support the experiences of the person testifying. The dissertation argues that researchers should consider the specificities and situatedness of each conspiracy theory and avoid homogenizing all conspiracy theories as being 'unreasonable,' 'illogical,' or 'harmful.' Instead, conspiracy theories can be used to bring people together to fight oppression. At the core of this project is an effort to distinguish conspiracy theories that call attention to forms of pervasive oppression from those that actively contribute to such oppression. For example, it highlights the differences between the conspiracy theories espoused by Alex Jones and those espoused by the Warao people of the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela who, after experiencing an outbreak of cholera in the early 1990s, drew upon conspiracy theories to make sense of the government's apathy toward their suffering. While Jones' use of conspiracies builds his own economic status and maintains a well-established racist, sexist and patriarchal worldview, the theories articulated by the Warao help to express their experience of racism, build community, and expose international neglect. The dissertation advocates for the process of "witnessing" conspiracy theories via three case studies of hip hop artists who explicitly deploy conspiracies in their art. *Immortal Technique*, Lauryn Hill, and KRS-ONE all use conspiracy theories as effective tools to call attention to structural forms of oppression.

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Preface

This dissertation is not a defense of conspiracy theories. Rather, it is an effort to nuance conspiracy theory research beyond locating the harms of conspiracy theories or identifying their distance from epistemically reputable methods of knowledge acquisition and dissemination. In my research, I found that conspiracy theories' proximity to established truth had little to do with whether they called attention to oppressive structures or contributed to them. My interest in conspiracy theories does not concern their adherence to truth, but rather lies in the ways they contribute to or challenge oppressive structures. Conspiracy theories have certainly been used to oppress certain groups and people, but this oppressive power does not reside simply in their truth or falsity. Rather, it reflects a broader socio-cultural context of discrimination. Indeed, there are countless instances where truth has been used as a tool to oppress specific people and groups under the auspices of 'rationality,' 'reason,' and 'enlightenment.' This dissertation proposes that conspiracy theories be studied with an intersectional lens in order to evaluate the interests they represent and who they target and oppress. Conspiracy theories have a unique capacity to give voice to how power is exercised and experienced. This potential can be harnessed to confront the systemic oppression of individuals and communities marginalized due to race, gender, religion, or class status .

1 What is a Conspiracy Theory?

While it may be difficult to define what comprises a conspiracy theory these days, the moral panics engendered by the assumed proliferation of ‘conspiracy theories’ are difficult to miss. Jack Z. Bratich (2008) argues that, when studying conspiracy theories, it is important to assess the “discursive practices that channel, shape, incite and deploy conspiracy theories as meaningful” (7). Existing at the nexus of an entire landscape of discursive relations, conspiracy theories are sites of contestation between various actors struggling for power. They function as “an intolerable line and an antagonism. While occasionally linked to particular groups (militias, African Americans, political extremists) the panic here is over a particular form of thought” (11). “Conspiracy panics,” Bratich continues, “help to define the normal modes of dissent” (11). In his view, conspiracy theories are positioned as a relative point of unacceptability against which hegemonic structures can lay claim to epistemological superiority. Conspiracy theories do not exist on their own accord, but only through and in contrast to mainstream ideas and opinions. This makes any definition of conspiracy theories contingent on the socio-discursive setting they occupy. To avoid the problems that can come from an undefinable set of discursive practices, Bratich turns his focus from the conspiracy theory itself to “the forums it appears in, its relation to other theories, and the legitimation accorded to it” (1).

Intended as a theoretical intervention into the field of conspiracy theory research, this dissertation builds on Bratich’s (2008) work and hopes to generate a dialogical encounter between it, feminist theory, and critical race theory in order to develop an intersectional approach to conspiracy theory research. If conspiracy theories exist as “an intolerable line and an antagonism” (11), how does their status alter when they circulate in settings conditioned by racist and sexist hegemonic institutions? While this project is indebted to Bratich, it strives to move beyond Bratich’s characterization of all conspiracy theories as “subjugated knowledges” (8) in light of the fact that many conspiracy theories have been deployed to attain and maintain power. For example, Donald Trump’s presidency was largely predicated on the efficacy of his conspiracy theories (Rosenblum

and Muirhead 2019, 1). When considering the weaponization of racism and sexism in the United States, conspiracy theories can be deployed to legitimate and intensify discursive sites of power. So, while conspiracy theories are continually being contested (as Bratich argues) this dissertation considers how their circulation and reception are affected by racism, classism and sexism.

To do this, *Witnessing Conspiracy Theories* adopts Kelly Oliver's (2001) concept of "witnessing," the act of "testifying to both something you have seen with your own eyes and something that you cannot see" (137). While a conspiracy theory may or may not be empirically true, it may still house a truth specific to the person espousing it, a truth that witnessing might elucidate. Witnessing is a heuristic tool that can break down the boundaries of intelligibility and open up the possibility of moving beyond empirical truth to truth of another kind. For marginalized communities, explanations of ongoing oppression that invoke a conspiracy theory—AIDS as a CIA creation or the systematic depopulation of Black people with vaccines (Pipes 1999, 4), for example—present an opportunity for witnesses of those narratives to acknowledge the possibility that a truth might exist beyond the empirical facticity of the claims. By departing from both the mindset that conspiracy theories should be approached in terms of their possible empirical validity (Dentith 2019; Coady 2006a; Basham 2006a), or as discursive sites of subjugated knowledge (Bratich 2008), this dissertation proposes an engagement with conspiracy theories in terms of their affective dimensions. For example, when film director Spike Lee states that "AIDS is a government-engineered disease" (as cited in Pebody 2015) targeted against Black people, his words call attention to the ongoing injustices Black Americans face in the U.S. health care system.

In utilizing Oliver's (2001) notion of witnessing, this dissertation argues that conspiracy theories should be approached as containers of meaning that elude forms of inquiry that depend only on empirical facticity as a condition of validity. It focuses on the conspiracy researcher specifically and advocates for a position of epistemic humility when engaging with conspiracy theories, arguing that other possible meanings of these theories might be foreclosed to researchers due to their positions of authority and allegiance to entrenched ways of knowing. To put this approach into practice, the

dissertation analyzes examples of conspiracy theories used in hip-hop music, focusing on the ways these conspiracy theories articulate the experiences of Black and Hispanic Americans living with systemic oppression.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Origins of Conspiracy Theory Research

Conspiracy theory research is said to have originated in Theodor Adorno's (1950) investigation of the driving factors behind the emergence of German fascism leading to World War II (Thalman 2014). In the *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno and his colleagues found that those who

did not succeed in adjusting themselves to the world, in accepting the 'reality principle'—who failed, as it were, to strike a balance between renunciations and gratifications, and whose whole inner life is determined by the denials imposed upon them from outside, not only during childhood but also during their adult life - [...] are likely to form sects, often with some panacea of 'nature,' which corresponds to their projective notion of the Jew as eternally bad and spoiling the purity of the natural. Ideas of conspiracy play a large role: they do not hesitate to attribute to the Jews a quest for world domination, and they are likely to swear by the Elders of Zion (765).

Similarly, following World War II, Hannah Arendt (1958) argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that it "is well known that the belief in a Jewish conspiracy that was kept together by a secret society had the greatest propaganda value for antisemitic publicity, and by far outran all traditional European superstitions about ritual murder and well-poisoning" (76). Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories circulated long before Hitler took power and are indicative of a broader culture of fear and paranoia fostered by racism, antisemitism, and economic, political, and institutional instability. Both Arendt and Adorno recognize the conspiracy theory's use as a supplement to an already hostile social setting, one that was hostile to Jewish people.

American conspiracy theory research was arguably inaugurated with Richard Hofstadter's (1964) essay, "The Paranoid Style of American Politics," which describes the advent of right-wing "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantas[ies]." He positions this development as a teleological continuation of historical

American suspicion of the Masons, the British, the Roman Catholic Church, and Indigenous people, to name just a few. Likewise, Karl Popper's (1945) description of the "conspiracy theory of society" laments a turn to conspiracy theories as a way to understand the harsh complexities of global and local events. Conspiracy theories demonstrate a "belief in gods whose whims and wills rule everything," a return to a theory "more primitive than most forms of theism" (as cited in Coady 2006a, 13).¹ They mark an absence of reason and, therefore, a detachment from legitimate modes of knowledge acquisition and dissemination. For Popper and Hofstadter, conspiracy theories are an easy way to deal with complicated events; the more complicated the events, the more likely it is that people will rely upon conspiracy theories.

1.1.2 Psychological and Evolutionary Approaches

Belief in conspiracy theories intensifies in times of political, economic, or social instability (Difonzo 2019, 259). When people are confronted with uncertainty, they may seek to fill the void with clear explanations of the source of their struggles. Frederic Jameson (1988) attributes this to the perpetual uncertainty provoked under late capitalism, where conspiracy theories function as the "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" (356). Hugo Drochon (2019) finds that, in response to a survey question about the existence of a secret cabal comprising government agents, corporate leaders, and others, "those of a lower socioeconomic grade responded positively 41% of the time while only 29% of the higher grade did" (340). Conspiracy theories are, to quote Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (2014), concentrated among the "losers" of society (22)—people who have suffered economic, political, and/or social hardship. In the face of such disenfranchisement, the affected group might use conspiracy theories to make sense of an otherwise unintelligible situation. The conspiracy theorist may find solace in the conspiracy theory because the existence of a

¹ Popper's (1945) approach is concerned more precisely with what conspiracy theories do to the social sciences. They turn otherwise complicated explanations of potentially haphazard events into simple explanations of conspiracies orchestrated intentionally. The result is the transformation of the institutions or people responsible—of the planned conspiracy or the haphazard event—into a "kind of group personality" (15).

group of clandestine conspirators is more palatable than insurmountable systemic conditions or random chance.

Some psychologists have found belief in conspiracy theories to be a natural response to many different situations, not just those produced by the impacts of capitalism. Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French (2014) diagnose conspiracy theorists as suffering from proportionality bias, the “product of a bias towards seeking or accepting explanations that are proportional to the consequences of the event in question” (238). Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Mark van Vugt (2018) go so far as to argue that conspiracy theories are evolutionarily necessary, suggesting that it is beneficial to err on the side of caution and submit to paranoia rather than engage in naïve optimism. They write that the

central question for the possible adaptive qualities of conspiracy theories...is how actual conspiracies influenced the lives of ancient hunter-gatherers during the millennia when many of these psychological traits evolved. As such, finding that basic psychological mechanisms facilitate conspiracy beliefs does not preclude the possibility that a predisposition to believe such theories is a functional solution to a specific adaptive problem that humans have faced throughout evolutionary history: the danger of real conspiracies forming against them (774).

The same belief is echoed in the philosophical musings of Steve Clarke (2006) who, when contemplating the role of conspiracy theories in human evolution, suggests that

A heightened awareness of dispositional factors in the understanding of the behavior of others was to our evolutionary advantage, even if this came at a cost to our understanding of the importance of situational factors. If another person, with whom I am in close contact, is disposed to conspire against me then it is very important that I am aware of this (90).

Pierre Clastres (2010), the mid-twentieth century French anthropologist, echoes these sentiments by speculating that conspiracy theories have been necessary for people across history: “if enemies did not exist, they would have to be invented” because “[w]ar serves to maintain each community's political independence” that demonstrates their “equal, free and independent sociopolitical units” (274). Clastres argues that belief in conspiring foes encouraged a cooperative effort to deter the looming threat, thereby strengthening community bonds against potential enemies. Of course, to return briefly to

Hannah Arendt (1958), conspiracy theories do not necessarily encourage community; they can also contribute to a culture of loneliness and fear (478). Given this, it is worth considering the specific factors that contribute to the conspiracy theory's ability to motivate social cohesion or undo it, a project out of the scope of this dissertation.

Obviously, conspiracy theories are not just artifacts of the past. In *American Conspiracy Theories*, Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent (2014) conduct the most comprehensive longitudinal study of conspiracy theories to date. Before their work, researchers tended not to study conspiracy theories due to for the absence of records about them. In an analysis of *New York Times* letters to the editor between 1890 and 2010, Uscinski and Parent found that conspiracy theories have been on the decline since 1890 (110). They also examined the comparatively conservative news outlet *Chicago Tribune* as a control, which yielded similar results. During this period, there were two notable peaks: in the 1890s at the height of industrialization and in the 1950s during Senator Joseph McCarthy's tenure.

Uscinski and Parent's study also seeks to understand the circulation of conspiracy theories in the 21st century, using online polls and surveys to assess conspiracy theory belief among the public. They found that conspiracy theories are ubiquitous, with more than 63% of respondents believing at least one (6). The distribution of conspiracy theory belief appears to be equal across the political spectrum, although the types of conspiracy theories differ. In the United States, Democrats are more likely to believe that 9/11 was orchestrated or facilitated by the Bush administration whereas Republicans are more likely to believe that Barack Obama was born outside of the United States (90). Uscinski and Parent also found that the likelihood to believe in conspiracy theories does not intensify individual radicalization (89) and that the distribution of conspiracy theory belief is nearly equal between genders (83). The most significant distinction they found was that racial minority populations are more predisposed to conspiracy theories. Among Black people, older citizens are more prone to conspiracy theories than their younger counterparts, "presumably because they experienced more discrimination" (84). Most surprisingly, they found that technological connectivity did not correlate with increased conspiracy theory

belief (122). In fact, the opposite seems to be the case on average.² Perhaps one explanation for this fact is the concomitant increase of access to properly sourced information that can discourage belief in conspiracy theories. In any case, their finding that 63% of the population believes in at least one conspiracy theory reveals that conspiracy theories are still prominent today.³

1.1.3 Philosophical Approaches

In addition to psychological and sociological research into conspiracy theory belief, some conspiracy theory scholarship is informed by the philosophy of social epistemology, a body of thinking concerned with how people collectively pursue and accept what is true. This school can be broken into three camps with three primary views of conspiracy theories. M R. X. Dentith (2019) classifies them as follows:

1. “Conspiracy theories are prima facie false.”
2. “Conspiracy theories are not prima facie false, but there is something about such theories which makes them suspicious.”
3. “Conspiracy theories are neither prima facie false nor typically suspicious” (94).

The first camp of conspiracy theory research informed by social epistemology focuses on the ways conspiracy theories can harm dominant and legitimate modes of knowledge production. For example, Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2008) argue that conspiracy theories are a form of “crippled epistemology” that stems from a “sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources” (3). Sunstein and Vermeule nuance their project, however, by suggesting that they are only interested in “false conspiracy theories, not true ones” (4). This is a tenuous claim because, once accepted as

² They argue that if technology correlated with conspiracy theory belief, then conspiracy theories would now dominate all conversations (123).

³ There have been many changes in the presentation and distribution of conspiracy theories since 2014. Reflecting on Donald Trump’s presidency, Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead highlight a mutation of conspiracy theories into conspiracism, a more pernicious and virulent brand of conspiracy theories that encourage radicalization in novel ways (2019).

true, a conspiracy theory is no longer a theory, it is a real conspiracy. The delineation of legitimate and illegitimate types of conspiracy theorizing forgets that every single recognized conspiracy began as a conspiracy theory. The Watergate conspiracy was only accepted as true when it was *proven* to be true. Before that moment, it was no less true, it was simply not accepted as such.

Sunstein and Vermeule propose that conspiracy theories must be debunked. They argue that “government can partially circumvent these problems [of debunking conspiracy theories] if it enlists credible independent experts in the effort to rebut the theories” (as cited in Ole Bjerg 2017, 152). Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen respond by pointing out that Sunstein and Vermeule are proposing that the “government should do precisely what conspiracy theorists are claiming that it is already doing” (155). The contradiction of their proposal overshadows its plea to combat conspiracy theories. While there are few other scholars who share this stance, there are many who hold similar views that there must be a direct intervention by legitimate authority figures to combat conspiracy theories by countering them with fact-based data.

The second camp of conspiracy theory research informed by social epistemology asserts that conspiracy theories are not *prima facie* false, but there is something about such theories which makes them suspicious. This position attempts to assess conspiracy theories on their own terms. If there are facts that accompany a conspiracy theory, then that conspiracy theory should be accepted as valid. Here, the conspiracy theory is not disavowed; it is given attention as a viable explanation that will remain so if the facts check out. Before this point, however, the conspiracy theory is regarded suspiciously, and is generally viewed as a poor explanation of events.

In his essay “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” Gordon Wood (1982) takes aim at Richard Hofstadter’s work on the “paranoid style” of conspiracy theories, noting that Hofstadter refuses to acknowledge “revolutionaries as paranoid personalities” (404). Wood troubles the view that the paranoid style belongs only to those who occupy the margins of reputability. Wood also argues that, far from expressing a political or social malaise in America, conspiracy

theories may have contributed to the formation of the United States itself. To situate conspiracy theories on the margins is to forget that they have been (and still are) powerful narrative styles in everyday political and social life.

Didier Fassin (2011) provides an additional line of argument in this camp. He explores the spread of AIDS conspiracy theories through South Africa by tracing the role of experts, data, and argumentation that helped generate AIDS treatment skepticism. Fassin points out that Peter Duesberg, “a gifted professor of molecular biology member of the National Academy of Sciences, and winner of the Outstanding Investigator Award from the National Institutes of Health” (41-2) was one expert who “led the contestation of the official interpretation of the AIDS epidemic” (42). Duesberg argued “that poverty, rather than a virus, was the cause of the African AIDS epidemic, and that antiretroviral drugs were killing patients instead of healing them” (as cited in Fassin, 40). Duesberg was, by all accounts, a rational and legitimate scientist, yet still fell prey to believing conspiracy theories that were responsible for hundreds of thousands of people refusing to seek AIDS treatment across the globe. With this example, Fassin makes that point that a “paranoid style does not presume paranoiac individuals” (42), revealing the ways that science and rationality can be co-opted and utilized by conspiracy theorists.

Brian L. Keeley (2006) makes a distinction between conspiracy theories and “unwarranted conspiracy theories” (47). For Keeley, unwarranted conspiracy theories are devoid of any evidence and reason and should therefore be disavowed. Keeley does not support other, somewhat substantiated conspiracy theories either, which he sees as embodying “a thoroughly outdated worldview” (57). But, if Keeley only accepts conspiracy theories that are proven to be true, then they are no longer theories, and he is actually not interested in conspiracy theories at all. Keeley’s focus on proven, or “warranted” conspiracy theories, amounts to only choosing to look for a lost item where light shines, ignoring all the other places that the item might be. His interest is fixed only on conspiracies that have been legitimated by powerful institutions and figures. As a result, he forecloses engagement with conspiracy theories *a priori*. Steve Clarke (2006) argues that none of “Keeley’s arguments against unwarranted conspiracy theories establish that unwarranted conspiracy theories are significantly less epistemically

reputable than other social theories” (87). Keeley does, however, concede that conspiracy theories “are not necessarily wrong” because “small groups of powerful individuals do occasionally seek to affect the course of history” (46).

Scholars that concede that conspiracy theories may not be *prima facie* false but remain suspicious of them nonetheless tend to be of a liberal democratic mindset, worrying that “the prohibition of even talking about conspiracy theories seriously leads to the *othering* of political voices” (Dentith 2019, 99). They recognize the necessity of paying attention to the voices of others, acknowledging Jürgen Habermas’ (1974) argument about the need for a robust public sphere that provides citizens the “guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions” (49). For these thinkers, some conspiracy theories will be accepted while others disavowed in the public sphere.

The third camp of thinking about conspiracy theories informed by social epistemology sees conspiracy theories as neither *prima facie* false nor typically suspicious. Rather, it argues that history is rife with conspiracies. Lee Basham suggests that “the genocide against indigenous North and South Americans, the Jewish holocaust, the Stalinist ‘wrecker’ show trials, and many others [...] began with a conspiracy” (2006a 134). Conspiracies are ever-present social phenomena and have been part of many of the most atrocious acts in history. It is reasonable to be suspicious of authority, for if it acts maliciously or ignorantly, the outcome might have devastating consequences. Basham argues that the “background suspicion of most conspiracy theorists is that public institutions are and perhaps always have been largely untrustworthy” (2006b, 67). Conspiracies are ubiquitous and their ubiquity makes their theorization a necessary component for a functioning liberal democracy. Such a claim is clearly controversial because it suggests that any form of free speech must be acceptable in a liberal democracy. At the end of *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate* an edited volume of essays about conspiracy theories, David Coady (2006b) argues that each of the contributors’ “could be accused of being [...] enemies of the open society, because they discourage an activity that is essential to its survival, conspiracy theorizing” (170).

Democracy and conspiracy theorizing go hand in hand as they are both ostensibly predicated upon open and free discussion.

The justification that conspiracy theories help foster open and free discussion is by no means new. In chronicling the plays about conspiracies of the “early seventeenth century” (135) that spanned the “period of the *Fronde*” (136), Malina Stefanovska (2004) argues that conspiracy theories represented “vertical and horizontal bonds that constituted a political community” (135). These narratives forced the audience to confront the “legitimacy of power, the balance between sovereignty and individual rights or between expediency (and secrecy) and the law, [...] and the related distinction between public and private interests” (136). Here, the conspiracy theory is seen as helping to galvanize a kind of public identity that can overcome the conspiracies orchestrated by those in power. While it might seem counterintuitive to propose that conspiracy theories are a model of public engagement, these thinkers view them as signs of a healthy democratic system.

This approach positions conspiracy theories as vessels for possible truth and believes they should be considered seriously as a result. Skeptical of power, this view is therefore prepared to entertain any possible explanation of an event or broad social/political/economic phenomenon.

1.1.4 Post-Structuralist Approaches

The approaches described above take conspiracy theories to be readily graspable phenomena. Some scholarly approaches have been critical of this belief, however, suggesting that conspiracy theories do not just exist in the world, but rather circulate within relations of power and knowledge. In the words of Jodi Dean (2000), “maybe the most significant difference between conspiracy thinking and legitimate reason is who’s calling the shots” (303).

Jack Z. Bratich (2008) and Peter Knight (2003) focus on the ways power constitutes and frames some knowledges as conspiracy theories. They both take aim at any outright rejection of conspiracy theories, arguing that conspiracy theories are worth studying despite their lack veracity. Knight claims that his approach “brackets off the

question of whether the particular conspiracy theories are true or false [...], and instead investigates what function the conspiracy stories fulfill in the lives of the people and the groups who circulate them” (21). In criticizing the implicit disavowal of conspiracy theories by figures like Richard Hofstadter (1964), Knight argues that conspiracy theories should be read as “a kind of pop sociology, a way of making sense of structure and agency in a time when official versions of events and more academic forms of explanation fail to capture the imagination of a disillusioned public” (21). Knight mirrors Frederic Jameson’s (1988) view that conspiracy theories are “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is the degraded figure of the total logic of late capital” (352). Both locate the conspiracy theorist in relation to a specific cultural phenomenon: the alienating structures of late capitalism and globalization. While Knight is less dismissive of the conspiracy theorist than Jameson, both acknowledge that the conspiracy theory might be a conduit to better understand social, economic, and political conditions.

Jack Z. Bratich (2008) raises the stakes of any cultural engagement with conspiracy theories by problematizing their easy identification. Drawing upon Michel Foucault’s (1980a; 1980b) work, Bratich identifies the “discursive practices that channel, shape, incite, and deploy conspiracy theories as meaningful” (7). Conspiracy theories are not only shaped by their ideological contexts, but also are named as such and determined by structures of power and knowledge that delineate what is considered knowledge and what is considered alternative or fringe knowledge. Bratich uses 9/11 as an example of this; the official explanation describes a conspiracy— people acted clandestinely to commit acts of terror—but is not taken to be a conspiracy theory. When a conspiracy theory is accepted by specific institutional structures, it ceases to be a conspiracy theory. To be deemed a conspiracy theorist is, then, a derogatory charge that positions the conspiracy theorist as a paranoid and disreputable person. In response to the existence of a conspiracy theory emerges what Bratich calls a “conspiracy panic,” a large-scale fear of conspiracy theories that are seen to threaten established theoretical or speculative inquiry. Conspiracy theories do not exist as a neutral generic category; they are a political category determined by the dominant structures of power and knowledge. Their capacity to elicit panic adduces their status as “subjugated knowledges” (7)—ways of knowing

that are derided based on their status as conspiracy theories, not on their merit as explanations of events or phenomena.

1.1.5 Feminist and Critical Race Approaches to Conspiracy Theories and Suspicion

There have been a few notable efforts to approach conspiracy theories in terms of gender and race. In *I Heard it Through the Grapevine*, Patricia Turner (1993) compiles a vast array of urban legends and rumours⁴ that circulate through Black American communities. Some of these include the belief that food from the fast-food chain Church's Chicken was laced with chemicals by the Ku Klux Klan to sterilize its mostly Black patrons (xiii), the belief that the Center for Disease Control experimented on Black children (xiii), and the belief that the government was willingly apathetic in the face of both the AIDS and crack-cocaine epidemics in the United States. Rather than disregard these beliefs, Turner posits that these theories "often function as tools of resistance for many of the folk who share them" (xvi). By constructing a vast network of enemies, Black Americans are able to encourage group solidarity in the face of threats: "attacks on single Black individuals are perceived as affronts to the entire African-American community" (151). For Turner, such theories "emerge in relation to both genuine and perceived acts of anti-black hostility" (74). In response to these perceived threats, Turner argues for a strong dose of truth, believing that it will help mitigate belief in rumours that are outside the bounds of accepted speculative inquiry: "Blacks [*sic*] need to be shown evidence that all contemporary white leaders are not in fact out to destroy them" (212).

Nicole Charles (2018) studies Black women and girls' suspicion about the HPV vaccine in Barbados. She cultivates "an appreciation of the multiple contingencies and sticky circulations of suspicion that shape hesitancy as a welcomingly fraught departure point from which we might begin to reorient our understandings of postcolonial biopolitics" (47). To do this, she replaces the rhetoric of hesitancy that is bound up within

⁴ While "rumours" and "legends" are Turner's terms to describe Black people's supposedly unsubstantiated claims, I think that it is important to acknowledge that these terms risk erasing the material conditions that encourage such ideas in the first place.

a specific medico-juridical framework with the idea of suspicion: “to feel doubt, to withhold, or resist feeling certain,” as an understandable affective response (54). While the suspicion these women express toward the HPV vaccine may not be justifiable through a traditional empirical lens, it nevertheless articulates the histories of biomedical and governmental intervention that have been repeatedly imposed on these communities. While Charles does not focus specifically on conspiracy theories, her work reveals how affective and embodied utterances convey histories of systemic oppression. When applied to conspiracy theories, her theoretical contribution supplies a necessary barometer with which to distinguish conspiracy theories that implicitly and explicitly maintain various oppressive structures from those that speak against, and challenge, oppressive structures.

Sara Ahmed (2004) provides a way to understand conspiracy theories as circulating within an economy of affective relations. For Ahmed, contact implies an entire constellation of relations that mutate in proximity with other people and objects; it “involves the subject, as well as histories that come before the subject. If emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects, then emotions are not simply ‘in’ the subject or the object” (6). The location of conspiracy theories as embodied utterances within a broader affective economy is not easily pinned down; it is only by engaging the history of power that “shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds” (12) that these locations can be discovered and conspiracy theories can be differentiated from one another.

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) notion of intersectionality calls attention to the multivariate ways that forces exert themselves against people depending on their identity(ies). In “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” she problematizes the narrow field of identity politics that seeks to attribute the causes of oppression to easily identifiable identity categories and argues instead that oppression is not so neat in its exertion of force. Rather, the end result of any combination of oppressive forces against any number of discernible identity markers “is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (140) on their own; no standard arithmetic can quantify the force of oppression on those who are multiply affected. For Black people, oppression based on race and class

is intersecting. This kind of intersecting oppression evades traditional methods of assessment.

For marginalized people, oppression necessitates tactical responses that do not necessarily comply with hegemonic practices of testifying to one's experiences. Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) terrain-altering *Borderlands/La Frontera* magnifies the unique experiences of Latina women navigating multiple identities as they move between Mexico and the United States. By occupying both insider and outsider position, these women are open to certain vantage points foreclosed to those either completely outside of American or Mexican life, and those completely immersed within them. Anzaldúa calls this, borrowing from her ancestral heritage, "*La Facultad*," the "capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities" (38). *La Facultad* is the capacity to see the subterranean structures that maintain a given system's power and to maintain an elevated vigilance against its surreptitious oppressive forces: "When we're up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we'll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away" (38-9). For marginalized people, suspicion and conspiracy theories can be a survival tactic.

Kelly Oliver's concept of witnessing, developed in her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (2001), helps those of us without firsthand experience better understand the unspoken experiences of oppression. Oliver challenges the Hegelian view that subjectivity is conferred in an antagonistic struggle between two (or more) conscious beings. She writes, "if we start from the assumption that relations are essentially antagonistic struggles for recognition, then it is no wonder that contemporary theorists spend so much energy trying to imagine how these struggles can lead to compassionate personal relations, ethical social relations, or democratic political relations" (4). Instead of being defined by antagonisms, she argues that "subjectivity and humanity are the result of response-ability," and others "are obligated to witness beyond recognition, to testify and to listen to testimony—to encounter each other—because subjectivity and humanity are the result of witnessing" (90). Witnessing means embracing the possibility that there is a truth beyond recognition, accepting the fact that others might not ever completely comprehend what is

being relayed to us. A conspiracy theory might not be factually or historically true, but it may nevertheless articulate certain embodied truths not accessible to all listeners.

1.1.6 Hip Hop Studies

The dissertation's final chapter examines the generative possibilities of conspiracy theories in hip hop music by bridging hip hop studies with conspiracy theory research. The ethnomusicological work of Tricia Rose (1994), Cheryl L. Keyes (2004), S. Craig Watkins (2005), and Murray Forman (2002) helped found the field of hip hop studies. In *Black Noise* (1994), Tricia Rose defines rap as a form of “rhymed story-telling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically-based music” that captures and conveys the sounds and experiences of urban life (2) and draws important connections between socio-economic conditions in urban America and the development of Black cultural expression through music and video. Emerging in the Bronx in the 1970's, hip hop was inspired by African American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture. Given its place among Black and Latino populations, and its propensity to “mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion” (99), it historically has been a heavily policed and monitored musical genre. Hip hop uses “cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes” to conduct “symbolic and ideological warfare” (100). It engages in “discursive ‘wars of position’ within and against dominant discourse” (102), thereby drawing the ire of politicians, academics, and police alike.

In her book, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Cheryl L. Keyes (2004) examines the specific strands of hip hop music that directly call attention to the injustices experienced by Black and Latinx populations. For example, she traces the emergence of Afrika Bambaata's Zulu Nation that emphasized “black nationalism and street consciousness” to “promote empowerment, awareness, and ethnic pride among black youths” (158). When Bambaata speaks of Black nationalism, he does not reserve it for Black people alone: “when we say black we mean all our Puerto Rican and Dominican brothers” (as cited in George 2004, 50), drawing lines of affiliation between similarly disenfranchised groups at the hands of systemic discrimination. S. Craig Watkins (2005) emphasizes this point in his study of West coast hip hop culture, noting that the United States' incarceration rate increased seven-fold over the last 20 years of the 20th century.

About 60% of these newly incarcerated people were either Black or Hispanic even though they only made up approximately 25% of the population (170). Watkins argues that for Black and Latinx youth, hip hop is a way they can “articulate a vision of their world that is insightful, optimistic, and tenaciously, critical of the institutions and circumstances that restrict their ability to impact the world around them” (181).

Murray Forman’s (2002) *The 'Hood Comes First* is a theoretical investigation of the constitution of space and place through hip hop culture. Forman evaluates the discursive conditions that occasion the formation of various spatial categories like “race, nation, and the 'hood” (xxiii). These discourses congeal into the lived reality of a space that shapes those living within its boundaries. The relationship is affective insofar as both subjects and spaces are mutually conditioned by a reciprocal give-and-take. But no space is neutral. Spaces are also constituted by interests outside the community and by those who wield the most power within that community. The discursive utterances within a space do more than constitute that space then; they also work to impose dominant cultural values and forms of social stratification. As a result, “race is spatialized and space is racialized” (10), and the cultural artifacts to emerge from such spaces will tacitly convey the cultural events that condition them. Forman, Rose, Keyes, and Watkins, all illustrate the ways the form and content of Black cultural expression have historically been heavily monitored and policed according to dominant codes, governing acceptable and unacceptable discourse. Adding the concept of policed knowledge to Bratich’s theorization of conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledge helps to differentiate conspiracy theories that enjoy relative privilege from those that exist under perpetual surveillance and policing.

1.2 Theory and Methods

The method used in this dissertation is a brand of discourse analysis informed by phenomenology and narrative research as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018, 12). With this view, conspiracy theories comprise a narrative form that produces concrete,

phenomenological affects on people and the world at large.⁵ People create conspiracy theories and conspiracy theories, in turn, have an impact on people. This dissertation also engages with primary and secondary literature that explores the e/affects conspiracy theories have had, both historically and currently. The capacity of conspiracy theories to motivate e/affective bonds and impacts demonstrates the fact that they are speech-acts, types of speech that produce material e/affects from immaterial proclamations (Austin 1962). As J. L. Austin argues, speech does not merely describe something, rather “to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something” (12). Conspiracy theories do not only exist linguistically; they can motivate political movements, group solidarity, and fear. How a conspiracy theory performs this function is not intrinsic to the conspiracy theory but is conditioned by the conspiracy theory’s location within an economy of socio-discursive interactions and political, economic, and cultural practices. For examples, conspiracy theories that convey racist messages, like those in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, do so in conjunction with a broader atmosphere of anti-Semitic hatred that gives the conspiracy theory power to motivate material e/affects. To engage with discourse, then, means engaging with both the words of a text or utterance, its impacts, and the socio-discursive site from which they emerge.

The dissertation is also informed by Michel Foucault’s (1972) approach to discourse analysis that positions discourse as bound to the conditions that constitute it. In his words, discourse analysis reveals

relations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors were unaware of each other's existence); relations between groups of statements thus established (even if these groups do not concern the same, or even adjacent, fields; even if they do not possess the same formal level; even if they are not the locus of assignable

⁵ Conspiracy theories, like any other narrative, emerge from and exist within a particular socio-discursive setting. To say that they form a phenomenological bond with the people that hear and speak them means that conspiracy theories are conditioned by people and that conspiracy theories condition people in a certain setting. Conspiracy theories then embody both implicit and explicit elements of that setting’s socio-discursive dynamics. In Nazi Germany, for example, conspiracy theories were motivated by anti-Semitism within that setting. In turn, the conspiracy theories enforced anti-Semitism.

exchanges); relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind (technical, economic, social, political). To reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed is not to undertake to re-establish it in an isolation that nothing could overcome; it is not to close it upon itself; it is to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within it and outside it (29).

Discourse exists within a particular setting and functions to maintain that setting in its specificity. Discursive utterances comply to a set of standards implicitly and explicitly formulated to establish that site as unique. Describing this in *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault (1973) writes that “one now sees the visible only because one knows the language; things are offered to him who has penetrated the closed world of words; and if these words communicate with things, it is because they obey a rule that is intrinsic to their grammar” (115). Language is material insofar as it can elicit real and material effects (i.e. the pronouncement “I do” in a marriage ceremony (Austin 1962, 5)), but it is also material in the way that it codifies and organizes tools, objects, and subjects that exist within or come into contact with a particular organization of knowledge. Discourse analysis acknowledges both of these dimensions of discourse, identifying its material effects and its materiality in the objects it describes and whose meanings it attempts to fix. For example, the discourse of pathology used to control people who are described as “mentally ill” serves the dual function of deploying a physical apparatus of care and rehabilitation and reinforcing its own power by containing and controlling the material quality of the symptoms it describes.

For Foucault (1972; 1973), discourse does not circulate neutrally within a particular economy of meaning; it is imbued with the interests of that economy. In relation to the clinic, Foucault identifies how the treatment of the sick satisfied many interests in 18th century Europe by establishing and maintaining a coherence around the idea that “a patient can be cured only in society” (1973, 84), and the view that such treatment was made possible only by the philanthropy of privileged and powerful social figures. Of course, the benevolent selflessness of their care was underwritten by an implicit desire to utilize those sick people: to make “possible a greater knowledge of the illnesses with which he himself may be affected; what is benevolence towards the poor is transformed into knowledge that is applicable to the rich” (84). The entire enterprise of

care reveals the extent to which power is co-extensive with the circulation of its discourse—no matter how caring it claims to be.

Once taken as a discursive site for meaning, conspiracy theories can be explored in relation to the specific contexts from which they emerge. It is through such an exploration that an engagement with the power structures that give rise to these discourses might take place. This dissertation builds upon the Foucauldian approach to discourse and power to highlight the capillary ways that power is imposed and lived specifically by those people marked by the discursive categories of race, class, and gender. It applies Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) notion of intersectionality to the study of conspiracy theories as discourses within a racist, sexist, and classist social structure.

Intersectionality as a method is a potent way to understand the articulations of oppression expressed by conspiracy theories. Its refusal to adopt a "single categorical axis" (Crenshaw 1989, 144) in examining oppression puts it at odds with traditional methods that emphasize readily accessible identity markers to facilitate information's organization and analysis. Intersectional methods adopt some components of traditional research—splitting of researchers from research subjects; accumulating data; analyzing and interpreting data—all the while calling attention to those very practices. Embracing its contradictory nature, Heather Hillsburg (2013) puts forward three central axioms fundamental to intersectional methodologies: 1. "A Researcher Must Not Police the Parameters of Intersecting Identities" (7), 2. "Identity Categories Are Not Fixed" (8) and 3. "Researchers Must Not Violate the Vulnerability of Others" (9). These axioms coalesce into a potentially liberatory form of research that reveals, rather than perpetuates, oppressive forms of knowledge acquisition.

Given the importance of location and positionality when considering conspiracy theories, I must also situate myself in relation to this project. I acknowledge the long history of white, male academics excavating knowledge(s) from marginalized communities to gain institutional legitimacy in academia, a legitimacy most often inaccessible to those same marginalized communities. As a white, rural, middle-class, cis-gender man, I have no historical connection to the largely Black, urban culture

discussed in this dissertation. This fact places this dissertation squarely along the trajectory of a historically problematic institutional practice: taking from communities to gain institutional legitimacy without giving anything in return. I attempt to counteract this by working to reform the many institutions participating in the continued discrimination of Black people. In the dissertation, I approach hip hop with a real epistemic humility. Any meaning inferred from the sounds and lyrics of the hip hop examined here is done cautiously, and with the theoretical assistance of other Black scholars who have contributed to this field. My goal is not to add to hip hop studies, but rather to advance theoretical knowledge about the ways marginalized communities may adopt conspiracy theories as a way to describe their experiences of systemic oppression. Drawing on Kelly Oliver's notion of witnessing, my goal is to argue for a way of listening, or bearing witness, that does not prescribe meaning or posit a "whole truth" about the experience of others. Rather, I hope to open space for the emergence of alternative readings and truths that might be illuminating for readers. Hip hop contains truths that are exclusive to the artist, truths that are exclusive to the community they inhabit and truths shared with all similarly situated people. Having no access to these truths, I am left only to acknowledge their existence and, potentially, create a space for them to emerge and be heard.

In addition to the use of intersectional feminism, the affect theory of N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Sara Ahmed (2004) informs the view taken here that knowledge is not an object to be unearthed with detached and objective tools. Sara Ahmed argues that "knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation; knowledge is bound up with what makes us sweat, shudder, tremble, all those feelings that are crucially felt on the bodily surface, the skin surface where we touch and are touched by the world" (171). The embodied nature of knowledge prevents it from ever being fully captured by the arbiters of empirical validation. Affective knowledges circulate within their own economy of meaning, a zone often inaccessible to both the people experiencing it and those hoping to study it. Despite this, a method drawing from intersectional feminist, critical race and affect theory is still possible and attempted here.

Nicole Charles (2018) illustrates this methodological approach in her discussion of the histories of colonization, medical neglect, and economic disenfranchisement of

vaccine-hesitant Barbadian women. To mitigate her own distance from the daily experiences of these women, Charles emphasizes the capacity to witness, and implores “social science and humanities researchers and healthcare practitioners alike [to] recognize and accept the histories, ideologies, and practices that we might yet comprehend” (102). The first step is to listen with more than one’s ears.

The witnessing of hip hop undertaken in this dissertation draws from Nic Beech’s and Stephen Broad’s (2018) definition of ethnomusicological method as “concerned with the connections between music, its meanings and significances, reflecting and contributing to the construction of a culture or community... there is an aim to understand music and its associated practices in their social context” (2). Music is largely conditioned by contextual conditions, but this is especially the case with hip hop music. As Murray Forman (2002) writes, hip hop presents “processes of social mapping that provides the coordinates or charting issues and practices within the broad terrains of popular culture” (15-6). Ethnomusicology acknowledges that hip hop conveys both the multivariate experiences of the artists and communities producing it and the strategies afforded to those attempting to navigate a social terrain that repeatedly victimizes them. For Tricia Rose (1994), “much of rap’s critical force grows out of the cultural potency that racially segregated conditions foster” (xiii). Insofar as any musical genre or style will reflect the social, political, geographic, and economic conditions it emerges from, a direct engagement with hip hop also demands the recognition of its simultaneous condemnation of these conditions.

1.3 Dissertation Breakdown

Chapter One considers Jack Z. Bratich’s contribution to conspiracy theory research. It traces Michel Foucault’s (1980b) influence of Bratich’s thought, and outlines criticisms of Foucault’s homogenous treatment of the effects of power (Hayles 1999). The chapter applies these criticisms to conspiracy theory research and makes the case that a new domain of conspiracy theory research is possible once embodiment, affect, and positionality are added to Bratich’s notion of subjugated knowledge.

Chapter Two turns to feminist and critical race theory as supplements to Bratich's discursive approach to conspiracy theories. These schools of thought help us to focus on the specificities of place and location when considering conspiracy theories. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality allows us to distinguish these two narratives in terms of the subject different positions of their speakers.

Chapter Three illustrates Oliver's method of witnessing by applying it to specific examples of hip hop music specifically called "knowledge rap"—rap that deals with "sociopolitical concerns or spatially oriented themes relating to Black cultural frames of experience" (Forman 2002, 83). Drawing from Murray Forman's work on rap's connection to Black urban spaces, the chapter proposes that rap music presents a doorway into the many socio-economic conditions that function as a backdrop and motivation for its production. Examining artists like KRS-One (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone), Immortal Technique, and Lauryn Hill, the chapter explores how the conspiracy discourses expressed in their lyrics differ from conspiracy theories expressed by those in positions of authority.

2 Conspiracy Theories/Counter-Knowledge

“Power has a rationality that rationality does not know. Rationality, on the other hand, does not have a power that power does not know.”

Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter*

Jack Z. Bratich’s (2008) contribution to the study of conspiracy theories identifies a fundamental issue: how do discursive regimes of power contribute to the designation of some modes of thought as conspiracy theories and others not? For Bratich, the conspiracy theory does not exist in and of itself, it grows in the nexus between apparatuses like “academic researchers, ‘independent’ scholars, journalists, citizen watchdog groups, public intellectuals, and private intelligence-gathering organizations” (48-9) designated as “legitimate,” and narratives that dispute and challenge those apparatuses. To call something a conspiracy theory, then, is not to identify a narrative from a neutral perspective, rather it is to employ “a term of derision, disqualification, and dismissal” (3). The designation and circulation of a conspiracy theory is a perpetual site of struggle, where those who deride the narrative and those who embrace it vie for recognition in the face of a dominant regime of knowledge production. Acknowledging this, Bratich frames his project as an effort “to examine the very conditions of recognition, the contexts that make [the conspiracy theory] visible and intelligible” (6). He asks: for whom is the conspiracy theory operationalized? How does the conspiracy theory function as a point of opposition against which socially legitimate sites of authority can claim epistemic superiority? How might conspiracy theories, despite their empirical validity, “collectively function as doorways to a broader context” (6)? Throughout his analysis, he positions conspiracy theories as “subjugated knowledges” (7), which involves putting aside their substantive differences and focusing instead on their common treatment by official regimes of knowledge production and dissemination.

This chapter examines conspiracy theory research, developing Jack Z. Bratich’s (2008) work in order to consider the role of class, gender, and race in the ways conspiracy theories emerge, are distributed and (de)legitimated. The chapter is organized into five sections. The first section presents a brief overview of conspiracy theory

researchers prior to the work of Bratich. The second section explores Bratich's intervention into the field of conspiracy theory research, which shifts the focus from whether or not the conspiracy theory may be true to examining what the conspiracy theory means and does in a society. The third section develops Bratich's approach, nuancing his claim that all conspiracy theories are examples of subjugated knowledge by highlighting the fact that some conspiracy theories, and conspiracy theorists, are not at all subjugated. Focusing on political figures and news pundits, this section attends to the varying ways that conspiracy theories are expressed and challenged and argues that the term "conspiracy theory" is not only used to disqualify explanations that do not comply with a normative standard. The fourth section focuses on the ways the business logics of the current digital economy, or platform capitalism, have incentivized the proliferation of conspiracy theories. It argues that the overt drive for profit through the pursuit of data about users mirrors the methods employed by conspiracy theorists in their quest for esoteric knowledge. The final section sets the stage for the next chapter by examining the ways class, gender, and race alter the function, distribution, and modes of de-legitimation connected to conspiracy theories. While it may be true that all conspiracy theories share, in some measure, a mutual position as subjugated knowledges, there are important specificities of social location and identity that can nuance researchers' views of their social meanings and importance.

2.1 Conspiracy Theory Research before Jack Z. Bratich

As reviewed in the previous chapter, most conspiracy theory researchers prior to Bratich's intervention are preoccupied with questions of epistemic validity and proximity to truth. Indeed, it might be argued that conspiracy theorists' drive for truth has often been mirrored in those scholars seeking to study them. Some scholars tolerate conspiracy theories while others are skeptical about whether a conspiracy theory can ever be a plausible explanation of an event or phenomenon.

Charles Pidgen (2006) criticizes Karl Popper's implicit disavowal of conspiracy theories, arguing that history is riddled with conspiracies. Likewise, Lee Basham argues that believing in conspiracy theories is understandable given the increasing secrecy and monopolization of power in a globalized world (2006c: 94). On the other hand, Brian L.

Keeley stresses the need to differentiate conspiracy theories from “unwarranted conspiracy theories” (2006: 47), arguing that there are degrees of legitimacy among conspiracy theories. (57). Steve Clarke echoes this sentiment, suggesting that, among intellectuals, there is an “entitlement to an attitude of *prima facie* skepticism towards the theories propounded by conspiracy theorists” (2006: 79).

As I have argued, what these approaches to conspiracy theory research have in common is a focus on the conspiracy theory’s validity in relation to its truthfulness. Some recognize that conspiracies have occurred, and can occur, but refuse to see a conspiracy theory as a valid explanation of any event; others concede, albeit reluctantly, that conspiracies are common phenomena and that they are worthy of consideration because they might be correct; while others argue that researchers must attend to conspiracy theories because conspiracies are ubiquitous social phenomena. All of these approaches share the view that a conspiracy theory can be laid to rest once it has been proven true or false.

Jack Z Bratich’s (2008) approach categorially differs from these arguments because he focuses on the *attribution* of the label ‘conspiracy theory,’ not on whether it is empirically true. He asks, “is it something inherent in the theory itself or is it more about the forums it appears in, its relation to other theories, and the legitimation accorded it?” (2). Conspiracy theories do not merely wait to be given legitimacy. Their very “discursive position in relation to a ‘regime of truth’” (3) conditions any legitimacy that might be conferred upon them. And so, for Bratich, the issue is not the veracity of conspiracy theories, but rather identifying the “discursive practices that channel, shape, incite, and deploy conspiracy theories as meaningful” (7). Following Bratich, my focus is not on whether conspiracy theories are empirically true but rather on the ways that conspiracy theories become meaningful and what they reveal about the socio-discursive landscape they inhabit.

2.2 Conspiracy Theories as Counter-Knowledge

2.2.1 Bratich's approach to conspiracy theories

Bratich argues that conspiracy theories operate “as an intolerable line and an antagonism. While occasionally linked to particular groups (militias, African Americans, political extremists), the panic here is over a particular form of thought” (2008 11). “Conspiracy panics,” he continues, “help to define the normal modes of dissent” (11). Conspiracy theories are constructed and positioned as boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable against which dominant forms of knowledge production and dissemination⁶ can lay claim to epistemological superiority. Neither dominant structures of knowledge nor conspiracy theories can exist on their own accord. Conspiracy theories help to mark out the limits of legitimate epistemological inquiry. For Bratich, borrowing from Michel Foucault (1980b), they are “subjugated knowledges” that exist in relation to “official accounts” (2008, 7). These two poles emerge concomitantly, each providing the conditions for the other. No account can be characterized as official unless there are also unofficial accounts against which it can be compared.

Bratich grounds his more abstract discussion of official and subjugated knowledges in his suggestion that both modes of inquiry make use of “diatorology,” defined as the search for “causes behind events” (27). The methods employed by conspiracy theorists and by legitimate sources are, at times, remarkably similar. To demonstrate this, Bratich presents the work of David Gilbert who sought to discredit the conspiracy theory that AIDS was a government creation to target Black Americans. Bratich argues that Gilbert selectively uses science, accepting the science that refutes AIDS conspiracy theories, but ignoring the science that might support them. Bratich asks, “[w]hen does science get questioned, and when does it get cited as evidence?” (106). In this case, science is mobilized not only to discredit the belief in a conspiracy, but also to position the people who believe in it as paranoid figures on the margins of acceptable

⁶ In Bratich's work, these dominant, or official, forms resemble those of prestigious academic institutions, mainstream journalism, and gatekeeping Liberal politicians.

critical inquiry. Consequently, any conspiracy theory is assumed to be illegitimate *a priori* even when it uses methods that are traditionally accepted as legitimate.

Bratich focuses his attention on conspiracy theories propagated by militia groups and Black Americans, two groups who have been subject to much criticism because of their use of conspiracy theories and who therefore share a discursively transgressive position on the fringes of society. Their points of contact foster a degree of cooperation that align them in a common struggle against “elites” (128). Militia groups, despite popular opinion, do not engender racist and xenophobic views; rather, they are “classed, raced and gendered in numerous ways” (126).⁷ Despite their veneer of politically conservative extremism, Bratich maintains that these groups share many key sentiments with anti-racist and anti-sexist doctrines, uniting people against an oppressive elite class.

Militia groups and Black Americans are targeted by an enterprise of legitimation that accords reputability to some speculative endeavors while denying it to others. One arm of this enterprise is the “gatekeeper Left” (143) that embodies “a particular kind of

⁷ Here I have decided to include a longer passage from Bratich’s book to provide additional context to his argument, “In this framework, the [New World Order] accounts are rooted in right-wing culture; they are a continuation of white male domination (its armed wing), allied with hegemonic interests against “real” opposition and “authentic” minorities (African Americans, women, Jews, immigrants, etc.). It is true that dominant, conservative forces were at work within the militia movement and thus articulated NWO in racist and anti-Semitic ways (e.g., when narrative elements like Zionist Occupational Government, race mixing, antiimmigration, and Christian Identity were central). In addition, cold war logic did organize NWO globalization accounts, marking an oppositional identity to the political chain “Clinton/Left/internationalism/communism/globalism.” While this context accounted for some paramilitary groups and theories, it primarily dealt with the armed units of already-established and self-proclaimed white-supremacist organizations (that is to say, nothing very new). At the very least, I would argue that the fixation on the right-wing elements of militias and NWO theories ignores the more pervasive anti-elitist, populist forces that comprised them and brackets the politics of articulation for a politics of fixed identities (more on this later). But what are these other populist elements? Despite the dominant attempts to singularize them as “angry white men,” militias were classed, raced, and gendered in numerous ways (Clark, 1997; Chermak, 2002). Michigan Militia leaders cited *Manufacturing Consent* by Noam Chomsky and Edward Hermann (1988) as a key media analysis text, as well as declared themselves to be carrying on the American tradition of armed citizenship whose most recent example, according to them, was the Black Panthers. And, finally, how does one account for the fact that it was the Alabama Minutemen who infiltrated and exposed the “Good Ol’ Boys Roundup” (the yearly backwoods gathering of Federal agents in which racist and anti-Semitic sentiments were openly displayed) in 1996, only to be ignored in the mainstream reportage of the scandal? Now, some may counter that these are just examples of tokenism, identification with the oppressor, or a manufacturing of an oppressed identity, but this would neglect the specific interests in each of these cases, and would, I argue, foreclose the counterhegemonic aspects of NWO conspiracy theories in general” (125-6).

rationality [that] entails addressing the claims not at the level of the evidence but at the level of the legitimacy to make the claims at all” (143).⁸ Some key figures among the gatekeeper Left include Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky who believe that “conspiracy research focuses too much on individuals, on the explicit actions of small groups, and on a moral discourse of evil that treat symptoms and aberrations, not structures. In other words, conspiracy narratives lack or misread context” (141), according to them. Specifically, Bratich quotes Zinn as saying that “conspiracy theories are a ‘diversion from real issues’” (141), and Chomsky, who maintains a staunch distinction between “institutional analysis vs. conspiracy analysis” (141). Other Left thinkers of concern to Bratich include Michael Alpert, David Corn, Alexander Cockburn (editor of *CounterPunch*), and Norman Solomon (100). Their criticisms of conspiracy theories resemble “classic conspiracy panic charges” that articulate the limits of acceptable inquiry and criticize those who overstep those boundaries. Focusing on 9/11 conspiracy theories, Bratich attributes a splintering among Left positions to conspiracy panics that “antagoniz[e] potential peers” (142).

The irony of these charges is that, for Bratich, at times 9/11 conspiracy theorists perform a more thorough contextual analysis than the “gatekeeper Left” (143). Despite the charges from the “Left” (145), 9/11 “conspiracy accounts address broader questions of consent, of the legitimacy of government, and of historical corruption” (145). These concerns are legitimate insofar as conspiracies have historically articulated a legitimate concern that powerful people and institutions might overstep their bounds. To say otherwise is to believe that “(1) conspiracies have never been a part of governance, or (2) they once were, but the West has left that behind with modernization. The first ignores history, the second presupposes a progressivist (even ethnocentric) historiography” (147).

The guiding force behind the *prima facie* disavowal of conspiracy theories is “[l]iberal political rationality” that “calls for a *moderate* suspicion, one well within the

⁸ Here, Bratich reveals his ambiguous position regarding empirical validity. On the one hand, he emphasizes how the truth of the conspiracy theory is unimportant to an engagement with the discursive regimes that condition it, and on the other he laments those official sites that refuse to engage with a conspiracy theory in terms of its evidential merit.

boundaries of a regime of truth” (41). Liberal political rationality “signifies both a form of governing (governing at a distance, indirect regulation) and its content (a subjectification that relies on the exercise of reason and thought)” (40). It encourages “properly moderate self-reflection” that assumes the form of “self-policing and liberal self-correction” (152). These strategies extend beyond individuals, crystallizing into an organizational framework of control that relies “on an increased civic or community relations to govern more efficiently. The populace, once autonomized and responsabilized, ties its self-regulated behavior to traditionally state-centered governance” (72). This hybrid model of governance combines a top-down with a bottom-bottom approach to surveillance. People identified as conspiracy theorists are chastised by both powerful people and common people alike, attesting to a situation of mass-submission to a normative model of “political rationality” (95). This complies with a broader transformation in the organization of power from being commanded by independent sovereign figures to a general model of disciplinary force dispersed across a self-regulating and compliant social body.

Given this view, it is clear that Bratich finds inspiration in Michel Foucault’s (1975) analysis of power. In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault describes the emergence of a self-regulating organization of atomized individuals as “the gradual extension of the mechanisms of discipline throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their spread throughout the whole social body, the formation of what might be called in general the disciplinary society” (209).⁹ The disciplinary society eschews classic markers of difference (class, status, political affiliation), preferring to structure people and identities in accordance with an homogenous normative standard:

In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and

⁹ Foucault identifies many reasons for this transformation, including the political and economic. One of the more significant reasons he cites is a desire to normalize processes of discipline, to codify them. Previously, discipline—if it can be called that—was exerted somewhat arbitrarily, at the command of specific powerful people including priests, political figures etc. By generalizing a model of discipline, it could be more readily accepted by the social body at large as a normal and expected response to certain actions. So no longer were crimes viewed as a slight against those in power; they became a sign of an attack against the entire social body.

to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences (184).

Liberal political rationality performs these operations by submitting some explanations of events to the disreputable domain of counter-knowledge while attributing legitimacy to other explanations.

By virtue of conspiracy theories' established place outside of the bounds of proper political inquiry, they always serve to challenge power. Bratich argues that conspiracy theories, no matter their content, present a fundamental challenge to the structures of power that work to delineate the boundaries of acceptability and critical inquiry, abstracting the form of conspiracy theories from the locations and people that generate and circulate them. This allows him to juxtapose the conspiracy theories propagated by white-dominated militia groups with those espoused by Black Americans. I will return to this idea, and the problematic components of this argument, in the fourth section of this chapter.

2.2.2 Michel Foucault's influence on Bratich

Bratich's inclusion of various groups' conspiracy theories into one category of subjugated knowledge is informed by Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France (1980b). Here, Foucault distinguishes popular knowledge from disqualified knowledge:

through the re-emergence of these low-ranking knowledges, these unqualified, even directly disqualified knowledges (such as that of the psychiatric patient, of the ill person, of the nurse, of the doctor-parallel and marginal as they are to the knowledge of medicine-that of the delinquent etc.), and which involve what I would call a popular knowledge [*le savoir des gens*] though it is far from being a general common sense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity and which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it-that it is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work (82).

The identification of some knowledge as counter or subjugated knowledge positions them as automatic challengers to power. There is often little engagement with such knowledge, and so it is disqualified or ignored outright. Discursive regimes of truth participate in this qualification, not only to proffer their own preferred outlook but also to concretize the very distinction between general, and therefore neutral, knowledge from particular, and therefore biased, knowledge. In an interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, Foucault (1980a) offers the following schematization of regimes of truth:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (131).

Earlier in his academic career, Foucault (1965) illustrated a correlative operation at play in the diagnosis of someone suffering from mental illness:

The man who imagines he is made of glass is not mad, for any sleeper can have this image in a dream; but he is mad if, believing he is made of glass, he thereby concludes that he is fragile, that he is in danger of breaking, that he must touch no object which might be too resistant, that he must in fact remain motionless, and so on. Such reasonings are those of a madman; but again we must note that in themselves they are neither absurd nor illogical. On the contrary, they apply correctly the most rigorous figures of logic (94-5).

As this example elucidates, the person navigating a mental illness and the doctor analyzing them belong to the same epistemic continuum. The difference between them materializes in the appeal to a discursive medical regime that pathologizes some conditions over others. Medicine's authority on such matters crystallized in the nineteenth century when it "became the major authority in society that delimited, designated, named, and established madness as an object" (1972 42). For Foucault, medicine belongs to an entire constellation of institutions including political, juridical, educational, and religious institutions, which all cohere around a mutual desire to codify the boundaries of normative discourse, and to punitively respond to those discourses and knowledges outside of its purview.

According to Bratich, conspiracy theories exist outside of established institutional discourses. Conspiracy theory researchers tend to put this fact on full display when they pathologize conspiracy theorists (Hofstadter 1964) or lament their methods as epistemically unsavory (Popper 1945). Conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledges haunt dominant knowledge structures, highlighting the intractable distinction between the two. Bratich uses the Kennedy assassination to highlight this point, addressing how the “Warren Commission itself could have promoted a conspiracy theory if it had found more than one assassin involved, regardless of the sinister intentions or nefarious organizations behind the assassination” (3). But unlike popularly labeled conspiracy theorists, the Warren Commission’s designation as a legitimate example of speculative inquiry immunizes it from being labeled a conspiracist organization.

Conspiracy theories exist within and against a regime of truth that paints them as untrustworthy, and therefore a sign of epistemic inferiority. Political rationality exerts itself against subjugated knowledges through a panoptic model of surveillance under which powerful and regular people and institutions govern themselves and each other. Michel Foucault (1975) suggests that such a model “produces homogeneous effects of power” (202), thereby erasing the differences between these subjects of power. Against an illustration of sovereign power, panoptic disciplinary power permeates the entire fabric of society, imposing itself on everyone (298). Those at the helm—for Bratich, the “Gatekeeper Left” (2008 143)—are victims of this disciplinary apparatus as well, albeit with more relative comfort. Foucault’s critical engagement with disciplinary power attributes differences between people to an operation of power readily traceable to the socio-historical, political, and economic developments of post-Enlightenment Europe. This prompts a number of questions regarding conspiracy theories: What happens, for example, when traditionally hegemonic sites of power utilize the rhetoric of conspiracy theories to maintain their power? Do they lose their status as conspiracy theories and become official accounts? How are differently situated people among the dominant or subjugated classes treated when they are charged with conspiracy theorizing?

2.3 Conspiracy Theories as Dominant Knowledge

Following Robert Mueller’s probe into the Trump presidential campaign’s ties with Russia, Sean Hannity (2019) delivered his nightly monologue on the *Fox News* show, *Hannity*, proclaiming that it was not a good day for the “lying, conspiracy theorist[s] in the destroy-Trump-media mob.” Specifically targeting *MSNBC* and *CNN*, he states that “they’ve been caught spreading a baseless hoax: conspiracy theory after conspiracy theory” and that, going forward, they will “move onto the next mutually agreed upon conspiracy theory with the democratic leaders who feed them information.” Referring to the Russia collusion investigation, Hannity uses the rhetoric of the conspiracy theory to discredit the legitimacy of that investigation and the media institutions that covered it. For Hannity, the Mueller investigation was only a conspiracy theory, and was therefore disreputable. Ironically—or perhaps not so ironically—he justifies his claims with his own conspiracy theory: that Democratic leaders are conspiring with *CNN* and *MSNBC* to dupe the American public.¹⁰

The same sentiment is echoed by Tucker Carlson (2019) on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* on the *Fox News* network. In a segment that also comments on the Mueller investigation, Carlson suggests that the “very same people who pushed the Russia collusion conspiracy are the ones who told us Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction in 2003.” Earlier in the segment he argues that Robert Mueller was “part of this conspiracy too. It was a conspiracy so brilliant, so complex, that he and eighteen other federal prosecutors conducted a two-year Potemkin investigation in order to shield their plot from discovery.” Like Hannity, Carlson advances his own conspiracy theory to combat the supposed conspiracy theory maintained by his ideological opponents.

Around the same time, on the other side of the corporate media political spectrum, *CNN* was condemning *Fox News*’ conspiracy theories. In a 2019 *CNN* article, Oliver

¹⁰ Whether or not Hannity or Carlson adopt this rhetoric in good faith, I cannot say for sure. The point I am raising here does not concern the hidden intentions of the people involved, rather I argue that conspiracy panics are not reserved for any political party, nor are they directed solely towards those who reside on the margins of epistemic reputability.

Darcy accused both Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson (among other “right-wing media personalities”) for spreading the “debunked conspiracy theory that Ukraine, and not Russia, hacked the Democratic National Committee’s emails in 2016. The theory is popular in pro-Trump circles because it lets Russia off the hook for election interference and suggests Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s probe was unnecessary and had corrupt origins.” Darcy’s is one of many *CNN* articles detailing and condemning conspiracy theories from their political counterparts.

Outside of the mass media, independent news broadcasters have also taken it upon themselves to challenge conspiracy theories propagated among the major news networks. Laying claim to evidence and reason, David Pakman (2019c) of the syndicated *The David Pakman Show*, claims that it his duty to provide the most accurate information to his viewers. Following the accusations leveled against Jeffrey Epstein, for example, he intimates that, for those on the “side of logic and reason,” “Epstein was possibly facilitating trysts for Donald Trump at Epstein’s homes.” To justify his claim, he says that there is “video evidence of them in cahoots with individuals with whom they allegedly conspired on some of these sexual assaults.” This video does exist, but it in no way conclusively reveals a conspiracy. Pakman entertains this conspiracy theory in response to the alleged charge that Epstein was colluding with Bill Clinton for sex trafficking purposes. He puts forward one conspiracy theory to combat another conspiracy theory, but he attaches to his conspiracy theory the weight of “logic and reason” to lend it a degree of legitimacy that the others ostensibly lack.

Approximately a month later, just days following Jeffrey Epstein’s death, Pakman (2019a) releases a video titled, “Jeffrey Epstein Found Dead, Conspiracies EXPLODE.” In it he argues that “the main conspiracy [theory]”—that Epstein’s death positions him among “Clinton body count,” the “list of people ‘associated’ with President Clinton who have supposedly died mysterious deaths sort of doesn’t make that much sense in terms of motive given that it is much more complex than the simplest murder hypothesis that exist.” The simple hypothesis is that “believed child-abusers are not treated well in prisons and jails” and so it is more likely that the official version of Epstein’s suicide is correct, given that he was likely facing a lifetime of abuse within the

prison system. Pakman does not stop there, however. He contends that any conspiracy to kill Epstein would most likely have been concocted by Trump and his allies because “if we are simply theorizing, [...] Trump has a long history of sexualizing his own daughter, [and] he’s on video with Epstein evaluating the attractiveness of girls at a party.” In the concluding remarks of the video, Pakman asks his audience to post their thoughts in the comment section. Interestingly, Pakman chose to “love”¹¹ the following comment:

With the fact that [Epstein] was put in a high security cell, had no access to anything with which to hang himself with whilst all the guards were mysteriously missing and no security recordings were found, the idea that Jeffery Epstein killed Jeffery Epstein is the most ridiculous conspiracy I’ve heard.

Pakman’s self-proclaimed attendance to “logic and reason” over speculation and paranoia appears tenuous given his not-so-subtle espousal of conspiracy theories. It is not the conspiracy theory *qua* conspiracy theory that concerns Pakman necessarily; rather, he simply seems to want to argue for some conspiracy theories over others. As I have shown, this is not an isolated phenomenon. Many news networks must navigate the volatile terrain of deciding whom to charge with being a conspiracy theorist. The issue, as Bratich (2008) characterizes it, is less about the factual merit of the claims as it is about the very “forms of truth telling allowable in professional journalism” (84). Bratich wonders what is erased in the pursuit of truth, especially when “uncooperative official sources, vested interests, and generalized institutional secrecy” (82) make the ability to verify facts difficult. Moreover, journalism’s procedures can occlude the corporate and ideological motivations behind the scenes that can shape what topics are covered or verified.

On journalism, Bratich maintains that it “circulates within a [...] regime of truth and political rationality” (53) to embrace a “dignified and noble cause” (61). To do this, journalism is meant to be self-reflective and autonomous, free of outside influence and therefore ostensibly in pursuit of neutrality and truth. Bratich is suspicious of these

¹¹ To “love” a comment is to click a small heart emoticon that signals to the commentor the video creator’s approval, or ‘love,’ of the comment.

efforts, however, suggesting that neutrality is not in-itself a neutral term. In the case of journalism, while neutrality is proffered as an antidote to extremities like conspiracy theories, journalism's codes and practices are determined by a vast commercial media network that disseminates the idea of neutrality as spin for its own interests. The appearance of neutrality depends on the steady condemnation of alternative narratives and counter-knowledges to maintain its legitimacy. Journalism frames itself as distinct from "talk, radio, shortwave, and the internet where hate speech dangerous talk and shrill irrationality dominate" (73) by not only producing content that aligns with established forms of political rationality, but also by galvanizing a vigilant audience to stand for reason and rationality. These efforts intensified in the 1990s when the internet was increasing in popularity and the looming threat of politically ambiguous populism was on the rise. To these risks, journalism "could reintegrate citizens (more precisely, the populace as citizens) into governing institutions, thereby restoring trust in basic political discourses and procedures. At the same time, professional journalism could regain its own authority as a representative of the public, restoring trust in its own operations" (74). As one force among many, journalism positioned itself as a paragon of political rationality.

One way to support dominant forms of political rationality within journalism is to exorcise conspiracy theories, especially bombastic ones. During the investigation into Donald Trump's ties to Russia for example, the idea that the investigation itself was a conspiracy seemed outlandish. However, this did not stop some news outlets, such as *Fox*, from arguing that it was before the results of the investigation were even presented to the public. When *Fox* news reports on the deep state, or globalist cabals, some are inclined to disavow such charges as unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, while large numbers of people believe and advance these ideas. Distinguishing the validity of any conspiracy these days appears to depend on the information context within which the conspiracy emerges, and these contexts are hopelessly politicized. In the United States, a left-leaning *CNN* viewer would be more likely to condemn *Fox* for espousing conspiracy theories while a right-leaning *Fox* viewer might be more inclined to condemn *CNN* for espousing conspiracy theories. Where, then, is the dominant site of political rationality Bratich describes? How can conspiracy theory researchers account for the preponderance

of conspiracy theories if they rely on the concept of a dominant discursive regime of power and knowledge deployed to unilaterally remove them?

As described in Chapter 1, researchers Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent surveyed more than 1000 letters to the *New York Times* and *The Chicago Tribune* to ascertain the prevalence of conspiracy theories in the 21st century as compared to the 20th. They found no increase in belief in conspiracy theories among the American public (57).¹² Their study revealed that more than half of the American public believes in at least one conspiracy theory and argue that this number has remained somewhat stagnant for over a century. In 2021, Uscinski revisited this conclusion to assess conspiracy theories in the age of COVID-19 (Enders *et al* 2021). His team found that even during a “global pandemic where many Americans were confined to their homes and online contact with outsiders, social media usage alone appears incapable of promoting beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation” (797). Exposure to conspiracy theories does not guarantee belief in such conspiracy theories. The researchers stress the need to consider “individual-level motivations [that] seek out and accept certain perspectives” (781) as believable. This approach then refuses to foreground technology, like social media, as the determining factor in belief in conspiracy theories; instead, it suggests a more holistic approach that acknowledges the many varying factors that contribute to belief in conspiracy theories. If someone is not predisposed to belief in conspiracy theories, exposure to conspiracy theories will not change their disposition. Likewise, Hugo Drochon (2019) found that the same could be said of most European countries (343). Moreover, he finds that the distribution of conspiracy theories was roughly equal across the political spectrum. Given this, what role does the present digital landscape play in transforming—while not necessarily increasing—belief in conspiracy theories?

¹² In their text, they address a number of potential methodological rebuttals to their arguments. To the charge that their sample—comprised primarily of literate citizens—is skewed, they invoke the work of Sidney Verba *et al.* (1967) who found that compared to non-letter writers, “letter writers are not more likely to take extreme positions” (329).

2.3.1 Logics of conspiracy theorists mirror logics of platform capitalism

The term “platform capitalism” describes the centrality of now ubiquitous technological mediators, platforms, and the data they collect to the accumulation of capital. Technological platforms have allowed large swaths of people “to build their own products, services, and marketplaces” (Srnicsek 2017, 43), fostering the belief that users have control over their online labor. Platform capitalism also introduces data as a new commodity. Nick Srnicsek recounts this process as follows,

In the twenty-first century, [...], the technology needed for turning simple activities into recorded data became increasingly cheap; and the move to digital-based communications made recording exceedingly simple. Massive new expanses of potential data were opened up, and new industries arose to extract these data and to use them so as to optimise production processes, give insight into consumer preferences, control workers, provide the foundation for new products and services (e.g. Google Maps, self-driving cars, Siri), and sell to advertisers. All of this had historical precedents in earlier periods of capitalism, but what was novel with the shift in technology was the sheer amount of data that could now be used (40).

In just a few years, capitalist industries developed novel ways to extract information from consumers that they could use to predict buying habits and sell to advertisers, shaping online content and consumer goods in order to optimize data generation. Consequently, these platforms promote content that reflects the users’ interests and desires, or incite their emotions and pique their curiosity, conditioning societal trends, prejudices, and ideological dispositions in the process.

In “YouTube, the Great Radicalizer,” Zeynep Tufecki (2018)¹³ recounts that her engagement with videos of Donald Trump on YouTube resulted in the platform

¹³ While Tufecki’s attention to the radicalizing nature of online platforms is highly relevant to this project, I would be remiss if I did not highlight Tufecki’s own use of conspiracy theories. In June 2021, she wrote a piece for *The New York Times* advancing a conspiracy theory that COVID-19 originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology and was therefore human-made. Her piece is riddled with speculation and hardly complies with standard investigative journalism methods. Here, Tufecki irresponsibly contributes to a highly politicized explanation for the origins of COVID-19. For more on this, see Andre Damon’s piece for the World Socialist Website that identifies the many ways that Tufecki draws upon—and often plagiarizes—the work of Nicholas Wade (whose book titled *A Troublesome Inheritance* reinvigorates racist conceptions of evolution) to construct her lab-leak theory, thereby revealing her serious lack of consideration of the tacit ways such explanations lend themselves to racist political and scientific projects.

recommending she watch “white supremacist rants, Holocaust denials and other disturbing content.” To test whether this was a purely partisan phenomenon, she engaged with videos of Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders as well, which also yielded video recommendations and autoplays of radical content including “arguments about the existence of secret government agencies and allegations that the United States government was behind the attacks of Sept. 11.” Tufekci hypothesizes that YouTube “promotes, recommends and disseminates videos in a manner that appears to constantly up the stakes;” in other words, the more sensational the content, the likelier it is to be clicked, the longer users stay on the platform and the more data is generated. This phenomenon has been well-documented (Smicek 2017; Santana and Dozier 2019), revealing a business model of these platforms that relies on the transmission of sensational and eye-catching content to generate data, creating an hospitable environment for conspiracy theories. Before the internet offered novel opportunities to accumulate data and translate that into profit on platforms like Google and Facebook, the conspiracy theorist’s activities were not necessarily profitable in themselves.

Beyond their bombastic form, conspiracy theories contain another integral component that resonates with the broader paradigm of digital capitalism; the copresence of a subject pursuing knowledge to justify belief in a theory and a body of data to confirm that theory. As Wendy Chun (2011) writes, interfaces

— as mediators between the visible and the invisible, as a means of navigation — have been key to creating ‘informed’ individuals who can overcome the chaos of global capitalism by mapping their relation to the totality of the global capitalist system. (Conversely, they enable corporations to track both individuals and totalities, through the data traces produced by our mappings.) The dream is: the resurgence of the seemingly sovereign individual, the subject driven to know, driven to map, to zoom in and out, to manipulate, and to act. The dream is: the more that an individual knows, the better decisions he or she can make (8).

Despite the emerging logics of self-empowerment and human capital that places the user in the metaphorical driver’s seat of the gig economy, their efforts are ultimately

conducted for the benefit of the corporate accumulation of capital (Zuboff 2015, 79). For Chun (2011), neoliberalism “focuses on discourses of empowerment in which the worker does not simply own his/her labor, but also possesses his/ her own body as a form of ‘human capital.’ Since everyone is in control of this form of capital — the body — neoliberalism relies on voluntary, individual actions” (8). But these individual actions are limited in advance by ubiquitous algorithms that predict and shape what users are able to do on any given platform. In his exploration of Netflix’s Cinematch algorithm, Mattias Frey (2021) identifies the “principle that the most useful form of personalization actually reduces personalization. It functions on the principle that many if not most human beings poorly understand and articulate their own tastes” (78). Platforms like Netflix, then, have the potential to shape users’ interests to align with their own corporate agenda. More broadly, Safiya Noble (2018) has demonstrated the extent to which algorithms mirror and intensify deeply entrenched prejudices in society at large. She writes that “algorithmically driven platforms are situated in intersectional sociohistorical contexts and embedded within social relations” (13), thereby “reinforc[ing] oppressive social relationships and enact[ing] new modes of racial profiling” (1).

The ubiquity and efficacy of platform recommendation tools troubles the foundational assumption of the pursuit of knowledge for the conspiracy theorist. Knowledge is not hidden; on the contrary, algorithms are intent on feeding the hungry conspiracy theorist with every bit of information they can provide. And in so doing, the algorithm beckons the conspiracy theorist by asserting their importance in bridging the connections among the points of a vast conspiracy. Conspiracy theories can then, in some measure, be understood according to Frederic Jameson as the “the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age” (1988, 356). However, the conspiracy theorist is doing more in digital capitalism than making sense of an increasingly chaotic postmodern world; not only are they confirming their own identity as subjects of esoteric knowledge, they are also supplying data for the beneficiaries of digital capitalism.

Platform capitalism creates a reciprocal situation in which the subjects who engage with it are affirmed as individuals at the same time as the commercial platforms are affirmed as a necessary component for the pursuit of knowledge. “By interacting with

these interfaces,” Chun (2011) suggests, “we are also mapped: data-driven machine learning algorithms process our collective data traces in order to discover underlying patterns (this process reveals that our computers are now more profound programmers than their human counterparts)” (9). The conspiracy theorist and the algorithm mirror one another in the operations they perform. The conspiracy theorist draws connections and looks for patterns to grapple with unpredictable events and phenomena that provide an ordering to our increasingly chaotic postmodern world, while algorithms employ their own efforts to discover underlying patterns to grapple with human unpredictability (among other efforts to capitalize on the profit-potential of data). Chun adds that,

Mapping often seduces us into exposing what is ‘secret’ or opaque, into drawing connections between visible effects and invisible causes, rather than actually reading what one sees. It can become an endless pursuit of things, aimed at robbing them of their thingliness, in order to create a closed world in which every connection is exposed, every object reduced to a code (74).

Deploying language reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard’s (2002) prophetically apocalyptic vision of a world subsumed by integrated networks, Chun highlights the transformative capacity of these technologies. They change the process by which someone may come to know something, and thereby change the subject’s relationship to themselves to the point that they are incapable of discerning the difference between “empowerment and surveillance” (Chun, 58). To learn about something, a person might be inclined to search for information through one of the myriad search engines readily available, thereby committing their information to be a part of the broader predictive apparatuses these platforms use. Knowledge, it seems, now comes at the expense of a loss of privacy and an openness to the algorithmic selection of topics catered to the user. For Chun, interfaces “induce the user to map constantly so that the user in turn can be mapped” (59).

These underlying patterns and connections do not necessarily exist, however; they are imposed upon people in order to mould them in accordance with the mapper’s (the platform capitalists and conspiracy theorists’) view of the world. For the conspiracy theorist, anything can be offered as confirmation of a conspiracy. Even a lack of evidence can be construed as evidence. Algorithms can steer people to consume catered content that serves the interest of the beneficiaries of user data. Agnis Stibe (2015) argues that

such “socio-technical spaces often comprise information systems designed to change behavior and attitudes of their users by leveraging powers of social influence, further described as socially influencing systems” (173). In such a situation, the line between prediction and coercion is obscured. By playing on the consumer’s interests and propelling the object of the consumer’s gaze into the realm of extremity, algorithms can nearly guarantee their predictive capacity. Similarly, the conspiracy theorist may interpret anything and everything as confirmation of their theory, and the more bombastic the theory, the easier it is to pull others into the fold.

In the age of digital capitalism and algorithmic data mining, conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theorizing are good business for online platforms and search engines because people “tend to click on conspiracy theories and sensationalized news, [...], and do so more than clicking on real news or relevant information” (Shah 2021). This is especially true for search-engines that generate ad revenue. They “are designed to reward clicking on enticing links because it helps the search companies boost their business metrics” (Shah 2021), and this contributes to the dissolution of previous modes of knowledge acquisition and dissemination.¹⁴ This transformation impacts traditional sites of knowledge, and puts people at a “substantial risk of encountering medically unsubstantiated information, such as popular myths or active conspiracy theories that are not based on scientific evidence” when using Google, for example, for information on health-related matters (Susarla, 2020). Advanced industrial capitalism produces the conditions for such an epistemic turn that calcifies with the advent of digital media and algorithmic culture in the 21st century.

Thus far I have been concerned with the tacit and abstract connections between the digital age and the conspiracy theorist in terms of their structural adhesion to an epistemic transformation in the organization and dissemination of knowledge. It is also important to highlight how the pursuit of profit encourages the circulation of conspiracy

¹⁴ This observation is not meant to mourn such traditional modes given their own problematic nature but is intended rather to illustrate the present dominant landscape of platform capitalism and how the conspiracy theorist exists within it, not outside of it.

theories and the attack on traditional sites of knowledge production. Misinformation is, without a doubt, profitable.

At an individual level, Alex Jones, a name synonymous with conspiracy theories, has made copious amounts of money from the supplements he sells on INFO WARS store to curb the ostensibly deleterious effects of government chemicals placed in America's food and water supplies. In response to the threat that estrogen and other "feminized" additives pose to masculinity and western civilization, Jones offers the consumer Super Male Vitality, a supplement intended to hinder the growing "femininity of men" (Jones 2018).¹⁵ Proving lucrative, he accrued more than \$15.6 million between October 2013 through September 2014 (Williamson and Steel 2018).

On a general level, misinformation, which often assumes a bombastic style, is the bedfellow of "clickbait," "web contents specifically designed to maximize advertisement monetization, often at the expense of quality and exactitude. They do so by using sensationalist headlines, aiming to attract a greater portion of clicks" (Daniel López-Sánchez *et al* 2017, 2967). As presented above, the more bombastic the message, the more likely it is to attract clicks, and the easier to generate ad revenue. In a post-Foucauldian world, where traditional centers of power are shifting, anyone can contribute to the dissemination and intensification of misinformation. If a piece of misinformation finds its way onto someone's social media page, it means that an algorithm has placed it there with the anticipation that it will be clicked. Misinformation replaces expertise with individual contributions that claim to wield esoteric knowledge.

The owners of and investors in commercial platforms and search engines like Google politicize science and expertise purely for the sake of profit. Michael Schwalbe (2021), in his review of Gil Eyal's (2019) *The Crisis of Expertise*, notes that "institutional analysis is incomplete, and potentially misleading, if it fails to consider the flesh-and-blood actors who create and use institutions to pursue their interests" (Schwalbe 2021,

¹⁵ It has been scientifically shown that Jones' supplements ironically kill sperm and contain threatening amounts of lead (Herzog 2017; Nazaryan 2017). Of course, Jones will continue to push his supplements whether or not they are proven to be good or bad.

47). Schwalbe demonstrates that the crisis of expertise can be directly traced to a few bad-faith actors intent on augmenting their economic positions. The crisis of expertise is not the same as the death of expertise, however. Eyal argues that expertise has not disappeared but has simply transformed. He notes that today there is an “unprecedented reliance on science and expertise” and also “an increased suspicion, skepticism, and dismissal of scientific findings expert opinion, or even of whole branches of investigation” (2019 4). For Eyal, there has been a simultaneous intensification and degradation of people’s faith in science and expertise. He argues that expertise, as a category of epistemic reputability, only emerged in the 1960s in English North America, and was almost immediately the subject of lamentation at its dissolution, writing that, “discussions of expertise developed against the background of increasing instability and doubt regarding the established professions, regulatory science and similar authorities” (19). Expertise is not in decline, rather the specific sites associated with expertise are losing their cultural force. Alex Jones, for example, relies on the cultural force of the “Dr.” prefix of Edward Group, a frequent guest and expert on his show, to confirm the efficacy of his supplements. It makes little difference to his audience that Edward Group earned his title from the Texas Chiropractic College that does not offer courses on nutrition. All that matters is his title. This emphasizes the promotional power of expertise even when the field of expertise itself is under scrutiny.

Nick Srnicek (2017) suggests that under platform capitalism, “expertise is necessary” to “cope with the massive amounts of data that will be produced and to develop new analytical tools for things like time series data and geographical data” (36). Multinational corporations now rely upon a vast array of experts to procure and analyze data to predict trends in user activity and consumer habits. Even at the level of programming, Wendy Chun (2011) argues that “expertise is both created and called into question” (41). Programs that are able to recollect any bit of information at lightning speed pose a fundamental challenge to traditional sites of knowledge production and dissemination, and thereby contribute to “narratives of masculine expertise under siege” (42). After losing to the computer program, Deep Blue in 1997, chess Grandmaster Garry Kasparov said that “Few people in the world know better than I do what it’s like to have your life’s work threatened by a machine” (as cited in Scammell 2019), a prescient

prophecy for a coming digital economy. As Srnicek argues, technological developments in 21st century capitalism have produced “deskilling technologies,” which “enable cheaper and more pliable workers to come in and replace the skilled ones, as well as transferring the mental processes of work to management rather than leaving it in the hands of workers on the shop floor” (2017, 8). Within the digital economy, Srnicek suggests that “those businesses that increasingly rely upon information technology, data, and the internet for their business models” cut “across traditional sectors – including manufacturing, services, transportation, mining, and telecommunications” (4) to construct “an ideal that can legitimate contemporary capitalism” (5).

Against the backdrop of the digital 21st century capitalism, the examples of *CNN*, *Fox*, and *The David Pakman Show* presented earlier demonstrate the difficulty of characterizing conspiracy theories merely as subjugated knowledge given their multi-variate forms and the different media forms and voices that disseminate them. Bratich’s location of conspiracy theories among the discursive margins of legitimate thought and inquiry is a necessary point of departure from which to engage the epistemic privileging of some forms of thought over others, but his argument would benefit from a consideration of the disparate sites from which conspiracy theories emerge and the impacts of this new abundance of digital voices and players. Instead of a totalizing demarcation of official from subjugated knowledge, I propose an engagement with conspiracy theories in terms of their social, political and economic locations, their content, and the forms of policing that emerge to counter them, a topic explored in the next chapter.

2.3.2 The limits of conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledge

Bratich (2008) anticipates such a response in his criticism of the “sociocultural approach” to conspiracy theories, which “finds ‘good reasons’ for these conspiratological beliefs (in the conditions of social/political oppression), giving them an understandable, rational basis” (111). Bratich argues that this approach abstracts the category of the conspiracy theory away from the discursive regimes of knowledge that always already construct it as meaningful. In other words, the sociocultural approach assumes the existence of the conspiracy theory *out there* and suggests that the sociocultural analyst

must determine which conspiracy theories are more politically valuable than others. This is done by appealing to the historical legitimacy of belief in a conspiracy. In the case of Black Americans, who espouse the conspiracy theory that AIDS was designed in a lab to depopulate Black populations around the world for instance, the sociocultural approach searches for the reasons why such a conspiracy theory was espoused in the first place and why people continue to believe it.

Bratich argues that figures in mainstream media often engage in this kind of analysis; rather than “address[ing] the truth claims of those beliefs, these media reports went outside of the claims themselves to look for their rationale—in historical experience or social conditions” (102-3). They often present the rationale for belief as a kind of hidden treasure to be unearthed by a compassionate eye, tacitly conferring validation to the conspiracy theory. As an object of analysis, the conspiracy theory, then, is simply assumed to exist outside of the discursive regimes of knowledge that construct it.

I propose a middle ground of analysis between a sociocultural view that finds good reasons for people to believe in conspiracy theories and Bratich’s position that conspiracy theories do not exist in and of themselves, but are created to legitimate some knowledges over others. This involves an analysis where conspiracy theories are approached—not as signs of a monolithic enterprise of discursive power relations nor as localized results of certain historical conditions—but as embodied responses to abstract forms of oppression that they bring to light, albeit not necessarily directly or concretely. To engage conspiracy theories in this way is to acknowledge the discursive regimes that simultaneously persecute and rely upon subjugated knowledges to reaffirm their power, while recognizing the different social locations from which these conspiracy theories emerge. A consideration of their differing proximities to discursive power regimes necessitates a nuanced engagement with conspiracy theories as forms of subjugated knowledge.

When Bratich classifies all conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledge, he overlooks the myriad important differences between different people and groups that fall under this category. Given the two examples mentioned above—the conspiracy theories

of militia groups and those of Black Americans—then the specific conflicts each confronts are reduced to a battle between subjugated knowledge and the wielders of legitimizing authority like the “Gatekeeper Left.” But not all subjugated knowledges relate to other forms of counter-knowledge, and their mutual place on the margins does not signify their compatibility, especially when one subjugated knowledge—the racist, conservative, and xenophobic counter-knowledge that often emerges in militia discourse—is deeply entrenched within America’s dominant social fabric and social structures.

The militia conspiracy theory only appears as a form of counter-knowledge because it has been kept under wraps by polite society for decades, re-emerging recently in popular discourse and even in the highest political echelons. For example, Donald Trump’s conspiracy theories targeting Barack Obama are now an example of official knowledge *par excellence*, in spite of America’s long history of racial injustice. Trump may be derided by commentators on *CNN* and the “Gatekeeper Left,” but his attachment to the dominant structures of American life remains intact. Conspiracy theories peddled by Donald Trump, and the ways that his conspiracy theories emerge as part of conspiracy panics, forces a distinction between conspiracy theories that maintain a structural status quo, including its racist, sexist, and classist attacks against marginalized citizens, versus those espoused by the victims of those attacks—people living in a system that continually disenfranchises them.

Bratich appears to overlook this distinction when he seamlessly moves from discussing the ultra-conservative conspiracy theories found in militia groups to those espoused by Black Americans against systemic forces of structural oppression. Historical events “such as the Tuskegee Syphilis study, atrocities against blacks during the civil rights era, and America’s eugenics movement have greatly influenced African Americans’ distrust in the health care system” and in government policies generally (Harris 2009, 17). Any affinities sketched between these disparate groups and the types of oppression they experience are therefor limited. This is not to suggest, that white Americans, even

those who espouse violent reactionary sentiments, have been immune to forms of oppression that can be articulated with the rhetoric of the conspiracy theory.¹⁶

For example, Black Americans and ultra-Conservative militants who cite class as a determining factor in their daily struggles express a common set of concerns about class oppression. However, Black Americans do not only experience class oppression and when their ongoing struggles are reduced to capitalist exploitation, ongoing histories of racial oppression are also erased. Cedric Robinson (1983) has written extensively on the disjunction between class affiliation and inter-racial affiliation. In *Black Marxism*, he writes:

Though there had been exceptions, the lack of an identity between the interests of Black and non-Black workers was fairly consistent in the labor movement. Wherever one looked—among those who saw the movement in political-electoral terms, or those who advocated revolutionary violence, or those who were committed to economic trade unionism—the labor movement was most often at best ambivalent toward Black liberation and progress. The ideology of racism in combination with self-interest functioned to pit immigrant and poor white workers against the Black worker and the slave (202).

Class affiliation does not erase legacies of racism that privilege white people over Black people in the American context, nor does class present a magical point of union between differently situated people within a hegemonic system that was constructed through the forced labor of enslaved people.

¹⁶ In Adam Smith's (2012) *The Wealth of Nations*, he describes the ways that landowners and "masters" are endowed with the privileged potential to conspire with other privileged people: "Masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform, combination, not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate. [...] Masters, too, sometimes enter into particular combinations to sink the wages of labour even below this rate. These are always conducted with the utmost silence and secrecy till the moment of execution" (71-2). He even goes so far as to suggest that "whosoever imagines, upon this account, that masters rarely combine is as ignorant of the world as of the subject" (71). Karl Marx (1976) goes further, noting that the Irish "famine and its consequences have been deliberately exploited both by the individual landlords and by the English Parliament through legislation so as to accomplish the agricultural revolution by force and to thin down the population of Ireland to the proportion satisfactory to the landlords" (869). In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx (1981) argues that "the capitalists, no matter how little love is lost among them in their mutual competition, are nevertheless united by a real freemasonry vis-à-vis the working class as a whole" (300). The rhetoric of the conspiracy theory is useful for Marx as it underscores the urgent need for workers to oppose their subjugation. Whether or not the conspiracy is true is beyond the scope of our analysis, but it is noteworthy that Marx does not supply evidence for his equation of the capitalists with freemasons, almost as though he believed that anyone reading his work would readily accept the analogy.

Moreover, attributing the plight of lower-class Americans only to the capitalist control of labour establishes the standard of empirical verification to justify the counter-hegemonic movements mobilized by those affected. Bratich argues that the “gatekeeper Left’s attachment to a particular kind of rationality entails addressing the claims not at the level of the evidence but at the level of the legitimacy to make the claims at all” (2008, 143). But by addressing the ways by which some forms of evidence are eschewed, Bratich nonetheless maintains that some basic legitimating conditions must be established to offer an explanation of conspiracies worth hearing (“at the level of the evidence,” he says), and establishing those conditions continues to rely on empirical methods of quantitative and qualitative data collection. As I will argue in the next chapter, truth can assume forms that exist apart from such methods. If conspiracy theory researchers do not attend to these forms, they risk contributing to the same legitimating apparatuses Bratich challenges.

While the efforts of capitalists to conspire against workers have been well documented, accounts of organized violence against Black people are more difficult to track and ‘verify.’ As Paul Gilroy (1993) writes in *The Black Atlantic*, accounts of organized violence against Black people in the United States are generally found in “sources that are both more imaginative and ephemeral” (119). To rely solely on forms of justification that adhere to traditional forms of documentation, and to use these as evidence of conspiracy, is akin to the sociocultural approach criticized by Bratich. Because Black people in the United States experience both race and class-based oppression, any real or imagined alliances with white people on the basis of class come at the expense of a direct engagement with the ways that their white comrades are complicit in racism. I elaborate on this point in the next chapter when I discuss Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of “intersectionality,” but for now I propose that, given the repeated violence inflicted on Black communities by even the most well-intentioned white people, it would not be outlandish to posit a vast conspiratorial network of white people seeking to further disenfranchise their Black neighbors.

The circulation of conspiracy theories today challenges Bratich’s application of the Foucauldian notion of neoliberal governmentality. Simply put, the ubiquity of

conspiracy theories across all echelons of society belies Bratich's characterization of them as existing on the margins (Uscinski & Parent 2014). Both conspiracy theories and misinformation can be—and have been—deployed by those in positions of power to consolidate and strengthen their power. Nick Srnicek's work on platform capitalism and Wendy Chun's work on software reveal a set of conditions by which conspiracy theories and theorists mirror the dominant logic of exploitative capital in the 21st century and thrive within it.¹⁷ Bratich's firm association of conspiracy theories with counter or subjugated knowledge conceals the conspiracy theory's proximity to those in power. Their ubiquity demands that conspiracy theory researchers move beyond their transgressive potential as discursive tools of counter-knowledge and toward a more holistic engagement with their specific locations, targets, and the forms of oppression they are describing. Otherwise, there is the risk of justifying oppressive conspiracy theories as "counter-knowledge" regardless of the systems and institutions they uphold.

Bratich's unified view of all conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledge erases the significant differences between those who experience class-based oppression and those who experience both class and race-based or gender-based oppression. In establishing these differences, it is important to clarify that one is not necessarily *more* justified than the other in their use of conspiracy theories to describe oppression. They are simply different and deserve to be considered and assessed separately. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to not rely too heavily on broad characterizations of different forms of oppression; they also require further nuance.

In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race & Sex," Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) persuasively argues that forms of oppression are not so neat in their expression. The result of any combination of oppressive forces against any number of discernible identity markers "is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (140). To be targeted on the basis of both race and class means more than the sum of race and class oppression. This kind of

¹⁷ This is not to say that conspiracy theories have increased in prevalence, but to argue that their rapid circulation on digital media works destabilize traditional sites of power and allows them to exert some discursive dominance.

intersecting oppression may elude traditional methods of assessment. While Bratich's focus on power and the discursive strategies deployed to challenge that power is an important intervention, it is equally important to recognize that those who are discriminated against in more than one way do not necessarily experience power and powerful institutions in the same way as others.

The truths that can be gleaned from these sites of resistance may differ depending on the way those people are affected by power. Conspiracy theories are, to rely on one of Bratich's central observations, "doorways to a broader context" (6), and their content might illuminate much about the people articulating them, especially when that content describes violence inflicted against marginalized people based on their overlapping and intersecting social identity categories. Conspiracy theories are not simply examples of counter-knowledge because they may be weaponized by those who either directly or indirectly uphold an oppressive status quo.

2.4 Embodied Subjectivities and Conspiracy Theories

In her discussion of Foucault's typification of power, N. Katherine Hayles (1999) identifies its universal and abstract character. She notes that Foucault tends to divorce the operation of power from the lived realities of those it oppresses. His conception of power "diverts attention away from how actual bodies, in their cultural and physical specificities, impose, incorporate, and resist incorporation of the material practices he describes" (194). This is illustrated in Foucault's reliance on the figure of the panopticon¹⁸—a technology of power that is itself disembodied, a pure stylization of

¹⁸ Meaning "all seeing," Michel Foucault (1975) was inspired by Jeremy Bentham's effort to construct a prison that would optimize surveillance. He designed a circular prison with a single tower in the middle providing the inmates the sense that they were being constantly watched by someone in the guard tower. The ideal effect would be that whether or not there was a guard in the tower, the inmates would align their actions in accordance with the prison's rules and regulations. Foucault applied this real structure to understand the more abstract way that power operates in 19th century Europe onwards. With developing means of surveillance, and administrative bodies capable of collecting and storing massive amounts of information about people, citizens are always under some kind of surveillance. His conclusion about the panopticon is that it "produces homogeneous effects of power" (202), and that the only individual differences exercised among the objects of its gaze are those permitted by the panopticon itself: "it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fining them one to another" (184). The issue here is the way it erases the specific

surveillance and control free from the burden of identity. Hayles argues that Foucault's criticism of the panopticon mirrors the oppressive disavowal of bodies and identities conducted by panoptic surveillance; Foucault "participates in, as well as deconstructs, the Panoptic move of disembodiment" (194).

Rather than focusing on bodies and identities, the Foucauldian gaze is aimed toward discourse—the ephemeral play of identity categories deployed and maintained by various loci of power. However, some of his philosophy has sought to move beyond the realm of discourse to that of bodies as a kind of return to materiality. A passage from the final pages of Michel Foucault's (1978) *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* clearly illustrates this effort:

It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim-through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality-to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex desire, but bodies and pleasures (157)

"Bodies and pleasures" occupy a material arena free from the grips of the discursive regimes of power that enact "sexuality." Hayles, however, contends that this turn to bodies assumes a zone of neutrality somehow free from the grip of power, ideology, and discourse. Instead, she emphasizes the distinction between the body and embodiment, suggesting that "embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment. Embodiment never coincides exactly with 'the body,' however that normalized concept is understood" (196). A consideration of embodiment presents a radical alternative to both panoptic power and Foucault's criticism of that power. "As soon as embodiment is acknowledged," Hayles suggests, "the abstractions of the Panopticon disintegrate into the particularities of specific people embedded in specific contexts. Along with these particularities come concomitant strategies for resistances and subversions, excesses and deviations" (198).

ways that power is exercised against people on the basis of their identity markers like race and gender, and how no surveillance mechanism can be truly homogenous in its application given the ways that conscious and unconscious bias permeate the very motivations behind surveillance in the first place.

Interestingly, Hayles considers the place of the conspiracy theory when recounting Carl Freedman's reading of Philip K. Dick who "argues that paranoia and conspiracy, favorite Dickian themes, are inherent to a social structure in which hegemonic corporations act behind the scenes to affect outcomes that the populace is led to believe are the result of democratic procedures" (167). The specificities of the situation described—one dominated by multi-national corporations—provides a specific frame through which to engage a phenomenon like the conspiracy theory, not as subjugated knowledge, but as a legitimate response to dominant corporate power.

Casting entire ways of knowing into the camp of subjugated or official knowledge can lead to the erasure of specificity endemic to the panoptic system itself. Beyond erasing the multivariate identities that comprise either the zone of domination or subjugation, the demarcation of one from the other conceals how they might overlap. No one person perfectly fits into any identity category. Instead, people are amalgamations of various identities that therefore trouble the organization of people into manageable categories.

Rey Chow and Pooja Rangan (2013) exemplify this dimension of Foucault's thought in their discussion of race as a technology of power. For them, racism

proves to be a remarkable fit with the problems specific to regulation at the level of the population. Like the abstract category 'population', race lends fixity to flexible and nebulous qualities such as the nature, character, and potential of a group. It does this by locating these invisible traits in visible physical attributes such as skin colour, body build, physiognomy, and behaviour, all of which can be 'scientifically' observed and documented (403).

In the Foucauldian paradigm, differences are reducible to the operations of power that permit them. In the case of race, the otherwise "nebulous qualities" of a given person or people are concretized and "fixed" (403) in conjunction with a specific enterprise of socio-political rationality. Race—among other designators—emerges solely at the hands of a normative rationalizing apparatus. Wherever power exerts its homogenizing force, the possibility for resistance emerges.

Embodiment does not only address the ways that people experience themselves and their histories, but also how they treat and are treated by others. In her discussion of the phenomenon of the stranger, Sara Ahmed (2013) contends that “some-bodies are more recognizable as strangers than other-bodies precisely because they are already read and valued in the demarcation of social spaces” (30). This accentuates a rupture produced within any discursive site of meaning, where not everyone is treated the same by everyone else and where political rationality is not the only oppressive force. Ironically, Bratich’s grouping of differently situated people under the umbrella of subjugated knowledge conflicts with Foucault’s attention to the micro-physics of power that seeps into the smallest crevices to shape and organize groups and populations (1977). By way of evidence, Bratich draws his reader’s attention to the Alabama Minutemen by asking:

how does one account for the fact that it was the Alabama Minutemen who infiltrated and exposed the “Good Ol’ Boys Roundup” (the yearly backwoods gathering of Federal agents in which racist and anti-Semitic sentiments were openly displayed) in 1996, only to be ignored in the mainstream reportage of the scandal? (126).

By contrast, United States Congressional records (2006) describe the Minutemen like this:

The largest border vigilante group, the Minuteman Project, held a reprise in April of their 2005 vigilante border patrols along the Arizona-Mexico border, and followed up with a caravan that staged anti-immigration events across the country. One Minuteman event in Birmingham, Alabama, was organized by Mike Vanderboegh, a former militia leader. At the rally, an attendee distributed copies of Olaf Childress's racist and anti-Semitic newspaper, *First Freedom*. Other anti-immigration groups held rallies from Arizona to Minnesota. Anti-immigration groups have also turned to publicity stunts. The Minutemen, for example, declared on May 9 that they would start building their own ‘border security fence’ on private property along the border with Mexico, unless the federal government itself deployed the military or erected such fencing. The Minutemen claimed that they had received nearly \$200,000 in donations to build such a fence. Other border vigilante groups have already begun or announced similar projects (10970).

The Congressional record illustrates a group that firmly embraces racist and xenophobic doctrine, perhaps more so than anti-elitist doctrine. No matter the case, the groups’ efforts to expose racism among federal agents does not erase or lessen their own racist acts.

Ahmed identifies the tacit ways that some bodies are able to blend into a social setting with more ease. Likewise, some conspiracy theories may more comfortably align with a hegemonic status quo than others. By recognizing the nuances embedded with any subjugated knowledge, researchers can open the door for an approach to conspiracy theory research that builds upon Bratich's necessary intervention in the field.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has made the case for more complexity and nuance in conspiracy theory research. This is offered as a supplement to Jack Z Bratich's (2008) characterization of the discursive regimes that construct conspiracy theories as narratives of derision. For Bratich, conspiracy theories exist at the nexus of a number of regimes vying for recognition in the face of normative political rationality. They emerge as antithetical points of comparison against a legitimating apparatus of liberal governmentality comprising journalists, politicians, academics, and the public alike. Bratich suggests that the conspiracy theory does not exist in itself; it is rather a term deployed to diminish and discredit some explanations out of hand. All conspiracy theories exist on the margins of acceptable discourse and necessarily haunt the centers of power/knowledge that police that discourse.

What undergirds Bratich's approach is a commitment to the idea that conspiracy theories, and conspiracy theorists, exist in the wastelands of illegitimate discourse. Being labeled a conspiracy theorist makes a person the target of a type of moral panic, discredited before the fact. While Bratich's approach is informed by an acknowledgement of traditional sites of power, and organizational methods that permeate those sites, as the paragons of liberal political rationality, what happens when new hegemonic formations like Big Tech and platform capitalism emerge on the scene? In this chapter, I have argued that these conditions have created a hospitable environment for conspiracy theories. The conspiracy theorist's desire to know things that are scary, thrilling or spectacular is good business in the age of platform capitalism. This fact highlights a limitation to Bratich's claim that political rationality always condemns belief in conspiracy theories.

I believe that it is important to look beyond platform capitalism and consider other oppressive practices and discourses like racism and sexism to observe how conspiracy theories and theorists are not always on the margins of acceptable political discourse but are sometimes embedded within it. Perhaps the most obvious example is Donald Trump, whose conspiracy theories targeting racialized immigrants did not disqualify him from inhabiting the highest political office in the United States. Indeed, such beliefs may have solidified his place there. By framing conspiracy theories as subjugated knowledges, Bratich provides a heuristic tool with which to understand how power operates to establish a normative standard for speculative inquiry. However, how this power exerts itself will differ depending on the people being subjected to it. In relation to traditional sites of knowledge production and dissemination, it is clear that some people's explanations of events may be more readily challenged than others. Today, conspiracy theorists themselves may be central to dominant hegemonic discourses.

The next chapter expands on the discussion of embodiment introduced here to consider how race, gender, and class intersect when it comes to conspiracy theory belief. In this chapter, I argue that while the conspiracy theories espoused by some marginalized communities may or may not all be factually true, they nevertheless articulate lived experiences of oppression. It will also contend that the ways people convey their experiences of oppression do not always adhere to traditional methods of knowledge production and dissemination.

3 Intersectional Conspiracy Theory Research

This chapter brings together intersectional feminist theory and conspiracy theory research in order to engage with conspiracy theories in terms of the locations from which they emerge, and to differentiate between conspiracy theories intended to maintain oppressive structures from those hoping to challenge them. The task here is to explore the political and cultural value of conspiracy theories for marginalized populations.

As Bratich (2008) demonstrates, conspiracy theories are always challenging power. However, some do so while mirroring the power they challenge. When Alex Jones is decried as a conspiracy theorist by the “gatekeeper Left” (143), he remains within the domain of subjugated knowledge described by Bratich. Locating him on the margin of proper inquiry, however, ignores the fact that the content of his conspiracy theories positions him squarely at the centre of a discursive site that upholds established structures of oppression, including white supremacy and patriarchy. Any anti-oppressive possibility is undermined by a strong affinity with the systemic forces that maintain his privileged status and condone his repeated attacks on marginalized people. By contrast, some marginalized people’s conspiracy theories, described by Bratich as occupying the same discursive site of subjugated knowledge as Jones, strike at the heart of these forces. These theories articulate and embody a double-pronged challenge to dominant structures. For example, when Spike Lee suggests that “AIDS is a government-engineered disease” (as cited in Roger Pebody, 2015) targeted against Black people, his conspiracy theory is transgressive not only as subjugated knowledge, but also in the way that it calls attention to the ongoing injustices Black Americans face in the U.S. health care system. While it is impossible to know whether Jones is earnest in his beliefs about the marginalization of his audience by dominant powers,¹⁹ it is crucial to ask what the conspiracy theory can *do* – either in terms of maintaining established power structures such as patriarchy or white

¹⁹ In a pre-trial divorce proceeding, Randall Wilhite, attorney for Alex Jones’ ex-wife, Kelly Jones, argued that Jones’ online personality is a fabricated one, and that he is “playing a character” (Siemaszko 2017). I believe that this is likely to be true, but is still not proof of the claim, I believe.

supremacy, or in calling attention to them. The conspiracy theory is not simply or always a transgressive force.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first juxtaposes conspiracy theories that emerged in response to a deadly outbreak of cholera in Venezuela in the 1990s with conspiracy theories espoused by Alex Jones on his website, *INFOWARS*. This analysis focuses on water poisoning, and the diverging consequences described by the Warao people and Alex Jones. For the Warao people, poisoned water results in hundreds of death from cholera, whereas for Alex Jones water poisoning affects IQ, teeth whiteness, and masculinity and femininity. By juxtaposing these examples, I demonstrate how conspiracy theories differ from one another in the severity of the consequences they describe, and how they are derided and criticized as conspiracy theories. I argue that socio-cultural landscape informs not only the subject matter of conspiracy theories, but also how they are taken up, disciplined, or ignored.

The second section develops an intersectional approach to conspiracy theory research arguing that conspiracy theories need to be examined in terms of their specific social and political locations. Drawing upon the intersectional feminist and critical race theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Sara Ahmed (2004), Nicole Charles (2020), Kelly Oliver (2001) and others, the chapter emphasizes how the effects of multiple forms of oppression can be difficult to describe, even by those who are the most deeply affected by them. The goal of intersectional conspiracy theory research is to acknowledge how conspiracy theories, as a narrative style that describes operations of power, can be helpful and productive tools to describe oppression.

All conspiracy theories are subject to discursive dismissal and subordination, but the forms of subordination vary in terms of the theories' content and the opportunities they afford in communicating oppressions that escape widespread recognition. For some marginalized people, the conspiracy theory may be used to call attention to ongoing forms of systemic oppression, and for some privileged people, the conspiracy theory may be a tool to protect and amplify power (?).

3.1 A Tale of Two Conspiracy Theories: How they differ and why that matters

3.1.1 The Warao People and Cholera in Venezuela

Between 1992 and 1993, Venezuela's Orinoco Delta was hit with a deadly outbreak of cholera, killing approximately 500 Indigenous people in the area (Briggs 2004). The official authorities were quick to attribute the epidemic to "unsanitary eating practices" and offered little government help or intervention to the affected communities, despite cholera's treatability and prevention through water treatment. Some people rejected this official account, however, turning to conspiracy theories to explain the government's lack of action. According to Esteban Castro, "The epidemic formed part of a master plan developed by government officials who wish to get rid of the Warao once and for all, thereby eliminating the major obstacle that stood in the way of criollos enjoying free access to the delta and its natural resources" (171).

These details are chronicled eloquently in Charles Briggs' (2004) "Theorizing modernity conspiratorially: Science, scale, and the political economy of public discourse in explanations of a cholera epidemic." In this text, Briggs reflects on his anthropological work with the Warao people during the cholera outbreak. He argues that modernist constructions of the Warao as "less-advanced" (and therefore expendable) were central to the government's lack of action. Positioning the Warao as perpetrators of the epidemic, was in turn figured as a sign of the harms of pre-modern life, an unqualified and racist classification of the Warao.

The government's condemnation of the Warao people did not stop there.. It went on to refute any alternative explanations of the origin of the epidemic or criticisms of its inaction as markers of epistemic inferiority. As Briggs writes, "If getting cholera demonstrates that individuals and communities lack scientific knowledge, telling conspiracy narratives further proves their premodern status by showing that they cannot distinguish scientific and social spheres" (174). Such a disavowal corresponds to broader mechanisms of erasure that seek to absolve the powerful of responsibility for the Warao people's suffering by delegitimizing their experiences.

These strategies underscore the importance of the counter-narratives espoused by the Warao people because they call attention to the historical structures that perpetuate the continued expendability of some groups. Patricia Turner (1993) calls these types of theories “benign-neglect theories,” which seek to normalize passive forms of control established through years of collusion and cooperation by governments, corporations, and medical institutions (189-190). These forms of power are designed to ignore and silence issues raised by members of marginalized communities. In Briggs’ words, “Conspiracy narratives read diseased bodies as signs of a diseased body politic, showing how racialization fostered an epidemic that lay at the core of a sick racial project” (175). In this case, the conspiracy theory calls attention to systemic conditions that are maintained by oppressive historical inertia and intentional acts of violence and exploitation.

In his book-length exploration of the 1992-1993 cholera outbreak, Charles Briggs and his co-author Clara Mantini Briggs (2003) include many transcribed interviews they conducted with indigenous populations on the Orinoco delta. One local resident, a *wisidatu* [healer] named Hénaro Romero, explained the breakout of cholera as follows,

This is a *criollo* disease. That is its origin. The *criollos* made it, and its owners are the people from Trinidad. That’s what we heard. It’s said that they brought more and more and more and more crabs from there [in Mariusa]. But then: What happened? The owners of the crabs, it’s said, didn’t want to go get them—it appears that they hadn’t been paid. Okay, fine! So right then they started putting poison [in the water], for the crabs. They kept on making poison. Then the black people [Trinidadians] left. So [the Mariusans] in turn went and got crabs and ate them, see? But they had become bad. Maybe that’s why they made [the poison]. That’s how it happened (236).²⁰

Romero attributes the epidemic’s origin to greedy corporations that would prefer to poison the food supply than compromise on the conditions of exchange.

²⁰ The inclusion of Trinidad reflects other concerns held by residents of Trinidadian economic encroachment on their waters and wildlife. An in-depth analysis of this conspiracy theory goes beyond the scope of this project.

Ramón Gómez, another Warao interviewee, situated the cholera epidemic within a broader global context where unbridled military efforts overseas poisoned the waters in Venezuela:

It was the Americans, with Iraq. They fought and fought, and they dropped their fire into the water—that's what we call it. In Warao we call it that, in Spanish they're called "bombs." They dropped them on the ground and then dropped them in the water. They have some sort of poison in them that affects the fish, the water, and the crabs (239).

Gómez's doesn't suggest that there was willing intent behind the cholera epidemic in the same way that Romero's does, but it does nevertheless describe clandestine military strategies that poisoned the Venezuelan water, wildlife, and people in the area. Confronted with the harms inflicted against the Warao people, Gómez insinuates that the Venezuelan and American governments deliberately concealed these effects to save face.

The Warao people, alongside others who identified with the repeated struggles of Venezuela's *indígena* populations, were doubly erased in their use of conspiracy theories to describe the cholera outbreak. Their status as *indígena* marked them as less civilized than their *criollos*, or non-indigenous counterparts, and their use of conspiracy theories was used by government and health officials to justify their separation from legitimate explanatory mechanisms for the disease. While it would be difficult to quantify exactly how being doubly affected damaged the Warao people, their use of conspiracy theories reinforced a firm distinction between the *indígena* and *criollos* people in Venezuela. In their book, Briggs and Briggs (2003) suggest that "the imposition of modernity and rationality is a powerful way to construct social and political hierarchies and to position oneself within them" (152). By using their conspiracy theory narratives against the Warao, public health and government officials encouraged public animosity toward them and further alienating them from the social and political power that might serve to improve their living conditions.

3.1.2 Alex Jones' Conspiracy Theories in America

For over twenty years, Alex Jones has broadcast his conspiracy theories over his radio show and website, INFOWARS. Operating as a beacon for disenfranchised and

frustrated Americans, *INFOWARS* offers an ongoing stream of reactionary political rhetoric targeting immigrants, minorities, and left-leaning people. Jones' theories are not only intent on targeting vulnerable communities and people. He also deploys the rhetoric of care to justify his concern about the harms of governmental authority. In a 2011 interview with Dr. Paul Connett to discuss the harms of fluoride in American water supplies, Jones suggests that fluoride is a “deadly toxic waste poison added to our water.” Interestingly, they do not provide any examples of people having died from fluoride consumption in the water,²¹ but Jones and his guest claim that fluoride has been shown to affect IQ, teeth whiteness, fertility, and brain development in children. Most strikingly though, Jones argues that “levels of fluoride are known to accelerate puberty and basically aging, and we wonder why, amongst the other hormones and things that are in the meat, that our girls are going to puberty now not just at 6, 7, or 8, but 3 years old in many cases. You see the areas of the world where fluoridation is going on you see these hotspots of the boys being effeminate and the women are going into puberty earlier.” His concern rests on a belief in the immutability of gender identity except in cases where a perceived poison has entered the equation. For Jones, to be a feminine man or a masculine woman is attributable to having been poisoned by a government engineered toxin distributed through the water supply. In this example, Jones' clearly reveals his attachment to a specific idea about traditional American feminine and masculine identities. The threat of poisoned water is then construed as a threat to a traditional status quo—one that galvanizes and rigidifies the gender binary. Beyond his concern for fluoride, his website *INFOWARS* features innumerable articles putting forward conspiracy theories that uphold traditional values in the United States including white supremacy, sexism, and xenophobia.

In one *INFOWARS* article, contributor, Chris Menahan (2020) reflects on the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd:

²¹ He does, however, share a story of someone who was poisoned and died when trying to fumigate a building with a gas that contained fluoride.

The media is doing everything in their power to act like these riots are not happening because they know it will hurt Joe Biden and Kamala Harris who worked tirelessly all year to fan the flames of anti-White [sic] racial hatred and resentment and even encouraged people to donate to a bail fund to bail out the rioters and looters caught in the act!

For Alex Jones and his INFOWARS contributors, the threat posed by anti-racist activists to white people eclipses the repeated harms inflicted against people of color in the United States. In the same article, Menahan suggests that BLM protestors were “specifically targeting and attacking white people.” By way of evidence, the article includes a number of tweets by Andy Ngo,²² featuring videos of stores being looted. The implication is that store owners were white whereas the looters were Black, an assumption that is firmly embedded within American history where property was systematically denied to Black people. The looters, however, are not only Black people, and there is no evidence offered to demonstrate that the store owners are white. Menahan simply assumes that the looters were Black people and that the store owners were white because it fits with the established INFOWARS narrative.

The description of an anti-white conspiracy resonates with another common claim repeatedly espoused by Jones and his colleagues: that Western civilization, like whiteness, is under threat. Another article titled, “Dismantle The Squad Before They Dismantle America,” argues against the Democratic party whose “Marxist ideology [...] is burning down Western civilization” (Bowne 2020). Alex Jones and INFOWARS’ overt promotion of America and Western civilization positions them as the defenders of a fragile nation, resembling the founders of America, who felt themselves to be perpetually on shaky socio-political ground. The more dire the situation they sketch, the stronger the defenses need to be to combat the foes conspiring against America (Hofstadter, 1964). Beyond the facticity of these claims, these conspiracy theorists use these ideas to strengthen their own power consciously or not.

²² Ngo is a popular figure in right-wing political circles, and has been a vocal opponent to the Black Lives Matter movement and Trans people’s rights.

In the United States, there is historical precedent for this kind of strategy . The protestant founders celebrated individualism and freedom, generating an atomistic social landscape where the institutions and structures that were traditionally responsible for facilitating group identity were subordinate to individual liberty. Conspiracy theories and conspiratorial groups at this time were fascinated by the “common man,” who saw in the conspirator’s collective organization an antidote to the loneliness produced by American individualism (Davis 1972, 64). The public’s feelings of isolation and rootlessness led them to establish “religious revivals, reform movements, and a proliferation of fraternal orders and associations” (65). Ironically, these same institutions would become the targets of many conspiracy theories for centuries to follow.

These movements were established with the intent of forming a counter-subversive force against possible Catholic and British foreign influence in America (Smelser 1972). Fear of conspiracies extended beyond British and Catholic influence to Spanish collusion with enslaved Black people in Louisiana. In the early 19th century, Spanish officials worked to promote emancipation among enslaved Black people, generating much concern by American officials. Eric Herschthal (2016) found that Throughout Louisiana’s territorial period, lasting from 1803 to 1812, U.S. officials at both the local and federal level worried incessantly that Louisiana’s enslaved and free black [sic] populations might exploit the lingering influence of Spanish policies within Louisiana in pursuit of their own freedom, undermining U.S. attempts at westward expansion (284).

Consequently, American policy makers perceived Black Americans as a barrier to stabilizing American-Spanish relations, and as potential proxies for Spanish influence in the United States. They passed legislation that would expand slave-owner powers in Louisiana. In New Orleans, the city council “passed a law requiring that all innkeepers report each new guest, including his color, age, profession, and country of origin” to keep an eye on free people of colour (301). While Herschthal is clear that it may be “impossible to know what degree of truth lay behind these fears” (311), the oppressive tactics used are unquestionable. Enslaved and newly freed Black people in the American south were subject to surveillance in order to control them, their correspondences, and their associations with others. As this historical example makes abundantly clear, conspiracy theories differ fundamentally depending on who they target, and the relative proximity of the conspiracy theorist to reputed sites of authority and governance.

In such cases, the conspiracy theory is clearly meant to maintain the privilege of the dominant group by targeting marginalized populations. This is exemplified in the current moment by Jones' and his colleagues' refusal to acknowledge the overwhelming number of white men in positions of power in America. There is a lot to be gleaned from what the conspiracy theorist does not discuss; these absences that render some identity markers transparent help to reveal the connection between these conspiracy theorists and the status quo. What the conspiracy theorist leaves out reveals as much as what they choose to address. When secret cabals are cited, they are often marked by religious affiliation or ethnicity. For example, Jewish people are often seen to be secret wielders of unimaginable wealth.²³ Or, in the case of the birther conspiracy theory against Barack Obama, black skin and non-whiteness are implicitly connected with 'un-American-ness' and to economic and social policies that are bad for America, and so on. The birther conspiracy theory conjures up the spectre of a coordinated effort on the part of racialized people to disenfranchise "true" Americans. At the core of Alex Jones' conspiracy theories is the message that white people are synonymous with America and Americans, and that people of colour are threats to the normalized recognition of white superiority. In different contexts, where white people do not comprise the majority position (but may nevertheless have occupied an historically oppressive position), the narrative may shift, revealing the extent to which conspiracy theories and their condemnation are contextual.

3.1.3 Expanding on the Differences between these Conspiracy Theories

The YouTube channel, Black people's voices comprise almost all *Voicetv Nigeria* in their description of racism by colonial powers on the world-stage. On July 8th, 2020b, *Voicetv Nigeria* released a video titled, "Shocker: Virus Links To Anti-Christ Mark Of

²³ There is a long history of antisemitic conspiracy theories targeting Jewish people for their supposed wealth, or threats to Christianity. Diane Zahler (2009) documents that as the "plague attacked Spain and France, whispers immediately started about poisonings of wells and of the air by the Jews" (65). During the Black Death, Herman Gigas, a Franciscan friar shrouded in mystery, wrote that "many Jews confessed as much under torture" that they had "obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this wickedness, only the most powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed" (as cited in . Horrox 1994) Beyond the confessions obtained through torture, Gigas cites "men" who "say that bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs" (207). Amounting to unsubstantiated conjecture, Gigas' evidence resulted in the immolation of innumerable Jewish people across Germany.

The Beast, (666) Exposed, Say No To Bill Gate Vaccine.” It features an unnamed Black woman describing how the word “corona,” from “coronavirus,” is comprising 6 letters and that, if the letters of “corona” are attributed a numerical value determined by their position in the alphabet (for example, c=3; k=11), their added value is 66. She concludes that, because the word has 6 letters and the letters add up to 66, then the word “corona,” can be summarized as 666, the “mark of the beast.” She takes this to mean that the coronavirus has been unleashed by clandestine figures to reduce the world’s population at the behest of Satan. In another video from the same channel, another anonymous Black woman argues that, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, “Africa should stay strong, rise, and say no to any vaccine because this said vaccine is a plan really to depopulate 2.3 billion people in Africa. [...] I don’t know what the whites are really planning to do, but let’s fight with all our strength against this vaccine” (2020a). Within the Nigerian context, where white people do not comprise a majoritarian position but have historically been colonizers, they are clearly marked and therefore can be a more common target of conspiracy theories. Following the historical cases about the United States mentioned above, conspiracy theories are tightly bound up with established power structures. This is no different in the Nigerian context, but the actual force and potential of the conspiracy theory to oppress people differs greatly. White people might be recognizable as conspirators by virtue of being white people in Nigeria, but this has not translated into heightened surveillance and control of white people there. Analyzing conspiracy theories with specific attention to whom they target and who produces them can reveal much about the many historical and present dynamics that shape inter-group relationships.

The conspiracy theorist draws connections between people and events, but they only do so when pieces of evidence between disparate groups, people, and phenomena are clearly understood. Whiteness and maleness in the Global North and West are not marked qualities, and so Alex Jones does not draw connections between white men and their accumulation of power. Kelly Oliver (2001) puts this phenomenon astutely when she writes that “whiteness operates as an unmarked culture” (187). Indeed, those who are ignored or erased by conspiracy theories are often those aligned with the interests of the conspiracy theorists. The way evidence is (un)used reveals the conspiracy theory’s location within a specific domain of intelligibility, where some identity markers are clear

while others are omitted. This might explain the use of conspiracy theories among the most powerful and epistemically exalted figures; they work to reaffirm hegemonic structures that confer upon them a privileged status. Establishing the kind of evidence used in conspiracy theories within broader domains of intelligibility can help us discern, not only whether a conspiracy theory is antithetical—yet still attached dialectically—to dominant power structures, but also whether it complies with majoritarian dispositions—like racism and sexism.

Alex Jones and INFO WARS do recognize whiteness as an identity category, but only when they perceive white people as threatened. One article by Paul Joseph Watson (2021), a prominent figure on INFO WARS and YouTube, presents an excerpt from a Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) (2021) document that reads: “race and ethnicity alone, apart from other underlying health conditions, may be considered in determining eligibility for mAbs [monoclonal antibodies].” From this excerpt he concludes that the MDH is instructing “hospitals to discriminate against white people by ensuring non-white patients have priority access when it comes to potentially lifesaving COVID-19 treatments.” His conclusion conceals the MDH’s (2021) acknowledgement that because the data is not conclusive, “health care providers ‘should consider the benefit-risk for an individual patient’” (13). Interestingly, they argue that the lack of data is “due to underdiagnosis of health conditions that elevate risk of poor COVID-19 outcomes in [racialized] populations” (13). As the MDH identifies, Black and Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, but due to a lack of risk assessment resources, the MHD defers the decision of who gets care directly to the health care provider. Watson either ignores these facts willingly or is impervious to them. In either case, his article highlights the conspiracy theorist’s connection to a hegemonic order that can only see white people as a group of victims, never as a group of perpetrators, in America.

People of colour are disproportionately affected by all diseases, not just COVID-19.²⁴ Given the histories of systemic oppression that contribute to such disproportionate rates of disease, it would seem that, if there is a conspiracy afoot, it would more likely involve one targeting racially marginalized populations than white people in this context. However, efforts to explain the ways disease disproportionately affects marginalized communities are still derided as conspiracy theories. In 1992, *The Washington Post* published an incendiary article titled, “Who will Speak the Truth to Spike Lee?” in response to Spike Lee’s claims mentioned above that AIDS was a government engineered disease and comparing it to the inner city drug epidemic. Journalist Nat Hentoff argued against Lee, offering “that vintage remedy for poisonous expression—more speech that tells it like it really is.” Hentoff’s strategy of speaking ‘truth’ to conspiracy theories brackets off the lived experiences of racialized people in the United States who often encounter medical malpractice and/or apathy, reading access to free speech as equally available to everyone.

Like the treatment of the Warao people, Alex Jones is vilified as a purveyor of anti-rationalist discourse, but the criticisms stop short of attributing this to his identity as a white man. In his context, Jones continues to enjoy the privileges his identity affords him despite persistent backlash by reputable institutions. In comparison, when the Warao people are ostracised in response to their use of conspiracy theories in conjunction with their Indigenous status, the results can be fatal.

‘The Warao’ were seen not simply as an embarrassment and an obstacle to exploitation of the delta’s resources, but as a political liability. Therefore, the few clinics established in this vast area were often without even aspirin on their shelves. When patients were turned away by disillusioned physicians and nurses, institutional medicine was also delegitimized. ‘When they wanted to save our lives, they did,’ noted one delta resident. ‘Now they want us to die’ (Briggs and Briggs 2003, 5).

²⁴ The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (2022) reports that rates of Asthma, Autoimmune disorders, STDs, Coronavirus, Hepatitis C, HIV, and Tuberculosis are significantly higher among racially marginalized communities with variations between them.

These two examples of the use of conspiracy theories are dissimilar in terms of both their scope and their proximity to historically established loci of power. Furthermore, the way legitimating institutions deploy “liberal political rationality” (Bratich 2008, 41) varies widely. For Alex Jones, the conspiracy theory is mobilized to maintain power for both himself and the group with which he identifies (white, Western, men), whereas, for the Warao people, the conspiracy theory confirms and explains ongoing attempts to neglect or erase them by powerful forces. I am not arguing that one conspiracy theory should be more readily accepted as true or legitimate; the key point here is simply to recognize their differing content and reception by powerful institutions and individuals, and that engaging with these differences can reveal how conspiracy theories maintain or challenge hegemonic power structures and serve to silence or illuminate the position of marginalized people and ideas.

Briggs’ analysis of the events in Venezuela resembles Bratich’s claim that conspiracy theories are a term deployed to delegitimize some views while legitimizing others. But contrasting conspiracies deployed by racialized or marginalized people with those of figures like Alex Jones, who occupy a position far closer to reputable sites of power/knowledge, can help us nuance this argument and better understand the interests of these dominant modes of legitimation. One conspiracy theorist might be a passive beneficiary of the conspiracies they describe, while others can become victims of them. After all, Donald Trump repeatedly appealed to Jones and his followers to win the Presidency in 2016.

To engage with conspiracy theories as forms of counter-knowledge demands as broad a scope of analysis as possible to capture the many ways that power operates within and through them to quell or amplify oppositional explanations to official accounts. By adding feminist and critical race perspective to the mix, researchers can nuance their readings of conspiracy theories by highlighting how belief in conspiracy theories, in certain structurally oppressed communities, can serve to make those forms of oppression knowable and accountable.

3.2 Intersectional Conspiracy Theory Research

3.2.1 Intersectionality and Structural Oppression

Structural oppression is fuelled by history, which dictates the conditions of proper conduct that reflect the interests of the dominant group as determined by race, gender, and/or class, etc. As Rosino and Hughey (2018) argue, “racialized social reproduction” is “a set of both ideas (dominant meanings) and practices (dominant structures) that rationalize, justify, and normalize racism and racial inequality” (854-5). The way that this structure exerts itself is not only through overt forms of discrimination, but also through more surreptitious forms that are not necessarily purposefully set in motion. The roots of the continued subjugation of Black Americans may be traced to the actions of conspirators intent on maintaining their own power, but their ongoing effects are not reducible to a few malicious actors. Of course, there are some examples of such coordinated efforts; Patricia Turner (1993), for instance, describes the ways that the owners of enslaved people sought to reinforce their own power and stifle opposition by “prohibiting slaves from learning how to read, by preventing loose-lipped whites and free blacks from having access to the slaves, and by deliberately spreading misinformation” (36). The only way that these strategies could be effective was if they were implemented *en masse*, which demanded an intricate network through which misinformation could be spread, implicating high numbers of people, many of whom would not be propagating these practices and ideas intentionally. Without a more thorough engagement with ways that oppression continues into the present, it becomes difficult to distinguish structural oppression from non-structural forms of oppression. As Turner goes on to claim, “all contemporary white leaders are not in fact out to destroy [Black people]” (212), suggesting that the realities of structural oppression, which are often unseen, implicate all those who benefit from them. As a racist system privileges some people over others, the opportunities to recognize this oppression become few and far between.

In the Canadian context, where Indigenous nations and people experience structural oppression daily, Dene scholar Glen Coulthard (2014) offers us this insight into the ways that structural violence against Indigenous women has become naturalized:

The violence that Indigenous women face is both systemic and symbolic. It is systemic in the sense that it has been structured, indeed institutionalized, into a relatively secure and resistant set of oppressive material relations that render Indigenous women more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to suffer severe economic and social privation, including disproportionately high rates of poverty and unemployment, incarceration, addiction, homelessness, chronic and/or life-threatening health problems, overcrowded and substandard housing, and lack of access to clean water, as well as face discrimination and sexual violence in their homes, communities, and workplaces. Just as importantly, however, the violence that Indigenous women face is also ‘symbolic’ in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu used the term: ‘gentle, invisible violence, unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone.’ Symbolic violence, in other words, is the subjectifying form of violence that renders the crushing materiality of systemic violence invisible, appear natural, acceptable (177).

Coulthard’s words emphasize the ways that oppressive structures evade identification by sites of knowledge production and dissemination that rely upon epistemically complicit forms of critical insight. As Audre Lorde (2018) writes, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” an observation that may inform us about the potential roadblocks to the pursuit of social justice when relying upon established methods and sites of reflection and diagnosis.

Intersectional feminism militates against a homogenous approach to the study of oppression, refusing to use explanatory mechanisms like identity or identity politics. As summarized in Chapter 1, Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality stresses the need to move beyond a “single categorical axis” (144) to study and challenge oppression. Assessing legal complaints by Black women about of their mistreatment in the workplace, Crenshaw argues that the force of systemic oppression “is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (140). The justice system is unequipped to identify and adjudicate experiences of oppression that target more than one identity marker. The Black women complainants that Crenshaw studies claim that they are being discriminated against in their workplaces on the basis of both being women and Black. The justice system is only equipped—and willing—to handle one form of discrimination, not two, and so these women’s experiences are reduced to personal feelings of oppression rather than a reflection of real systemic factors affecting all Black women. When grappling with experiences of oppression amongst marginalized populations, the totality of that oppression is often greater than the simple addition of one identity to another.

Intersectional feminism and critical race theory attend to the varying ways that people can be discriminated against, and they argue that traditional ways to identify, adjudicate, and remedy oppression are ill-equipped as long as they are trained to only identify a “single categorical axis” (144).

Intersectionality also leaves room to acknowledge that some experiences of oppression do not neatly lend themselves to hegemonically established forms of verification. This is especially true when those experiences are expressed in ways that are not accepted as legitimate by dominant institutions. Some of these include storytelling, embodied feelings that are not easily translated to written or verbal language, and tactics of survival in an oppressive society. Conspiracy theories can be a part of these forms of expression and so should not be discounted—or celebrated—without deeper analysis.

3.2.2 Conspiracy Theories as Resistance to Power

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) argues that those who occupy the liminal space between Mexico and the United States are in “a constant state of transition” (3), troubling singular ideas about identity that posit people as unchanging wholes. These people are often forced to assume a singular identity to match the totalizing logics of racism and oppression. In Anzaldúa’s personal case, the choice was between her “White, Mexican, [or] Indian” backgrounds, never all three. She asks, however, what it might mean to embrace all three, and works to craft a space in which she could be all three. One of the key insights she takes from this task is an idea from her ancestors called “*La Facultad*”—the “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities” (38). By occupying all three positions, she has a unique vantage point, allowing her to see what anyone completely immersed in any one of these identities may not be able to see. Looking from the outside in is to see the hidden machinations that keep any system afloat. *La Facultad* is this capacity to see the subterranean structures that maintain a given system’s power; it requires an elevated vigilance against surreptitious forms of oppression: “When we’re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away” (38-9). Suspicion might be one way this

faculty manifests itself, helping those who experience repeated oppressions prepare for novel threats.

Suspicion is not only mobilized by those living in the borderlands Anzaldúa describes, however. By way of a supplement (and point of contrast), Patricia Turner (1993) argues that the vast array of urban legends that have circulated through Black communities in the United States, including include the belief that the food at the fast-food chain, Church's Chicken, was laced by the Ku Klux Klan to sterilize its mostly Black patrons (xiii) or the belief that the Center for Disease Control was experimenting on Black children (xiii) "often function as tools of resistance for many of the folk who share them" (xvi). By constructing a vast network of enemies, Black Americans encourage group solidarity in the face of these threats: "attacks on single Black individuals are perceived as affronts to the entire African-American community" (151). These rumours, for Turner, "emerge in relation to both genuine and perceived acts of anti-black hostility" (74). At the core of this argument is the recognition of specific kinds of oppression that have historically targeted America's Black communities like the Tuskegee experiments, governmental apathy, and the violence conducted by the Ku Klux Klan. But, in response, Turner prescribes a strong dose of truth to mitigate belief in rumours outside of the bounds of acceptable speculative inquiry: "Blacks need to be shown evidence that all contemporary white leaders are not in fact out to destroy them" (212). This emphasis on the perception of harm is troubling for the simple reason that structural oppression is typically devoid of intent, and enjoys the privilege of transparency. Turner characterizes oppression in such a way as to reduce it to those testimonies that can be catalogued, communicated, and verified according to procedures that she recognizes as valid. By employing these mechanisms, she is able to confidently separate "genuine" from "perceived" oppression (74), assuming the neutral position of arbiter between victims and propagators of oppression. Turner then speaks on behalf of Black people, separating legitimate from illegitimate concerns, all the while tacitly confirming the neutrality of her own position and the neutrality of the methods she uses. As structural oppression enjoys the privilege of transparency, it can be argued that Turner might be contributing to it rather than challenging it.

Kelly Oliver's (2001) concept of "witnessing," which acknowledges how people can communicate lived oppressions in ways that evade traditional forms of assessment and verification, can provide a corrective to positions like Turner's. Oliver's approach frames witnessing as a responsibility; the listener situates themselves in relation to someone else who confides in them. To witness a Black person's experiences of oppression, for example, does not simply involve trying to convince them that "all contemporary white leaders are not in fact out to destroy them" (212); instead, it involves recognizing that testimonies will not always be comprehensible on account of the different positions the speaker and listener might occupy, and confronting the discomfort that incomprehension might induce.

3.2.3 Witnessing Conspiracy Theories

To witness conspiracy theories demands a disengagement from empirical facts as the only evidence of structural oppression. As Kelly Oliver argues, empirical facts are not nearly as interesting or telling as that which goes unseen, that "which is beyond recognition in history" (11). Drawing from the psychoanalytic work of Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (1992),²⁵ Oliver contends that facts circulate within an economy of recognition that confers upon them meaning in their adherence to, or departure from, dominant structures and beliefs. What is counted as a fact is contingent upon the politics of recognition that delimit what can be intelligible. Breaking from these discursive sites of power demands, what she calls, the capacity to witness, "testifying to both something you have seen with your own eyes and something that you cannot see" (137). Loci of power maintain their authority by carefully curating what can be acknowledged as evidence of an event. This does not necessarily happen deliberately but can be established over years of repetitive actions that normalize some events, phenomena, and objects as

²⁵ While working in the Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, Laub (1992) and the team of historians he was working with, found a number of testimonies by Holocaust survivors that were factually incorrect. To the historians, these inaccuracies were a sign of the unreliability of those witnesses. However, Laub found in them a truth that extended beyond their empirical fidelity; they communicated a truth about the event that the facts could not capture - that to mis-remember was a strategy of survival. In this case, the misremembering involved the effectiveness of a Jewish led revolt in a concentration camp where a number of chimneys were destroyed. The witness reported that more chimneys were destroyed than had been officially reported. To Laub, this signified a desire to intensify the feeling of the revolt's effectiveness.

significant, and others as insignificant and not worthy of attention. Witnessing acknowledges how empirical evidence can be political and cultural — how it can adhere to certain hegemonic standards.

The “birther” conspiracy theory mentioned above, the belief that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, reveals much about the politics of evidence. For Donald Trump, and others who shared in his racist beliefs, Obama’s skin colour was invoked as evidence of his foreignness. His foreignness was then used as a marker of his supposedly anti-American policies, and so on. To call attention to these markers of difference, weaponized to consolidate power and anti-Black racism, is to expand what can count as evidence of a conspiracy. In this case, the evidence used serves a dual function: to lend epistemic legitimacy to the claims, and to convey a decidedly political (and racist) message. The content of the conspiracy theory here reveals much about the status of anti-Black racism in the United States, where recognizable identity markers are utilized to maintain a largely white supremacist status quo. Of course, the great irony is that Trump and others who contributed to the birther conspiracy theory paid little to no attention to the fact that Ted Cruz, a fellow Republican, was born outside the United States. Facts exist within a specific socio-historical paradigm and are bestowed with meaning in accordance with that setting. For Trump, Obama’s race is evidence of his being non-American, and the fact that this birther conspiracy theory gained so much public support reveals the extent to which white Americans in general see Black skin as a core marker of difference in the United States.

These discriminatory strategies, even as they are marked as signs of disreputable speculative inquiry, are clearly indicators of a type of anti-Black racism that has a long history in the United States. This is even apparent in criticisms of Trump and others on the right, for example, in Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead’s (2019) extended challenge to Donald Trump, *A Lot of People are Saying*. They argue that the type of conspiracy theories found among the modern GOP in the United States produce “a schism over what it means to know something” (105) by the “intransigent denial of simple facts” (106). Birtherism is, in their words, “a prime example of rejection of simple, verifiable facts” (104-5). Their focus on the epistemic merits of birtherism,

however, occludes recognition of another powerful force in operation here: racism. In fact, they never invoke the term “racism” at all; and “racist” (75) is used only once in order to describe Donald Trump’s conspiracy theories in a separate discussion of birtherism. For them, the real threat in the Republican party’s birtherism is its refusal of epistemically legitimate forms of political conduct, not in its racism. Here, anti-Black racism is erased, contributing unwittingly to a legacy of structural oppression. “Facts” are a panacea to Rosenblum and Muirhead; it is as though they believe that, with enough truth and facts, histories of racial discrimination can be resolved. They do not see that what can count as a fact, or as evidence, is subject to many social factors. Kelly Oliver’s approach to witnessing furnishes the possibility to acknowledge the weight of historical oppression by moving beyond facts as a metric of legitimacy toward that which is “beyond recognition in history” (11).

To challenge oppression, witnessing must be conducted on two fronts: by those against whom discrimination is directed and by those complicit in discrimination. In the case of the former, the capacity to witness, to experience the world without the fear of having those experiences disqualified, is a necessary component of subjectivity. As for the latter, witnessing is the recognition of others in terms of their specific subject positions, positions that can delimit their phenomenological experience in the world and society.²⁶ However, there is a distance between these two positions that can never be completely bridged; there will always be knowledge and experience that is foreclosed to some because of their socio-historical location. Witnessing by privileged groups always involves the recognition that it is impossible to fully grasp what exists outside of their own phenomenological and affective relationship to the world and society. When conducted with care, witnessing becomes synonymous with vigilance, a “response to the demands of otherness” (212). What may previously have gone unseen may now unfold

²⁶ Oliver stresses that she does not want to re-capitulate the Hegelian framework of subjects/objects that Judith Butler employs. Rather, her goal is to recognize difference without submitting the ‘other’ to the status of object, or even to the status of ‘other’ for that matter. Her axiomatic position is that all people are first and foremost subjects with their own histories and locations, a point that is minimized when people are reduced to the politically and philosophically charged terms of ‘object,’ and ‘other.’

into the light of witnessing, where structural oppression can no longer hide in the shadow of privilege.

Witnessing may also work to acknowledge the ways that evidence is deployed and maintained according to certain oppressive normative beliefs. In such instances, witnessing acknowledges the ways that evidence can be used to delegitimize and to dehumanize. In the case of the birther conspiracy theory, Trump is acting as a “false witness” to Obama’s Black skin, claiming it as a sign of his foreignness. For Oliver, “false witnesses” can be identified by “critically examining and interpreting the social context within which [they] speak” (109). Trump’s conspiracy theory uses the logic of witnessing to propagate an oppressive status quo, one that ultimately dehumanizes the person it addresses—in this case, Barack Obama. To discern the difference between witnesses and false witnesses is to be attuned to the varying histories that inform subject positions, and the ways that some people’s propensity to witness is guided by a desire to maintain and intensify systems of oppression, whereas for others it is a way to call attention to and challenge such systems.

Witnessing is not only reserved for people outside of oppressive structures looking into those structures and the ways that they affect oppressed people. Witnessing is a practice of agency for those who are affected by oppression because one of oppression’s strategies is to “restrict or annihilate the possibility of subject positions and to undermine or destroy the structure of subjectivity” (87). To embrace one’s “inner witness” is to rejuvenate an assailed subjectivity, and to open the possibility for more equitable participation and communication between people and communities. For Oliver, the process cannot occur in isolation; rather, revitalizing one’s inner witness demands “dialogic interaction with other people” (87). When this criterion has been met, and there is an equitable exchange of testimonies between witnesses and someone’s inner witness, there is the possibility of breaking away from the confines of the “repetition of either history of trauma” (86). When dialogic interaction is permitted, the incessant repetition of historical trends is called into question, and different possibilities open up.

Some efforts to witness are delegitimized from the start. The Warao people's use of conspiracy theories to explain the cholera epidemic and concomitant government apathy was read as a sign of "their premodern status by showing that they cannot distinguish scientific and social spheres" (174). By contrast, Briggs and Briggs (2003) suggest that "these conspiracy theories seem to embody a premodern epistemology less than they confront social and material gatekeeping mechanisms that exclude their narrators from privileged domains of knowledge and communication" (174). With the act of witnessing, researchers may open the door for an engagement with the myriad factors that a conspiracy theory may be addressing beyond the veracity of the evidence used. The Venezuelan government and public health officials witnessing the Warao people's eating and living habits as a sign of premodern life confirm deeply entrenched beliefs regarding the indigenous people in Venezuela.

As Anthony Cooke (2011) identifies, in the common trend to characterize Black people's criticisms of white supremacy as simply rage, paranoia, or hatred,

Black articulations of institutionalized or overt racism [...] get reworked as pathologies of 'normal' Western discourses to reproduce 'illnesses' to be properly attended to by liberal-minded, sympathetic Whites. Black 'psychoses' cannot be viewed by Whites as legitimate knowledge systems functioning as healthy stages in formulating Black self-determinate epistemologies; to do so equates to White discourse suicide" (617).

An incapacity to witness the experiences and testimonies of Black Americans is interpreted as a sign of Black people's inability to adhere to the normative methods of testimony of the privileged, while any and all elements of Black culture that can confirm widely established racist beliefs about Black people circulate freely.

When Patricia Turner, for example, points to the historical events that explain Black people's use of conspiracy theories, she reduces them to their truth index, as symptoms that cannot be readily offered as explanations for Black people's experience. But, as we have seen from Paul Gilroy, historical violence against Black people is likely not to be found in legitimate sources but in "sources that are both more imaginative and more ephemeral" (1993: 19). Against Turner's emphasis on empirical validity then, witnessing can be a way to read testimonies as truths that exist outside of the domain of

intelligibility. To witness is to acknowledge the capacity for Anzaldúa's *La Facultad*, a tactic used to both recognize the historical factors that set the stage for oppression and the ways that oppression tacitly asserts itself. *La Facultad* not only points to those historical instances that crystallize oppressive institutions but also acknowledges the continued oppression of some people over others. Intimations of the future can shape the present as much as the past does. When Black people in America describe a vast conspiracy orchestrated by the KKK to sterilize them, they are speaking to the truth of continued efforts to disenfranchise and marginalize them.

La Facultad cannot be adopted by well-intentioned witnesses to the oppressions of marginalized communities, however. Only those who share Anzaldúa's ancestral, cultural, and linguistic heritage are fully open to it. Its usage, therefore, is restricted. This is not to argue that it can or should be appropriated by those outside the borderlands, rather simply to say that its existence makes clear the possibility of seeing beyond that which is rendered see-able by the arbiters of 'proper' speculative inquiry. And, while it is impossible to fully understand the testimony of another, the project of witnessing also suggests a degree of humility about the limits of any given subject's understanding. With an ear trained toward the possible, the witness may be presented with small moments of esoteric knowledge that trouble what they know about the plight of others and their own place within the socio-cultural framework.

In her consideration of embodiment, Sara Ahmed (2004) distinguishes the experiences of those whose embodied responses to threats tacitly maintain a hegemonic order from those whose embodied fears are a tactic of survival against disenfranchisement. She writes that:

fear is an embodied experience; it creates the very effect of the surfaces of bodies. But an obvious question remains: Which bodies fear which bodies? Of course, we could argue that all bodies fear, although they may fear different things in different ways. But I want to suggest that fear is felt differently by different bodies, in the sense that there is a relationship to space and mobility at stake in the differential organisation of fear itself (68)

Ahmed's emphasis on embodiment and affect accentuates the differences between those whose narratives maintain their privileged position and those whose narratives call

attention to their ongoing struggles. Like Hayles' critique of Foucault presented in the last chapter, Ahmed highlights variations among people's embodied experience of fear.

Although fear is the common denominator here, and is a common denominator within many conspiracy theories, the ways that fear is directed against certain bodies and not others reveal the hidden machinations of a hegemonic apparatus that constructs some people as frightening and others as fearful. Fear is central to the way any given society maintains itself. For Ahmed, fear "re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface" (63). The consequences of fear manifest themselves differently depending on who is experiencing the fear and why. Reflecting on a passage from Franz Fanon, Ahmed notes the differences between a white child expressing fear of Fanon, a Black adult, and Fanon's fear of the white child. The fear between them is mutual; the child fears Fanon's Black body and Fanon fears what the young child's fear will mean for him. But the child's fear comes with the promise of safety whereas Fanon's fear comes with no such guarantee. To be a racial minority means that fear will not necessarily be recognized or remedied by dominant institutions and figures. The child's fear and Fanon's fear function differently within a racist colonial setting. To witness, then, means granting someone's pain the "status of an event, a happening in the world, rather than just the 'something' she felt, the 'something' that would come and go with her coming and going" (29-30).

The practice of witnessing is further illustrated in the recent work of Nicole Charles (2018; 2022), summarized in Chapter 1, who studies human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine hesitancy and "suspicion" (46) in Barbados. Charles identifies the problems that can come from applying a Westernized understanding to vaccine hesitancy in this context. She argues that, against the backdrop of a fading imperial power and the shadow of a bio-medical apparatus of care, Barbadian women's concern about the vaccine should be read as an embodied refusal to capitulate to Western logics of health and caregiving. Charles (2022) does not approach suspicion as a barrier to cultivating a healthy public, but rather sees it as "welcomingly fraught departure point from which we might begin to reorient our understandings of postcolonial biopolitics" (47). While the term "suspicion" is often used to describe embodied feelings of unease with vaccination,

it actually works to conceal histories of racial oppression perpetuated by the same bio-medical apparatuses intent on healing an underprivileged population. The vaccine stands in for more than public health. It marks an entry point into an ostensibly humanitarian, objective, and advanced organization of medical care controlled by the West. For the Western bio-medical experts, and the ideological interests they embody, suspicion and disease are treated as targets of derision—signs of pre-modern life in need of a cure. Like the treatment of the Warao people in Venezuela, resistance to dominant approaches to health care are taken as evidence of “physically and morally threatening Black colonial subjects” (Charles 2022, 59) in Barbados. While there are affinities between the Warao people and Barbadian women’s experiences of oppressive bio-medical exertions of force, their discursive similarities end when considering the embodied responses exhibited by these different groups.

Charles locates the rhetoric of care along a trajectory of racist and sexist Westernized healthcare: “As suspicion attaches both to the capitalist interests behind the pharmaceutical promotion of the vaccine and to tropes of hypersexuality and erotic subjugation under slavery, the use of the term ‘vaccine hesitancy’ must be situated within longer histories of racialized science, dispossession, and exploitation that characterized the colonial period” (59). The HPV vaccine does more than impose a Western model of healthcare on these populations; it makes “adolescent sexuality hypervisible, resuscitating lingering colonial discourses around threatening Black female sexuality in the Caribbean” (57). Black women and girls, then, experience this discrimination differently than white and Black men and white women in this context, which aligns with the trajectory of sexism and racism there.

Through her own practice of witnessing, Charles embraces a status of epistemic humility and acknowledges the histories of oppression that contribute to feelings of fear and also pathologize such fear. In her words, “suspicion embodies a radical potential to teach of a care rooted in deep witnessing and reflection as a precursor to prescription, mediation, and medical innovations” (101). Witnessing is not content with a one-size-fits-all model of engagement with marginalized populations; it militates against a homogenous understanding of oppression. So even suspicion, a common sensibility

shared by some marginalized groups, should not erase the differences between these groups.

To be sure, the experience of oppression may be difficult to describe in a simple way that can be made intelligible to witnesses and even to the victims themselves. One way it might be articulated is through embodied struggles of resistance that do not readily adhere to epistemically reputable strategies of survival, like *La Facultad* described by Anzaldúa, or the suspicion of Barbadian women, as described by Charles. These survival tactics may evade dominant ways of assessing the effects of oppression, and instead, they demand acknowledgement of the role of the unintelligible and the unknown.

Informed by these interventions, evaluating conspiracy theories, then, should not involve assessing them in terms of their truth index or their empirically verifiable claims. Rather, they should be assessed for the ways they identify the forces of oppression experienced only by the person or group articulating them. The task is not to speculate about all the unspoken motivations behind the conspiracy theory; it is, instead, to reconcile histories of oppression with the conspiracy theories being espoused, and then to enact social, political, and cultural change in the service of ending those oppressions, or, at the very least, fostering a safe space for people to convey their experiences of systemic oppression.

3.3 Conclusion

The next chapter will apply this method of witnessing conspiracy theories to examples drawn from hip hop music. It will discuss the ways some rap artists make use of conspiracy theories, and the ways hip hop has been targeted for failing to adhere to reputable methods of knowledge acquisition and dissemination. As a narrative and musical style that has been historically policed, condemned, and challenged, hip hop resides at the nexus of a number of competing historical factors and forces. Like the privileged vantage point afforded to the person in the borderlands, some rap music illuminates structures that generally go unseen by people and institutions aligned with the dominant socio-political framework in the United States.

4 Conspiracy Theories and Hip-Hop

“You can't tell me life was meant to be like this
A black man in a world dominated by whiteness
Ever since the declaration of independence
We've been easily brainwashed by just one sentence
It goes: all men are created equal
That's why corrupt governments kill innocent people”

(“Conspiracy” Gang Starr, 1992)

Rap music is a form of “rhymed story-telling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically-based music” that captures and conveys the sounds and experiences of urban life (Rose 1994, 2). Rap, along with breakdancing, scratching (turntabling) and graffiti, comprise the constellation of hip hop culture. Emerging in post-industrial America in the 1970's, hip hop soon became a mainstay of African American, Afro-Caribbean, Latinx, and Indigenous expression (Rose, 1994; Mays, 2018). Rap's history and style is inextricably linked to cities, specifically the race and class-based struggles faced by marginalized communities there. For nearly five decades, rap music has presented an opportunity for minority urban populations to articulate the “social partitioning of race and the diverse experiences of being young and Black or Latino in North America” (Forman 2002, 3).

This chapter examines the use of conspiracy theories in rap music. Drawing from the feminist and critical race theories outlined in the previous chapter, it argues that the use of conspiracy theories in rap reveals much about the forces of discrimination that permeate the daily lives of minority populations in the United States and in the Global South. Following the work of Kelly Oliver, I position myself as a “witness” to this music and describe the ways these artists draw upon the rhetorical substance and style of conspiracy theories to articulate their lived experiences of oppression and discrimination, making the often abstract qualities of systemic oppression tangible. My goal is not to justify or validate the conspiracy theories with factual accounts that prove their veracity. Instead, I highlight conspiracy theories that describe events and phenomena that cannot necessarily be verified with “legitimate” forms of historical analysis. This is not to

dismiss the importance of empirical verification; it is important to excavate historical injustices to justify and quantify reparations to atone for the violence of the past. However, in this context, I situate myself as a witness to rap as a culturally charged musical style, contending that the truth of the conspiracy theories expressed in it may not ultimately be verifiable, but may nevertheless be understood as descriptors of ongoing injustices that should be challenged.

As music philosopher Leonid Perlovsky (2015) argues, music has a unique capacity to convey and elicit embodied experiences and feelings: “musical emotions embody abstract knowledge and unify our mental life, language and body. [...] Music connects thinking and intuition to the world” (3). Music has the unique potential to bridge abstract thought with real-life experience, thereby facilitating both learning and “understanding of highly complicated systems, structures and issues” (Hess 2018, 58). Coupling conspiracy theories with music, then, intensifies the conspiracy theory’s capacity to reveal otherwise abstract and embodied experiences of oppression.

The chapter is broken into two sections. The first surveys the genealogical work of Tricia Rose (1994), Cheryl L. Keyes (2004), and S. Craig Watkins (2005) to trace rap’s trajectory in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century urban America. It then reviews Murray Forman’s (2002) consideration of the roles of space and place in positioning rap as a primarily Black and Latino urban musical genre. The second section begins by re-introducing Oliver’s notion of “witnessing” and mapping its resonance with musical expression before looking at some specific examples of rap and analyzing what conspiracy theories are used, and what oppressive systems they call attention to. Given the huge amount of rap music to choose from, to narrow the scope here, I focus on “street consciousness” rap (Keyes 2004, 158), a subgenre that explicitly contains political messaging and social critique. I pay specific attention to three artists who belong to that subgenre and who make use of conspiracy theories: Immortal Technique, KRS-One, and Lauryn Hill. Each of these artists make some use of conspiracy theories to describe the impact of systemic oppression on racialized people, gender minorities, and poor people. This group of artists comprise an eclectic set of concerns that they convey through their music and conspiracy theories. Immortal Technique uses his platform to call attention to

American imperialism, with specific focus on the harms inflicted on the Middle East and the Global south by the American military and medical institutions. KRS-ONE uses his music to elevate Black youth's knowledge of Black history across the globe while calling attention to the forces that deliberately obfuscate and erase Black history in favor of white-European history. Lauryn Hill's music focuses on Black women's experiences in the music industry and the powerful figures that keep the masses brainwashed in their economic subordination. Each of these artists have been subject to much criticism for their use of conspiracy theories and have therefore been the subject of the conspiracy panics that Bratich describes. These rap artists are not the only ones to draw upon conspiracy theories to call attention to oppression, and I have selected them as a sample of some of the most widely known conspiracy theories including anti-vaccine and 9/11 conspiracy theories described by Immortal Technique, knowledge suppression and Black oppression described by KRS-ONE, and mass brainwashing and corporate exploitation described by Lauryn Hill. Other artists take up these themes, and I hope that others will amplify those voices and perspectives with an intersectional approach to conspiracy theory research.

This chapter is not intended to contribute to hip hop studies, a now well-developed field of popular music studies. Rather, it is as a conduit to further conspiracy theory research. Rose (1994), Keyes (2004), Watkins (2005), and Forman (2002) focus on the socio-historical events that accompanied rap's emergence and highlight rap's intimate connection to its geographical and cultural contexts, examining how it reflects and responds to cultural changes. This dissertation makes the same claims about conspiracy theories; they are modes of expression that reflect the places and lived experiences of the people espousing them. Of course, I do not suggest that all conspiracy theories that emanate from historically oppressed communities are automatically anti-oppressive. Many contribute to legacies of oppression, like those that target Jewish people for example. The point here is simply to engage conspiracy theories with an intersectional lens in order to identify their points of contact with—and departure from—hegemonic power structures.

4.1 A Brief History of Rap

There are myriad players, influences, and places that have contributed to rap's emergence; its history is not straightforward. Indeed, even definitions of rap are contested. Rap has never been an easily identifiable and static genre, and since its absorption by the big record labels in the 1990s, it has undergone several expansions and mutations (Watkins 2005, 114). Rap has always been a disputed genre, by both rap artists and critics. Tricia Rose's (1994) *Black Noise* recounts rap's history while also acknowledging the complexities of these interminable conflicts and contestations; she emphasizes that rap and its history are always being negotiated.²⁷

Rapping is only one element of hip hop culture; breakdancing, graffiti, and scratching are three other modes of hip hop cultural expression. Hip hop culture emerged in the Bronx in the 1970s and was inspired by African American and Afro-Caribbean youth culture. At the time, economic inequality greatly affected Black and Hispanic people in cities, and so hip hop is closely associated with these communities as a mode of artistic expression. Consequently, hip hop culture has often been violently policed for its capacity to "mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion" (Rose 1994, 99). Hip hop uses "cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes" to conduct "symbolic and ideological warfare" (100). It engages in "discursive 'wars of position' within and against dominant discourse" (102).

Despite the heavy emphasis on the ways rap and rap artists have been surveilled and policed, rap has also been a lucrative business for many Black artists. Following Sugar Hill Gang's release of "Rapper's Delight," big record companies came to see the potential of rap music to generate massive profits by marketing it to white youth,²⁸ and so

²⁷ Perhaps the largest war waged over rap's identity was fought between East and West coast artists. With the East coast embodied in Notorious B.I.G. and the West coast in Tupac Shakur, numerous rivalries and affiliations emerged to lay claim to the realest brand of rap music (Muwakkil 2003).

²⁸ In an effort to explain why white youth comprise a significant proportion of rap's listeners, Quinn (1996) argues that white youth "turn to rap to relocate themselves in relationship to the center, to marginalize themselves" to "combat their otherwise normative position in society" (87). While Quinn's observation is perhaps too generous, his point illustrates the way that whiteness figures itself as the dominant race against which all other races are 'othered.'

began its entrance into the mainstream.²⁹ While rap's absorption into the musical mainstream did not necessarily suppress its political dimensions, it did lead to the heightened exploitation of Black artists and producers by established record labels (Rose 1994, 40). Despite this, Black artists managed to gain prominence and mainstream fame, garnering attention beyond the streets of the Bronx on the East coast or Compton on the West coast. Artists and groups like Eazy-E, Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., Public Enemy, and Wu-Tang Clan were some of the few to turn rap into a multi-million-dollar enterprise.

Rap's corporate successes led to the false division between "real" and "marketed" rap, the former concerned with capturing the sights and experiences of the streets and the latter concerned only with money and fame, thereby evacuating rap of its transgressive potential. Rose (1994) argues that such a distinction fails to account for the extent to which rap music has always been heavily dependent on self-commodification, money, power, and notoriety (44). Rappers have historically conspicuously consumed curated styles and made use of the most advanced technical equipment at their disposal. Self-expression through consumption extends beyond rappers to the three other primary components of hip hop as well. For instance, Rose notes that female graffiti artists had to sport specific brands and styles of clothing to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of their male counterparts (44). Similarly, women breakdancers could not present themselves as too masculine (49).

Many Black artists who entered the mainstream by signing with large record companies retained their musical style and continued to be policed by (mostly) white academics, parents, schoolteachers, critics, police officers, and government officials. Earning more money did not protect these artists from white supremacy and so the politically transgressive essence of their music remains.

In *Hip Hop Matters* (2005), S. Craig Watkins argues that hip hop is a way Black and Latinx youth may "articulate a vision of their world that is insightful, optimistic, and

²⁹ Drawing from Matthew Oware (2013), I use the term, "mainstream" to describe "artists signed with large (or 'major') record companies" (61).

tenaciously critical of the institutions and circumstances that restrict their ability to impact the world around them” (181). As early as the first rap recordings and music videos, rap has served as a medium to call attention to the plight of marginalized youth in North America’s urban settings. The oppressive power of white supremacy takes center stage in the lyrical compositions of artists and groups like Grandmaster Flash, KRS-One (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone), Immortal Technique, N.W.A., and Public Enemy. Addressing topics like the impacts of police violence, the disproportionate incarceration of Black people, the lack of government spending on Black communities, and predatory American foreign policy, these groups and artists articulate racism as a mainstay of American life.

Rap that attends to the issues of race, class, and gender falls under the moniker of knowledge rap.³⁰ Knowledge rap became prominent with the rise of Afrika Bambaata’s Zulu Nation (now Universal Zulu Nation), a hip hop awareness group which emphasizes “black nationalism and street consciousness” to “promote empowerment, awareness, and ethnic pride among black youths” (Cheryl L. Keyes 2004, 158). When Bambaata speaks of Black nationalism, he does not reserve it for Black people alone: “when we say black we mean all our Puerto Rican and Dominican brothers” (as cited in George 2004, 50). While the exclusion of “sisters” here is regrettable, the statement nevertheless illustrates hip hop’s focus on battling the oppressive and divisive structures that permeate marginalized people’s daily lives.

In the final twenty years of the last millennium, the United States’ incarceration increased seven-fold. About 60% of these newly incarcerated people were either Black or Hispanic even though they only made up approximately 25% of the population (Watkins 2005, 170). Many criminal justice reform advocates argue that “the increasing investment in incarceration and the decreasing investment in education created a situation in which youth in California and across America ““were being set up to be locked up”” (171-2). As lawyer Andrea L. Dennis (2020) points out, there is a

³⁰ Different artists have different names for this type of rap music. For example, Immortal Technique calls it reality rap, an effort to communicate everyday experiences of the artists (as cited in Shahid 2012).

particularly troubling aspect of the connection between hip hop and mass incarceration: a situation where rap music documenting mass incarceration moves to rap music facilitating mass incarceration. As far back as the early 1990s, police and prosecutors nationwide have been using rap lyrics as criminal evidence to investigate, convict, and sentence young Black and Latino men.

In the same piece, however, Dennis (2020) also champions rap music for being “a potent means to spread the stories of those who live today in marginalized, under-resourced, over-policed communities and educate listeners about mass incarceration.”

Michelle Alexander (2010) puts the phenomenon of racialized mass incarceration succinctly when she writes that,

The racially segregated, poverty-stricken ghettos that exist in inner-city communities across America would not exist today but for racially biased government policies for which there has never been meaningful redress. Yet every year, hundreds of thousands of poor people of color who have been targeted by the War on Drugs are forced to return to these racially segregated communities—neighborhoods still crippled by the legacy of an earlier system of control. As a practical matter, they have no other choice. In this way, mass incarceration, like its predecessor Jim Crow, creates and maintains racial segregation (244).

Rap’s politically charged lyrics often directly address the complexities of being Black and Latinx in (North) America while navigating institutional structures intent on policing them.

Alexander (2010) goes on to argue that “even if the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration were completely overcome, we would remain a nation of immigrants (and Indigenous people) in a larger world divided by race and ethnicity” (303). This is the basis for a new racial class system that is “largely invisible” (3). As argued earlier in the dissertation, any dynamic that at all resembles conspiratorial behavior may be seen as conspiratorial. It would not be outlandish to suggest, then, that the behaviour of legislators and policy makers who routinely reinforce white supremacy could easily be seen as conspiratorial and encourage forms of “anti-conspiratorial” thinking among those oppressed by it. Mobilizing the rhetoric of the conspiracy theory, Afrika Bambaataa states that “Yes, Brothers and Sisters, there is a plot to destroy the Hip-Hop culture...The news media and radio on some parts helped to destroy it [by] not writing on any positive things like how many of the rap groups did benefits for anti-crack

and drugs, and homeless people” (as cited in Keyes 2004, 159). While there may not be a coordinated effort to conduct a conspiracy, Bambaata’s words call attention to the large scale opposition to hip hop culture rooted in systemic racism.

In response to the cultural assault against Black and Latinx people and rap music, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights worked overtly to tap into hip-hop’s popularity to communicate the realities of these oppressive mechanisms (Watkins 2005, 180). In the year 2000, it organized a political rally titled Third Eye Movement to challenge California’s Proposition 21, which sought to expand the list of criminal activities that would classify juvenile defendants as adults. As Davey D (2000) of the independent *Hip-Hop News* put it:

They had made a mark for themselves by using Hip Hop as a tool to help bring about social change. Over the past couple of years, it has not been unusual to see these cats show with as many as 500 people and shut down a business or spark up a rally. People are still talking how earlier this year, the group came through with close to 300 people and surrounded the Hilton Hotel in downtown San Francisco and shut it down. The owner of the Hotel chain had apparently contributed a bunch of money in support of Prop 21.

Recounting these efforts, the Ella Baker Center’s (2021) website comments that the “combined efforts of Third Eye and a larger student youth movement make the five Bay Area counties the only counties in California to reject Proposition 21, though it is ultimately passed by the state.” Despite the inability to stop the Proposition, this example demonstrates hip-hop’s potential to challenge racist structures and motivate political consciousness in its listeners. Rap, then, can be seen as an alternative approach to education, wresting pedagogy from the confines of schools and bringing it into the streets, a point I will return to in my discussion of KRS-One’s music. Rap is a relevant and concrete response to the structural operations of racism that permeate the daily lives of Black and Latinx people.

4.2 Space, Place, Race

Rap music (and hip hop more broadly) is inextricably bound to urban spaces although it has escaped the city’s borders to be enjoyed by affluent suburban, and often white, youth. Rap transports suburban youth to another space—a loud, urban one whose

rhythms mirror rap's base-heavy sonic waves. Murray Forman (2002) contrasts rap's space-ness with the spaceless-ness of other music genres like Rock or Country. Listening to his radio during long drives across the United States, Forman found Rock and Country music everywhere, while Rap (and Funk, and Jazz—two other demonstrably Black musical genres) only became accessible when he approached a city (xvi), underscoring rap's "civic locality" (xvii).³¹

In *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (2002), Forman evaluates the discursive conditions that produce and condition spatial categories like "race, nation, and the 'hood" (xxiii). These discourses are deeply tied to the lived reality of a specific space and go on to shape those existing within its boundaries. Both subjects and spaces are mutually conditioned and conditioning, and no space is neutral. Spaces are also conditioned by economic, political and cultural interests that extend beyond the community, and by those who wield the most power within that community. To illustrate this, Forman uses an anecdote about famed cultural critic Cornel West who was unable to get a cab in uptown Manhattan, even while wearing a suit and tie. Forman argues that, in that space, West's Black skin eclipsed his otherwise upper-class style, rendering him an outsider. In his words, "race is spatialized and space is racialized (10). West's Black skin renders him an outsider in a predominantly white space, whereas in another space like Harlem, he is far less likely to face the same discrimination on the basis of his skin colour. Forman stresses that no space is completely racialized, nor is any race completely spatialized; these spatial conditions and associations are repeatedly being negotiated.

Space's ambiguity, in conjunction with rap's unambiguous association with specific spaces, presents a paradox. On the one hand, space is always being negotiated, and on the other, rap, for Forman, is inextricably bound to some spaces as opposed to others. To circumvent this, Forman imbues rap with the same ambiguity he ascribes to

³¹ Emphasizing radio music dates these ideas given that the firm connection between music and place have transformed with the introduction of smartphones and streaming services. However, the perception that rap directly influences Black urban youth is still prominent among commentators (Carson 2022)

space: rap “thwart[s] absolute coherence and closure, instead remaining highly ambiguous” (11). Rap’s undecidability mirrors space’s undecidability, eluding any firm definition in either its form or content. Rap, then, will be taken up differently by differently situated people in terms of their race, cultural background, socio-economic status, and so on. Much like space, rap can be experienced by anyone, but its meaning will fluctuate depending on many other factors.

Space is often treated as neutral, seen as just being *there* and readily accessible to anyone. But when considering space’s discursive construction as a site of meaning, Forman proposes that it transforms from space to place, which “involves the investment of subjective value and the attribution of meanings to components of the socially constructed environments” (28). Once constructed as a “place,” a space is not necessarily accessible by anyone, only by those who “fit” within the discursive frames of that place. Cornel West, an Ivy League professor, and public intellectual, was present and visible in a space, but he was invisible in a place. He was obviously seen by cab drivers, but not recognized; his invisibility within that space situated him within the domain of place(less)ness.

To engage the delicate distinction between space and place, and the ways that each constitute and frame the people within them, demands a “process of translating micro-worlds of experience into language and making this experience meaningful in social terms” (59). “It is important,” Forman continues, “to question the themes being communicated and to imagine how they might provide a foundation for grounded and informed dialogue among constituents of various dispersed localities” (67). The question of grounding is important, because otherwise the “micro-worlds of experience” (59) cannot cohere into an intelligible domain of interpretation. If everything in a place is completely fragmented, where each person occupies their own world, then no community and no common discourse can emerge at all.

The urban places central to hip hop contain a particularly fruitful supply of micro-worlds, making interpretation difficult but not impossible. Forman changes his gaze from the macro-world of the city to the micro-configurations that exist within it. Specifically,

he attends to the 'hood that "situates hip-hop identified youth within an enunciative space [...] that is often summarized 'in opposition to foreign' things but not necessarily in a negative or defensive configuration" (67). The dialectical interplay between insider/outsider—while not necessarily a negative description—demarcates the borders of the contested 'hood, providing something of a holographic veneer to stand in for an immutable presence. Of course, even this veneer is open to contestation and will undoubtedly undergo various mutations. But what remains consistent in this case is the 'hood's situatedness in relation to a dominant order that repeatedly polices and condemns it. The "scope and intensity of economic duress and systemic racism [...] continue to set minority youth apart from their white counterparts" (48-9), thereby galvanizing many micro-worlds that, when taken together, crystallize into a collective opposition to the hegemonic order,³² opening up a dynamic of interminable antagonisms vying for recognition in this discursive field. As Homi Bhabha (1994) writes in his argument in favour of the enunciative over the epistemological, "if the epistemological tends towards a reflection of its empirical referent or object, the enunciative attempts repeatedly to reinscribe and relocate the political claim to cultural priority and hierarchy (high/low, ours/theirs) in the social institution of the signifying activity" (254-5). Against the overwhelming force of America's political, educational, disciplinary, military, and medical institutions, the 'hood is a bastion for those repeatedly disenfranchised by discriminatory institutions. In their efforts to maintain a racist status quo, normative institutions coalesce—and perhaps even conspire—to synergistically intensify their power. Black Americans in late 20th century America had to navigate a criminal justice system that disproportionately incarcerated them, medical institutions that prioritized their white counterparts, and a decelerating domestic industrial sector that left many without work. In the face of these unjust institutional norms, the 'hood is an enunciative space that gives voice to some of these experiences.

³² I do not wish to infer that there are no conflicts within this place. Like any place, it contains micro-places that open up conflicts and antagonisms within it.

Hip-hop, and rap more specifically, supply “the coordinates for charting issues and practices within the broad terrains of popular culture” (Forman 2002, 15-6). Rap performs these operations both directly and indirectly. Insofar as rap often captures the sights of sounds of Black and Latinx urban environments, it is always in the process of mapping those environments. Similarly, when Gang Starr raps the words used in this chapter’s epitaph—“You can’t tell me life was meant to be like this/A black man in a world dominated by whiteness/Ever since the Declaration of Independence/We’ve been easily brainwashed by just one sentence/It goes: all men are created equal/That’s why corrupt governments kill innocent people”—they directly position themselves in opposition to the dominant order, framing a site from which to contest that order.

Rap is one mode of musical expression “in a lengthy tradition of Black musical expressiveness that transmits the psychic materials upon which people of a shared but dispersed culture can draw as a sustaining force in their lives” (Forman 2002, 159). This sustaining force does not assume a single identity, but rather operates more as a web, binding disparate people with a common position in the racialized hierarchy of (North) American culture. Rap allows people to construct a “relatively coherent identity out of the urban debris” (198), and the anger that it sometimes conveys concretizes a tentative identity in contrast to the structures of power that perpetuate oppression. Rappers have taken it upon themselves to call attention to the forces that target Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people. As Forman writes, “hardcore rappers conceive of themselves as legitimate street reporters for disenfranchised blacks and Latinos who actively sustain the community infrastructures through which they articulate but whose access to public means of communication is denied” (250). As I will show in *Immortal Technique*, *KRS-One*, and Lauryn Hill’s music, rap can be used to call attention to these structural inequalities, and to give them a face—to make abstract structural oppression tangible.

4.3 Conspiracy Theories and Rap

Noted Africana Studies scholar, Travis L. Gosa (2011), also uses intersectional feminism and critical race theories to examine the circulation of conspiracy theories within the Black community, but argues that they re-inscribe, rather than challenge, legacies of systemic oppression. While Gosa acknowledges that hip hop “conspiracy

theorists attempt to give voice to racial inequality,” he worries that they point listeners “away from the structural sources of oppression by focusing on fanciful explanations. The misdirection of conspiracy theory may hinder hip hop’s ability to be a cultural force for racial justice” (188). Instead of fanciful explanations for the state of things, Gosa believes Black people should seek “systemic solutions to societal problems” (201). But what exactly are “systemic solutions” when the system is geared to repeatedly disenfranchise Black people? Following Angela Davis and her proclamation that “Freedom is a Constant Struggle,” how does the emphasis on the possibility of “solutions” mischaracterize the necessarily interminable anti-oppressive political project? And how much of Gosa’s idealist political solutions depend upon the work of the oppressed, absolving the powerful of responsibility in the anti-oppressive project?

No doubt a systemic approach, even one in serious need of qualification, would aid in challenging oppressive structures and institutions. However, a systemic approach is not the only solution or form of resistance to the issue of systemic racism. To say otherwise is to narrow the possibility of resistance to those in comfortable alignment with traditional forms of higher education, foreclosing those without financial means from taking part in meaningful resistance. There is no guarantee that access to such methods of “proper” systemic critique will guarantee their adoption anyway. In a New York Time/WCBS-TV News Poll, Anita Waters (1992) concludes that “rather than promoting social withdrawal and political quiescence, conspiracy theories may at times foster political mobilization” among African Americans (123). The poll also found that Black conspiracy theorists “are better educated and informed than are their skeptical counterparts” (117). Just as with educated white people, educated Black people are not automatically immune to conspiracy theories. One could even argue that with more education comes more knowledge about the repeated historical violence committed against oneself. While none of these studies definitively establish the determining factors for the propensity to believe conspiracy theories, it wouldn’t be outlandish to suggest that

continued racial violence and deceit fosters social wariness, continually reminding those it disenfranchises that the system functions to maintain their subordination en masse.³³

For Gosa, conspiracy theories in hip hop distract from proper challenges to systemic injustice. They trick Black people into believing that their hardships are the consequence of a few conspiring global elite. Gosa admonishes hip hop conspiracy theorists so intently that he equates them to “birther” conspiracy theorists—people who argue Barack Obama was not born in the United States: “Similar to hip hop conspiracy theory,” he continues, “the embrace of Obama conspiracy theory obscures the structural sources of discontent” (201). Gosa positions all conspiracy theories as simply opposing proper forms of inquiry, i.e., those methods of speculative inquiry that adopt proper academic or political vernacular and therefore proceed to criticize the system from within that system. Consequently, he ignores the specificities of different conspiracy theories, foreclosing an engagement with the distinctive ways that they reflect and speak to ongoing historical injustice.

Against Gosa’s claim that “Birther” conspiracy theories and hip hop conspiracy theories are analogous, I argue that conspiracy theory researchers must acknowledge their varying histories and contexts. When white Americans propagate the birther conspiracy theory, they are comfortably aligned with America’s racist history; when Black Americans use conspiracy theories in hip hop music, they are speaking from a place often policed by America’s discriminatory institutions. Surely this distinction between those conspiracy theories motivated to maintain systemic oppression and those intent on calling attention to it must matter.

³³ Gosa does not discuss Waters’ findings, choosing instead to bemoan “non-academic” book publications: “With the accessibility of independent presses and print-on-demand Internet websites (i.e., LuLu), this alternative hip hop literature is often sold on the street. The themes of these books are much different than what is typically found in hip hop books published by Oxford or Duke University Press” (199). Characterizing these reputable publishing houses, he cites the work of Murray Forman (2002) and Mark Anthony Neal (2004), two hip hop experts whose expertise and complicated prose make their work virtually inaccessible to anyone without prior knowledge of the myriad cultural and social theorists their work draws from. However, even if someone had access to that esoteric pool of knowledge, there is no guarantee they would agree with the interpretations of these scholars. Turner points out that it was Black university students who conveyed to her the many Black rumours and conspiracy theories that spurred her genealogical excavation of those narratives (Turner 1993, xiii).

Kelly Oliver's approach to "witnessing" allows me to listen to conspiracy theories differently; engaging with someone else's narrative—someone else's truth—involves acknowledging that that narrative may contain a truth unknown to me. The task of the witness, for Oliver, is not to excavate someone's testimony for the kernel of empirical truth that either affirms or undermines that narrative. Instead, it involves being present as an ally to the narrator. As Ewa Ziarek (2011) points out, Oliver puts forward "a new theory of relational subjectivity that is articulated from the point of view of those who have been marginalized and proposes a dialogic, non-appropriative structure of intersubjective relations" (29-30). "Witnessing" is the act of being-with the testimony of that place, even if its truth is not fully comprehended by the listener. This contrasts with the figure of the false witness, someone who "attempt[s] to close off response from others, otherness, or difference" (19). In doing so, the false witness "[assimilates] the past and present in order to deny the present effects of our racist past and render race irrelevant to the present." Even if active and present racism were to suddenly end, the effects of past violence would still be felt and need to be addressed.

As Kelly Oliver argues, witnessing relies upon a dialogic encounter among subjects to foster a site of discourse that challenges hegemonic efforts to stifle the creation of alternative subject positions and subjectivities. It might seem, then, that mediated and mass distributed music does not permit such an encounter because it is a one-way form of communication. However, in *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (2004), Oliver notes that hip hop, among other policed media, "may offer the support necessary for revolt that sustains and restores agency. Resistance itself is a form of sublimation that returns a sense of agency to othered subjects" (151). Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's (2002) characterization of music as containing and fostering singularities, Oliver contends that music exists at the intersection of the singular and the social. It "is fluid and operates in an open system of exchange that makes possible belonging to the social as singular" (173). Oliver deliberately uses the term, "singularity," to distinguish what she describes from "individuality." As she writes, "singularity connotes eccentricity, oddness, and strangeness along with uniqueness, whereas individuality is defined as indivisible, inseparable, self-same, and self-identical" (174). "This is why," she continues, "we keep speaking, singing, dancing, painting. This is why we keep trying to express ourselves, our

singularity, using the only means available, the world of meaning into which we are born” (174). So even if music is transmitted unidirectionally, it houses the potential to build community and oppose oppressive forces intent on limiting people’s capacities for self-expression and subjectivity.

In their cross-cultural and cross-historical examination of music as a universal communicative media, Ian Cross and Ghofur Woodruff (2009) make the important case that,

In the context of collective musical behaviours, processes of entertainment are likely to endow the communal activity with a powerful sense of joint and co-ordinated action, allowing the emergence of a sense that aims are shared and enhancing the likelihood that participants will experience each other’s states and intentions as mutually manifest. Hence entrainment processes in music provide a potent means of promoting a sense of joint affiliation that helps maintain the collective integrity of a musical act even though music’s floating intentionality affords each participant the possibility of interpreting its significance quite differently. Music’s semantic indeterminacy [...], together with its affiliative powers [...], render it effective as a communicative medium that is optimised for the management of situations of social uncertainty (88-89).

Cross and Woodruff’s points resonate harmoniously with Oliver’s in that they both characterize music as promoting group cohesion (even when performed and transmitted) while also maintaining “the possibility of interpreting its significance quite differently.” Like Oliver, they want to resist any totalizing engagement with music, and also to acknowledge music’s propensity to elicit change and transformation among those listening to it. Insofar as music is always adapting, it intrinsically resists the oppressive forces that wish to exploit individuals and groups.

In what follows, I explore how Immortal Technique, KRS-One, and Lauryn Hill’s music and use of conspiracy theories participate in crafting oppositional communities and ideas that run counter to dominant corporate, patriarchal, and political American interests. Through the process of witnessing, I hear their conspiracy theories as a means to understand the latent and manifest structures of oppression that affect so many people in America and the Global South.

4.3.1 Immortal Technique and Imperialism

Felipe Andres Coronel, known as Immortal Technique, has spent his artistic career calling attention to the imperial injustices perpetuated by the United States and other global superpowers. Born in Peru, his family immigrated to the United States shortly before the Peruvian civil war, settling in Harlem in the early 1980s (O’Neill 2006). Growing up in Harlem at that time, he was soon immersed in the hip-hop scene, where he became a prominent battle MC in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³⁴ Immortal Technique refined his skills during a stint in prison following an altercation when he was a student at Pennsylvania State University (O’Neil 2006). Upon being paroled in 1999, he pursued more education at Baruch College in New York before focusing primarily on his musical aspirations. Immortal Technique capitalized on his MC skills to earn the funds necessary to produce his first album titled, *Revolutionary Vol. 1*, released one week after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Immortal Technique addresses his position as a Peruvian-American in a predominantly Black context of hip hop culture in his music, by highlighting the fact that he has a stronger affinity with Black people than with other Hispanic people. On the track, “The Getaway” (2005d) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2yeYgUohlY>) he raps that,

Yo, I hate my job, so I always look to a better day/
Far from New York City on a tropical getaway/
But not in Miami/ ‘Cause these white Cuban anti-Castro's can't stand me/
And that's the reason I'll never win a fixed up Latin Grammy/
After this racist Latinos'll goddamn me/
But my Black people love me/And when I go to South America, people be tryna hug me/
‘Cause I talk about reality that effects them/
And even though I blew up I could never neglect them/
What kind of a revolutionary action would that be?

With these lyrics, Immortal Technique confirms, in part, Forman’s (2002) insistence on the continual contestation of space, place, and race, and their relationship to hip hop culture.

³⁴ In an interview with Omar Shahid (2012), Immortal Technique listed a number of rappers as inspiration including, “KRS-One, Ice Cube, Chuck D, Kool G Rap, Big Daddy Kane, Slick Rick, Big Punisher, Lord Finesse, DITC.”

Immortal Technique is renowned for the speed of his delivery and his aggressive MCing, blending otherwise incompatible words and phrases together to convey a sense of urgency and to saturate his music with many political and revolutionary ideas (Anonymous 2008). Focusing on American foreign policy, systemic racism, and capitalist exploitation, Immortal Technique uses his music and following to raise awareness about the many issues that affect marginalized people all over the world. Having spent time in university studying political science, he is no stranger to the ways that systemic forces, both directly and indirectly, maintain the hegemonic status quo at the expense of economically vulnerable populations.

The album's musical composition features prominent rhythmic beats and patterns to communicate largely political messages and stories. Music and lyrics complement each other, building a sense of "flow," where the music's rhythmic patterns accentuate the lyrical patterns and delivery. The timing of the delivered verses adheres to a broader rhythmic structure, but certain points are accentuated to intensify the guiding rhythm and disrupt its form. On *Revolutionary Vol. 1*, Immortal Technique deploys a number of compositional tactics to punctuate his music and lend it a degree of urgency that mirrors the themes of oppression he addresses in his lyrics. The first track, "Creation and Destruction" (2005a) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3J6CtWyqfLM>) samples Al Green's blues-inspired cover of "The Letter." It is delivered over a two-chord arrangement, where two bars of A minor conclude with a shot to B major that is repeated for the duration of the track. Often, the beat on B marks a directional shift for the lyrics, propelling them in new directions, lending the track a storytelling quality. For example, the lyrics of the first eight bars over A minor run as follows:

Immortal Technique disintegrates mics when I spit/ I cause more casualties than
sunken slave ships/ Full to capacity, I bring tragedy to rap without my man
Khadafi/ The government took.³⁵

Then, the shot of B accompanies the first words of the next eight bars that continue with

³⁵ From this point onward, lyrics will be added in block-paragraph style when longer than a line to have them sit distinctively in the body of the text. Forward slashes mark changes in lines, and so they allow the reader to follow the rhythmic and rhyming schemes of the lyrics.

Nazi scientists from Germany/ To design nuclear rockets and ways of observin'
me/ 'Cause their pathetic attempts didn't work to murder me/ When this country
was conceived, these bastards never heard of me/ But now I hold the.

B major's place in the arrangement necessitates the lyrics' adaptation to the beat,
resulting in the syncopated or delayed delivery of words to match the B note.

Despite his knowledge and education, Immortal Technique does not shy away
from deploying conspiracy theories to bolster his political messages. In the second track
of *Revolutionary Vol 1.*, "Dominant Species," (2005b)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WjXj3juFyI>) he raps:

The government is psychotically racist and robotic/ The matrix of entrapment is
socio-economic/ Erotic conspiracy theory becomes reality/ Life is war, and every
day's a battle to me

Towing the line between theory and fact, Immortal Technique stresses the historical
legitimacy of his claims. In a *Guardian* interview with Omar Shahid (2012), where he is
asked whether a lot of his "music is about conspiracies," Immortal Technique responds
by saying that

I wouldn't call it conspiracy. I would suggest people research. For example when I
said Bin Laden was part of the CIA and people said 'that's not true'. There was a
poll in the US and it showed less than 15% knew Bin Laden was employed by
US. When people say it's a conspiracy I welcome the criticism, because the music
I make is backed by historical facts. I'm not afraid to be wrong or debate it. I
won't allow people to marginalise my music.

The interviewer's focus on the conspiracy theories in Immortal Technique's music might,
as per Jack Z. Bratich's (2008) observation, signal a "conspiracy panic," where the
concern is about a conspiracy theory as such, without regard for any evidence and
arguments that might obtain. However, the acts of bemoaning the conspiracy theory out
of hand and justifying its validity through evidence both ignore the ways that the
conspiracy theory functions to call attention to ongoing injustice.

Omar Shahid's question reflects a broader societal concern for 9/11 conspiracy
theories. In Immortal Technique's (2005) collaboration with DJ Green Lantern and Mos
Def on the track, "Bin Laden," (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Z8yUuAolVY>),

Mos Def starts by rapping that “Bin Laden didn’t blow up the projects,” which is then accompanied by DJ Green Lantern’s distant voice proclaiming that “Bush knocked down the towers.” This intro serves as the song’s chorus between Immortal Technique’s verses, and it establishes the scene for the song’s subject matter. By juxtaposing the act of destroying the “projects” with the destruction of the World Trade Center, Mos Def and DJ Green Lantern contextualize the 9/11 terrorist attacks in a setting where unhoused and/or precariously housed Black and Hispanic people experience injustice and death every day.

In “Bin Laden’s” verses, Immortal Technique raps about the strategies that the American government uses to perpetuate societal injustice, and to privilege rich Christians in America. His first verse begins by pointing the finger at the President as the primary conspiratorial figure behind this injustice:

I pledge no allegiance, [...] fuck the president's speeches/ I'm baptized by America and covered in leeches.

He calls our attention to many governmental strategies used to supervise the public and practice counterinsurgency:

Drownin' you in propaganda that they spit through the speakers/ And if you speak about the evil that the government does/ The Patriot Act'll track you to the type of your blood/ They try to frame you, and say you was tryna sell drugs/

Immortal Technique describes propaganda, government surveillance, and a rigged legal system to guarantee the continued privilege of rich “fake Christians” and “fake politicians.” He continues:

Look at they mansions, then look at the conditions you live in/ All they talk about is terrorism on television/ They tell you to listen, but they don't really tell you they mission/ They funded Al-Qaeda, and now they blame the Muslim religion/ Even though Bin Laden, was a CIA tactician/ They gave him billions of dollars, and they funded his purpose/ *Fahrenheit 9/11*, that's just scratchin' the surface

By attributing the overwhelming disparity between America’s rich minority and poor majority to a government conspiracy, he opens up the possibility of acknowledging these inequalities as the product of systemic decisions and policies beyond the reach of

ordinary people, and the fact that the rich maintain their wealth and privilege through opaque means. Immortal Technique states that the rich make deals with dictators and foment war, working to keep the poor majority poor to facilitate their exploitation. As he raps in the second verse,

And of course Saddam Hussein had chemical weapons/ We sold him that shit,
after Ronald / Reagan's election/ Mercenary contractors fightin' a new era/
Corporate military bankin' off the war on terror/ They controllin' the ghetto, with
the failed attack/ Tryna distract the fact that they engineerin' the crack

He identifies that the corporate military fights on two fronts: maintaining a lucrative war effort and policing Black people in impoverished communities. This claim is not at all outlandish given the growing militarization of domestic police forces in the United States (Anonymous 2018). It seems entirely obvious that victims of this domestic militarization might posit a conspiracy between a profit-driven military and the police.

Immortal Technique also claims that the purpose for heightened policing originates from the highest levels of government who are “engineerin’ the crack.” These lyrics are reminiscent of Furious’ (Lawrence Fishburne) iconic speech from *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton 1991) when he asks a group of inquisitive listeners, “Well how you think the crack rock gets into the country? We don’t own any planes. We don’t own no ships. We are not the people who are flying and floating that shit in here. [...] They want us to kill ourselves.” Of course, attributing the systemic oppression of Black people to conspirators is not new; it conveys the deeply rooted experience of injustice within the Black community - injustice rooted in slavery. Immortal Technique, Mos Def and DJ Green Lantern (2005) actively speak out against being construed or dismissed as conspiracy theorists:

Cuz innocent people get murdered in the struggle daily/ And poor people never
get shit and struggle daily/ This ain't no alien conspiracy theory, this shit is real/
Written on the dollar underneath the Masonic seal.

After Immortal Technique’s verses, the concluding chorus feels almost like a plea for the listener to re-assess any initial response they had to the song’s introduction by considering the weight given to the attacks on 9/11 in comparison with the relative silence about Black people living in economically disadvantaged communities. The track

is a call to action about racial injustice in the United States, not an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory meant to sell records.

Beyond injustice in the United States, Immortal Technique's music also focuses on American aggression in the Global South. As one anonymous (2008) biographer notes, Immortal Technique writes extensively about

what he had lived and seen in the struggle back at home in relation to his visits back to his native land. He came to embrace his African roots that stemmed from his grandfather and understood the nature of racism and ignorance in its role in Latino culture, separating oppressed peoples and keeping them divided.

In "Poverty of Philosophy" (2005c)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzWj9ZORv8E>) Immortal Technique delivers one of his sharpest challenges to American culture and foreign policy from *Revolutionary Vol. 1*:

You see, most of Latinos are here because of the great inflation/ That was caused by American companies in Latin America/ Aside from that, many are seeking a life away from the puppet/ Democracies that were funded by the United States/ Places like El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua/ Ecuador and Republica Dominicana/ And not just Spanish-speaking countries either/ But Haiti and Jamaica as well.

In this case, his claims can be easily verified. American corporations have consistently influenced American foreign policy to align with their appropriation of new markets for exploitation (Chomsky and Herman 2002, xli-xlii). Yet beyond the empirically verifiable element to Immortal Technique's lyrics lies the a conspiracy that cannot be readily verified: "many are seeking a life away from the puppet." People are united in their mutual suffering at the hands of conspiring foes. The conspiracy theory brings that mutual suffering to light and highlights the ongoing efforts by corporations to continue to exploit the Global South. Without overt proof of a concerted effort to organize a conspiracy, Immortal Technique acknowledges the deleterious effects of efforts to disenfranchise entire populations for the benefit of a few foreign stakeholders.

To witness Immortal Technique's lyrics does not involve disavowing the conspiracy theories he articulates outright, but rather identifying how they point to the

experience of real exploitation. Of course, empirical verification is necessary to hold people legally or politically accountable, but accountability does not necessarily promise a lessening of harm—especially if part of the harm committed is a refusal to listen to people express their experience of oppression simply because they do not adhere to legitimate models of empirical inquiry. Empirical verification is often made difficult by the normalizing power of liberal democratic capitalism itself.

For Oliver, one component of witnessing is its propensity to reclaim a stolen subject position, which is on full display in Immortal Technique's (2008) seventh track from *The Third World*, titled "3rd World" featuring DJ Green Lantern. In it there is a biographical reflection on his national roots from the "third world," and the ways that American corporate interests have exploited and scarred those countries. The track begins with the words,

I'm from where the gold and diamonds are ripped from the earth/Right next to the slave castles where the water is cursed.

Then, in the refrain, an anguished illustration of the harms routinely inflicted on the resources and people there,

You polluted everything, and now the third world's gone/ The waters poisoned where I'm from the third world son/ Seven hundred children die by the end 'this song/ Revolution will come, where I'm from, the third world son/ Constant occupation, leaves the third world torn.

Pointing the finger at corporate interests and American intelligence agencies, he raps:

'Cause Rico laws don't apply to the CIA/ And mother fuckers make sneakers for a quarter a day/ I'm from where they overthrow democratic leaders/ Not for the people but for the Wall Street Journal readers.

His suspicion extends well beyond efforts to establish political control to seemingly benevolent efforts to provide medical aid:

Fuck your charity medicine, try to murder me/ The immunizations you gave us were full of mercury

The abrupt turn to vaccination signals his view that the enforcement of vaccines resonates with neo-colonial and capitalist violence emphasized throughout the rest of the track.

“3rd World” highlights people’s resilience in the face of America’s and Europe’s efforts to install their political, economic, and medical interests in the South American “third world.” Reflecting on these forces, and his own experience in Peru among other South American countries, Immortal Technique refuses to capitulate to these forces. He does not depend upon evidence to validate his position, instead testifying with his life experience, in conjunction with the experiences of his community members, in a way that makes sense to himself and his listeners. His conspiracy theories function as a kind of compass, guiding his listeners to the forces behind the oppression he has experienced.

There is no evidence to suggest that vaccines were delivered to South America to deliberately poison or murder the people there, but vaccines belong to a longer continuum of medical care that has disproportionately ignored, or indeed poisoned people of colour (as with the Tuskegee study where Black people infected with syphilis were deliberately not treated by The U.S. Public Health Service to assess the effects of syphilis on the body (Shafer *et al* 1936)). To witness Immortal Technique’s suspicion is to acknowledge these histories, and to read his suspicion as an embodied response to unequal power dynamics that are exacerbated by profit-driven pharmaceutical companies at the helm of public care. Immortal Technique’s anti-vaccine view can then be read as much more than a simple expression of medical ignorance; it may be interpreted by a witness as:

1. An effort to reclaim a community identity in terms of its relationship to community healthcare. It returns the power of care, and the knowledge of how to care, back to those people who have been subject to these biopolitical interventions.
2. An identification of the capitalist interests behind large-scale biomedical care. Juxtaposing neo-colonial efforts by American economic and political interests in South America with the introduction of vaccines, he draws an important political conclusion. If care is tethered to the accumulation of capital, and capital has been historically and routinely prioritized over people’s well-being, then the people’s collective interests and needs will never truly be met.
3. A concern about the inaccessibility of knowledge around how vaccines work and their possible side-effects.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it illustrates the ways researchers can move beyond proof and veracity to witness and open up a dialogic encounter. Immortal Technique's claims might not be empirically true (and indeed they are outright false when it comes to vaccine safety and efficacy (Baker 2008)), but they may be true in their description of generalized neo-colonial apathy about the safety of people in the Global South. Immortal Technique may be confident in the historical veracity of his claims, which lends his words a degree of legitimacy when viewed with the expectation that empirical facts are the only determining factor in a claim's possible legitimacy. Witnessing accepts that empirical verification is only one metric by which to engage with someone's testimony.

Immortal Technique's music not only engenders dissent insofar as it addresses the material conditions of capitalist exploitation and medical biopolitics, but also in the very act of speaking through the policed medium of rap. His music opposes the "ways that colonization requires those colonized to seek approval and legitimation from their colonizers" (Oliver 2001, 100). By adopting rap, Immortal Technique strikes at the colonial system from without and avoids submitting to the highly structured and normalized arena of political discourse. In conjunction with conspiracy theories, Immortal Technique employs a refined knowledge of both the historico-empirical facts of colonialism (the nations and industries involved, the resources extracted, and the kinds of labour exploited) and the oppressions they establish (the normalization of capitalist relations of production, control of "reputable" discourse and media, and the global subordination to American power).

4.3.2 KRS-One, Reality Rapper

Lawrence Parker, or KRS-One (Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone) focuses his music on the many ways Black people experience racism and other oppressions in late 20th century America. Born and raised in 1975 in New York City, KRS-One witnessed the effects of inflation and recession on his Black urban community. At the age of 16, he left home and spent a significant amount of time homeless, a period that solidified his doubts and disenchantment with political leaders' willingness and capacity to raise the living standards of Black people in urban America (Parker and

Daniels 2022). As he raps in “The Mind” (2001) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DYzu_5HETg),

Whether you know it or not, you deep in politics/
All inside of it, in fact you the issue/
Don't let this government diss you!/
They really do not want you to vote/
They really do not want you to hope/
They really want you sniffin they coke.

Drawing upon the same experiential source material that motivated Patricia Turner’s acknowledgement of “benign-neglect” oppression, KRS-One highlights negligence as a primary force in the continued oppression of Black people in the United States. For there to be “benign-neglect” implies a concentration of power that could only be acquired through the active subjugation of minority populations in the United States. This neglect can happen through lack of action or through active efforts at ‘revitalization.’ For KRS-One, black people are negatively impacted regardless of intent.

Education plays a significant role in KRS-One’s music. In a 1989 opinion piece for *The New York Times*, he writes:

While no single cause accounts for the problems of inner-city kids, much of what black youth is missing - self-esteem, creative opportunity, outlook, goals - can be traced to what we're not learning in schools...Afro-American kids are taught white American history, while our own heritage is blatantly ignored. Everyone is supposed to learn about being (white) Americans.

He highlights the fact that Black students are not represented in the school system and are, therefore, alienated from it.

This phenomenon is attributed to both a systemic white supremacy, and to the deliberate efforts of a few to conceal Black history in the United States and the rest of the world. In “Blackman in Effect” (1990a) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_m5_yVKKGOI) he raps that

Timbuctoo existed when the caveman existed/
Why then isn't this listed/
Is this because the Blackman is the original man/
Or does it mean humanity is African/
I don't know, but these sciences are hidden/
For some strange reason it's forbidden.

For KRS-One (1989b) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfhvP-Gpk50>), these efforts have a long history, extending back to Greek, Persian, and Roman suppression of Black people's contributions to world history:

It's good to know that in ancient times/ Egyptians developed all sciences of the mind/ To the point where they ruled the planet/ But Rome, Greece, and Persia wasn't havin' it/ They attacked, and won the war/ But it wasn't enough, they had to get to the core/ Cause in that time it was Alkebulan/ That ruled religion, politics, and man/ In order to destroy the Egyptian race/ They had to wipe the sciences from off the face of the planet/ So they proceeded to ban it/ Then replace it with Christianity.

KRS-One's attribution of a history to these conspiratorial efforts adds bombastic flare to his plea and highlights the need to oppose these trends. His music is one vector for an Afrocentric challenge to white European pedagogical norms.

Asserting that rap is a “revolutionary tool in changing the structure of racist America,” KRS-One (1990c) has supplemented his musical production with educational conferences, presentations, and performances to help improve the lives of Black youth. These efforts do not seek to mirror the dominant educational structure in America, however; instead, they draw upon pedagogical and artistic practices that resonate with urban Black youth. His work opposes both the content of the education system and the form of that education system. In “Edutainment” (1990b) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7d2PYz3bl4>), he characterizes his educational style as a transcendent one, opening the pupil to a place

Higher than the physical plane/ To the plane of forces in the astral plane/ The mental plane, and the final three/ They're all around you, yet you can't see/ So grab the sphere of life and aim it/ And you'll be guided by Edutainment

Echoing Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) ancestral dedication to *La Facultad*, the “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities” to “know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away” (38-39), KRS-One rejects purely material explanations of events and phenomena to leave room for those that evade traditional analytic methods. Music serves many purposes in this process, offering people an opportunity to express their experiences without being constrained by words alone. Music breaks from the rigidity of schooling as a “machine for learning” (Foucault 1977,

165) to reframe education as a conduit between lived experience and the pursuit of esoteric knowledge. Music galvanizes groups and speaks languages that are inextricably tied to specific people and places. In these settings, rap music may serve as one of many solutions to the alienation experienced by Black youth in American schools. For KRS-One (1989a), “young Black kids experience a more subtle form of racism when their heritage and culture are stripped from them early on in their schooling.” He does not claim that rap music and Black culture are synonymous, but rather that the exclusion of Black culture sits within a broader systemic effort to exclude and prosecute Black people’s knowledges and experiences.

Controversially, and beyond his musical ambitions, KRS-One has vocally opposed the “New World Order,” and has collaborated with some of America’s most notorious and problematic conspiracy theorists, including Alex Jones. In Alex Jones’ *The Obama Deception* (2009), KRS-One makes an appearance to criticize Barack Obama’s presidency and the potential his presidency might hold to improve the lives of Black people in the United States: “If they controlled it before, [...] what makes you think they’re not controlling it now? The country was on the verge of revolution, they threw a Black man up and now we’re like this [KRS-One leans back in his chair exuding an air of disinterested satisfaction]” (15:45). A few moments later, the film cuts back to KRS-ONE saying that “they put a Black face on the New World Order and now we all happy. KRS ain’t buying it” (16:37). KRS-One views any president as a pawn controlled by global elites and financiers. As he says, the “president has very little to do with the economy. It’s the federal reserve chairman that at least sets the policy. That’s a privately owned company—the federal reserve bank” (57:00). As though to clarify KRS-One’s point, *The Obama Deception* then cuts to a scene of Alex Jones in front of the federal reserve bank explaining that “these guys are masquerading as a federal institution. They are a private banking consortium. This is their front—their holding company. The federal reserve is not federal; it’s a front for a private banking cartel” (57:15). Jones’ views of the harms of private enterprises notwithstanding, *The Obama Deception* presents a starkly anti-progressive political viewpoint, calling into question KRS-One’s stated political goals.

A few months after *The Obama Deception*'s release, KRS-One was invited for an interview with *Hip-Hop Wired* magazine (2009) to clarify his views and his relationship with Alex Jones. In response to the interviewer asking KRS-One about his view of the film, KRS-One states, "I'm not in support of [the film] but I am in support of everything I said. No doubt but when I did the interview it wasn't supposed to be a movie. It wasn't supposed to be what it is. I'm sensitive to the struggle" (as cited in Anonymous 2009) Later in the interview he continues:

I don't really support the movie or how they tried to pull Obama out like that. I'm not in support of that. But Obama is on that sh%& too on another level. He is The President. F%@k all the dumb sh\$%, he is the President and he has people that he must answer to that are not me and are not you and they don't have our interest in mind. No government does in that sense. It's about people power so in that instance I'm not ashamed of the message. I don't disagree with the message of the movie but KRS is a little deeper than the movie projects.

Despite being cautious about the political and racist spin of the film, KRS-One justifies his involvement by saying that "when you're a revolutionary, sometimes you take one for the team and that's what I'm doing right now." The fact that he does not disavow his affiliation with Alex Jones, who he says is part of his "crew," does not diminish the need to attend to the realities represented by the belief in the conspiracy theories themselves. Instead, by "witnessing" the conspiracy theory on its own terms in conjunction with KRS-One's repeated efforts to challenge established sites of hegemonic power, it becomes possible to see the points of departure (as well as the similarities) between KRS-One and more problematic and oppressive figures like Alex Jones.

As Oliver (2001) notes, there are instances in which witnessing and testifying are not geared towards undoing dominant hegemonic systems but are instead interested in strengthening those systems by repeating ideas resonant with the dominant order or refusing to hear someone if they describe an experience outside of the scope of that order. She calls such people "false witnesses," and they are those who close off, rather than open up, "responses from others, otherness, or difference" (19). For example, she suggests that white people who preach about "reverse discrimination" are false witnesses because they refuse to acknowledge the "differential sociohistorical subject positions of whites and racial minorities and our ethical responsibility to open up rather than close off

responses from others” (19). Alex Jones is a false witness in his refusal to engage with the myriad social forces that work against people of colour, women, immigrants, religious minorities, or anyone who does not fit the privileged cis, white, heterosexual, able-bodied and male subject position. In speaking from his own position as a Black man who has experienced perpetual racial oppression, KRS-One does not shy away from considering the socio-historical conditions that have targeted him and his community. His words do not uphold a status quo in the same way that Jones’ do, and it is by virtue of this difference that listeners may glean a world like—or unlike—their own and that highlights the fundamental injustices of the current order of things.

As a witness, I interpret KRS-One’s words and music as describing:

1. The sordid histories of systemic oppression against Black people and youth.
2. The replication and enforcement of dominant worldviews in mandatory educational institutions like elementary and high schools in the US.
3. The overwhelming apathy of American policy makers and their systemic failure to address urban Black youths’ specific experiences of criminalization, substance abuse, and poverty in ways that would help turn the tide on these inequalities.

Although differently situated people may interpret KRS-One differently, to witness effectively demands, at the very least, some recognition of the distribution of power across racial, class, and gendered lines. If this criterion is met, then both the witness and testifier can participate in opposing dominant power structures and allow people to embrace their own identities without fear of reprisal.

4.3.3 Lauryn Hill and Hip Hop Feminism

Lauryn Hill has solidified her place among some of the greatest rap artists and musicians of all time. Despite her relatively short musical discography, she has received numerous accolades for her work and has enjoyed much fame as a result. However, Hill has also been subject to a great deal of criticism for leaving the music industry and for using her musical talents to communicate her lived experiences of oppression. After her

time with The Fugees, her music shifted to overt forms of social critique calling attention to sexism, exploitation in the music industry, and discrimination in the legal system.

In her (1998) “Forgive them Father” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpgiIJ_F2Sw) she stresses the need to oppose these oppressive forces controlled by clandestine figures who secretly pull the strings of American society:

To survive is to stay alive in the face of opposition/ Even when they comin',
gunnin' I stand position/ L's known the mission since conception/ Let's free the
people from deception/ If you looking for the answers then you gotta ask the
questions/ And when I let go, my voice echoes through the ghetto/ Sick of men
trying to pull strings like Geppetto/ Why black people always be the ones to
settle?/ March through these streets like Soweto, uh.

The imagery of a Geppetto-like figure pulling the strings of American social life ascribes malicious and surreptitious effort to control the public. While the intent might not *necessarily* be there, the situation that Hill describes is no less urgent. Yet Hill’s focus is not only reserved for people acting at the highest levels of government. Throughout her career, she has called attention to the sexism endemic in the music industry and American society more broadly, effectively engendering what Joan Morgan (1999) calls “hip hop feminism” (241) alongside other iconic figures like Queen Latifah, Lil Kim, and Missy Elliott. The lyric “sick of men trying to pull the strings” might be better understood as a commentary on the fact that men hold most of the power in American life. Interestingly, the victims of this power for Hill are not just women, but also “Black people.” In *When the Chickenheads come to Roost*, Morgan (1999) writes,

White girls don’t call their men “brothers” and that made their struggle enviably simpler than mine. Racism and the will to survive it creates a sense of intra-racial loyalty that makes it impossible for black women to turn our backs on black men—even in their ugliest and most sexist of moments (25).

Hip hop feminism acknowledges the ways that both Black women and Black men suffer in a white supremacist society, and this mutual suffering can create lines of alliance that conflict with other feminist approaches that identify all men as complicit in perpetuating sexism. This doesn’t mean that Black men do not contribute to sexism, far from it. Morgan is clear about the threat of “black male sexism and the conspiracy of protective

silence that surrounds it” (26). The point of hip hop feminism is not to defend some acts of sexism while criticizing others, it is to illustrate the interrelated factors that (re)produce the conditions that normalize sexism, especially against Black women. To do this demands an engagement with the varying histories that contribute to this sexist culture, including the ways colonialism and slavery have imposed Western patriarchal norms on enslaved people and communities.

In *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks (1982) explores the many ways that slavery divided Black men and women in the name of productivity. Hooks identifies that “the slave trade focused primarily on the importation of laborers; the emphasis at that time was on the Black male. The Black female slave was not as valued as the Black male slave. On the average, it cost more money to buy a male slave than a female slave” (15), planting the seeds for Black women’s undervaluation in America and elsewhere. Ironically, Black women were expected to work much harder and across many different jobs during slavery. Unlike Black men (who were largely tasked with jobs that required physical labour), a Black woman was expected to be a “laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and an object of white male sexual assault” (22). To the people who enslaved them, Black women’s value was inversely proportional to the real value they supplied. Black women’s capacities to work many different jobs troubled many of the patriarchal assumptions held by white slave owners, forcing them to adapt their view of Black women as possessing “unusual masculine-like characteristics not common to the female species” (71). Black women were obviously also forced into a status lower than that of white women. Angela Davis suggests that they were “genderless” (1983, 5); their presence among Black men who still retained their masculinity produced feelings of unease. If Black women, who were debased by slave owners, could perform more arduous work than Black men, then this would call Black men’s masculinity into question. hooks writes that in some cases, “Black men have been the most supportive of male subjugation of women. They hoped to gain public recognition for their manhood by demonstrating that they were the dominant figure in the Black family” (94). hooks’ intervention highlights masculinity and patriarchy as unified forces in the oppression of Black women.

When confronted with such an unspoken alliance, one that evades empirical confirmation given that there are no records of Black men and white men coming together in secret to disenfranchise and oppress Black women, it is still possible to account for an observe its real-world effects. In a society that reflects men's interests, there will be points of contact between men of hierarchically opposed groups. So, when Morgan (1999) calls attention to "black male sexism and the conspiracy of protective silence that surrounds it" (26) or when Lauryn Hill raps about "sick men trying to pull the strings" like Geppetto, they offer an opportunity to grasp the empirically unverifiable conspiratorial alliance between men to oppress Black women. To witness Hill's words in this way is to attune oneself to the unaccounted-for remainder of the "sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1989, 140).

After releasing *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* in 1998, Lauryn Hill left the limelight and faded from public view. In 2001, she returned to deliver a transformative performance at MTV Studios in Times Square. Accompanied only by an acoustic guitar, her performance differed radically from the highly produced hip hop sounds of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Lyrically, the music differed as well, emphasizing her spirituality, her experiences of systemic oppression, her disenchantment with fame, and the injustices of the legal system. Between songs, she mused about her life and career, offering an intimate peak into her struggles as a Black woman artist in America and the expectations placed on her by critics and audiences.

Not everyone was pleased with her performance, however. Robert Hillburn (2002) from *The Los Angeles Times* remarked that "the eccentric nature of Hill's performance on the album, 'Unplugged' was too easy a target for jokes. 'Unhinged' might have been the only title more unfortunate." Alexis Petridis (2002) from *The Guardian* suggested that Hill's "new songs underline the fact that Hill now lives in the land of do-as-you-please. A scant handful of powerful moments, including a furious meditation on the police shooting of a young black man, I Find It Hard to Say (Rebel), are outweighed by repetitious rambling." Alex Needham (2005) of *NME* lamented that in the music there was "barely a hook to be had, never mind the pop concision of an 'Ex Factor' or 'Doo Wop (That Thing).'" And David Browne (2002) from *Entertainment*

Weekly went so far as to say that “*Miseducation [of Lauryn Hill]* might have been just as strident had it not been for the multitextured arrangements that compensated for her lack of humor. Stripped down to basics, Hill comes across as one stern, daunting taskmaster.” These comments reflected a disappointed critical reception to Hill’s return, and they all highlighted a strong disdain for Hill’s commentary throughout the show. Petridis (2002) wrote that “Hill no longer does anything she doesn’t want to do [...] because obligation is ‘slavery.’ This isn’t lunacy at all, but a philosophy tailor-made for the tantrum-throwing, I-don’t-do-stairs world of soul divas and supermodels.” Hilburn (2002) painstakingly quantified Hill’s commentary when he wrote that she “devoted a quarter of the 100-plus minutes to rambling commentaries between songs, outlining a spiritual awakening that led her to sever ties not only with her earlier hip-hop/rap music but also her old ways of thinking.” While I am unsure how Hilburn knew what Hill’s old ways of thinking were, I can say that his and other comments reflect an inability to witness thanks to sexist, patriarchal, and white supremacist efforts to restrict transformation and adaptation.

Witnessing Hill’s 2001 return reveals a profound artistic and social reflection on an exploitative music industry and a country with deeply rooted racist and sexist institutions. Her music and comments during this performance should stimulate a discussion of the many ways Black women are systemically marginalized in the US, just as the critical reactions to it mentioned above belong to a long legacy of pathologizing Black women and others who try to challenge dominant American institutions and economic practices. These male critics center Hill’s lack of “discipline” (Hilburn 2002), and focus on her being “barking-mad,” “tantrum-throwing,” a “diva” (Petridis 2002), and a “stern, daunting taskmaster” (Browne 2002) who should have “taken a cue from Bruce Springsteen” with *Tunnel of Love* following the commercial success of *Born in the USA*. They seem to only engage with Hill through the prism of their own sexist understanding to the world, refusing to listen or witness her experiences, trauma, and anger.

Three tracks from *MTV Unplugged 2.0* (2002) titled “Freedom Time,” “I Get Out,” and “The Mystery of Iniquity,” which Browne (2002) claims “consist of strummed sermons directed at unspecified enemies and soul crushers,” call attention to systemic oppression, malicious actors, and organizations at the heart of the American government

and the legal system, and the ways that these forces are normalized in America. “Freedom Time” (2002a) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bI5l8aoGNHQ>) begins with a soul-influenced plea for listeners to free themselves of guilt. Her words soar delicately from her soul, much like the long cadences in her lyrical delivery, before her guitar turns into a syncopated rhythm-machine for an extended rap monologue exposing many forces that contribute to marginalized people’s lack of freedom in America. The rap section begins with the following lines:

Yo, there's a war in the mind, over territory/ For the dominion/ Who will
dominate the opinion/ Skisms and isms, keepin' us in forms of religion/
Conformin' our vision/ To the world church of decision/ Trapped in a section/
Submitted to committing election/ Moral infection/ Epidemic lies and deception/
Insurrection/ Of the highest possible order/ Distortin' our tape recorders/ From
hearin' like under water.

These words illustrate the ubiquitous nature of oppression from the Church and government, and the surreptitious ways that oppression is exercised to hide the truth in favor of “lies and deception.” Hill doesn’t provide evidence for these claims, nor does she name anyone involved in these efforts, but her lyrics nevertheless reveal the tangible ways that systemic interests can impose themselves on people while simultaneously delegitimizing resistance.

In the same song, Hill continues,

Truth comes, we can't hear it/ When you've been, programmed to fear it/ I had a
vision I was fallin' in indecision/ Apallin', callin' religious/ Some program on
television/ How can, dominant wisdom/ Be recognized in the system/ Of Anti-
Christ, the majority rules/ Intelligent fools/ PhDs in illusion/ Masters of mass
confusion/ Bachelors in past illusion

Here she articulates that no one is immune from the privileging of certain knowledges over others, not even those most educated. In the face of this, she pleads with the audience to recognize these surreptitious forces:

Our present condition/ Needs serious recognition/ Where there's no repentance
there can be no remission/ And that sentence, more serious than Vietnam/ The
atom bomb is Saddam and Minister Farakkhan/ What's goin' on, what's the
priority to you/ What authority do we do/ When the majority hasn't a clue/ We
majored in curses/ Search the chapters, check the verses/ Recapture the land/

Remove the mark from off of our hands/ So we can stand/ In agreement with his
command/ Everything else is damned/ Let them with ears understand/ Everything
else is damned, let them with ears understand

Reclaiming the land and reclaiming minds are priorities for Hill, even if she doesn't elaborate on what either entail. In her live performance, this moment is met with cheers and applause from the audience. When she repeatedly raps, "let them with ears understand," she allows her audience to connect with the way that she sees and has experienced the world. In drawing this line of connection between herself and the audience, she cultivates a site for a dialogic encounter necessary for witnessing, and for communicating experiences and ideas that might otherwise be condemned, policed, or institutionalized by systemic forces.

In "I Get Out" (2002b) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ok0nxA50pLM>), she raises the stakes of her emancipatory effort by putting her own life into play:

Your stinking resolution is no type of solution/ Preventing me from freedom,
maintaining your pollution/ I won't support your lie no more/ I won't even try no
more/ If I have to die, oh Lord, that's how I choose to live/ I won't be
compromised no more/ I can't be victimized no more.

Each of the four verses describe Hill's feelings of entrapment by the "system." She is not only calling attention to the existence of such a system, but also demonstrating her desire to transcend it.

Blinding me through mind control/ Stealing my eternal soul/ Appealing through
material/ To keep me as your slave/ See, it don't change the truth/ And your hurt
feeling's no excuse/ To keep me in this box/ Psychological locks/ Repressin' true
expression/ Cementin' this repression/ Promotin' mass deception/ So that no one
can be healed/ I don't respect your system/ I won't protect your system/ When you
talk I don't listen

In the final verse, the track changes course from focusing on Hill's oppression and emancipation to the listener's:

Afraid to face reality—the system is a joke/ Oh, you'd be smart to save your soul/
Oh, and escape this mind control/ You spent your life in sacrifice to a system for
the dead / Oh, are you sure, where is the passion in this living?/ Are you sure it's
God you serving?/ Obligated to a system/ Getting less then you're deserving/ Who

made up these schools, I say/ Who made up these rules, I say/ Animal conditioning/ Oh, just to keep us as a slave

This shift asks the listener to participate in the emancipatory process that Hill has been describing.

While the track follows a fairly standard verse-chorus-verse-chorus pattern, the chorus is not the same each time. The unifying thread between each chorus is her emphasis on ‘getting out’ from the weight of social bondage and tradition.

But I get out, oh, I get out of all your boxes/ I'll get out, oh, you can't hold me in these chains/ I get out, oh, I want out of social bondage/ Knowin' my condition, oh, is the reason I must change

The final chorus, which repeats twice, recapitulates the possibility of death in the face of these oppressive forces and a hegemonic status quo:

Oh, just get out of this social purgatory/ Just get out, all these traditions are a lie/ Just get out, superstition killin' freedom/ Knowin' my condition is the reason I must die

She delivers these words at the track’s crescendo when her voice and guitar are at their loudest and most powerful. Afterwards, the crowd erupts in applause, communicating the extent to which Hill’s words and music resonate with them.

After this song, Hill delivers a few comments before performing the “Mystery of Iniquity.” Recounting her feelings of isolation, alienation, and self-criticism in the music industry she states that,

There’s some people who prefer deceptions, see. They say, uh, I don’t like this new expression, and I say, what, you want two-thirds of me to stay outside? I’m a whole person. You can’t say, you know, two-thirds of Lauryn, come in here. Only two-thirds is acceptable. I’m a whole person. You know. And that’s everybody (2002c)

Ironically, the critics mentioned above, who were not fond of Hill’s commentary between songs, lamented how Hill in 2001 is nothing like Hill from 1998. But their words actually underscore the need for Hill’s on-stage commentary. Her performance is an example of a personal reclamation of power; the furor of critics afterward only confirms its necessity.

Before proceeding with “Mystery of Iniquity” (2002d) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAMa0PN58i0>), Hill (2002c) informs the audience that she is considering not playing the guitar to allow the audience to “really hear the words.” Focusing on the injustices of the legal system, Hill sings about the preponderance of corruption and manipulation in a system that primarily targets Black people in the U.S. Like ‘Freedom Time,’ the “Mystery of Iniquity” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi9fB89M7ng>) begins soulfully before turning into a rap with blazing-fast lyrics and a syncopated accompanying guitar. The opening words are as follows:

It's the mystery of iniquity/ Said it's the misery of Inequity/ Said it's the history of Inequity/ When it all, all falls down/ Telling you all, it all falls down

The lyrics play with the terms “iniquity” and “inequity,” and it’s often unclear when Hill is using one or the other. The ambiguity here is purposeful, highlighting the faint distinction between the terms for many Black Americans. Informed by her new-found spirituality, Hill fills the track with biblical references targeting the hypocrisy of American Christianity and the legal system. “Iniquity” is mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible to refer to wickedness, lawlessness, and/or blasphemy. The mystery of iniquity, however, only makes its appearance in The Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, when Paul pleads to the Thessalonians not to fall prey to deceptive messaging about missing the Day of the Lord before the Rapture. Paul clarifies that the Day of the Lord will only arrive when the “wicked one” (*King James’ Holy Bible* 2004, 2:7-8) has been vanquished by Jesus Christ. While the nature of the mystery is not entirely clear, it seems to refer to the problem of evil in a world created by God, the Supreme Good. In her seamless substitution of the two terms: “iniquity” and “inequity,” Hill underscores the contradictions of a society that claims to offer equal opportunity for everyone while thriving on rampant inequality.

The soul-influenced introduction is followed by rapped verses describing the many kinds of systemic injustice that affect Black Americans. As Tao Leigh Goffe (2021) writes, “‘The Mystery of Iniquity’ is as contemporary as it is unvarnished. Unfinished, the song epitomizes a certain set of struggles against injustice that is best

defined as Black politics or the familiar key of Black diasporic life. Lauryn Hills gives us a draft for revolution.” Diverging from the critics mentioned above, Goffe celebrates Hill’s music as a call to action for the marginalized to fight against the systemic forces that repeatedly oppress them.

The rap section of the song sets the stage in a courtroom:

Yo! Y'all can't handle the truth/ In a courtroom of lies/ Perjures the jurors, witness despised/ Crooked lawyers, false indictments publicized

Hill’s focus on the courtroom is poignant given that it is understood by many as a site for the practice of justice. From Hill’s vantage point, deception outweighs truth, no matter what higher beings are invoked:

Swearing by the bible blatantly blasphemous/ Publicly perpetrating that ‘In God We Trust’/ Cross-examined by a master manipulator/ The faster intimidator receiving/ The judge's favor/ Deceiving sabers doing injury/ To their neighbors for status, gratis/ Apparatus and legal waivers.

The justice system’s confluence with broader systemic forces that Hill describes as “the system” is the primary driver behind this deception. While attributing hardships and experiences of oppression to the “system” may not map the clearest path to countering oppression, it nevertheless calls attention to the existence of these forces. In the courtroom, just one vector of the “system,”

The defense isn't making any sense/ Faking the confidence of/ Escaping the consequence/ That a defendant is depending on the system/ Totally void of judgment purposely/ Made to twist 'em/ Emotional victim blackmailed by the henchmen/ Framed by intentions/ Inventions whereby they lynch men/ Enter the false witness/ Slandering the accused/ Planting the seed openly showing/ He's being used/ To discredit, edit, headed for the alleged/ Smearing the individual fearing/ The unsuspected/ Expert witness (the paid authority)/ Made a priority to deceive the majority/ Of disinterested peers/ Dodging duty for years hating the process/ Waiting to be returning to their careers/ Do we expect the system made for the elect/ To possibly judge correct? Properly/ Serve and protect?

For Hill, the “system” encapsulates the totality of injustices exercised against the most marginalized. From paid-off witnesses to crooked judges, to manipulating lawyers, Hill describes a cornucopia of conspirators that keep the system afloat. To witness these claims demands separating them from their empirical facticity and instead reckoning with

the lived experiences conveyed in the words themselves. By calling attention to these malicious figures and their coordination across institutions, Hill's conspiracy theories reveal the persistence of injustice in the criminal justice system. Moreover, they highlight the interconnected web of powerful people who benefit from the "system:"

Legal extortion, blown out of proportion/ In vein deceit, the truth is obsolete/
Only two positions: victimizer or victim/ Both end up in destruction/ Trusting this
crooked system/ Mafia with diplomas keeping us in a coma/ Trying to own a
piece/ Of the "American Corona"/ The Revolving Door, insanity every floor/
Skyscraping, paper chasing/ What are we working for?/ Empty traditions,
reaching social positions

In a prescient way, the "Mystery of Iniquity" illustrates Hill's future experiences in the criminal justice system more than a decade after *MTV Unplugged 2.0*. Like Immortal Technique and KRS-One, Lauryn Hill's relationship with conspiracy theories extends beyond her music. Following her arrest for tax evasion in 2013, a Newark judge ordered that she serve three months in jail and "undergo counselling because of her conspiracy theories—including that artists are being oppressed by a plot involving the military and media" (Gover 2013). Interestingly, Alex Jones has never been sentenced to mandatory counselling for his conspiracy theories despite the irreparable harm they've caused, like in his claiming the Sandy Hook massacre was a hoax (Ali 2022). To justify her tax evasion, Hill cites the "climate of hostility, false entitlement, manipulation, racial prejudice, sexism and ageism" of the music industry. "Over-commercialisation," she continues, "and its resulting restrictions and limitations can be very damaging and distorting to the inherent nature of the individual." Hill claims that she distanced herself from society to raise her children in a setting that was free of these forces that she says were born out of the United States' legacy of slavery: "I am a child of former slaves who had a system imposed on them. I had an economic system imposed on me" (Gover 2013). It's unclear whether or not these words influenced the judge to institutionalize Hill, but the historical evidence behind her beliefs was absolutely not considered as a legitimate explanation for her views.

The fact that Hill was pathologized in court as a conspiracy theorist places her squarely within the realm of the kind of subjugated knowledge Jack Bratich describes.

But because there is a dearth of examples of defendants being ordered to attend counselling for espousing conspiracy theories, it is important to ask why this happened specifically to her. Arguably, Lauryn Hill is the target of a conspiracy panic similar to the one described in my previous chapter on the Warao people. Historically Black women have been subjected to institutional measures in order to silence them and any dissenting ideas born out of their experiences. Institutionalization transforms a systemic issue into an individual issue that can be corrected with the right medical intervention. Nicole Rousseau (2009) observes that Black women have been especially targeted by the “Black ‘pathology’ Myth,” the “myth of sickness among Black [people] that causes failure in society” (2009, 125). White policy makers take it upon themselves to intensify Black people’s incarceration and institutionalization rates to oppose their (apparent) efforts to “[overrun] city streets and [change] the face of the nation” (130). Whether consciously or not, the judge in Hill’s case belongs to a long trajectory of oppressors that have pathologized Black women as unruly mothers and/or citizens. The critics of *MTV Unplugged 2.0* belong to a similar tradition when they suggest that Hill is mentally ill or too narcissistic to deliver an enjoyable performance. The desire to institutionalize Black women or remove them from society altogether by repeatedly marginalizing them (leading to a higher likelihood of death) are blatant expressions of racist, patriarchal capitalism. In the case of pregnancy alone, Black women are three times as likely to die during childbirth and the postpartum period than white women (Marhsall and Plain 2021). Given this, a person who discusses centuries of oppression and exploitation via overt conspiracy theories is far less urgently in need of institutional correction than the institutions themselves.

As a witness, I read Lauryn Hill’s music and experiences as:

1. An expression of the fraught relationship between artists and record labels intent on extracting as much value from the artists as possible. The nature of this exploitation does not change even if, as in Lauryn Hill’s case, the artist is compensated well for their work. Using the rhetoric of conspiracy to describe these exploitative practices illustrates a phenomenon that extends well beyond Hill’s experience alone.

2. An effort to grapple with her repeated experiences of sexism and racism from critics and audiences who place disproportionate expectations on women artists of colour. When Hill uses her platform to describe conspiracies that target her and her talents, she is met with heavy resistance and is institutionalized. By comparison, a similar use of conspiracy theories helped Donald Trump become President of the world's most powerful nation.
3. An unapologetic criticism of the American legal system's rampant discriminatory practices. Her conspiracy theories and her personal experiences put a face to these unjust practices, opening the door for her listeners to identify these same forces in their lives.

4.4 Conclusion

Through Oliver's practice of "witnessing," this chapter examined the conspiracy theories expressed in the music of hip hop artists and saw them as ways to call attention to inequalities without necessarily abiding by standard methods of knowledge acquisition and dissemination. Witnessing is necessary because it does not place the burden on marginalized people to adopt the style and rhetoric of reputable projects of resistance generally expected in political or academic circles. Rather, it accepts their experiences and forms of expression on their own terms. This is not to say that institutionally acceptable practices cannot be effective in motivating change, only that they should not be the sole vector of anti-oppressive movements.

As a musical genre bound up with the communities, cultures, and lived experiences of people of colour in the United States, rap is uniquely situated to bring to light the workings of systemic oppressive forces that can feel opaque or impenetrable. Conspiracy theories expressed in rap may help to facilitate criticism of these oppressive forces; they can help make rap music a "revolutionary tool in changing the structure of racist America" (KRS-One 1990c).

Immortal Technique, KRS-One, and Lauryn Hill each call attention to forces of oppression that have directly affected them in their lives. By attesting to their

experiences, they reassert their subjectivity in the face of a system intent on destabilizing their relationship to themselves and their communities. Their music is revolutionary in the way that KRS-One suggests earlier, but it is also transformative in the way it crafts a sonic encounter to cultivate subjectivities. In Oliver's words, "[r]ealness and reality are experiential categories that refer to a phenomenological truth rather than a purely historical truth. Witnessing and responding, testifying and listening transform our reality, the realness of our experience" (106). These artists present their lived experiences to open a dialogic encounter between themselves, their communities, and their listeners. Goffe remarks on Lauryn Hill's transformative and revolutionary effect when she writes,

The Mystery of Iniquity continued to reverberate for me in subsequent months, the summer protests of 2020 in New York City where I live. I heard the prophecy anew in an echo of global chants for Black lives, amidst burning and looting as the coronavirus pandemic raged on. The line "Mafia with diplomas keeping us in a coma / Trying to own a piece of the American corona" took on a new prophetic power.

Where Black people's voices have been repeatedly silenced, Goffe argues that academic integrity and adherence to standardized methods are not enough for Black people to express their experiences. Given this, witnessing must be adopted by people occupying positions of power and authority to grapple with experiences that differ from their own, and to begin processes of reconciliation to eventually correct the systemic injustice that perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism.

Conspiracy theory researchers have the responsibility to employ Kelly Oliver's technique of witnessing and to inform themselves on the different forms of oppression that may motivate belief in conspiracy theories in the first place. In the case of hip hop music and the larger Black American experience, belief in conspiracy theories can be seen as an affective response to centuries of subjugation. In my case as a researcher, I believe that by taking responsibility for my own education about oppressions such as these, I can more effectively distinguish between conspiracy theories that call attention to oppressive structures, and those that benefit from and contribute to those same structures.

5 Conclusion: Using Intersectional Conspiracy Theory Research

5.1 Introduction

When I began working on this project in 2018, the world was a very different place. The global COVID-19 pandemic has shown how fragile our social institutions are, and how differently situated people are differently affected by infectious diseases. People who are forced to work in close contact with others; people who are forced to commute on public transit to get to work; disabled and immunocompromised people; people who live with aging relatives and immunocompromised people; people who do not live in close proximity to health care facilities; people who have historically been targets of bio-medical oppression; the poor and the homeless; those living in war torn or impoverished areas of the world, all have found themselves at heightened risk of severe or fatal COVID-19 infection. In North America, it is no coincidence that these people are most likely to be people of colour (Minnesota Department of Health 2021) – a reflection of legacies of separation and estrangement between them and the institutions meant to protect them. The pandemic highlighted the real material effects of oppression and its management that, unfortunately, continued to sow mistrust and suspicion of the broader constellation of social and political institutions. A plethora of anti-Covid and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories emerged in the wake of the pandemic that expressed this mistrust.

As I have argued in this dissertation, not all conspiracy theories are created equal. When engaging with them, it is important to consider the points of contact between conspiracy theories, hegemonic belief systems, and forms of oppression based on race, class, gender and other social identity markers. To do so is to acknowledge the difference between conspiracy theories intent on maintaining an oppressive status quo from those that describe marginalized people's lived experiences of systemic oppression. In the context of COVID-19, people of colour are at a heightened risk of infection, and that their opportunities to receive medical care are significantly lower than white people's.

Kelly Oliver's (2001) concept of "witnessing" allows us to attend to those utterances that cannot be verified with empirical means, and to the ways that structural

oppression functions to conceal its motivations and operations. To witness is to be attuned to the possibility that the speaker's testimony recounts an event of phenomenon that others "cannot see" (86). But for Oliver, the process of witnessing can also be transformative for the witness. As she prescribes,

In order to 'see' what we cannot see, in order to move beyond our blind spots, we need to be vigilant in interpretation, elaboration, and analysis. We need to interpret the ways that our performances both perpetuate and challenge institutions and structures of dominance. Only through this process of continual reinterpretation and reassessment can we be vigilant in an attempt to think through our blind spots and transform ourselves and our culture (218).

This dissertation argues that this prescription should be applied to conspiracy theory research. It is crucial to go beyond an assessment of conspiracy theories in terms of an empirically verifiable truth claim to acknowledge and attend to explanations that cannot be easily verified but that may nevertheless describe lived experiences of oppression. The process of witnessing must be attuned to historical and ongoing structures of oppression that target and marginalize some groups over others.

5.2 Summary

Summarizing Bratich's (2008) argument in *Conspiracy Panics*, chapter two, following the introductory chapter, reviews the idea of conspiracy panics, which work to establish and maintain discursive hegemonic norms. Bratich questions the discursive parameters of what is labelled a conspiracy theory in the broader context of Liberal governmentality, and its insistence on acceptable speech that never veers toward extremes. Through the careful alignment of institutional norms in accordance with Liberal governmentality as a mode of conduct, Bratich cautions against the formation of a docile population that governs and polices itself. These norms, expressed in institutions, such as the media, label some ideas or beliefs as conspiracy theories and gain the support of their fellow "community participants" (71) in disqualifying those beliefs. In the face of these forces, Bratich holds out hope for a spirited public that will oppose the anti-democratic nature of these institutions. By identifying the forces of subjugation that

render some knowledges illegitimate and beyond the pale of legitimate discourse, he provides a stark illustration of the effects of power in stifling the free propagation of ideas. Bratich terms all those theories and ideas considered outside established Liberal consensus, “subjugated knowledges.”

Chapter three expands Bratich’s notion of subjugated knowledges to consider variations in the ways that conspiracy theories are challenged and policed by legitimating academic and political institutions. While Bratich provides a necessary entry point to grapple with the intertwined nature of conspiracy theories and forces of discursive legitimation, it is necessary to expand and nuance his analysis so as not to treat all conspiracy theories in the same way. The chapter juxtaposed Alex Jones’ conspiracy theories with those of the Warao people of colonial Venezuela to emphasize their different contexts and distance from sites of reputed authority and power. The chapter also considers the implications of conspiracy theories in the digital age, and their confluence with the logics of platform capitalism. In this context, it seems that conspiracy theories are overwhelmingly welcomed—not subjugated. Given the fact that conspiracy theories may not necessarily be subjugated, the chapter turns to feminist and critical race theories to open a broader account of power.

Drawing upon thinkers like Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Kelly Oliver (2001), and Sara Ahmed (2004), the chapter goes on to situate conspiracy theories within a broader economy of power relations. An intersectional approach opens the door for a holistic engagement with the varying ways that race, gender, and class influence belief in conspiracy theories, and explains how some people are more stringently policed for their use of conspiracy theories than others. The chapter expands on Kelly Oliver’s idea of “witnessing” as a way to begin a dialogic encounter with another so that they are validated and legitimated in their experiences and feelings. At its core, witnessing is an anti-oppressive practice that situates the encounter between a testifier and a witness within an economy of systemic power relations that the rhetoric of conspiracy is particularly suited to call attention to and describe.

The fourth chapter attempts to put the idea of witnessing conspiracy theories into practice by focusing on conspiracy theories in hip hop music. Hip hop music is an expressive practice that has been relentlessly marginalized and policed. In this way, the conspiracy theories found within hip hop are situated at the margins even before being spoken. The first part of the chapter looks at the history of hip hop and some key thinkers that have contributed to its study and emphasizes the importance of hip hop's urban location and its intrinsic connection with Black and Hispanic people and their lives. Hip hop's unique location permits it to identify and discuss otherwise institutionally ignored forms of discrimination. Witnessing conspiracy theories in selected music of Immortal Technique, KRS-One, and Lauryn Hill allows the listener to hear about the impacts of local and global efforts to disenfranchise and perpetuate violence against marginalized people. These artists' use of conspiracies encourages witnesses and allies to work to context and undo the forces of marginalization.

5.3 Future Considerations

While this dissertation has focused primarily on the American context, more intersectional conspiracy theory research is needed in different national contexts. For example, how were conspiracy theories used to motivate intensified aggression against Indigenous people in Canada following colonization? How did these fears catalyze the formation of Canada's current political system? In the wake of the "Freedom Convoy," it is crucial to situate Canadian conspiracy theories within the Canadian context rather than simply attributing these developments to American influence in Canada. What were the points of resonance between the Freedom Convoy's conspiratorial concerns and its imagined conception of a "true" Canadian? Who do they perceive as a threat and why? How might these views reflect the effects of multiculturalism and growing class for Indigenous rights? Why doesn't the Freedom Convoy's concern about the infringement on Canadian's rights extend to Indigenous people's continued suffering at the hands of the Canadian state? Is there a history of conspiracy theorizing in Canada that has functioned to propel and protect colonial interests over Indigenous people's interests?

Conspiracy theories are a perennial phenomenon, and so are irreducible to changing epistemic conditions and communicative practices. This dissertation

acknowledges the potential problems that conspiracy theories might pose to government and medical agencies but situates them along a broader trajectory of systemic power relations that disenfranchise people of color in the United States. In response to conspiracy theories then, researchers and policy makers should at least acknowledge these histories and treat conspiracy theories as an embodied vocalization of these histories. To do so opens the door for a holistic engagement with conspiracy theories as complicated expressions of historical oppression instead of as mere demonstrations of epistemic inferiority in need of correcting. Moreover, it allows for a nuanced evaluation of the differing proximities of conspiracy theories to hegemonic sites of power, and how conspiracy theories may call attention to systemic oppression and motivate group solidarity against these forces.

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