

Into the UpsideDown: Conspiracy Pedagogies, Critique, and the Apocalypse of Exposure

Jake Burdick and Jennifer A. Sandlin

Purdue University and Arizona State

Abstract

In this article, we explore one phenomenon that was ‘exposed’ by the ongoing multiple apocalyptic pandemics of COVID-19, Trumpism, racism, science denialism, and misinformation: QAnon. We examine the limits of the concept and practice of ‘exposure’ by exploring how QAnon adherents share many processes and practices with critical theory-oriented academics. We employ the metaphor of the “UpsideDown”—taken from the television show *Stranger Things*—to analyze how QAnon creates inverse, even perverse, versions of the academic discourses and practices of critical media literacy, critical thinking, feminism, and more. We end by asking “what is to be done”, where we argue that we should look for pedagogies that lie outside of the “critical thinking” mantra, specifically those currently being enacted by artists, activists, and journalists.

Part One: This is Fine

[T]he paranoid mind is far more coherent than the real world.

(Hofstadter, 1964, para 37)

Maybe forcing things to be bright just makes the darkness underneath even darker.

-Abed Nadir, 'Regional Holiday Music' (2011)

We are writing this article in the Fall of 2021, months deep into what might be called *the unprecedented now*. We are writing from the nexus of a seeming constellation of apocalyptic signs, tropes, meanings, and possibilities, from murder hornets to the shamanism of the Far Right. We are writing in the shadow of the failed January 6th 2021 seditious attack on the United States Capitol Building, but before the likely coups to come, given the state of voting rights and the organized distrust fomented in the 2020 elections. This is the dance of the modern apocalypse—a slow, sickly disco that sways between sublime unreality and banal resignation. We are writing *of this time*, as well; two more academics who saw the silver lining of *publishable writing* running through the tar-thick cloud of bodies, souls, and hope. And, as we hope to illustrate, we are just as inevitable as the virus—academics perched in the hope of having something to say, at last, again.

As we enumerate in our introduction for this volume, we saw, in those nascent moments of the present apocalypses—the wildfires of Australia; COVID-19; the siege of Portland, Oregon; the emboldening of the far Right under the inside-out-Id of Trump—the revelation that is promised inside of apocalyptic meanings, the unveiling of the *Real of reality*. To this end, we wrote a call for papers that hinged on authors taking up the metaphor of exposure and utilizing it to illustrate the metaphysics that undergird and hard-wire meaning within this episteme. However, as we hope to illustrate via our inquiry into the QAnon conspiracy theory network in this paper, perhaps it is this will-to-expose that has funded much of the fear, unmeaning, and destruction that has emerged at the intersection of culture and virus. To this end, we are now writing from a place of *concern* (Latour, 2004) and a sense of response-ability (Bakhtin, 1981) that—we will argue—must extend beyond critique of the ideological Other and into our collective understanding of exposure, of criticality, of pedagogy, of the academic urge to dismantle, and of our own complicity in the end(s) of the world.

To take up these tasks, we start by offering our original call for papers in full:

*This issue centers on the public in an historical moment that is characterized by the metaphor of **exposure**. Under the aegis of COVID-19, we have fled public spaces out of fear of exposure to the virus, and simultaneously, the nature of the public itself has been subject to an exposure more akin to that of photography. COVID-19, as well as the overlapping sociocultural pandemics of racism, austerity, and fascism, has shone a light into, through, and across the institutions that we hail as public; created the desire for new spaces of public discourse and pedagogies; exposed disturbingly racist and violent movements for 'freedom' that had formerly been mostly hidden from sight; and potentially has been revealed as an ultimately illusory construct. The public has been lauded, even fetishized, across the history of Western thought, from its inception as a site of purportedly democratic discourse in antiquity to contemporary social thought that hails it as a space set apart from a world all-but-swallowed by the ravenousness of privatism and late capitalism.*

*Questions around how publics form and sustain have been particularly vexing issues within the field of public pedagogy, as scholars have struggled to understand and theorize conceptualizations of the **public** and what it might mean to enact public pedagogy in a way that opens up*

*possibilities for a more just and democratic public sphere (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013; Cooper and Sandlin, 2020; O'Malley, Sandlin, and Burdick, 2020; Sandlin, Burdick, and Rich, 2017; Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick, 2011). Within public pedagogy thought, then, the notion of the public thus remains contested—see, for example, Glenn Savage's (2010, 2014) landmark work on decoding what a public might actually be, Anna Hickey-Moody's (2014, 2016) development of the concept of micropublics to attend the vast complexity of intersubjectivity, and Gert Biesta's (2012, 2014) reconceptualization of **publicness** as a state to be achieved by Arendtian action. Yet, even in contestation, the **public** remains a regulative ideal for our field, even a sort of panacea for the ills of institutional sites of education. However, a confluence of viruses—bodily, ecological, cultural, and political—have seized this moment in history and forced us to wonder what, and if, the public really is. And if we call into question what a public is or might be, what, then, does it mean to create and enact pedagogies in the interest of publicness?*

*As a means of conceptualizing the present moment, we take up the term **apocalypse** for its signification of ruin and the collapse of a particular historical assemblage, as well as for its etymological origins as an **unveiling**, a revelation of the cruel metaphysics working beneath placid ontologies. Berger (1999) claims that our social order is comprised of a decidedly post-apocalyptic milieu. Within this space, Berger identifies the cultural traumas of such events as the Holocaust and the Gulag as primal scenes of the breakdown in the narratives of modernism. Whereas these narratives once posited an arrow of human progress, one foisted via industrialization and technical enhancements and heading towards an enhanced moral, ethical, and decidedly human existence, the ends wrought by these historical traumas, their repercussions and repetitions, and—most importantly—their reframings and denials, serve as a reminder of that project's structural and narrative failings. Berger writes,*

Apocalypse and trauma are congruent ideas, for both refer to shatterings of existing structures of identity and language, and both effect their own erasures from memory and must be reconstructed by means of their traces, remains, survivors, and ghosts; their symptoms. Post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them. (p. 19)

Thus Berger argues that, in terms of the narratives of history and identity we are offered, the apocalypse has already come to pass, and we, like Nietzschean last men [sic], are left to pick through the representational dust and echoes, piecing together these remaining, still smoldering scraps and collectively suturing them into a history that elides the Real scene from which it is wrought. Thus, while we agree with Berger's (1999) characterization of meaning as a piecemeal corpse of sorts, we alter his theorization to argue that instead of being post-apocalypse, we are now living daily life in the midst of apocalypse. The mid-apocalyptic is a space that announces the end not as an event, but a process, one that cannot be adequately articulated via such causal language as beginning or end. In such a rethinking, the Holocaust and the Gulag do not lose their significance, but rather they shed the colonial reliance on distinctly Westernized notions of civilization and civility's failures. Instead, the Holocaust becomes a genocide among genocides, one whose horrific scope and perversely scientific undergirdings cannot be ignored or understated, but that must be situated as an historic event that serves as an exemplar in the long history and future of the apocalypse.

Applying these ideas to the moment of COVID-19's ravaging of global health and economies; the re-legitimization of nationalist, supremacist, and fascist politics in the ascent of Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, and Morrison; the encroaching environmental crisis, heralded by the angels of drought, brushfire, and ever-rising tide; and the ongoing denigration of intellectualism, scientific reasoning, and common sense under the feet of a glibly self-gratifying populism; the term apocalypse seems neither overreaching nor alarmist, as all of these events certainly have the capacity to bring about the world's end. However, as in our reworking of Berger's theorizations, these dis-

*courses are not, as popular sentiment would suggest, effects of the year 2020. Rather, we contend that the rationalization of 2020 as a temporal epicenter of the apocalypse is both ahistorical and a marker of economic, spatial, racial, and gendered privilege. The disasters we described above are not discrete manifestations brought together by the happenstance of history; rather, they are instances of processes and machinations that extend deep into capitalist history and ideology. We are in the middle of multiple apocalypses that have always been with us. **2020 is not the year the world ended; it's the year White people noticed.***

*The public, then, has to be considered a particularly significant space for study, as its idealized state is wholly composed of the very species of interaction that these churning apocalypses enervate. But, turning to apocalypse as a sign of the **unveiling**, the public, too, has been stripped of its varnish, revealing—again, largely only to those who could afford ignorance—that it is also a fragile latticework of smoke and embers. Within the United States, public institutions such as national and state health systems rapidly collapsed under the weight of COVID-19, as their classist, sexist, and racist bones were cast into the broad light of day. As Savage (2010) realized, the idea(l) of the public as a truly common, democratizing space fails to account for the multiplicity of publics individuals experience and are allowed/forbidden to inhabit. For example, in Victoria, Australia, public housing lockdowns and mandatory testing as a response to COVID-19, which purported to be in the interest of the public good, were revealed as racist and classist, and echoed the same moral panics that have been created throughout history as fear of the ‘Other’ rises (Zevallos, 2020); Whiter, richer suburbs were not subject to the same surveillance and punishments. And in the United States, our sense of being in **public** bears little resemblance to the public George Floyd faced in his last minutes of life or its abject repetition across the lives of Black peoples across much of the Western(ized) world. These collective misrecognitions of the public have now come into sharp focus, unveiled via exposure to/from the baleful, unyielding **light** of our many apocalypses.*

*The ideas we hope to include within this issue should center on a fairly simple proposition: what do we do now that we know? Whereas our collective apocalyptic exposure certainly reveals a dire state of reality, it has also served as a call to resistance in the form of activisms, emerging ecological consciousnesses in the face of the Anthropocene’s end, and the growing visibility of mutual aid networks as alternate **publics** to meet the needs of minoritized peoples. As such, we call for both empirical and theoretical papers focusing on the multiple effects of this exposure, both in terms of what has been revealed and how we might create publicness from the ruins. Further, we seek work that describes how public spaces are produced and/or enacted, that problematizes the often taken for granted assumption that publicness is always an ethical enterprise, and/or that examines **the process of public pedagogy** and implores us to reflect critically on our roles as public educators beyond the academy.*

Under the sign of exposure, and in the light of mid-apocalypse (Berger, 1999), we set out to see what the pandemic had uncovered. We almost immediately settled on the rising prominence of QAnon, a collection of conspiracy theories that locate Donald Trump as the Campbellian hero (Beres, Remski, and Walker, 2021) in a Manichean struggle against a leftist, cannibalistic cabal of pedophiles¹. Part of our decision to take up such decidedly charged subject matter emerged from our prior work on paranoid pedagogies (Sandlin and Wallin, 2018) and conspiracy theorizing (Burdick, 2008, 2018), but we were also vexed by the efficacy of QAnon in penetrating contemporary popular and political publics, as well as our initial suspicions that QAnon moved *pedagogically* across both internet and identity, enacting a public pedagogy that, in many ways, has been far more successful than most critical movements, formal or informal. With these suspicions, we began our own process of exposure, digging

into conspiracy literature and history, as well as the fascinatingly abject spaces from which Q emerged and, to some extent, remains.

This article serves as an overview of our year in the apocalypse, outlining, albeit briefly, where this year has taken us. This piece serves as a starting point for a series of papers, all of which will take up the concepts and findings herein in a more robust, detailed fashion. We frame this work as an exploration of the emergence and “conspiratorial pedagogies” of QAnon, and our hope has been to understand how QAnon’s growing presence is historically rooted in prior, largely racist and antisemitic conspiracies; how QAnon’s conspiratorial style works as form of “public pedagogy” that normalizes and mobilizes white supremacist ideals; how QAnon’s post-truth stance—which includes a rejection of science, history, and established facts—has challenged the possibilities for critical educational dialogue; and how QAnon’s embrace of right-wing extremist ideologies has impeded movements for justice and equity and threatened democratic ways of life. Our research over the past year has employed multiple data sources and both humanities-based and humanistic social science research, including an historical analysis of conspiracy theories and how they have influenced and given shape to QAnon, and a netnographic inquiry into QAnon’s online culture. Our initial hope was to utilize this research to develop curricular and pedagogical strategies for higher education to better address and counter the rise of QAnon via deeper understandings of how conspiracy theories teach, how they spread so readily despite their outlandish claims and premises, and what they offer individuals in terms of understanding the world and their place in it. However, based on our findings (as described in this paper), we have shifted this final goal toward discerning how *critique*, as the lingua franca of critical academic discourse, is structurally homologous to conspiracy logics, as well as how we, as critical educators, have helped produce both the tools of and conditions for the rise of epiphenomena like QAnon.

Part Two: The Problem of Conspiracy

The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization. He constantly lives at a turning point. (Hofstadter, 1964, para 29)

A wealth of prior scholars of conspiracy (Hofstadter, 1964; Jameson, 1991; Kellner, 2002; Mason, 2002; Melley, 2008; Willman, 2002) have suggested that conspiracy theory is deeply woven into American understandings of citizenship and political agency. In spite of its appeal and seeming logic (particularly given this moment in history), however, this analytical frame has also been met with extraordinary scorn. A public intellectual in his own right, Hofstadter (1964) argued that conspiracies are a fantasy of the populist masses, one that he labeled as a “paranoid style,” with full, admitted weight given to the pejorative nature of that term. In his foundational 1964 piece, Hofstadter posits understandings for the origins of conspiratorial belief that transcend their historical location:

. . . the modern right wing . . . feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners as of old but major statesmen who are at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high. (para 20)

Hofstadter's understanding of the relationship between ideology and conspiracy is, admittedly, seductive, as it remarks on what feels like the modern conspiratorial crisis in surprisingly cogent and specific ways. However, as Sedgwick (2003) has noted, Hofstadter's articulation suffers from its own internally divisive logic, suggesting that the Right (who were actually ascending at the time of the publication of Hofstadter's essay) alone participates in paranoid phantasmagoria, yet Left-leaning conspiracies (particularly around the Kennedy assassination, which was undoubtedly a large part of the cultural moment in which Hofstadter wrote) are not difficult to locate. Moreover, the association of conspiracy as a populist discourse seemingly ameliorates some subset of (ostensibly liberal) elites from the wages of the paranoid style, establishing, presumably, Hofstadter and those who agree with his ideological, epistemic, and ontological proclivities as the arbiters of *reality*, disabused of the wages of frustration, paranoia, and conspiratorial thinking within this position.

That said, much of the scholarship regarding conspiracy theory in the 20th and 21st centuries serves as extensions of Hofstadter's (1964) condemnation of conspiracy theories as pathological, populist fantasies of the elite Other. For example, Jameson's (1988) critique of the conspiratorial, while less dismissive, also views conspiracy thinking as an impoverished approach to understanding cultural and social relations—what he calls “poor cognitive mapping,” a move that, as Melley (2002) argues, works to *a priori* invalidate the beliefs, experiences, and discourse of anyone deemed to be a *conspiracy theorist*. Neither of these critiques offers space for interrogating the historical, epistemological, and ontological foundations of conspiratorial pedagogies, and both cast the conspiratorial as a pathological issue, rooted in individual, rather than social, psychoses. Further, they provide no understanding of how conspiracy theories like QAnon work, how they spread so readily despite their seemingly untenable claims and premises, and what they offer audiences in terms of understanding the world and their place in it. To understand these aspects of QAnon, we draw from more recent work of cultural studies scholars (Butter, 2020; Fenster, 1999; Hustins and Orr, 2007; Knight, 2000; Melley, 2000, 2012) who have called for more nuanced inquiry into conspiracy theory as a manifest political disposition that responds, however errantly, to oppressive modes of knowing and being.

As Knight (2000) rightly asserts, one central issue within Hofstadter's (1964) articulation of the paranoid style rests in the incorrect attribution of conspiracy theory as a politically minoritized position. Given the benefit of history, it is clear that the conspiratorial has risen to a central, even dominant position within both formal and cultural politics. Both popular and political culture in the United States have embraced conspiracy, with clear zeniths occurring during the multiple U.S. political assassinations of the 1960s, the events of 9/11/2001, and the current *mélange* of far-right conspiracies continuing to emerge from the ruins of the Trump presidency. In contrast to these positions, Butter (2014) argues that conspiracy theories were more popular and influential in the US before the middle of the twentieth century because they were then considered orthodox knowledge—a sentiment echoed by Butter and Knight (2020), who state, “earlier historians did not analyse conspiracy theories and their impact on history, but articulated conspiracist interpretations of history themselves” (p. 28). Thus, according to Butter and Knight (2020), conspiratorial thinking is not the domain of the paranoid, the cognitively impoverished, or the politically minoritized; it is part of the fabric of history, and thus, culture itself. This embedded, historical nature of conspiracy theory is particularly apparent within the *omnibus* nature of QAnon, whose ontology draws clearly from the antisemitic trope of blood libel that originated as early as the 12th century. Within QAnon, the corpus of conspiratorial history becomes solid—a space from which to legitimize claims of cabbalistic, child-eating politicians and philanthropists. We agree with Butter and Knight (2020) that approaches like those of Hofstadter and Jamison fail to recognize the

imbricated nature of conspiracy within the political and cultural imaginary of contemporary politics. As such, the critical approach that seeks to delegitimize and dismiss conspiracy theorists ignores the nature of our own (to include both Hofstadter and Jamison) rootedness in an epistemic distrust of power and belief in subrosa metaphysics.

Part Three: Into the UpsideDown

Reading across these texts helped us develop a robust and historicized understanding of how QAnon pedagogically produces and reinforces beliefs and identities characterized by a distrust of authority and a xenophobic, often violent worldview. However, this process left us with a sense of aporetic unease around the tension between academics who study conspiracy theory and individuals who believe in and mobilize these theories. After all, we, too, are funded by conspiratorial logics hidden under their academic name: *Theory*. At this juncture, we took up Jackson's (2017) call toward "thinking without method: forgetting method, starting in the middle, and being receptive to chance encounters" (p. 673). We reinvented the academic as the conspiracy theorist, which allowed us to see a symmetry across the work of conspiracy theorists and critical academics. We developed the idea of the "UpsideDown" to describe how QAnon has taken up processes such as research and theorizing as well as aspects of discourses such as feminism and critical pedagogy, but in ways that contradict the fundamental ethic and beliefs historically undergirding these concepts and processes. The UpsideDown is more than a mirror image—it is a perversion of these theoretical concepts that reterritorializes them as a politically inert technology of dismissal and defusal. Below, we briefly describe three examples of QAnon UpsideDown moments.

Bread from Crumbs: UpsideDown Inquiry

First, QAnon (see endnote 1 for a more extensive explanation of QAnon) conducts research and inquiry practices that center on distrust of news media and scientific discourses due to those sources' purported clandestine ideological, economic, or spiritual commitments and the biases these commitments entail. From 2018 until the 2020 US Presidential Election, the flow of knowledge within the QAnon community followed a predictable path—"Q" would make a text post to an anonymous image board (often called a *drop*), typically consisting of cultural references, names, numbers, or dates—all vaguely referencing the basic QAnon beliefs and the impending "storm" of arrests to be made by Trump. Anons (as Q believers refer to themselves) would then take the *crumbs* of the drop and begin to *bake* it, trying to decipher the meaning therein via deep engagement with text and context, often interpreting linkages between the content of the drop and the actions of key political figures. This process of *baking* takes on a radically communitarian approach, with Anons working across the globe to produce meaning, and from this meaning, political, identificatory, and ideological decisions. This *research* process exists as a point of pride for Anons: it represents a form of epistemic agency within a world they find overrun with "fake news" from the mainstream media, evidenced in Anons' frequent suggestion to "do your own research."

Although the *research* QAnon followers conduct begins with the central belief that a global cabal of murderous politicians controls the flow of power in the world, the methods they utilize to decode media sources are exceedingly close to the practices left-leaning academics label as critical media literacy. And, although an easy dismissal of this practice would be to assail its highly speculative and exceedingly unlikely premise, such a move would also mirror the right's dismissal of utopian concepts like Marxism, which in its own right, promises a utopian end of history if the masters of production are overturned. This similarity does not end with Marx, however. Lacan (2008), to take a perhaps extreme example of near-impenetrable theoretical discourse, has claimed that "the end of my teaching is, well, to train

psychoanalysts who are capable of fulfilling the function known as the subject, because it so happens that it is only from this point of view that we can really see what is at stake in psychoanalysis” (p. 43). Lacan has also famously described his writing and teaching as things to be *struggled* with—a meaning that is won, rather than received. Taking these two pedagogical approaches together, we can surmise that Lacan’s understanding of the proliferation of his own theoretical contributions and teaching revolves around producing independent subject-agents who are capable of achieving meaning from difficult, even intentionally cryptic, texts. Moreover, learning in this way produces “subjects” who can immediately put this meaning to work towards a shared goal. In practice, then, how does Lacanian *teaching* differ from what is asked of bread-baking Anons? Further, given that Q’s drops can read as follows, as a mixture of vague inspiration, leading questions, and little undergirding rationale, the onus of both producing a coherent narrative and acting according to that narrative’s purported meaning is certainly on the Anons.

Q !!Hs1Jq13jV6 ID: 6599d9 No.10619905 4685
Sep 12 2020 13:47:18 (EST)
Ehu7LRLVKAkhCQ.png

PENNSYLVANIA CHANGE IN REGISTERED VOTERS	
SINCE NOVEMBER 2016	
DEMOCRATS	-91,567
REPUBLICANS	+75,281
INDEPENDENTS	+42,035

PA
PENNSYLVANIA SECRETARY OF STATE
FOX NEWS

MSDNC CON: the Country is divided and dementia Joe [currently taking early-stage dementia medication?] is leading across-the-board.
HOW DO YOU AMPLIFY A DESIRED THEME-NARRATIVE?
MSDNC controls what you see [digital echo].
Twitter - FB - GOOG control what you see and what trends [digital echo].
Hollywood ['stars'] swarm to enforce ['trend' echo].
Blue checkmarks swarm to enforce [digital echo].
ANTIFA swarm to enforce [non_digital echo].
Rage and emotion follow by those indoctrinated [echo controlled].
Define 'indoctrinate'.
to often repeat an idea or belief to someone in order to persuade them to accept it
Next: grab 'rage & emotion' [organized platform(s)] by indoctrinated and project as 'majority' [zoom and enhance narrow focus as mainstream].
System of control.
Many choose the path of least resistance.
For many you cannot tell them the truth.
You must show them.
Only at the precipice will people find the will [strength] to change and break the system of control [be free].
Q

Figure 1. Q drop from September 12, 2020, taken from <https://prayingmedic.com/q/>

Bodies and Choices: UpsideDown Feminism

UpsideDown feminism is best exemplified in the use of the slogan “my body, my choice”—an historically ubiquitous rallying cry for the pro-choice movement—as rhetorical strategy against masking and vaccinations during the coronavirus pandemic. Further, prominent Q-Anon-associated congressperson Marjorie Taylor-Greene (2021) has generated several tweets that ostensibly call for “women’s rights,” such as the following:

Laurel Hubbard should be kicked out of the Olympics! He is NOT a woman!! REAL women train their entire lives to compete in the Olympics. Their opportunities should NOT

be stolen by a man with an identity crisis in need of attention. Where are women's rights activists?

Greene's tweet is easily located within the discourse surrounding the Twitter *TERF* (trans-excluding radical feminist) phenomenon, a term that gained notoriety during the backlash to J. K. Rowling's transphobic sentiments on that platform. However, such a discursive move would imply that Taylor-Greene is a form of feminist, a suggestion that is difficult, at best, to reconcile with her vocal pro-life and heteronormative stances. This is the feminism of the UpsideDown—one that operates on a simplified, biologically-based, culturally conservative view of *woman*, but one that affords space within the QAnon universe for what Marc-André Argento (2021) calls the "Pastel-Q" phenomenon and for a central, agentic role for women like Taylor-Greene (as well as the archetype for this role, former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, and other prominent U.S. political figures, such as Representative Lauren Boebert and South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem): strong, confident, and successful women who work to undermine everything other strong women have built.

Bitter Pills: UpsideDown Critical Pedagogies

Finally, and perhaps most striking, are the symmetries between QAnon's espoused belief and mission and the discourse that surrounds the critical pedagogy project. For example, Ira Shor (1992), a luminary in the field, offers the following definition of critical pedagogy:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

Whereas Shor's words likely ring familiar to critical scholars, they also echo the pedagogical import behind much of QAnon's epistemology, only stemming from a divergent value system at the core. The exposure of the true masters of the world, despite the very different *face* these masters wear, is central to both the critical pedagogy project and the beliefs that undergird the growing legion of Anons.

Thus, as these purported pedagogical challenges to QAnon are leveraged, they become only more tendrils of the UpsideDown—technologies that support, ultimately, a racist, anti-semitic, homophobic, transphobic social doctrine. These findings are what ultimately led to our sense of aporia—our realization that the theoretical and critical tools that have been touted as panacea across the conspiracy theory literature via a litany of calls for "more critical thinking" might actually be complicit in transforming QAnon into the mainstream discourse we find today.

Part Four: Apocalyptic Futures, or, Where We Go One We Go All?

A tournament, a tournament, a tournament of lies,

Offer me solutions, offer me alternatives, and I decline.

("It's the End of the World As We Know It [And I Feel Fine]", REM) (Mills and Stipe, 1987)

Following Jackson (2017; Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), we used the questions we found within the UpsideDown as an opportunity to leave the already-known about conspiracy theory and theorists and instead, engage these *data* differently—to look at not what sets QAnon apart from the orthodox discourse of *good education* lauded by academia but to instead consider

what a deeper understanding of conspiracy pedagogy might tell us about how we enact education itself. That is, understanding the ways in which QAnon produces the UpsideDown, despite all of the unmeaning and perversion (Žižek, 1992) this process likely holds for the academic left, involves understanding how critical discourse itself enacts the same divisive logics and adheres to the same unquestionable, relatively theoretical premises. We thus sought a means of reading across both QAnon and critical academia that might allow for a discursive position beyond their shared mode of critique and that might afford us space to engender a response to the growing tide of conspiracy belief that does not simply contribute more arms to an endlessly escalating culture war fueled by a clandestine struggle regarding the *truth* regarding our secret masters (Latour, 2004; Love, 2017).

We turned to the “postcritical” theorizings of Latour (2004) and other scholars (Haraway, 1988; Love, 2010, 2017) who have argued against the central mode of argumentation within academic discourse: *critique*. Within these authors’ collective corpus of work, the common, and highly contentious, thematic is that academic criticism is a largely failed, fundamentally unassailable, and agonistic political project. Applying this to our data around QAnon and our interpretation of their work as parallel to that of academic criticism, the postcritical position adds the urgency of addressing the volatile, conspiratorial present to finding a mode of activism and address that does not fall into the stalemate of an interpretive war funded by incontrovertible premises.

Whereas previous scholarship within the field of public pedagogy, including our own work, has focused on understanding how publics emerge, the rapid ascent of QAnon as an ideological force in American politics has illustrated that the creation of a public is not an inherently ethical proposition. Furthermore, the typical mode of address we found in academic responses to QAnon all traded in the same call for *more critical thinking*—a skill that, we argue, Anons have in abundance and use to construct their analyses of media, culture, and politics. As such our research into QAnon is an extension of research in public pedagogy that illustrates how the production of public spaces operates at an empirical level, complicating prior—largely theoretical—work that uncritically assumes *publicness* and *critique* to be ethical enterprises. In undergoing this project, we have provided a measure of empirical support to Latour’s fundamental postcritical move. We agree that “it is time, [as] Latour declares, to adopt new tools; to move from a spirit of debunking to one of assembling, or from critique to composition” (Anker and Felski, 2017, p. 15).

We believe the various recent QAnon-focused podcasts, documentaries, and other largely non-academic sites of pedagogical address might constitute postcritical public intellectualism. Anker and Felski (2017) state, “[r]ethinking critique can . . . forge stronger links between intellectual life and the nonacademic world. Such links are not simply a matter of capitulation or collusion, but can offer a vital means of influencing larger conversations and intervening in institutional policies and structures” (p. 19). This collaboration, employing what Latour (2004) calls an emphasis on “matters of concern [. . .] whose import then will no longer be to debunk, but to protect and to care” (p. 232) might abandon the wages, antagonistic nature, and insular interests of academic critique towards a pedagogy of care. Seeking not to *expose* QAnon as fraudulent and intellectually insufficient, we might ask more salient and fruitful questions around conspiratorial beliefs and pedagogies, as well as around the beliefs that have tended to furnish our fields.

End Notes

1. QAnon is a far-right conspiracy theory that began in October, 2017, on the internet site 4chan, and its central claim is that Donald Trump and his supporters are embroiled in a clandestine struggle against a “deep state” cabal (consisting of Hollywood elites and high ranking government officials and politicians) who control the mainstream media and are involved in a number of crimes spanning decades, including child sex trafficking and actual cannibalism of said children. Despite these unsubstantiated claims, QAnon has recently become more visible within the landscape of American culture and politics, including entry into mainstream political discourse and Republican candidates’ ideologies. Media Matters tracks congressional candidates, and at least 76 individuals who ran for Congress in 2020 supported Q (Kaplan, 2020). Indeed, Jeet Heer (2020) of *The Nation* declared recently that QAnon is firmly ensconced as the future of Republican politics. QAnon also has deep ties to far-right-leaning groups in at least 71 countries (Farivar, 2020); countries with the largest groups of QAnon followers include Germany, Britain, Canada, Australia, France, Italy, New Zealand, and Brazil (Eisele and Benecke, 2020).

QAnon started as a fringe movement relegated to alt-right and/or meme-oriented image boards, wherein “Q,” the anonymous progenitor of the movement, claiming to be a high-security clearance member of the United States government, regularly posted information that purportedly “unmasks” the work of the aforementioned cabal. However, since its inception, the theory has moved into mainstream belief systems, driven by the wide reach of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. A recent internal investigation conducted by Facebook revealed thousands of QAnon-related groups and pages, with millions of members and followers. Via these growing social media spaces, QAnon has become an increasingly present fixture of Donald Trump’s fanbase at his rallies since 2018 (Sen and Zadrozny, 2020). QAnon is deeply anti-Semitic, racist, and homophobic (McNeill, 2020), and has been implicated in several violent attacks, including the August 3, 2019 mass shooting at an El Paso Walmart that targeted Latinos, killing 23 individuals and injuring 23 others (Gilbert, 2019). It has also been associated with a number of anti-BLM groups—including one in La Mesa, California called “Defend East County”—that arose in Spring and Summer 2020 as a reaction against the nationwide racial uprisings (Dyer, 2020). QAnon was designated a domestic terrorist threat by the FBI (Winter, 2019).

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