

THE TRUTH ABOUT 9/11 TRUTH MOVEMENT: A FOLKLORISTIC STUDY

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Stephanie Singleton

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Conspiracy theories and their socio-cultural impact have been analyzed with great interest by numerous folklorists. Heretofore, these studies have examined conspiracy theory as a specific type of rumor or legend. This includes folklore research that examines conspiracy theories surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States.

Through in-depth interviews and interactions with 9/11 Truth Movement activists, this study explores structural characteristics, content, socio-political functions, and folk beliefs that undergird conspiracy theories and inform their creation. This study concludes that a conspiracy theory is a genre of folkloric behavior. Therefore, methodologies used to study rumor and legend, as well as debunking approaches which carry implicit biases and contextualization, greatly limit the identification and understanding of what a conspiracy theory attempts to communicate and the process by which it informs behavioral responses.

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## **Introduction**

**September 11, 2001**

There are few people who do not remember where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001 when they heard that an airplane had crashed into the World Trade Center. It is one of those surreal moments in time where everything you thought you knew and believed with conviction comes into question. Watching as the Twin Towers crumbled, one knew the world as he or she had known it was gone—*justlikethat*.

I will never forget what I was doing the morning of September 11, 2001 before the first plane hit World Trade Center 2 in New York City. I'll never forget the irony of that day. It was gorgeous outside. My bedroom was flooded with crisp pale gold sunlight. Tree leaves shimmered like chandelier crystals outside the windows, and I watched them dangle elegantly from the knobby coconut brown limbs for quite some time.

That morning my friend Ramon had come over. He had finally gotten a weekday off from work and was overjoyed at his luck to have such a gorgeous day; he was determined to make the most of it. So, there we both sat with the television providing light background noise, trying to agree on how we were going to enjoy the day. We had finally narrowed the choice down to Brooklyn Botanical Garden, Central Park, or South Street Seaport, when suddenly Ramon glanced over to the television and said, "What is that—a movie? Turn the TV up."

We sat there transfixed in disbelief as we listened to the news anchors explain that a plane had crashed into one of the Twin Towers. This was no movie. "How did the pilot

not see that big building that has been there forever? He must have been drunk or on drugs or something.” Ramon was silent for a minute—then, “How are they going to get those people out of the building on the floors above the crash? Oh my God!” We sat there in silence for a while hypnotized by the images we were seeing on the television. I cannot say how much time elapsed as we sat there in silence waiting for the cavalry to come in and save the people in World Trade Center 2 from such a horribly freakish accident.

Then a second plane hit World Trade Center One. Almost on impact, Ramon jumped to his feet screaming expletives, “Did you see that! Did you see that! That’s no accident....” Before he could complete his thought, the news anchor finished it for him by confirming what we now already knew; this was a terrorist attack.

Ramon began talking a mile a minute; I on the other hand, could not speak. Ramon did not seem to notice. We did not know what to do, so we did the only thing we could do at that point—continue to be horrified by the images on television. After some time, Ramon became silent and we sat horribly quiet in the sun-drenched apartment. “Turn to some of the other stations; let’s see what they’re saying,” Ramon suggested. I began flipping from station to station only to find all but the Spanish speaking stations filled with snow. “How come no other stations—oh, oh, that’s right. All of their antennas are on the World Trade Center. Okay so turn back,” he demanded. We listened as the news anchors told us of a plane hitting the Pentagon and one that they believed was headed for the White House but instead crashed in Pennsylvania. This was surreal. “Four hijacked planes? Ramon shouted. “Yo, that’s crazy! Where the hell is the military?”

For the life of me I could not answer him. I could not stop wondering how the sun was still glistening so happily. Ramon's hurried expletives brought my attention back to the television screen just as World Trade Center One began to collapse on itself. There is no way for me to articulate the sense of anger and dread that consumed me in those moments as I thought about the awful and senseless death crushing in on those people. When the second tower collapsed I dropped to the floor on my knees in a fetal like position. Fear, confusion, and despair engulfed me. Ramon leaped from his seat like a rocket gathering his things while shouting, "*IgottagoIgottagoIgotta go!*" over and over.

"Wait! Where are you going? Why are you going?" His only response was he had to go as the front door opened and slammed shut as did the stairwell door soon after. Where in the world was he going? The country was under attack; New York City was under attack. For now, the attacks here seemed to be limited to Manhattan, but who knew if the terrorist had the other four boroughs targeted today as well. Although we were in Brooklyn, it did not necessarily mean we were out of the line of fire. The terrorist could blow up the bridges, buses, trains. Why did he go when we still really did not know what was going on, the scope of the attack, or if, and when the military would be dispatched?

The last thing I wanted now was to be alone. Yet, here I was alone on the floor feeling like I should do something more helpful than crying and listening to the news but not having a clue as to what that something was. The phone rang. Thank God; I really was not alone.

"Stephie! Stephie! Did you see what happened?" It was Liz; I could hear the anger shaking in her voice.



“Oh my God Liz, all of those people.”

“All of those people Stephanie! I am so upset you know because we brought this on ourselves. We keep going into all those countries over there in the Middle East trying to tell them what to do, and they don’t want us over there. And look at this situation between Israel and Palestine you know this is all related to that. We need to mind our business. We brought this on ourselves! Steph, do you know anybody that works in that area?”

Oh, my goodness! How in the world could I have just laid here curled up on the floor crying instead of trying to contact Carol, Deborah, and Mark to see if they were all right? I abruptly hung up from Liz, promising to call her back when I heard from my three friends. I called around frantically. Mark was the first of the three I was able to reach.

I was so relieved to hear his voice. He told me how he was on his way to work and was exiting the Bowling Green subway station when he heard a commotion and saw thick black smoke and debris. He told me how upon seeing such a sight he immediately turned to reenter the subway station when he bumped into a coworker who asked him where was he going and what was happening “up there” on the street. Mark replied he didn’t know what was happening and he wasn’t interested in finding out. He was going home. The co-worker tried to insist that Mark turn around and go to work arguing that if whatever was going on “up there” was a real emergency situation then without a doubt the company would send all the employees home. Mark restated his position and continued into the station. He had been fortunate enough to catch the last number 4 train that was able to go straight through from Manhattan into Brooklyn. It was not until he got

home and turned on the news that he learned what had happened. The next day I asked him if he knew if the Metropolitan Transit Authority (his employer) had let his co-workers go home early. No. They made them stay in the building and work the entire day.

Carol had not been as fortunate as Mark. She had been talking to a co-worker in the office whose back was turned to the window. Carol saw the first plane hit the Twin Tower while her co-worker remained unaware until their whole building shook, the lights went out, and the phones went dead. Shortly afterwards, the building's back-up generator kicked in and restored power, but the phone lines remained down. Carol's boss instructed them to go back to work. Although the phone lines were down, she advised that they could busy themselves with doing some work on the client files. Thinking that the plane crash into the Twin Tower had been a tragic accident, they slowly settled down and went back to work-- that is until the second plane hit the other Twin Tower. That is when they knew these were not tragic accidents--the country was under attack! Still, the boss insisted that they continue to work on the client files. She was not moved by her employees' protests. Carol insisted that she was leaving. Her boss informed her that if she left she was fired. Without hesitation, Carol picked up her purse and headed for the door. Upon seeing this, her two other co-workers mustered the courage to leave as well.

When they reached the lobby, there was pandemonium. The FBI—who has offices on the first floor of their building—had locked down the building refusing to let people leave. People were frantic demanding that they be let out of the building. As fear and panic escalated and threats of breaking down the doors rang from the throng, the FBI decided to allow the people to exit the building.

The streets were filled with chaos. People were running, screaming, through thick black smoke as debris rained down upon them. Disoriented, Carol tried to get her bearings. She was midway between two subway stations: Wall Street and Fulton Street. Instinct told her to go to the Wall Street train station. It was a good call in some respects. By going to Wall Street she caught the last number 4 train to leave Manhattan for Brooklyn. It did not make it. The train got as far as the tunnel that links Manhattan to Brooklyn when it stopped, and shortly thereafter the electricity went out. They sat in that dreaded dark tunnel wondering what was happening above ground. In that eerily quiet darkness, they sat for some time before they heard the thunderous apocalyptic collapse of World Trade Center 2. Of course, they did not realize at the time that the horrific sound was the demise of 2 World Trade Center, Carol explained. All she knew was that it sounded like the world above them had come to an end. The passengers on the train remained quiet and in the dark. After what seemed like forever, transit crews led the passengers through corridors of several disabled trains, and then along the train tracks through the remainder of the tunnel to the first subway stop in Brooklyn: Borough Hall.

Carol was terrified as she ascended the subway steps: terrified of what she might find when she emerged. What had happened in the time that she was stuck in the tunnel? Had there been more attacks? Had Brooklyn been attacked? Was it being attacked now? When she reached street level she found downtown Brooklyn in chaos. It appeared that folks in downtown Brooklyn knew something had happened—some type of attack, but they didn't know who, what, when, and how. Many people made frantic attempts to duck and dodge the many planes that now swarmed the Brooklyn skies; they had no idea if

those planes represented friends or foes. Carol hurriedly boarded an awaiting bus and arrived home over three hours later from the time she had left Manhattan.

Deborah had been engaged in her morning ritual when she saw the first plane hit the towers. She had come out of a shop near King Street with her cup of coffee, sat on a bench, and lit a cigarette. As she sat there enjoying a few minutes of down time before going into the office, she saw the first plane hit one of the Twin Towers. She was shocked that such an unusual and unfortunate accident could happen. She and others who were also relaxing on the benches went upstairs to their offices for a closer look. When she reached her sixteenth-floor office on King Street, her coworkers were helplessly looking out the windows at this unbelievable accident.

The moment the second plane hit they all knew it was not an accident. Deborah and many others began screaming and crying. They watched as some of the people on the floors above the fire line waved for help from the windows while others jumped to their deaths. Deborah's heart sank as she watched people continue to wave for help. She knew their cries were futile; they were done. There was no way they were going to be rescued. The people on the floors beneath the fires would be the only ones who would have a chance at survival. Deborah swore no one, absolutely no one, in her office ever expected the towers to collapse. "Those buildings just evaporated. I mean they just fell in on themselves. I didn't know skyscrapers didn't fall over. Once they began to fall, I thought they were going to topple over, and I was really hysterical then because those buildings would take down other buildings for blocks. But they just fell in on themselves. What kind of engineering is that?"

After witnessing the collapse of both towers Deborah went into the stairwell and cried like a baby. It was like she felt the spirit of those people killed in the collapse. A song of “We Are All One” kept swirling in her head. When she could partially collect herself, she walked home. It took her hours to walk home. She cried most of the way. Through her tears she saw that all the liquor stores she passed were packed, including the one in her neighborhood where she stopped to make a purchase. She had needed something to help her manage the pain and trauma of witnessing the murder of almost 3000 people. She cried for them for a month.

I was relieved of sorts that the people whom I knew that worked in the area of the World Trade Center were alive, but I was still tormented by the plight of my fellow New Yorkers. Hundreds of people were scrambling to join almost never-ending lines to use a pay phone. People were desperate to call loved ones and let them know they were alive and fine or they were calling to check on loved ones who lived or worked in the area to see if they were alive. I’m sure many more were calling hospitals frantic—hoping to find the whereabouts of a family member or friend. The news had stated earlier that practically no one had cell phone service; it had something to do with the satellites once the planes razed the towers. I was glad I had a landline and could still talk with people to break up the monotonous repugnancy of watching one television channel showing mass murder in a continuous loop.

Still, I just felt so lost, like the explosion of the planes blasted me into purgatory. The silence in the apartment was echoing off the walls and the whole space took on a texture of bareness. The sunshine continued to flood the apartment almost mockingly. It created this eerie calm—the kind that envelopes one in cemeteries and mausoleums.

Days later, there would be that same eerily quiet calm in lower Manhattan near what was now called Ground Zero. Usually, the streets would be bustling with people and tourists, shopping, trying to choose from a plethora of restaurants in which to dine while street vendors hawked food and other wares. The traffic would be the usual bumper to bumper with horns blaring, people swearing, and yellow cabs skillfully weaving through traffic in a mad dash to get passengers to their destination so they can pick up another. Time is money, especially in New York City—in Manhattan. The New York minute is a living and breathing organism in the city: fast, fast, faster, go, go go—people, cars, animals, insects, businesses, duties, responsibilities, life all continued, but death had slowed the New York minute with its cacophonous bustle to a low moaning dirge, especially in the areas surrounding Ground Zero.

One could not hear the traffic and the noise. The smell of over 2,000 burned and decomposing human bodies hung in the air deafening everyone. God, that smell! It was so strong, so invasive. It assaulted your nostrils, your mouth, permeated the fibers of your clothes, the folds of your handbag, rode for blocks with you in your car, and soaked into your body through your pores. Your brain cells reeked of senseless sudden death. New Yorkers carried that stench of death and that eerie quiet calm for months. I don't know why the media began calling the place where the Twin Towers had once reigned the Manhattan skyline, Ground Zero. Why use such a euphemism for a mass grave and crime scene?

What had it been like for the people who felt the hot breath of death on the backs of their necks as they were trying to escape the Twin Towers through plumes of smoke

and blackness? Maybe it helped them to know that they were not going to have to face death alone.

Since September 11, 2001 there is not a month that goes by that I do not think about Deidre and what her last day on earth was like. She, Carol, and I had met in floristry school. Afterwards, Deidre attended culinary school and became a chef. Eventually, she was hired to work at Windows on the World; it was her dream job to work in such an upscale establishment. Windows on the World was located almost at the top of the North Tower on the 107<sup>th</sup> floor. Once the plane hit that tower, there was no way to get to the lower floors and out of the building.

Her fiancé had heard nothing from her. The last time he had seen her was that morning when she left for work. No one had heard from her since. He, her mother, and other relatives had called around to all the hospitals hoping to find her alive, but nothing. Weeks later, finally, reluctantly, we had to accept that Deidre was gone. She was gone and there was no funeral to go to, no last words, or flowers to send, no funeral program to place in a bible or other place for safe keeping—just this awful silence.

For a long time, I kept wondering what her last moments were like. Did she leave her station in an attempt to make it down the stairs and out of the building? Did she try to call someone to say goodbye? At what point did she realize that she was not going to make it out of that building alive—that she was not going to be rescued and what did she think about, who did she think about in that moment? Did she huddle with other employees and patrons and pray? Did she have someone's hand to hold? God, what must that have been for her to hear the rumbling of the other floors above her collapsing one

by one: to hear her death coming closer and closer with no possible escape. When those floors came crashing in on her and all the others, was her demise immediate? I always, always, always hope so. I hate to think that she suffered, buried alive under tons of rubble, hurting, bleeding for hours or days praying for death amidst the painful, pitiful groans of others trapped around her. I hope that day she was shown a modicum of mercy and perished immediately. But I don't know, and that's what haunts me—that silence, that absence of wake and funeral arrangements: that absence of a body, her physical presence—proof that she had been here and had been somebody to many people who knew and loved her. Nowadays, I try to just think about our time at school together, how we used to cut up in class, and our many conversations, but the other thoughts about her last day on this planet are always in the background.

Later in the afternoon my daughter came home from school and my brother came home from work. Their arrivals prompted other discussions about the attack. As soon as my daughter walked in the door from school her first question to me was, “Ma did you hear what happened.” What a question I thought. How could I not have heard and seen what happened?

The rest of the night continued with phone calls from family and friends each sharing their experiences, thoughts, grief, and concerns about the events of the day. I never shut off the television. Later that night there was a bomb scare at the Empire State Building. My whole digestive tract knot itself in panic. “My God, they are going to bomb all of Manhattan—every landmark, every skyscraper,” I thought to myself. The television showed people and first responders running from the area. Fortunately, it turned out to



be a false alarm, but nobody was taking chances. Finally, with the television on, I fell asleep.

I barely slept that night. I don't think anybody did. I tossed and turned; it was a choppy sleep. In the morning, the one available English speaking television station was still on and still running yesterday's attack in a loop. The new anchors this morning didn't look like they had slept either—anxiety and disbelief evident in their voices.

What had happened yesterday was starting to sink into Americans, into New Yorkers. Less people were tongue tied with shock. People were buzzing, talking, loudly awaiting and harboring expectations of what the government's response would be. Where time had seemed to stand still yesterday, today it began to move so fast the days just seemed to run together, so I am not really sure of the chronological or sequential order in which the following events happened; I just remember them happening.

The loop of the Twin Towers collapsing, pancaking on themselves was now rotated with human interest stories of survival and heroism. There were also other images of hundreds of people putting up flyers and photos of loved ones asking anyone with any information on the whereabouts of the person on the flyer to contact a number below. Lamp posts, buildings, business windows, community bulletin boards, bus shelters, you name it and it was covered with these types of flyers. It was unsettling to see so many faces of the missing, especially when you knew that most of the people on those flyers were lying underneath the ruins of the Twin Towers. I don't know, maybe the folks posting the flyers knew that too, but they had to do something; they had to have hope. You just saw loved ones and friends of the missing wandering the streets in a daze,

wandering from hospital to hospital searching and hoping. I cannot describe how disturbing these images are. It was like New York City had become purgatory in which New Yorker's were sentenced to wander in a daze of fear, uncertainty, and disbelief—searching for a lost loved one.

It was unsettling to walk outside to go to the grocery store or the bank or to catch the bus and see these flyers plastered everywhere. There was not a neighborhood, no gated community, no affluent background, or position that granted one immunity from these flyers: from the faces of the dead, someone's mother, father, daughter, son, husband, wife, partner, child, and the horror they suffered, and the pain of their families. It was like living in a ghost town. I tried not to look at these flyers because they were so disturbing to my spirit: partly because of the raw emotional pain and desperation they displayed and partly because it was very likely that I knew some of the people on those flyers hung in my neighborhood, and I just didn't want to deal with that information. I could barely handle Deidre. Thank God, she had lived in the Bronx. I just could not have handled seeing her face on one of those flyers.

Now there were other images on the news: people who had survived the attack in the Towers. People described how orderly and helpful many of the people were as they descended the steps of the World Trade Center to freedom. While it was interesting and comforting in a way to hear the stories of survival and resilience, especially, considering how many people did not make it out of the towers, I was still disturbed by the images of the people on television. They were practically all white. I couldn't believe it. As of 2000, there were 8,008,278 inhabitants of New York City; 2.80 million were identified as

white non-Hispanic making them 35% of the population of New York City (New York City Department of City Planning).

Why were the images of the victims and people suffering and affected by the terrorist attacks only of white people? Where were the stories of the other 65% of New Yorkers? We were looking for our loved ones! We had worked in the Twin Towers and had died in the Twin Towers! Deidre died in those Towers! We had survived the attack on the Towers! We were in pain and shock. Damn it! We lived in this city too! There was only one English speaking channel available in all of New York City— if you did not have cable, which I didn't—and it was not reporting on how the attacks affected **all** of New York City!

Even in the aftermath of terrorism, we didn't matter; our stories didn't matter. Our lives, our pain, our deaths, didn't matter. The only lives that were important were those of white people. Only their stories and pain were newsworthy. I was not the only one who had noticed the television "brown out." My friend Puma, who is bi-racial Native American and African American noticed too. When I called her, we spoke about it. She didn't understand my shock and surprise at our absence in the mainstream media. "Come on Stephanie!" she said. "You know we don't matter and our lives are expendable! You may just want to turn off the T.V. so you won't be more upset than you already are."

I did not turn off the television, but I did change the station to channel 41 which is the Spanish speaking station and I saw us; I saw people of color; I saw white people; I saw the **real** New York City. I really could not understand all that was being said but that was not so important. The images communicated the pain of loss, grief, and shock. I saw people of color who had survived, who had helped others to make it out of the Twin

Towers. I saw people of color express their concerns, hopes, wishes and opinions. It was refreshing and it was necessary for my psyche. Later, when I spoke to my friend Myra, who is a Latina, she told me that she knew a lot of non-Spanish speaking people who had turned to Channel 41 to watch the coverage for the very same reason I had.

I imagined the mainstream media coverage of New York City was probably experiencing the same “brown out” in other states. Hence, a few days later I could not figure out why white New Yorkers were very concerned that African Americans did not seem to be “with them” in the pursuit of justice and retribution for the terrorist attacks. They were concerned that they did not see African Americans wearing American flag pins or flying flags in front of their homes and neighborhoods as a show of support. They were so concerned that Al Sharpton was interviewed to reassure them that African Americans were indeed “with them.” Mark and I talked about this later. Mark stated:

Of course, they’re nervous and want to know where we stand and if we’re with them, because they know we have every right not to be with them. Now you know how they treat us, and we live here right here with them, so you can imagine how they treat black and brown people in these Middle Eastern countries. That’s why they came over here and did what they did. I’m not saying what they did was right. They killed a whole bunch of people who had nothing to do with what the government is doing to their people over there.

But right now, I am not concerned about whether they [white people] think we are with them or not. I am worried about us and our communities. They claim these hijackers were supposed to be Muslims from the Middle East, so you know they are going to be profiling and coming after Arabs, and that scares me. The police, FBI, ATF, and whoever else they can get will be coming after these Arabs. Arabs own a lot of businesses in our communities, and they are not like other ethnic groups that have stores in our communities.

The Koreans and the Indians (East) may have stores in our neighborhoods, but they don’t live here. But the Arabs live here with us; they live right above their stores. So, this makes me very nervous because we already know the police don’t care about our lives. Our lives are worth nothing to them. So, can you imagine if they start coming after these Arabs how many more of us will be killed in their search for terrorists in our neighborhoods. That’s what I’m worried about:

not to mention that many of our people are Muslims and they're targeting Muslims too.

Mark had a point and people in black communities all over New York City were expressing some of the same concerns. One of the few times CBS showed people of color was a segment featuring reporter Pablo Guzman who asked an elder black man playing dominoes (I think it was dominoes) his feelings about the attacks. The man's reply sounded like Liz's statements to me earlier. What did we expect? We were in these other countries doing all sorts of things and these people were retaliating. Pablo Guzman was astonished. He could not believe what he had just heard. After a momentary pause to collect himself, Guzman asked the man if he really believed that. The man affirmed that he did and casually returned to playing dominoes.

I think it was the next day that I was sitting next to a black man on the train as I was going to school and he had a copy of the New York Daily News in his hands. The front-page headline had a picture of the Twin Towers aflame and the number of people who had perished in the attack. The man kept looking at the front page and the headline while shaking his head. Finally, he turned to his friend and said, "That ain't right. I understand why they did it, but dang man that just ain't right." His friend, another black man, silently nodded in agreement. Weeks later, a statue honoring first responders was unveiled; there was an uproar from many white first responders who argued that the representation of a black and Latino firefighter in the statue was not historically accurate and should not be installed until it was corrected. Yet, folks wanted reassurances that people of color were "with them" even as they continued to demand our obliteration from history and from reality.

A few days later, when Christine Todd Whitman of the Environmental Protection Agency announced that the air in lower Manhattan was safe, many New Yorkers thought the Environmental Protection Agency was lying long before Joanna Walters of the *Guardian* reported the EPA admission that it had done so (September 10, 2016). It was just plain common sense; you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know better. There was no way the air could be safe. All of that pulverized concrete, glass, wood, bone, flesh, chemicals, asbestos, and other materials were now tiny particles floating in the air. A *New York Times* article by James Glanz and Andrew Revkin states that one of the Twin Towers themselves had contained asbestos (September 18, 2001). A month later, *New York Daily News* reporter Juan Gonzalez writes that asbestos and other airborne toxins were in the air at alarmingly excessive rates (October 26, 2001). Moreover, the smell in the area alone was enough to let anybody know the air quality was poor and unsafe.

On street corners, buses, and trains you could hear people talking about the Environmental Protection Agency's finding. Many people even joked about it saying that soon black folks would be able to afford to live downtown in lower Manhattan because the white people would be too afraid of terrorist attacks and all of that "bad air" and flee to areas where blacks and Latinos currently lived or flee to New Jersey. The rents would be forced to come down and landlords desperate for tenants in their empty buildings would woo blacks to lower Manhattan. Although people joked about it, they felt they were joking about something that could possibly happen.

Many people, myself included, also felt that the real reason the EPA was lying about the air was because to have said otherwise would probably have meant that the people who were living and working in that area would have to be evacuated. That was a

scenario the government didn't even want to begin to deal with. The government was not willing to spend the money to evacuate that many people and compensate them for their losses, and where would they relocate all of those people, and for how long would they have to do so? No, it would just be easier to lie and say the air was safe.

The day I saw the PATRIOT Act (Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act) being brought out to congress, I knew that document had been in existence long before September 11, 2001. It was a mountainous document, and there was no way it could have been written within days of the attack regardless of how many people and interns had worked on it. Worse yet, I knew no one in congress had time to read it and they were going to sign off on it anyway even though they were practically clueless as to what it contained. This was not going to be good. I sat in front of the television for several minutes trying to figure out a possible reason for the PATRIOT Act existing before September 11, 2001. Then I just let the thought go.

There were other things that caught my attention like the reports of Osama bin Laden being the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks and images of Palestinians in Palestine celebrating the attacks on the United States. The stories about Osama bin Laden ran in an endless news loop. He was rich; he hated Americans; he masterminded the attacks, and he was believed to be somewhere in Afghanistan getting refuge from the Taliban as he operated Al-Qaeda. So, there it was. We were going to war in Afghanistan, although I could not figure out why we weren't also going into Saudi Arabia since that is where 15 of the 19 hijackers were said to have been Saudis. Yet, there was no discussion about Saudi Arabia.

There were other areas related to this attack that did not make sense to me. Why would anyone say to a flight instructor that he only wanted to learn how to fly a plane but not learn how to land it and that flight instructor not think something was suspicious and then subsequently agree to such instruction? I also thought it was amazing, fantastic even, that in all the rubble, jet engine fuel, fire, and people running and trampling over everything, that Mohamed Atta's passport survived and was found. The *Guardian's* Anne Karpf was just as amazed as I was. (March 18, 2002).

I still didn't have a satisfactory answer from the government or the media as to why a third building, World Trade Center 7 fell on September 11, 2001. And, what was with this color-coded alert system? It just seemed so pointless to me. We already had an alert system—the Emergency Broadcast System alerts that periodically conducted test alerts on radio and television. I could not see the point of the colors; it just seemed so dramatic and overdone. New York was on orange alert which was the highest alert. What did that mean exactly? What were we supposed to do with this orange alert? Were we just to have a heightened sense of awareness? Was it to make people aware that New York City may be a prime terrorist target? Well, we already knew that. What was the point of an orange alert if it was not attached to a plan of action? Were there underground shelters to be built all over New York City in every borough and county so that when an orange alert was sounded we could run to our nearest shelter? Were we going to be given locations to board buses so we could evacuate the city? Was there going to be some protocol given as to what and where we needed to gather and what we needed to bring to await further word from officials? No, there was no talk of such things: just the fear surrounding the declaration and continued maintenance of an orange alert.



Orange alert meant that while you were riding the subway, the conductor would periodically instruct passengers to be aware of any unattended bags or packages and report them. These announcements served to maintain a sense of fear and create a sense of distrust among passengers. Between the ubiquitous missing person flyers, looped media coverage of mass murder, talk of an axis of evil, the smell of dust and death as you moved through lower Manhattan, and Middle Eastern looking people being overly nice and accommodating as they shrank from eye contact to avert being personally attacked, you just could not get away from the feeling of drowning in the surrealism of it all.

It just seemed like everybody was absorbed with blaming, defending, and being scared, but nobody was questioning. Nobody was questioning war except Congresswoman Barbara Lee. Not enough people were questioning the profiling of Arabian looking people or Muslims. Nobody was questioning whether terrorists were born or created and if U.S. foreign policies and actions in foreign countries played in the creation of terrorists. Nobody was questioning the PATRIOT Act and what it would mean to our civil liberties really and just how long would it be in affect—**and**, what exactly it contained? It seemed for each of these issues, no one was steadfastly questioning all this except some so-called conspiracy theorists who called themselves the 9/11 Truth Movement. However, the demands and responsibility of providing for my family consumed me as it did for most people; I and many others shelved our questions and concerns and instead got on with the business of trying to make a living. Now you know where I was physically, geographically, and emotionally on September 11, 2001. There are some things you just don't forget.

I do not remember exactly where I was or what I was doing when I first heard the conspiracy theory that 9/11 was an inside job—a false flag<sup>1</sup> attack staged by the United States government as a pretext not only to go to war for oil and other big corporate interests, but as a way of revoking the civil liberties and constitutional rights of Americans to usher in a New World Order. I had been hearing rumors and alternate theories surrounding the attacks of September 11, 2001 almost since the attacks occurred. There was much anger among some New Yorkers who felt and still feel that the attacks happened because of the United States government’s unwavering and unquestioning support of Israel regarding the Israeli Palestinian conflict. I remember being on email lists that posted messages stating that the Jews who worked in the Twin Towers were told to stay home on September 11, 2001. Then there was Amiri Baraka’s (2003) poem, “Somebody Blew Up America” with verses that read: “Who knew the World Trade Center was going to get bombed; Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers to stay home that day; Why did Sharon stay away?”

When this rumor came about, I really wasn’t surprised. It simply expressed the frustration and opinion that many people have about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is not a subject many people feel they can broach or question without being labeled an anti-Semite, but such a rumor and its implication can express such opinions anonymously, shielding folks from the label and stigma of anti-Semitism.

However, the rumor that Jewish people were told to stay home on the day of the attacks implies a conspiracy was afoot—that somebody knew of the attacks and could have possibly prevented them but let them go forward to aid a political agenda. Similar

narratives alleging Mormon-Mossad-CIA agents as the real perpetrators of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks were also circulating (Wallace, 2009).

There were rumors that Mexican immigrants who had been hired to assist in the retrieval of human remains and clean-up of ground zero along with professional first responders (police, and firefighters), were not given any protective gear: not even inexpensive surgical masks. There were already reports that many of the people working in Ground Zero were developing a particularly menacing type of cough. Then, a Mexican first responder, Rafael Hernandez, a volunteer fireman who volunteered to clean-up at ground zero, died; the medical examiner determined that his death was a result of natural causes and many people doubted the validity of the medical examiner's finding and suggested it was part of a cover-up. (Associated Press, January 6, 2012). Some people felt there was no way the government was going to admit to the people who were working and volunteering to clean-up ground zero that they were doing so at the expense of their health; the government did not want to pay for anyone's lifetime of health care.

Furthermore, for the government to acknowledge that the environment was not safe at ground zero, it would also have to admit that the air was not safe either and then they would have a responsibility to safeguard and provide medical attention to all the people who lived and worked in that area, and they wanted no parts of that.

News reports were swirling that the government had been warned about the attacks in a Presidential Daily Brief. Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney led the charge with her infamous question, ““What did this administration know and when did it know it, about the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>” (Nichols, 2002)? This was a question that

harkened back to the Watergate hearings when Senator Howard Baker Jr. asked, “What did the president know and when did he know it” (Neuman, Raab, 2014)?

Other rumors claimed that the war on terrorism was a ruse because the government had not closed the Canadian and Mexican borders. Could not potential terrorists just walk across or drive across either one of these borders? It just didn’t make sense to people that if there was so much fear of terrorist attacks in large metropolitan areas, on the water supply, and at nuclear plants, why wouldn’t the borders be closed? Now this served as “proof” that something suspicious was afoot!

The rumor and conspiracy theories gave voice to concerns and frustrations that I believe are always boiling in folks and in society just below the surface, but political correctness, and the attitude of going along to get along, among other things, keep these feelings veiled. However, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the subsequent events opened old political wounds and tensions: socio-economic, political, racial, and ethnocentric. Many people did not trust George W. Bush and had felt he—with the help of his brother Jeb Bush and a complicit Supreme Court—had cheated his way into the White House. He was not someone to be trusted. He was not viewed as someone who had earned his way to the presidency; he was not president-elect but president-selected.

In addition, some felt that the administration was too secretive and that there was not enough transparency. Far too many people felt that the administration had evaded many of the questions posed by various congressional committees regarding its decision to ignore warnings of impending attacks illustrated in one of the presidential daily briefings. Overall, there was a distrust of government and the feeling that the people’s

desire for answer and the people's will was not being heard or even considered by the government. The rumors and conspiracy theories brought these issues to the surface.

The rumors and jokes about blacks and poor people possibly being courted to occupy apartments in lower Manhattan because the environment would be unsafe speaks to racial and socio-economic tension present in the society. The unease of whites when they felt blacks were not with them and the reactions to that from people I know spoke volumes to the racial tension that are always just below the surface in America overall.

### **How I Became Interested in 9/11 Truth Movement**

Somewhere in between all of this I was channel surfing and saw a 9/11 Truth Conference; I think it was on C-span. There was a man named Alex Jones speaking at a podium, and I saw several other people seated behind him on a stage. I think I stayed on that channel for all of three minutes and then continued surfing. I didn't think any more about it.

At some point, I came across the film *Loose Change* which proffers that 9/11 was an inside job and that controlled demolition razed the Twin Towers. There was so much buzz about it on the internet; it seemed like everyone was talking about it. Then I remembered the symposium I had caught a glimpse of on C-span and started looking for it in their online library. Then, I started hearing about Scholars for 9/11 Truth and I began to peruse their website regularly. I was intrigued and fascinated. People were asking what I felt were good questions and demanding a new investigative commission, demanding the truth. Many of these people were scholars, academics, researchers, engineers, pilots, scientists, people who could not be readily dismissed.

In 2008, I attended a 9/11 Truth Symposium hosted by Students for 9/11 Truth in Keene, New Hampshire. As soon as I entered the building, there was an array of vendors selling books, DVDs, tee shirts, buttons, and other merchandise. I brought a button from a vendor that says, “Poverty is a weapon of mass destruction.” I love that button, and I still have it. From the same vendor, I brought a shirt that he said he ordered from Germany. The shirt has a picture of the United States on it in red, white, and blue complete with stars and stripes modeled after the American Flag. Above the image are written the words, “U.S. World Domination Tour.” Underneath the image of the United States are the words, “Coming to a country near you,” and underneath that statement is a list of many countries the U.S. has invaded or bombed. I thought it interesting that he said he orders the shirt out of Germany. It implies what some Germans and whoever designed that tee-shirt think of the foreign policy of the United States: Imperialist.

There were roughly eight to ten vendors there. They all had information sheets and pamphlets regarding questions about 9/11 and “facts” from the official version that are viewed as not being probable or possible. I picked up several of those. What I found most interesting was that there were legitimate copies of the *Loose Change* DVD being sold on one table that was next to a table that sold “pirate” copies of the DVD and pirate copies of other 9/11 truth DVDs made by other organizations within the movement such as “Blue Print for 9/11 Truth” produced by Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth. No one seemed to have a problem with copyright or intellectual property issues. In fact, the activists expressed the point that all the DVDs was to disseminate the information and stimulate discussion so that people could “wake up” and demand the truth from the government as to what really happened on 9/11. The goal was not to make money. In

fact, myself and other symposium attendees were encouraged to make copies of the DVDs and just give them to family and friends or just pass them out to people. As a graduate student who had been taking courses discussing issues of intellectual property and copyright infringement, I was surprised to find that neither of these seemed to be an issue within 9/11 Truth movement. I have since been to other meetings, gatherings, and conferences sponsored by organizations within the movement and have found that this is a wide spread practice. It is the dissemination of information that is important: not so much to convince or convert people to any one 9/11 conspiracy theory but to get people to at least think about it and ask questions.

Once inside the symposium there were about 100 people, and most of the attendees appeared to be baby boomers. I found this to be an interesting development, but then I thought about it. This is the generation that lived through several catastrophic events. This generation witnessed the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, Civil Rights Movement, The Black Power Movement spearheaded by the Black Panther Party, COINTELPRO<sup>2</sup>, Women's Liberation movement, the Vietnam War, and the Hippies. They lived and were a part of many social and political upheavals and rebellions, and saw the murder of several influential leaders who promised or seemed to have had the potential to exact even more radical change. One by one these leaders were assassinated leaving a plethora of questions, uncertainty, and suspicion in their wake.

I remember a woman I worked with, who is a baby boomer, asking me what my dissertation was on. I told her 9/11 Truth Movement. "What's that? What do they do, she asked? So, I explained and gave her an example of one of the popular conspiracy

theories in the movement which is that 9/11 was a false flag attack—hence the government brought down the Twin Towers using controlled demolition as a pretense to enact the PATRIOT Act and engage in wars in the Middle East. Her reply was, “Oh that’s interesting. I had never heard of this [conspiracy theory] or 9/11 truth movement, but I could believe that. We never got the truth about Kennedy, or King, or Bobby Kennedy, or the Vietnam War for that matter. I had never heard of 9/11 Truth Movement, but I could certainly believe that.” I have found this same sentiment among many baby boomers within the movement.

There were several speakers at the symposium. I heard several variants of 9/11 conspiracy theories from various speakers. There was the theory of 9/11 as a false flag operation orchestrated by the United States government, and that the Twin Towers and Building 7 were brought down, not by the planes as we were told by officials but instead by controlled demolition. This appears to be the most popular theory within 9/11 Truth movement—a MIHOP (make it happen on purpose) theory; this conspiracy theory is often truncated and quickly expressed as “9/11 was an inside job.”

Another conspiracy theory postulated by Daniel Hopsicker (2005), author of *Welcome to Terrorland: Mohamed Atta and the 9/11 Cover-up in Florida*, states that one of the Saudi Arabian hijackers, Mohamed Atta, was a drug runner and that the attacks of 9/11 were the result or retribution for a drug deal gone bad between the United States and Saudi Arabia. This “drug deal gone bad,” is similar to the President Ronald Reagan Administration’s illegal deal with Iran to sell them weapons in exchange for drugs in order to fund the Contra guerillas in El Salvador; this event became known as the Iran-Contra Scandal or Contragate.



Speaker Michele Little charged the government with covering up the health hazards and debilitating health of first responders and people cleaning up Ground Zero. Many people at the site had developed respiratory illnesses that they had not had prior. The speaker and her organization were fighting to expose the cover-up and force the government to provide compensation and healthcare for those affected. She said something very interesting during her presentation; she and her organization were not focused on whether 9/11 was an inside job or not, or if it was a drug deal between two corrupt governments, or if any of the LIHOP (Let It Happen on Purpose) theories were correct. Indeed, she and her organization felt the truth needed to be uncovered, but that was not their focus. They were solely focused on exposing the cover-up surrounding the health issues suffered by Ground Zero first responders, and the alleged conspiracy to prevent their obtaining medical and financial compensation from the United States government.

Bob McIlvaine spoke at the symposium. His son had been killed in the Towers and he was not convinced that the government version of the 9/11 attacks was the truth. He wanted answers. He wanted to know why there was no military response that day. He wanted to know why the Bush Administration had not paid attention to a Presidential Daily Brief (PDB) which warned that terrorists might use airplanes as bombs. He wanted to know why once the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the government realized that these four planes had been hijacked, a protocol for hijacked airplanes was not implemented, and why no one on that day seemed to know what the procedure was for handling a hijacking situation? He wanted to know why no one was seriously investigating the stock trading/stock puts of the airlines involved in the hijacking? There

seemed to be some questionable trading and there were some people and corporations who profited handsomely on the tragedy of 9/11; but most of all, Mr. McIlvaine wanted to know what really happened to his son that day and who was responsible.

Then one of the last speakers was Sander Hicks (2005), author of the book *The Wedding: 9/11, the Whistle Blowers, and the Cover-up*. He said something that surprised me a great deal. He called the government's official account of the events of 9/11 a conspiracy theory! It was like a jolt of electricity had struck me in the chest and traveled kundalini style to my brain. I visibly bristled. Hick's proclamation literally shocked me. I had never heard anyone prior to that point call the government's account/narrative a conspiracy theory. I had heard people call the government's account a flat out lie. That didn't shock me, didn't make me stop and hold my breath. There was something about using that phrase to refer to an "official" account that was much more serious, deliberate, and even dangerous about a government creating a conspiracy theory than there was with the government just lying. I'm not sure if Hicks meant *conspiracy theory* in the pejorative or neutral sense, but it seemed to me that his tone suggested the pejorative. Of course, in American popular parlance, conspiracy theory is usually pejorative code for a false, paranoid, irrational, intellectually deficient, or just plain crazy belief. My reaction surprised me so much that I had to really question what it was about his calling the official version a conspiracy theory that had taken me aback. It was not as simple as it being the first time I heard someone refer to the official version of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as a conspiracy theory. I was at 9/11 Truth symposium for Pete's sake; why would such a statement shock me like that? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the cause of my surprise that I had I never even considered that the government

participated in the creation and transmission of conspiracy theories, and it was so obvious that they did. Probably the quintessential example was McCarthyism, and more recently, the contention that Saddam Hussein allegedly possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Why had I not considered this before?

This led to another question—can most people identify a conspiracy theory when they hear one or can they only identify one when an item of information has been labeled as such? Is it only when we hear the label “conspiracy theory” that our conditioning and acculturation direct how we cognitively process or dismiss information labeled such?

This is an important question, because if we can only identify conspiracy theories if they are labeled as such, then it is imperative to discover who has the power and authority to assign that label. If the conspiracy theory label serves as a socio-political reference cue, does it trigger a culturally “normative” behavioral process for how a conspiracy theory is to be cognitively, socially, and politically managed? It is important that we understand not only what is being communicated by the conspiracy theory, but also the process by which this phenomenon initiates and informs behavioral responses. I am suggesting that the conspiracy theory is a genre of folkloric behavior.

Everyone possesses and utilizes folklore. Hence, Hick’s presentation and labeling of the government’s official account as a conspiracy theory inspired my interest in exploring why hypotheses and theories made by the general citizenry were referred to as conspiracy theories while theories generated by government officials, authorities, and mainstream media were not. The genre of conspiracy theory is an issue of power and control. Those who have the power to label an account as conspiracy theory attempt to control public discourse on that issue or situation. Once something is labeled a conspiracy

theory by those in power, it is dismissed from the mainstream public discourse—discredited as the ravings of those who are not rational. Hicks’ use of the phrase made me wonder if the general citizenry could ever obtain that type of power. Can the general citizenry somehow make conspiracy theory a neutral phrase that simply refers to a theory about a conspiracy? If this is possible, then a conspiracy theory would be evaluated on the amount of proof that one could produce and not automatically be ignored and cognitively processed as pejorative code. I wondered if this was one of the aims of 9/11 Truth Movement.

Later, Hicks said something else to shed light on the development of the beginning of 9/11 Truth Movement. He noted that there was a meeting among several grassroots organizations that have become 9/11 Truth Movement. They had come together to form a united front. Various organizations and groups held competing theories about what they think really happened on 9/11. There had been much debate and division amongst the groups regarding these theories. They came together to form a united front because the division was hampering the movement’s efforts to get the truth about what happened on 9/11. They decided to unify around one belief they could all agree on; the United States government had not told the American people the truth about what really happened on 9/11. According to Hicks, after that meeting, the movement seemed able to move forward as a unified front. That was the one thing they all wanted—the truth, whether it was about the air quality at ground zero, what made the Twin Towers collapse, why the military did not intercept some of the planes before the collisions and a plethora of other questions and concerns. All these and other questions would lead to discovering the truth about what happened on that day.

I also learned at the symposium that there is a 9/11 literary canon suggested to “newcomers” or people who were just starting to question the official version of events or were curious about learning more. Certain books by specific authors were suggested. The canon varies slightly depending on which conspiracy theory is being supported.

What was particularly striking about this 9/11 symposium were the ways in which many of the questions and concerns expressed by 9/11 Truth Movement correlated with the fears, concerns, theories, and rumors circulating in many neighborhoods in New York City shortly after the attacks. There was deep distrust of government and official accounts seemed to suggest that the government either MIHOP or LIHOP. (Make It Happen on Purpose; Let It Happen on Purpose). For example, New Yorkers accusing the Environmental Protection Agency of lying about the air safety and Michele Little whose main concern is to expose the government cover-up about the toxicity of Ground Zero, and help the first responders whose health has been affected mirror the same distrust of government.

The remarks of my friends Liz and Mark that United States imperialism and empire building and the rumors and conspiracy theories suggesting that Jewish people/Israeli government had foreknowledge of the attacks, speak to the tensions in the United States surrounding the country’s foreign policy in the Middle East and the treatment. Similarly, Hopsicker’s theory, which is reminiscent of Contragate, not only implies a failed United States policy in the Middle East but also that the United States government is corrupt.

Bob McIlvaine's concerns about Wall Street's profiting from stock-puts placed on the airlines that were hijacked, ties into a "profits over people" mentality that many Americans accuse Wall Street and multinational banks of being guilty. This "profits over people" motif is expressed in the personal narrative accounts of Carol and Mark in which their employers insisted that all workers remain at their desks and continue to work in spite of their close proximity to a terrorist attack. There were numerous news reports that even after the first plane hit World Trade Center 2, many workers were told to remain working at their posts and assured that the Twin Towers were made to withstand such impact and therefore, they were safe: reminiscent of the unsinkable Titanic, many workers were made to believe the Twin Towers would not collapse. Just keep working, and everything will be fine.

A few months later I attended another conference called Conspiracy Conference—Con-Con for short. It is given every year in Santa Clara, California. The conference had no plenary session and is not limited to 9/11 Truth issues and concerns. However, for the past several years a high profile 9/11 Truth Movement activist does a presentation. The organizer for the conference gave a disclaimer that the organizers were not making claims to the truth about any of the information being presented but that they encouraged conference attendees to listen to the information, evaluate it, do their own research if they wished, and make up their own minds. I also noticed at this conference that most of the conference participants appeared to be baby boomers.

The conspiracy Conference had presentations on UFOs, Depleted Uranium and its effects on American Soldiers, the Black Pope, Nuclear Arms race hoax, the unconstitutionality of the IRS and several other topics. It seemed like there was

something for everyone and every interest. In other words, there was a conspiracy theory for everyone. It really was an interesting conference which lasted two days at the Marriott Hotel. During lunch and in between presentations, I spoke with other attendees. Conversations ranged from people talking about how and why they became activists in their cause. Others gave their opinion on some of the presentations and the apparent quality of the research and scholarship. Some people attended Con-Con every year and commented on how the turnout fared with that of last years or the year before. Others suggested books and DVDs people should look at to get a sound background on certain issues. When it came to 9/11, I was referred to many of the same books that I had been referred to at the Student Scholars for 9/11 Truth Symposium. People exchanged their evaluations and analyses of the information included in certain books and DVDs and on certain blogs and websites. Names of authors whose scholarship and work were credible and why it was credible were given. In other words, they evaluated and determined what indeed was a credible source and why.

There were also vendors at the conference who sold books, tee-shirts, bags, DVDs, buttons, and other items. I found both the symposium and the conference intellectually stimulating. I found the theories and the people fascinating, and most of all, I found them to be ordinary regular everyday people. No aluminum foil hats or social isolationists. They were activists. They were doing more than just complaining around the dinner table to their family and friends about the direction of the country and their concerns about what it all meant to democracy, civil and human rights, in the United States. What did it all mean for the future of their children and grandchildren? They felt they were actively involved in doing something about it all. They were trying to “wake

people up” get them to think and question. So many of them came to symposiums and conferences to educate themselves and bring information back to share with others. They seemed highly organized and purposeful for a bunch of so-called paranoiacs.

The one burning question you probably have at this point is do I believe 9/11 was an inside job or any alternative theories that contradict or question the official version of events? Well, the jury is still out on that. I’m not convinced 9/11 was an inside job; however, I am not so sure about the government’s official version of events either. What I do believe is that in a democracy people have the right to question authority and demand answers. In fact, it probably is imperative that we do so for democracy to exist. I also believe that we must examine how those who question authority are labeled and how labels can be used to shut down public discourse and discourage questioning of authority (ies). I also believe that we hear conspiracy theories all the time from both official and lay sources but are unable to identify them if they are not pre-labeled as such.

### **Outline of Study**

The question this study seeks to answer is what exactly a conspiracy theory is? To study an item, apply methodology and speak to its function socially, politically, culturally, both emically and etically one must be able to identify the item whether it is labeled or not. If an item is only examined in the instances where it is pre-determined then that item has not been adequately examined; there is an information deficit and lack of full understanding of how the item functions and what communicative and behavioral processes it initiates and directs.



Currently when folklorists and scholars from several other disciplines study conspiracy theory, conspiracy theories are termed *conspiracy legends* or *conspiracy rumors*, or *rumor*, *legend*, and *conspiracy theory* are used interchangeably. This practice also suggests that even academics are grappling with defining and identifying the genus of conspiracy theories; are conspiracy theories rumors or legends: a subgenre of one of the aforementioned or a different genre with similarities to rumor and/or legend?

Several folklorists have published studies on folklore that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks. The peer reviewed journal, *Western Folklore*, dedicated an entire issue to research conducted by Diane Goldstein, Kay Turner, Carl Lindahl and Peter Burger. Goldstein (2009) explores rumors and legends that circulated in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom that expressed concerns about censorship, secrecy, and suppression. Turner (2009) explores traditions that memorialize the ephemeral. Lindahl (2009) examines how adults heal from traumatic events by uniting an imagined experience with the actual memories from the event. Peter Burger (2009) analyzes post-9/11 gang rape legends in the Netherlands.

Janet Langolois (2005) examined rumors claiming Arab employees at a Middle Eastern restaurant in Detroit celebrating the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Rosemary Hathaway (2005) 9/11 pictorial jokes circulated on the internet. Bill Ellis (2001) examines how the suppression of 9/11 humor impacts healing and coping processes. In 2002, Ellis extensively documents post 9/11 humor. Sylvia Grider (2001) studies the creation of shrines at locations of tragedies and disasters. While folklorists have published numerous studies on 9/11 there has not been a study about 9/11 Truth Movement until now.

This study will begin by looking at the history of the use of the phrase *conspiracy theory* in the United States. This is to establish if the phrase was originally coined as pejorative code and if not when it became such and possible reasons why it did. The second chapter gives a brief history of the academic origins of rumor studies and a brief description of contemporary legend. This examination compares and contrasts these genres of oral literature, the methodologies used to study these genres, and the efficacy of these methods.

The third chapter is a brief literature review of some seminal works on conspiracy theory and how political crises shaped the way conspiracy theories are culturally viewed and academically studied. The political crises that informed the perception of rumor during World War I and II resemble crises that later transform and frame the culturally accepted behavior and academic study of conspiracy theory.

Chapter Four gives a brief background on the 9/11 Truth Movement and offers several excerpts of interviews and brief oral histories of members of 9/11 Truth Movement, and an analysis of collected data. Chapter Five then includes analysis of the data collected in the and suggests methodologies for the study of conspiracy theory and highlights those characteristics that distinguish conspiracy theory from rumor and legend and thus, argue conspiracy theory as folklore genre.

## Notes

1. False Flag. “A political or military act orchestrated in such a way that it appears to have been carried out by a party who is not in fact responsible.” (*English Oxford Living Dictionaries Online*. [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/false\\_flag](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/false_flag), accessed July 7, 2017).
2. Many in 9/11 Truth Movement assert that the official account claiming that 19 Muslim terrorists executed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 is indeed a false flag; this false flag was used a pretext for war and the accompanying destabilization of the Middle East, and the enactment of legislation curtailing the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens. The PATRIOT Act is an example of such legislation. The “9/11 was an inside job” and controlled demolition conspiracy theories assert the United States government and or other actors are responsible.
3. COINTELPRO. “is an acronym for the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program, which was used in the 1960s to monitor, manipulate and disrupt social and political movements in the United States. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black Panthers, anti-Vietnam War activists, and the American Indian Movement were among the program’s targets.” (“COINTELPRO.” Democracy Now. <https://www.democracynow.org/topics/cointelpro> accessed July 7, 2017).

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s website, the agency implemented COINTELPRO in 1956 to disrupt subversive groups in the United States including but not limited to: The Communist Party, Socialist Workers Party, Ku Klux Klan, Black Panther Party, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (“FBI Records: The Vault.” <https://vault.fbi.gov/cointel-pro>. Accessed July 7, 2017). COINTELPRO consisted of numerous covert operations that employed illegal and unconstitutional tactics. Consult

the above listed resources and The National Security Archive at <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/.com> for in depth examination of several COINTEPRO operations.

## **Chapter One**

### ***Conspiracy Theory: History of Usage***

There have been many studies of conspiracy theory heavily influenced by historian Richard Hofstadter's (2008) seminal essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Hofstadter coined the phrase "paranoid style" to describe the use of conspiratorial narratives to frame political issues, influence public opinion and control the public discourse. Hofstadter's equation of conspiracy theory and conspiratorial thinking in politics with the psychological pathology of paranoia has led many academics to conclude that those who believe in conspiracy theories suffer from excessive anxiety, fear, delusion, irrationality, and inability to cognitively grasp the complexity of social, cultural, and political tensions that converge to create unusual historical events. This generally accepted diagnosis directs and limits the examination and methodology applied to the study of conspiracy theory and theorists. To this effect historian Robert Alan Goldberg (2001) writes:

Hofstadter's highly influential essay fixed scholarly attention for a generation, and in the hands of journalists helped fashion popular stereotypes of the conspiracy theorists. [...] Conspiracy theorists were marginal men and women whose personality disorders caused them to project their problems, status, grievances, and wounds into public affairs. Richard Hofstadter's influence is still apparent at the start of the twenty-first century. (ix).

Hofstadter's influence is apparent and appears to still dominate conspiracy theory studies, but new approaches have begun to emerge. Jack Bratich (2008) lists the three patterns of approaches to the cultural study of conspiracy theory: descriptive, historical relativism, and paranoia within reason. Bratich notes that the descriptive approach has been the most widely used. In this approach, the narrative form and rhetorical

characteristics are identified and examined before an exposition on the irrationality of the text is offered (17). Historical relativism asserts confirmed conspiracies of the past create a populist sentiment of doubt and suspicion. However, proponents of historical relativism always illustrate the implausibility of such beliefs (17-18).

Finally, there is the “paranoia within reason approach,” which asserts that a seemingly Orwellian Big Brother with its proliferation of surveillance and tracking technology render the belief in conspiracy theories plausible (18). Bratich writes: “What’s missing in the literature [scholarly works on conspiracy theory] is an analysis of the institutions and discourses that come to be obsessed with conspiracy narratives, or what Keith Goshorn in a review essay calls ‘anti-conspiracy’ discourse” (18). A folkloric behavioral study of conspiracy theory, such as the current study, would be yet a fourth approach to the study of conspiracy theory.

There are few studies of conspiracy theory that focus on conspiracy theorists and the intersectionality of conspiratorial beliefs with core beliefs regarding United States culture, identity, histories, as well as the beliefs and values of smaller folk groups: family, community, ethnic group, gender group, religious, and spiritual groups. In short, the conspiracy theory text has been analyzed to a fine level of granularity while the narrators, creators, and believers of the text have largely been ignored.

Moreover, many academic studies do not address the intertextuality of conspiracy theory texts with other texts and folkloric items. Such approaches and examination practices of conspiracy theory have but slightly increased understanding of the social, cultural, economic, political factors and mechanisms involved in the processes that create

and inform conspiracy theory texts which in turn inform human behavior within and outside of conspiracy theorist folk groups.

The tentacles of conspiracy theory texts wrap themselves around numerous folklore texts such as legends and mythologies concerning the creation of the United States of America as the beacon of the world, the city on the hill, populated with exceptional persons favored by God: an ideology that is the core foundation of identity in the United States and therefore, determines exactly who and what is “truly” American. Unlike many other countries where nationality or one’s national identity is solely a matter of where one was born, being an “American” is predominantly ideological. If one does not behave in the culturally accepted manner that suggests he is an adherent of American ideology, one can quickly become un-American—an “other” even if one was born in one of the fifty states. Seymour Lipset (1996) writes:

Other countries' senses of themselves are derived from a common history. Winston Churchill once gave vivid evidence to the difference between a national identity rooted in history and one defined by ideology in objecting to a proposal in 1940 to outlaw the anti-war Communist Party. In a speech in the House of Commons, Churchill said that as far as he knew, the Communist Party was composed of Englishmen and he did not fear an Englishman. In Europe, nationality is related to community, and thus one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however, is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth. Those who reject American values are un-American. (31)

It is this “other” and the activities of the “other” that are the concern of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories in America (United States) also tend to speak directly to whom and what—regarding behavior---is “truly” American.

In *Folkloric Behavior: A Theory for the Study of the Dynamics of Traditional Culture*, Hasan El-Shamy (1967) states:

Folklore can be defined as a class of learned traditional responses forming a distinct type of behavior. The individual must undergo the psychological process of learning to acquire the responses of folkloric behavior, and this learning process occurs under conditions determined by social and cultural forces. (i)

Using this definition as a point of departure, El-Shamy examines various psychoanalytic, behavioral, and learning theories and their application, or lack thereof, in folkloristics. The study ends with two case studies that demonstrate the application of several learning and behavioral concepts illustrated in the work.

El-Shamy's thesis argues that culture, and therefore, folklore is learned (acquired) behavior. Thus, folklorists should endeavor to understand the processes and mechanisms through which folkloric behavior is developed, maintained, and stabilized before examining the folkloric text itself. Moreover, folklorists should first examine and determine social and cultural factors related to folkloric responses prior to examining the response. Social and cultural factors shape the form and structure of folkloric texts; any change in these factors will inform folkloric texts and responses.

According to El-Shamy, folklore has largely ignored the role of social and cultural factors and the process of social learning in the stabilization of traditionality and continuity of folkloric materials. Such disregard was largely due to the widespread acceptance of biological determinism, undoubtedly influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection.

The phrase *conspiracy theorist* is often used as pejorative code that defines such people as having failed to evolve cognitively, intellectually: the backward, uncivilized, and unstable people in society. This perception of conspiracy theorists and conspiracy



theories assumes that conspiracy theories usually only emerge from a particular demographic—especially, when we consider that in the current popular American parlance, *conspiracy theory* is usually assigned to any account that counters “official” accounts; therefore, the backward, irrational, paranoid folk are the ones who create and believe conspiracy theories.

This Darwinian influence in the study of conspiracy theory has stymied the identification of cultural, social, and political factors that facilitate the formation, transmission, belief, and stability of conspiracy theory texts and why such theories assume particular content, language and Byzantine-like structures. Moreover, this influence in methodological approaches inhibits understanding of how conspiracy theories function, why such narratives enter the public discourse, and equally important, how Americans are acculturated to cognitively process those narratives labeled as *conspiracy theory* and the socio-political impact? If one has acquired the attitude or belief that conspiracy theorists are crazy, backward, and unevolved, then there is no impetus to delve into such questions, because conspiracy theories arise from those who are organically and biologically deficient.

However, a folkloric item, such as a conspiracy theory, represents a unit of worldview; moreover, a belief in a conspiracy theory is one belief within one’s person systems of belief. Therefore, interaction with the people and folk groups that produce or adhere to a conspiracy theory text and other folklore texts of which there is a dialogic is critical for understanding why and how conspiratorial beliefs are embraced. The beliefs expressed and advocated in conspiracy theory texts form a worldview that adherents use

to locate themselves within the larger national culture which gives them license to clarify and reinforce, ideologically, what it means to be an American.

The investigation of the dialogic discourse and intertextuality of various narratives is critical to identifying how secondary drives (social and cultural drives) and cues act as stimuli for the formation, transmission, and labeling of conspiracy theories in addition to determining their structure and content.

Mainstream socio-political cultural cues teach Americans how to interact, evaluate and categorize narratives. “The drive impels a person to respond. Cues determine when he will respond, and which response he will make” (El-Shamy, 64). “Cues guide a response by way either of perception or of action to a situation, though it may not itself be clearly discriminated” (El-Shamy, 61). This is an important point because many conspiracy theories express concern about the possibility of one not being able to satisfy both primary and social drives. For example, conspiracy theories about the elite 1% and oligarchs controlling production and access to resources needed for survival such as Monsanto controlling much of the food supply, billionaires owning aquifers, multinational corporations outsourcing jobs, and a police/surveillance state directly express concern on a possible future inability to readily meet one’s primary drives/needs. Furthermore, the idea that primary drives/needs may be difficult to meet causes agitation and frustration within the culture as people begin to feel they have little agency in their government and creation of laws and regulations to protect their lifestyle, communities, and ability to meet their needs.

The phrase/label of *conspiracy theory* elicits certain behaviors, images, and conditioned responses. In today's current culture, it is not a neutral phrase; indeed, the label carries negative connotations relating to conspiracy theory narratives and its adherents. In other words, when we encounter the label "conspiracy theory," pre-existing social and cultural factors (cues) determine or condition our response to narratives labeled conspiracy theories and people who espouse its premise. Is it the *conspiracy theory* label alone that deems a belief narrative implausible, paranoid, and irrational? In other words, is it possible that we hear conspiracy theory narratives daily and cognitively process and categorize them differently from conspiracy theory narratives that are readily identified as or with the "conspiracy theory label?"

Thus, an examination of conspiracy theory must begin with the question, "What exactly is a conspiracy theory?" At first glance, the answer seems obvious, but a closer examination may suggest otherwise. The legal definition of conspiracy states, "A combination or confederacy between two or more persons formed for the purpose of committing, by their joint efforts, some unlawful or criminal act [ . . .]" (TheLawDictionary.org). Regarding the use of the phrase *conspiracy theory* in popular American culture, philosopher David Coady (2006) writes that conspiracy theory has come to mean any alternate theory that counters the official version of events (2). The assumption in this definition is that the official version---an account of an event given by government and mainstream media authorities---is **never** a conspiracy theory.

This point brings us back to Hofstadter's essay which largely illustrates the use of conspiracy theories or the "paranoid style" as used by government authorities and mainstream media. Hofstadter illustrates use of the paranoid style by Adolph Hitler in

Germany and by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the United States (7). Indeed, the goal of Hofstadter's essay was to clearly define and describe not only the structure but also the rhetorical and symbolic language employed in the paranoid style so that the general public could readily identify it and nullify any disastrous results. However, over time, Hofstadter's "paranoid style" seems to be solely ascribed to members of the general citizenry which suggests governments, mainstream media and other authorities are not creators and active bearers of folklore—in this case, the oral narratives known as conspiracy theories.

However, Linda Dégh's (1994) *American Folklore in the Mass Media* is an extensive study on the reporting of rumor and legend in the mainstream media as news, when indeed these folkloric items were largely unsubstantiated pieces of information. In *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*, folklorist Bill Ellis (2000) has written prolifically about American mainstream media's reporting of satanic cult murders as actual real-life tragedies that had occurred, when in fact such reports were contemporary legends—which means that many of the accounts were not 100% factual verified accounts. Contemporary legends, like rumor and conspiracy theory, may not be entirely false and may contain kernels of truth.

Since it has been demonstrated that government authorities and mainstream media can also be active bearers and transmitters of rumors, legends, **and** conspiracy theories, why and how has conspiracy theory become pejorative code for irrationality, exaggerated and illogical falsehoods, paranoia, fanaticism, and craziness **solely** exhibited in the narratives of some members of the general citizenry? Although Hofstadter clearly illustrated the use of conspiracy theories by authorities, he nonetheless used a phrasal

euphemism to describe the phenomena—paranoid style. One wonders why Hofstadter chose to create a phrase as opposed to flatly describing the paranoid style as conspiracy theory or conspiratorial style. One possible answer may be that the phrase conspiracy theory was not always taken as pejorative code. Hence, this folkloristic behavioral approach to the study of conspiracy theory will begin with a brief history examining the meaning of the phrase in the United States.

Folklore is communication that conveys meaning and information to its folk group (community, society) regarding culturally, socially appropriate and community approved behavioral responses. The creation, transmission, cognitive processing, and other responses to folklore are all instances of behavior. Our perceptions, responses, and reactions to conspiracy theory narratives, or simply hearing the phrase *conspiracy theory* are part of a set of learned behaviors. As El-Shamy points out, if one does not exhibit the behavior deemed appropriate by one's folk group, then one risks punishment or ostracization from the group. Punishment and ostracization are negative reinforcement used by the folk group to correct one's behavior (12). Thus, the punishment/negative reinforcement for belief in conspiracy theories can include ostracization in addition to rendering one un-American, un-patriotic, or paranoid "other" or all three. In any of these three instances one is relegated to the status of "other" and outside of the acceptable parameters of the folk group. Historian Peter Knight (2003) gives a short history of the popular use of the phrase. He writes:

What is comparatively new, however, is the term "conspiracy theory" itself. The phrase first entered the supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1997, which is an indication of how much a buzzword it has become in recent decades. However, the entry suggests that the first recorded usage of the phrase was in an article in the American Historical Review in 1909, although it did not become

familiar in academic writing until the 1950s (with the work of Karl Popper), and did not really become common currency until the 1960s. (17)

The article in the *American Historical Review* that Knight refers to is a book review written by Allen Johnson. Johnson writes:

If Dr. Ray has not attained a new point of view at least he has presented a fresh and suggestive account of the Missouri factional struggle between 1852 and 1854, and he has established successfully the contention that there was a popular demand in the trans-Mississippi country for the organization of the Nebraska territory. The claim that Atchison was the originator of the repeal may be termed the recrudescence of the **conspiracy theory** first asserted by Colonel John A. Parker of Virginia in 1880. No new manuscript material has been found to support the theory, but the available bits of evidence have been carefully collated in this volume. (835-836)

Johnson's use of the *conspiracy theory* phrase does not appear to refer to an irrational paranoid exaggerated falsehood, but instead seems to note that there is a dispute regarding the transfer of land that involves a possible conspiracy. Since there is a lack of documentation to prove such conspiracy, said conspiracy remains a theory: a theory about a conspiracy. This is to be noted as Johnson's usage has been believed to be the first recorded usage of the phrase. However, it will be demonstrated that this is not the case. The phrase had been used frequently much earlier than 1909.

An article entitled, "Impeachment, Trial of Andrew Johnson for 'High Crimes and Misdemeanors,'" appeared in an American newspaper called the *Boston Press and Post* on April 16, 1868. The article discusses the impeachment trial of then President Andrew Johnson and describes the testimony of General Sherman as having "blown the conspiracy theory of General Butler to the wind . . ."

Then on August 8, 1874, *The Daily Critic* published an article entitled, “The Conspiracy Theory,” which gives an account and analysis of a conspiracy theory being used in the Beecher trial.

On April 22, 1875, *The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer* uses the phrase in an article entitled “Beecher vs. Beecher.” The reporter writes:

The theory of the defense in the Beecher trial has been, and only has been, that there existed a conspiracy on the part of Moulton and Tilton to blackmail Beecher, and to ruin him generally. Mr. Fullerton tipped over this theory in the cross examination of Beecher on Tuesday when he proved out of Beecher’s mouth that Moulton never attempted ‘blackmail,’ and that he, Beecher, never even suspected any such thing until his lawyers succeeded in ‘beating it into him’ that he had been forced to pay money to Moulton for Tilton by the ‘blackmail’ process. This upsets the **conspiracy theory**, for a chain is never stronger than its weakest link, and that was its strongest.”

In the article, “Flag of the Free and American Protectorate Declared at Honolulu by Minster Stevens” of February 10, 1893, the *Morning Oregonian* reports on tensions and uprisings in Honolulu that eventually result in the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and the subsequent annexation of the country to the United States. The *Morning Oregonian* states: “

If there were any conspiracy to precipitate matters in the interest of annexation, then the queen and the cabinet were the principal members of the conspiracy for the queen was the one who initiated the action and the cabinet ministers the ones who first requested the people to take up arms against the queen. Thurston then proceeds at length to provide additional facts to disprove the **conspiracy theory**, and says there was no public acknowledgement of the provisional government by the American minister until after the abdication of the queen and the surrender of the barracks and police station with all the forces and munitions of war located therein.

The above conspiracy theory is questioning or alleging the United States is a conspirator in the overthrow attempt. The usage of the phrase in this instance is an accusation of an organized political coup on the part of the United States. Minister Stevens rebuts the conspiracy narrative with an alternative conspiracy theory that names the former monarchy as the conspirators. There was a real conspiracy on some level to depose the queen. Usually, proven conspiracies are not considered conspiracy theories in the popular parlance. In this case, it appears that the phrase, particularly the theory aspect, is being used here to clarify who the actual conspirators were—not to label persons or narratives as irrational or paranoid.

The phrase appears again on December 24, 1894, in the *Plain Dealer*, a newspaper published in Cleveland, Ohio. The headline reads: “A Race War. Two Small Armies are Resting on Their Arms. Whites and Blacks Are Vowing Vengeance and Murder. Seven Negroes Are Dead.” The article goes on to describe a conspiracy theory to explain an incident that triggered the race riot.

Another account of the race war was published December 24, 1894 by *The Sun* of Baltimore, Maryland:

The arrest of Jeremiah Jeffreth, colored, charged with the murder of Thomas Moulden a few weeks ago, caused much excitement and resentment among the colored people, and it was reported that a number of colored men threatened to kill every white man who was in the posse that made the arrest. When Mr. Joseph Isom, one of the most substantial farmers of Brooks County was killed Thursday, it was regarded as the beginning of an attempt to execute the wild threats and great indignation ensued among the white people. The killing of Mr. Isom occurred in the public road, not far from his home, and the circumstances attending it seem to throw doubt on the **conspiracy theory**.



Again, the phrase in this context is not being used to describe a wild paranoid false accusation, but is speculation about the motive and provocation for the murder of Mr. Isom. Its use here is similar to how it is used in both the article on the Beecher Trial and the article regarding the overthrow of the monarchy in Honolulu in that it seeks to explain the motives for criminal activity. However, the race war and the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy conspiracy theories point to social, cultural, and political unrest in the populace as motives for the conspiracy in addition to referring to a premeditated criminal activity.

However, on September 21, 1896, we see a slightly different use of the phrase in an opinion editorial in the *Kansas City Star* regarding William Jennings Bryan, a populist Democrat and presidential candidate:

Mr. Bryan has discovered that the inflow of gold now in progress is due to ‘the mere nomination of a candidate for President [sic] on a free silver platform.’ [ . . . ] It would be interesting to know by what process of reasoning Mr. Bryan traces the inflow of gold to the nomination of a free silver candidate for President. [ . . . ] Mr. Bryan would explain that by applying the **conspiracy theory**, and declaring that the gold manipulators are purposely keeping silver down so as to make it appear that a free silver victory would not advance the price of silver. The logic is Bryanesque to the extremest degree.

The usage of the phrase here is interesting. At first glance, it can appear that it is being used to describe an irrational, paranoid, unfounded theory of a secret plot to harm certain groups in American society, because we see the use of a term that could lead us to this conclusion: *extremist*. The last sentence in the editorial is cleverly crafted and merits dissection. “The logic is Bryanesque to the extremest.” This statement serves to modify *conspiracy theory* in the previous sentence. Of note is the author’s use of the term *extremest* as opposed to writing, “the logic is Bryanesque to the extreme.” This use of

the superlative form of *extreme* is a deliberate attempt by the writer to lead the reader to homonymic association with *extremest* and *extremist*.

*Extremist* suggests a person suffering from pathologies of irrationality and /or fanaticism. It is the Bryanesque logic which is *extremest* and therefore, not really logical at all; thus, Mr. Bryan is an *extremist*. However, *logic* and *extremist* don't appear to be modifying or expanding the description or definition of "conspiracy theory" particularly because of the term, Bryanesque. The last two sentences, "Mr. Bryan would explain that by applying the conspiracy theory, and declaring that the gold manipulators are purposely keeping silver down so as to make it appear that a free silver victory would not advance the price of silver. The logic is Bryanesque to the *extremest* degree," suggests that it is not conspiracy theories themselves that are inherently illogical; they are just theories about a conspiracy. The theory lacks merit not because it involves a conspiracy, but because it is extreme. If indeed it was conspiracy theory in and of itself that was *extremest*, there would not have been a need for the writer to coin the term "Bryanesque" which ascribes unreasonable thinking—not to the phenomena of conspiratorial narratives— but to Mr. Bryan himself.

The inability to develop a plausible or reasonable conspiracy theory is neither conspiracist nor conspiracy theorist, but Bryanesque. Such faulty logic is Mr. Bryan's: a cognitive flaw of that particular individual. Bryanesque is an epithet that predates and is reminiscent of *McCarthyism*—another term to limit and personalize the postulation of irrational extremist conspiracy theories to the deficient intellectual machinations of a particular person. These personalized epithets suggest that there are conspiracy theories that are not extreme or illogical but that are probable or at least plausible. Yet, this

example of the use of the phrase *conspiracy theory* in 1896 could be considered a precariously gray area that appears to foreshadow a devolution to pejorative code in mainstream culture. However, it is not until the 1940s with the release of Karl Popper's (1945) *The Open Society and Its Enemies* that the term is used as pejorative code.

Throughout the late 1800s and into the early 1900s we continue to see the use of the conspiracy theory phrase, predominantly in a legal context. A conspiracy theory is a possible motive for a crime put forth by defense attorneys and police departments to make arrests and gain convictions. Conspiracy theories are postulated in the assassination of President James Garfield in 1881,<sup>1</sup> the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901,<sup>2</sup> the killing of a Catholic priest by an anarchist in 1908,<sup>3</sup> the killing of Senator Edward Ward Carmack in 1909<sup>4</sup>, and an explosion on Wall Street in New York City in 1920.<sup>5</sup>

On July 4, 1881, *The Evening Critic* uses the phrases *theory of conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory* interchangeably in the same article.

The **theory of conspiracy** died very soon after a few disreputable detectives started it shortly after the shooting. [...] Gradually the truth as to how far MacVeagh proceeded in the **conspiracy theory** is leaking out, for the reason that the detectives with whom it has its origin are now quarreling one with the other and heaping mud upon themselves.

This interchangeable use of *theory of conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory* is seen again on November 23, 1887, in *The Clarion*:

The opinion of the court delivered by Judge Campbell puts the case of Hamilton before the country in a new light. In the language of Judge Arnold, it 'explodes' the theory of conspiracy. [ . . . ] as far as our judgment can do so, the **theory of conspiracy** and of more persons than Hamilton and Gambrell being engaged in the tragedy, upon which the prosecution has been conducted, and upon which the

judgment of the Chancellor was evidently based. [ . . . ] The trial below being conducted on the **conspiracy theory**, manifestly enlarged the scope of the investigation and testimony [ . . . ]

On October 18, 1921, the *Jackson Citizen Patriot* uses the phrase in an article on the enforcement of Prohibition laws.

Judge Lindsey of the Juvenile Court is open to severe criticism if, as has been reported, he discharged certain ‘poor’ violators of the prohibition law on the strange ground that ‘the rich are in a conspiracy to have the laws enforced only against the poor.’ The **conspiracy theory** is childish, but even if it were entertainable by mature minds it would not affect the duty of a court to punish any defendant whom the evidence showed to have been guilty of breaking the law.

The usage of the phrase is interesting here, because it refers to a specific conspiracy theory as childish, something not to be considered by rational mature people. Once again, the use of conspiracy theory is a gray area bordering pejorative code. Obviously, the writer vehemently disagrees with Judge Lindsey’s theory that the rich are only interested in prohibition laws being enforced on the poor. Here, as in the example in the article regarding Mr. Bryan and his Bryanesque thinking, the writer has crafted his words very carefully to portray one whom he disagrees with as being cognitively deficient. Judge Lindsey’s conspiracy theory is not only childish, but so childish that it is not even entertaining.

The writer suggests that Judge Lindsey is not mature in his thinking or behavior. This and the opinion editorial article regarding Mr. Bryan are also *ad hominem* attacks. It is through the conspiracy theory narrative that these writers question and demonstrate the cognitive “deficiencies” of those with whom they disagree and to diminish or limit their stature and credibility in the public sphere. What is also of note in the instances of Mr. Bryan and Judge Lindsey is that both men insinuate conspiracies orchestrated by the elite

in their theories. These examples serve as a precursor to the popular notion of conspiracy theories, as described by Karl Popper (1950) as the “conspiracy theory of society” (Coady, 13).

In 1950, Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is published. Popper examines conspiracy theory as it relates to historicism. He writes: “I call it the ‘*conspiracy theory of society*’. It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon.” (Coady, 13). In the chapter, “The Conspiracy Theory of Society,” Popper explains:

In order to explain, what is, I think, the central task of social science, I should like to begin by describing a theory which is held by very many rationalists—a theory I think implies exactly the opposite of the true aim of the social sciences. I shall call this theory the ‘conspiracy theory of society.’ This theory, which is more primitive than most forms of theism, is akin to Homer’s theory of society. Homer conceived the power of the gods in such a way that whatever happened on the plain before Troy was only a reflection of the various conspiracies on Olympus. The conspiracy theory of society is just a version of this theism, of a belief in gods whose whims and wills rule everything. It comes from abandoning God and then asking: ‘Who is in his place?’ His place is then filled by various powerful men and groups---sinister pressure groups, who are to be blamed for having planned the great depression and the evils from which we suffer. The conspiracy theory of society is widespread, and has very little truth in it. Only when conspiracy theoreticians come into power does it become something like a theory which accounts for things that actually happen (a case of what I have called the ‘Oedipus Effect’). (Coady, 13)

Several of Popper’s points are of interest here. It is clear that he is using the phrase “conspiracy theory” as it is used in the now current popular parlance—an irrational theory or belief that explains history being controlled by hidden, secret, evil forces. Popper states that this type of thinking or belief has existed ever since man has been in existence to explain the world around him, and implies that this worldview is not

held solely by the irrational or paranoid. He distinctly says that rational men hold such theories. Such theories are usually benign and not necessarily a threat to the well-being of society at large unless a conspiracy theorist comes into power determined to counter a particular conspiracy. To this end, Popper uses the example of Hitler's rise to power: "[ . . . ] when Hitler came into power, believing in the myth of the Learned Elders of Zion, he tried to outdo their conspiracy with his own counter-conspiracy" (Coady, 13).

Another interesting point is Popper's equation of the conspiratorial worldview with theistic beliefs—mythology. The dialogic secular and sacred mythologies and conspiracy theories will be discussed in greater detail later in this study. It is this dialogic that forms the foundation of many conspiratorial beliefs.

Popper also mentions that conspiracy theories contain "very little truth" and this statement correlates with popular belief that conspiracy theories are not true but rather falsified or imagined accounts of a conspiracy. One of the observations that Popper makes is that bad things do happen, not necessarily because there are evil groups with sinister intentions serving as the puppet master for a marionette-like society, but instead because we can never foresee all the unintentional negative or destructive consequences that may arise from an action. (Coady, 14)

Peter Knight (2003) writes that the phrase *conspiracy theory* was not in heavy usage amongst academics "until the 1950s (with the work of Karl Popper), and did not really become common currency until the 1960s." Although the phrase *conspiracy theory* may not have become common currency amongst academics until a decade later, what can be observed in Popper's work is the beginning of the idea of a conspiracy theory of

society that defines the content, intent, and worldview of conspiracy theory narratives. This perception of conspiracy theory can be found in much of the scholarship on conspiracy theory today. There is no doubt that Popper's work has been a major influence.

In 1964, Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* is published. Included in the compilation is his seminal essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," where one can easily see the meshing of the illogical, childish/immature/ intellectual deficiency, with Popper's evil, covert-and often secret "enemy within" analytical conclusion. The published essay is an adaptation of a presentation given by Hofstadter at Oxford University on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1963, the day before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Hofstadter's intent in this work is to "establish the reality of the paranoid style and illustrate its use and recurrence throughout history" (29). Of the paranoid style Hofstadter writes:

More important, the single case in modern history in which one might say that the paranoid style has had a consummatory triumph occurred not in the United States but in Germany. It is a common ingredient in fascism, and of frustrated nationalisms, though it appeals to many who are hardly fascist and it can frequently be seen in the left-wing press. The famous Stalin purge trials incorporated, in a supposedly juridical form, a wildly imaginative and devastating exercise in the paranoid style. (29). 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 does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated — if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. (7)

After Hofstadter makes this point he immediately illustrates the use of the paranoid style as employed by Senator Joseph McCarthy. What is ironic here is that the purpose of this essay was to educate and empower the general citizenry by giving them the tools in which to identify the paranoid style and diffuse it and its often disastrous effects. Ironically, after President John F. Kennedy is assassinated, Hofstadter's essay becomes the cornerstone used to pathologize and stigmatize not only those who reject the official lone gunmen theory, but any other official account, explanation, or theory: thus, conspiracy theory becomes pejorative code.

*Conspiracy theory* became pejorative code applied to the general citizenry who questioned the official accounts and explanations of Lee Harvey Oswald acting alone in killing the president. This questioning and raising of doubt by the public—in addition to the killing of Oswald by Jack Ruby raised more questions than the government could or was willing to answer. These questions, doubts, and concerns were expressed by many in the form of conspiracy theories. The voracity of these theories forced the government to form the Warren Commission to investigate the assassination.

However, there were many in the public who had serious concerns about the integrity of the investigation conducted by the commission and the seeming omission of eyewitness and ear-witness testimony (shots allegedly heard from the grassy knoll) along with other issues, and many citizens articulated such concerns in the form of conspiratorial narratives that claimed a government cover-up was afoot. The government's response was to label such narratives as conspiracy theories—narratives devised by people who were irrational, paranoid, and/or otherwise cognitively impaired and therefore, not to be believed. In another case, David Coady (2006) writes:



Presumably all explanations of September 11, 2001, for example, will postulate agents working together in secret. Hence, when we label some, but not all, of these explanations ‘conspiracy theories,’ we must be using a different concept. This concept seems to be captured in the following definition: a conspiracy theory is an explanation that is contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question. (2)

Citizens of the United States have had other theories that ran counter to the official accounts, but those counter narratives do not seem to have been as widely infectious in its dissemination or to have snowballed as much as the theories surrounding the assassination of President John F Kennedy. Hence, it appears that *conspiracy theory* did not come to its current popular definition until conspiratorial narratives countering and/or questioning official accounts became so doggedly persistent in their snowballing effect that the mainstream media had no choice but to report on conspiracy theories as a means to debunk and dismiss them.

Hofstadter’s description of the paranoid style in politics, e.g. McCarthyism, and Nazism, was now used to describe those who questioned the official accounts of the Kennedy assassination and later for those who would go on to question the official account and findings of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Robert Kennedy, the presence of the United States in the Vietnam War, Iran-Contra scandal, 9/11, the Iraq War, Obamacare, corporatism, and whether oligarchs are running the country.

In retrospect, one can speculate as to why government officials would have wanted to dissuade any public dissent or distrust in the government. The emotional and political climate was desperately fragile. A greatly popular and well-liked president had been assassinated on US soil. The country was in emotional turmoil and the world was shocked. In the midst of this, some American voices were accusing or speculating that

forces inside of the government, to include Vice-President Johnson, had had the president killed. All of this on the heels of McCarthyism, the failed assassination attempt against Fidel Castro during the Bay of Pigs, and in the midst of a Cold War. The looming Vietnam War in the political backdrop, growing racial unrest, and continued mounting citizen distrust of government had the potential of leaving the country vulnerable both domestically and internationally for attack, infiltration, *coup d'état*, and/or socio-political disintegration.

One way of containing a potential socio-political meltdown is to shut down dissenting and questioning voices. One can achieve such by conducting an open investigation which is and transparent to the public and make the findings and testimony public by either televising it and/or publishing it for general consumption. Hence, anyone who then questions or doubts such openly transparent and thorough examination and would like to introduce such questions into the public discourse is labeled by government authorities and/or by adherents of the official account as a conspiracy theorist and his/ her questioning or further speculation as a conspiracy theory—both are automatically discredited and dismissed.

Today, *conspiracy theory* is far removed from its original neutral nomenclature. *Theory of conspiracy* and *conspiracy theory* were used interchangeably; both phrases simply referenced a theory about a conspiracy: “A combination or confederacy between two or more persons formed for the purpose of committing, by their joint efforts, some unlawful or criminal act [ . . . ]”<sup>6</sup>

The works of Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter defined and illustrated the rhetorical and semiotic style of conspiracy theory and became highly influential in the subsequent study of *conspiracy theory* and how and to whom the phrase is applied. Although both scholars demonstrated the use of conspiracy theories by governments and other authorities, *conspiracy theory* eventually came to refer to accounts and explanations that run alongside and counter to official accounts. The implication is that governments and other authorities do not create or transmit this folkloric item.

Conspiracy theories have been and continue to be created and transmitted by all different types of folk groups including the general citizenry, government officials, and other authorities. This chapter examined how the *conspiracy theory* phrase has been used historically in the United States—from neutral phrase to pejorative code. The next chapter examines the evolution of the academic study of rumor, as compared to that of conspiracy theory, and its social, political, and psychological function in society.

## Notes

1. No Headline, *Evening Star*, (July 4, 1881):3. America's Historical Newspapers Database (accessed October 5, 2015)
2. "President's Death May Occur at Any Moment from Heart Exhaustion. There is Not the Slightest Doubt That He is Most Critically," *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, (September 13, 1901):1. America's Historical Newspapers Database (Accessed October 5, 2015).
3. "Was a Marked Man. Father Leo Followed from Patterson to Denver," *Montgomery Advertiser*, (February 26, 1908): 3. America's Historical Newspapers Database (Accessed October 5, 2015).
4. "Alleged Slayers of Carmack Put through Ordeal Robin Cooper Successfully Stands Bitter Cross-Examination," *Philadelphia Enquirer*, (February 23, 1909): 2. America's Historical Newspapers Database (Accessed October 5, 2015).
5. "Score Dead and Hundreds Hurt Terrific Explosion in Wall Street between Office of J. P. Morgan," *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, (September 16, 1920):1. America's Historical Newspaper Database (Accessed October 5, 2015).

## **Chapter Two**

### **Rumor, Legend, and Conspiracy Theory**

The previous chapter examined the historical usage and intent in the use of the phrase conspiracy theory in the United States to determine if the phrase had been originally coined as pejorative code. This survey was a necessary step in the aim of this study which is to determine what exactly is a conspiracy theory; is it a rumor or legend? Is it a subgenre of either rumor or legend or is it a genre unto itself? Which is it and does it matter? What are the differences among these styles of communication and how do those differences affect our understanding of the social, political, behavioral, and cultural phenomena these texts express and for what purposes and end are these texts created and used among diverse folk groups? This chapter examines similarities and differences among rumor, legend, and conspiracy theory in structure, function, and content.

Genre classification is necessary to facilitate examination and understanding of folkloric items and the causal socio-political climates that give rise to them. To understand this is to understand how communities use folklore to locate and navigate their environment as well as attempt to reposition themselves into a place of power and influence through behavior modification and resistance. Moreover, such research will also help determine how communities use rumor, legend, and conspiracy theory as forms of resistance; as tools to modify and influence the behavior of their community and that of others; to influence political, social, ethical, and economic policy; and to create a new cultural normalcy or order by demonizing, praising, or highlighting specific people or issues.

Rumor, legend, and conspiracy theory are interrelated and can nest within a single text. Some folklorists vacillate between using *rumor* and *legend* when analyzing or describing texts that have conspiratorial content, and at one juncture in the discipline's history, folklorists have also used the term *rumor legend* to describe an entrenched rumor. This demonstrates how closely interrelated these items are. These terms also indicate how nuanced distinguishing characteristics among genres can be. This study seeks to provide a distinct genre demarcation for conspiracy theory from rumor and legend.

### **Rumor and Conspiracy Theory: Similarities and Differences**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the phrase *conspiracy theory* is popularly used as pejorative code to reference any “explanation that is contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question’ (Coady, 2). The phrase had been a neutral descriptor until political crises peaked in the aftermath of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Shortly thereafter, conspiracy theories that countered the official findings of the Warren Commission, and subsequent government accounts of any event, were declared untrue, irrational, paranoid, and in some cases even dangerous.

Rumor has a similar history but in reverse. It is not clear if rumor was viewed as deviant, hysterical, and dangerous behavior before World War II, but it certainly was considered such during the war. Rumors were often used in propaganda and Adolf Hitler often used propaganda to demoralize an enemy before invading a country. In other words, Hitler’s first line of attack was rumor and propaganda to psychologically weaken and make his enemy that much more vulnerable to his military onslaught. Cognizant of

Hitler's strategy, the Roosevelt Administration became increasingly alarmed at the proliferation of rumor around the country and viewed rumor as a threat to national security especially, after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Rumors ran rampant, due in part to the Roosevelt Administration's lack of transparency and information dissemination after the attack fostered the prime environment for rumor creation and transmission (Faye, 2007, 3).

Psychologist Jamuna Prasad (1935) has identified five conditions that an event must possess or produce to create the socio-political environment in which rumor thrives. Such an event:

1. sets up an emotional disturbance;
2. is of an uncommon and unfamiliar type
3. contains many aspects unknown to the individual affected
4. contains several unverifiable factors
5. is of group interest (p.5)

The advent of war fulfills the Prasad's criteria for rumor production. The absence of detailed official information fanned the flames. Cathy Faye (2007) writes:

Public mistrust proved to be one of the greatest impediment to civilian support and compliance during the months leading up to and following Pearl Harbor. As security standards regarding the release of information became more stringent, the public became more wary of the information that they did receive. [. . .] one popular columnist described civilian attitudes as 'clouded, divided, doubtful, hesitant, and therefore apprehensive' and attributed this state of affairs to 'the Administration's mishandling of public information [. . .] the public has not been told enough. The delay of information pertaining to the events at Pearl Harbor served to complicate matters. [. . .] As one journalist wrote, 'the silence created a growing possibility that the public would begin to believe all rumors, simply because no facts were made available to controvert them. (p.3)

The Roosevelt Administration grew increasingly alarmed by the swell of circulating rumors and their potential to be used as a weapon by the enemy. To squelch such threat, the administration created the Rumor Project that established rumor clinics around the country to debunk, control, and prevent the spread of rumors. The rumor clinics and their mission were described as follows:

A rumor clinic is a specialized group of volunteer professors and advanced students, prepared by a short intensive course on psychological warfare under the supervision of the Civilian Morale Service to collect, analyze, and route to the Office of Education significant rumors current in the clinics area. (Faye, 5)

Social psychologists were recruited to head and staff the rumor clinics.

Psychologist Gordon Allport—along with his graduate students Robert Knapp and Leo Postman—operated a rumor clinic in Boston and published a regular column in the *Boston Herald*, titled “Rumor Clinic.” Rumors were submitted to the column for analysis. The rumors were debunked with official verified information provided to the psychologists by government authorities. The “Rumor Clinic” column can be considered as a precursor to the non-governmental current rumor management and control website Snopes.com. In addition to debunking rumors and disseminating officially verified information, the rumor clinics and the “Rumor Clinic” column also provided psychological analysis of rumors presented (Faye, 8), and served as “counseling agencies, intended to provide an ‘understanding of the problem of rumor-mongering’ and to serve as ‘an outlet for authentic information.’” (Faye, 5).

Throughout the Rumor project, Gordon Allport collected and studied a plethora of rumors and conducted serial rumor transmission experiments at the Boston Clinic. Allport, in collaboration with his graduate student Leo Postman, published several



articles and a book on their research entitled *The Psychology of Rumor*, where they defined rumor as: [ . . . ] a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present. The implication in any rumor is always that some truth is being communicated” (ix).

Their studies and theories greatly influenced the academic study and approach to rumor. Moreover, the war and the purpose and context within which their study of rumor was conducted framed the way Allport, Postman, Knapp and others academically treated and approached rumor. Dan Miller (2005) writes:

Knapp (1944) characterized rumor as an irrational and dangerous activity. Although he did not use the term *irrational*, Smelser (1962) proposed that those involved in rumor processes were acting on ‘hysterical beliefs’ and were a danger to the social order” (p.513). . . . A less common charge against rumoring is that rumor participants suffer from some form of mental illness. Klapp (1972) has argued that rumormongers suffered from ‘anxious hysteria’ and that rumors were often characterized by a ‘paranoid logic.’ Allport and Postman (1947) believed that rumor participants had an unrealistic desire to gain the attention and respect of others and that passing along rumors relieved guilt and anxiety (p.514)

In “An Analysis of Rumor,” Allport and Postman (1946) write extensively about their findings and collaboration with the Office of War Information. In the article, the tension between the social psychologists and government officials is explicitly expressed. Allport and Postman write:

If public events are not newsworthy, they are unlikely to breed rumors, and under certain circumstances, the more prominence the press gives the news—especially momentous news—the more numerous and serious are the rumored distortions this news will undergo. The OWI [Office of War Information] official made his error in assuming that rumor is purely an intellectual commodity, something one substitutes, *faute de mieux*, for reliable information. He overlooked the fact that when events of great importance occur, the individual never stops at a mere

acceptance of the event. His life is deeply affected. In his mind, the emotional overtones of the event breed all sorts of fantasies. He seeks explanations and imagines remote consequence. (502)

This observation led Allport and Postman to devise their Basic Law of Rumor which they represent with the formula  $R \sim i X a$ —"the amount of rumor in circulation will vary with the importance of the subject to the individuals *times* the ambiguity of the evidence pertaining to the topic at issue" (502). Here, Allport and Postman assert that rumor is an emotional, (as opposed to cognitive), irrational, illogical fantasy employed to create psychological homeostasis through an imagined order of chaos. In this sense, the transmission and diffusion of rumor would be analogous to the contraction and spread of a disease and rumor would be the contraction of irrationality, and other emotional reactions.

Another important and seminal rumor study was conducted during World War II by Tomotsu Shibutani (1966) who applied a different methodological approach than that of Allport and Postman. Allport and Postman studied rumor in an artificially controlled environment in which rumors were serially transmitted. Such tightly controlled serial transmission discourages the natural processes of human tailoring and shaping of rumors to customize them to reflect the community and/or culture in which they circulate. Such customization may include oicotypes, variants, and the lengthening of rumor into legend or conspiracy theory. Furthermore, serial transmission thwarts the processes of refinement and vetting that rumor undergoes when dispersed in transmission.

In contrast, Tomotsu Shibutani (1966) was able to study rumor emergent in Japanese internment camps in the United States during World War II. Shibutani observed

that people did not just accept any type of information but vetted the information, determined what was plausible or possible and what was not. In other words, the content of the rumor was constantly being refined, vetted, and examined based on new and prior information. Shibutani did agree with some of the findings of Prasad and Allport and Postman in terms of the sociopolitical landscape necessary in order for rumors to be sown, but did not agree that rumor was deviant, immoral behavior or that the people who spread such rumors were deviant, backward, or irrational. Instead, Shibutani viewed rumor as a rational mode of communication and news gathering approach. Shibutani writes:

In this book, rumor will be regarded as a recurrent form of *communication through which men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources*. It might be regarded as a form of problem solving. [ . . . ] The reality to be studied, then, is not distortion in serial transmission [as is the focus of Allport and Postman's study] but the social interaction of people caught in inadequately defined situations. To act intelligently such persons seek news, and rumor is essentially a type of news. (17)

Folklorist Dan Miller (2005) writes:

Taking a sociological view, Shibutani, recognized that rumors were routine social processes—defining the processes. . . . Seeing that his work was in direct opposition to Allport and Postman's and wanting to remove the pejorative denotation of the subject matter, Shibutani referred to these collective acts not as rumor, but as 'improvised news.' (508)

Shibutani's use of the phrase "improvised news" to describe rumor removed it from pejorative connotation into neutrality. It can be argued that this shift informed subsequent approaches to rumor study and rumor theory. Shibutani's study was the impetus in transforming rumor from pejorative code for deviant behavior to a normative

communication strategy for obtaining information when there is a lack of sufficient officially verified news that a member of any folk group can employ.

Several academic research studies have confirmed Shibutani's finding (Miller, 512-513). These studies include those of Frederick Koenig (1985), Patricia Turner (1993), and Gary Alan Fine (2001). It is possible that Richard Hofstadter used the phrase "paranoid style" so as not to pathologize the phrase "conspiracy theory" and reduce it to pejorative code—knowing such reduction would impact our understanding and approach to this phenomenon.

Much of mainstream media's "breaking news" items illustrate employment of stringing rumors and facts to inform viewers or listeners of an event unfolding in real time. Often "breaking news" anchors will refer to receiving reports sometimes followed up with the statement asserting that their news crew is in route to the scene. In the interim, viewers usually hear supposed eyewitness accounts from people at the scene or in the area. These accounts are usually phoned into the station by the eyewitness and broadcasted in a repeated loop until the news crew arrives at the scene. From this we can deduce that the initial "reports" of an incident are unconfirmed—rumor. It is not always clear if the eyewitness was on the scene at the time of the event and if their statements have been confirmed by officials. Such accounts are hearsay/rumor, but are considered and reported as news and legitimate sources of information. It is usually several hours or days before factual accounts from first responders and other government officials, who were at the scene, are obtained and reported. In short, rumor masquerades as fact, because authorities have the power to label and can label and "report" unverified and unsubstantiated claims—rumors—as officially verified news accounts.

Rumor generated and disseminated by government officials and mainstream media is perceived, by a trusting and unsuspecting public, as news, composed of facts and objective truth. Gary Alan Fine (2007) writes:

Evaluating plausibility is not merely assessed by individuals, but is linked to interaction contexts and social systems. [ . . . ] The politics of credibility connects to the evaluation that audiences make of the source of the material: whether to award credibility and whether reference to one's source is incorporated in the text as it is transmitted, gainsaying it believability. [ . . . ] Audiences typically give great weight to truth claims from individuals who are defined as being credible sources by being in a position to know. Government spokespersons are often granted this assumption of closeness, particularly with regard to statements of fact as opposed to claims of motivation" (9-10).

The development of rumor studies during and after World War II, illustrates several similarities and differences between rumor and conspiracy theory. Political crises have greatly impacted the meaning, connotation, and academic study of both rumor and conspiracy theory. Extensive rumor studies were conducted during World War II by social psychologists in collaboration and at the behest of the United States government because rumormongering was viewed as dangerous behavior that posed a threat to national security. Therefore, the academic works presented by many psychologists who worked in the Rumor Clinics declared rumor as deviant, irrational behavior. This view and approach to rumor did not change until after the publication of Shibutani's study.

Conspiracy theory began as a neutral phrase but became pejorative code during the political upheaval and assassination of John F. Kennedy in the 1960s. Currently, *conspiracy theory* is still widely used in the pejorative and conspiracy theorists remain pathologized and stigmatized. However, recent, and future scholarship on conspiracy theories and the application of the phrase to describe and identify official accounts by

alternative media outlets and groups like 9/11 Truth Movement may serve to return the phrase to neutrality.

Both conspiracy theory and rumor arise and thrive when an event or situation creates specific conditions that: create an emotional disturbance, is uncommon or unfamiliar, contains many aspects unknown to the individual, contains several unverifiable factors, and the event is of interest to the community or group (Prasad, 5). To obtain news and information about an event where official accounts are scarce and unavailable, groups often gather and transmit information circulating in and around their community. Such information or “news” can either be in the form of a rumor— brief assertion or statement presented for belief or a conspiracy theory— “a theory that explains an event as being the result of a plot by a covert group or organization” (dictionary.com), but in each case, the “news” is unverified by government officials. This unverified status does not mean that rumors or conspiracy theories are always false. Shibutani demonstrated that much of the “improvised news” in the internment camps were proven to be very accurate. Similarly, there have been conspiracy theories that were later proven to have identified real conspiracies such as the Gulf of Tonkin Incident<sup>1</sup>, United States government mass surveillance of citizens, Operation Northwoods<sup>2</sup>, and COINTELPRO (anti-media.org).

Narration of a covert plot by a group of powerful conspirators versus a brief statement or proposition is one major difference between conspiracy theory and rumor. The conspiracy theory is a byzantine like narrative that usually postulates a covert criminal plot usually by a powerful “them” against a powerless “us.” While rumor can address a myriad of topics and events, the core issue of the conspiracy theory is always about finding and exposing a covert criminal plot and its conspirators. This core focus of

conspiracy theory coupled with the need for a theory to accumulate proof to demonstrate its merit affords it the potential for ever increasing content not seen with rumor.

In fact, rumor and contemporary legend can comprise some of the ever-increasing content of conspiracy theory. A rumor can imply a conspiracy and thus, many conspiracy theories may begin as rumors but for varied reasons, the conspiratorial element in the rumor gains a full narrative content of which the focal point is a conspiracy. For example, there are people who assert, “9/11 was an inside job.” When one speaks of an “inside job” one is usually speaking of a conspiracy or some covert criminal or malicious act where the actors are closely affiliated with the place or institution ravaged. Some folklorists might even consider the statement, “9/11 was an inside job” to be a *conspiracy rumor* because of the implication of a conspiracy in this brief statement. However, if speculation occurs around the identity of the actors, motive, conflicting information, lack of information, credibility or plausibility of information disseminated, handling of events in the immediate aftermath, etc. one can readily see how this rumor will amass narrative content and become a conspiracy theory. I argue that if a rumor implicates a conspiracy, a speculative narrative will almost immediately become affixed. Speculation and explanation would be a natural progression, because humans are inquisitive, and in an emergency or crisis, want to know or obtain what they do not know.

Moreover, most people are uncomfortable with the unknown, hence, the hint of a conspiracy will encourage further inquiry for specific information by many people, especially if Prasad’s five conditions for rumor generation are present and unresolved. Therefore, although the term conspiracy rumor has been used upon occasion by some folklorists (Turner, 1993; 181) I am reluctant to agree that there is such a thing as a

conspiracy rumor. I will agree that a conspiracy theory can be expressed as a brief statement or proposition for belief.

A rumor can represent a truncated form of a conspiracy theory, and if one does not have the cultural competency, he will conclude that what he has heard is a rumor when indeed said rumor is really a reference to a full-blown conspiracy theory, and it is that conspiracy theory that is being discussed when members of a particular folk group communicate with a conspiratorial rumor. For example, a person who encounters members from 9/11 Truth Movement for the first time may hear members assert “9/11 was an inside job” and think the statement is a rumor. However, members of 9/11 Truth Movement who are using that statement are referring to a conspiracy theory that asserts the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were a false flag operation complete with extensive details and data.

However, rumor and contemporary legend along with other folkloric items such as personal narrative, may be incorporated into the conspiracy theory in the form of eyewitness and ear-witness accounts, and narratives surrounding the circumstances around deaths of individuals working to uncover evidence of the conspiracy. Hence, stated earlier, rumor, legend and conspiracy theory are interrelated and are often nested.

### **Rumor and Legend**

The most marked difference between legend and rumor is narrative content. While rumor is defined as a short statement or proposition of belief, legend is a more detailed narrative account containing a plot. Diane Goldstein (2004) writes:



The term contemporary legend is used to describe ‘unsubstantiated narratives with traditional themes and modern motifs that circulate in multiple versions and are told as if they are true or at least plausible.’ Sometimes called ‘urban legends,’ ‘modern legends’ or ‘modern myths,’ the contemporary legend has been described as a solidified rumor—a story that combines rumor with formal narrative devices. [ . . . ] The legend form is dialogic: told to remark upon or debate issues related to contemporary concerns such as crime, technology, big business, government power, or sexuality. (25)

Another distinction of legend is the (FOAF) friend-of-a-friend rhetorical device that names a person as a protagonist or witness to the events narrated in the legend. The active bearer of legend is not always the person who experienced the event being narrated but is passing along the information in the legend to others and using the name of someone deemed credible (FOAF) as “proof” to validate the content of the legend. The FOAF aspect of legend is important to note because a credible source who “verifies” the veracity of the event is built into the narrative. Not all legends use FOAF. Legends narrating personal supernatural experiences, do not rely on FOAF for “verification” but instead obtains its validation from its narrator. This is usually not the case with rumor.

Rumor frequently circulates anonymously without transmitters claiming to have witnessed personally or knowing anyone who has personally witnessed an event. This anonymous circulation makes rumor a valuable political strategy in that issues and concerns, that are important to a community but absent from the public discourse, can be introduced or thrust into the public sphere by employing rumor. James Scott (1990) writes:

[ . . . ] subordinate groups have developed a large arsenal of techniques that serve to shield their identity while facilitating open criticism, threats and attacks. Prominent techniques that accomplish this purpose include spirit possession, gossip, aggression through magic, rumor, anonymous threats and violence, the anonymous letter, and anonymous mass defiance. (140)

Using rumor, folk groups can make their voices heard with little fear of reprisal. Rumors do not have a long circulation span as they are either verified, or morphed into legends becoming entrenched in communities where they can circulate for decades. Thus, rumor can be used as a quick but rapidly intense political strategy not only to have issues and concerns addressed but also to resolve those issues and/or elicit more information.

Legend can also function similarly. Bill Ellis (2001) writes:

Legend telling embodies a complex event, in which the performer not only narrates a story but also gains (or fails to gain) social control over a social situation. The best tellers and the most popular legends have the potential to transform social structures for better or worse. Hence, legend telling is often a fundamentally political act. (xii-xiv)

The advantage legend has when functioning as a political act is that it has a significantly longer circulation life than rumor and can achieve wider diffusion. The FOAF may be a key element responsible for the longevity and entrenchment of legend in communities. A rumor circulating anonymously in a community does so because it addresses a topic important to a community; however, it is not personalized or viewed as communal property. In contrast, the FOAF anchors legend in a community, because a community member knows of a well-regarded person who experienced an event within the same community. Thus, the legend can become part of that community's history. Legend trips also serve to concretize, reinforce, and personalize a legend for a community. For example, if someone states that a friend of Mrs. Smith's saw the ghost of a girl on the steps of the big green house two blocks over around midnight, others in the area may be motivated to go to the green house two blocks over around midnight

attempting to duplicate the experience of Mrs. Smith's friend. However, everyone who visits the green house around midnight does not have to "see" the ghost girl for the legend to continue to circulate. The personal experience of the legend trips will maintain legend circulation. The FOAF rhetorical device and the legend trip are two means by which legend achieves longevity and entrenchment.

Legends can, but do not always, originate from rumors. If Prasad's five necessary conditions for rumor creation persist without people gaining access to officially verified information then a rumor can develop into a legend; the same conditions that cultivate rumor cultivate legend. Folklorist Bill Ellis (2001) identifies three emergent levels of legend that initiate its creation and circulation. Ellis writes:

Legends grow out of social contexts, which they intend to alter, so contemporary legends are 'emergent' on three levels. First they emerge as news freshly arisen from the tellers social settings. [ . . . ] Second, [ . . . ]. their primary meanings *emerge out of specific social conditions and roles*. Those who tell a legend have a goal in doing so; likewise, audiences have implicit expectations they want fulfilled. Legend telling embodies a complex event, in which the performer not only narrates a story but also gains (or fails to gain) social control over a social situation.[ . . . ] Third, contemporary legends often embody an emergency—a social problem that urgently needs attention. Legends embody social stresses and attempt to define ambiguous feelings of threat in vivid dramatic form. [ . . . ] One role of legend is to redefine reality in a way that restores the narrators' control over situations. [ . . . ] That is, an ambiguous situation produces stress until witnesses find a 'name' or a statement of it in acceptable cultural language. Once this is done, the experience can be translated into a narrative and shared with others, and the act of narrating gives observers power over the event. (xii-xiv)

The factors that Ellis identifies as responsible for the emergence of legends correlate with the five conditions for rumor emergence identified by Prasad (1935): situation or event that set up an emotional disturbance; is of uncommon and unfamiliar type; contains many

aspects unknown to the individuals affected; contains several unverifiable factors; is of group interest (5).

Moreover, Ellis' explanation as to one role of legend echoes that of Shibutani (1966) regarding rumor:

[A] recurrent form of '*communication through which men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their intellectual resources.*' (17)

Here, Shibutani asserts that sometimes the only difference between rumor and news is verification from official authorities. Terry Ann Knopf (1975) writes: "[ . . . ] falsehood is not a necessarily a feature of rumor. The key factor which sets rumor apart from information is that the report, account, story or allegation is unverified—but such an unverified report may later turn out to be true or false" (2).

Knopf's observation of rumor is also true of legend. Legend can be true, false, or partially true. Saddam Hussein was a dictator that visited human rights abuses upon some Iraqis, but he did not have weapons of mass destruction nor did he have any role in the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The presidency of John F. Kennedy certainly inspired the country and offered a promising future for many citizens but it was not a utopian Camelot.

To summarize, both legend and rumor are forms of unverified information, usually about an ambiguous event or situation, which is relevant and important to its community. The same conditions that create rumor also create and cultivate legend. Both rumor and legend are means by which people attempt to interpret, make sense of or arrive

at solutions to problems or issues they face especially in unusual situations. The major differences between rumor and legend are that legend contains a narrative content and may use the FOAF rhetorical device to offer “proof” of legend content.

### **Legend and Conspiracy Theory**

From the above comparison of rumor and legend, one can readily see similarities between legend and conspiracy theory. The same conditions that foster conspiracy theory also foster legend, and both conspiracy theory and legend include unverified and unsubstantiated information; however, both legend and conspiracy provide “proof” of claims made in their narratives. Legend does so often using FOAF and legend trips while conspiracy theory more often uses varied types of communication to provide evidence such as: personal narrative, legend, rumor, official and mainstream media accounts, and research data, and simulation or reenactment of an event and/or circumstances of the event (ostension) to render specific claims plausible or implausible.

For example, after the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) published their final report in 2008 concluding that the Twin Towers collapsed due to fire compromising the steel resulting in the upper floors pancaking on the lower floors, members of 9/11 Truth Movement conducted numerous simulations trying to replicate NIST’s findings and were unsuccessful. (Cole, 2016). The NIST Report and 9/11 Truth Movement’s subsequent rebuttal of the NIST report are extensive proof feeding narratives within the controlled demolition conspiracy theory that add content to the controlled demolition conspiracy theory. The NIST report and 9/11 Truth Movement’s

rejection of it are known not only to people in New York, but to people all over the United States and abroad.

Legend also amasses content through legend trips. For example, each person who performs a legend trip to a haunted house will add their experience to the legend. These personal experiences then become part of the legend narrative as proof that the claims asserted in the legend are true. However, this personal experience content will more than likely only be known locally. Therefore, legend trip narratives of a haunted house in Crown Heights Brooklyn, New York, will not be known to many people in Bay Ridge Brooklyn, New York, and may not be known at all to people in Staten Island, New York, or in New Jersey.

When either legend or conspiracy theory is actively circulating, it communicates and addresses issues of importance to its community and folk group. A specific legend or conspiracy theory can become dormant, but when certain conditions and issues arise, so too does that specific legend or conspiracy. For instance, after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States several conspiracy theories and proven conspiracies reactivated: A New World Order involving a one world government run by the elites who will enslave the masses; false flag operations such as the Gulf of Tonkin incident and Operation Northwoods. The John F. Kennedy Assassination—which appears to never become completely dormant—experienced renewed vigor, especially, since President Kennedy prohibited the Department of Defense from executing Operation Northwoods. His prohibition is one reason attributed to his assassination by many. Operation Northwoods was a false flag operation in which citizens in the United States would be killed and the

attack would be blamed on Cuba. The aim of Operation Northwoods was to manufacture citizen consent for a US war with Cuba (Ruppe, 2001).

Operation Northwoods also serves as a “proof feeder” for several conspiracy theories including those concerning 9/11. I define “proof feeder” as elements that simultaneously provide “proof” for a conspiracy theory while adding to the content of the narrative (snowballing). Proof feeders give conspiracy theories tentacles—branches into other events and subjects relevant to the core conspiratorial belief. How proof feeders attach additional content to conspiracy theories is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5 of this study.

Another difference between legend and conspiracy theory regarding content is subject matter. Legends can address a myriad of subjects, but a conspiracy theory is always about a conspiracy and its narrative is paradigmatic. Robert Alan Goldberg (2001) writes:

The script has become familiar: Individuals and groups, acting in secret, move and shape recent American history. Driven by a lust for power and wealth, they practice deceit, subterfuge, and even assassination, sometimes brazenly executed. Nothing is random or the matter of coincidence. (ix)

Like legend, conspiracy theory can serve to gain or give information and explain events; however, conspiracy theory is a boldly aggressive accusation of intentional criminal and immoral activity that names the alleged conspirators, their motives, and their plot. It is a direct challenge to power. Moreover, conspiracy theory is always concerned with uncovering the “truth” about and surrounding an event. Moreover, the legend is

narrated in a chronologically ordered sequence of events. This is not the case with conspiracy theory.

The event that creates the conspiracy theory may be told in an ordered sequence, but the conspiracy theory itself contains a plethora of varied content such as, but not limited to: rumor, legend, proven conspiracies and other conspiracy theories, eyewitness testimony, reports, news, government and official accounts, experiments, legislation, sections of the United States Constitution and other legislation. Once a narrator asserts that the United States government did not tell citizens the truth about the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, he can take the narrative into any aspect of conspiracy theory.

The narrator usually delves into content that is of particular interest to him. Therefore, a conspiracy theory will not be told by any two active bearers in the same exact way. This is true of conspiracy theories generated by the general citizenry. It is possible that this is not so with government generated conspiracy theories or those generated by persons with immense political power, as such entities have the resources to transmit a uniform national or global narrative. The Office of War Information and its Rumor Clinic Project during World War II provides a demonstration. However, the main point here is that it is difficult to hear all moving parts to a conspiracy theory in a single sequential narration with a clearly defined beginning and end. The same cannot be said of legend.

At the beginning of this chapter the term *conspiracy legend* was mentioned. This term describes the conspiratorial focus of conspiracy theory in combination with the longevity and cultural entrenchment of legend. This author argues that any legend with a



conspiracy theory as a focus is indeed a conspiracy theory, and conspiracy theory is significantly different from legend. A conspiracy theory that enjoys active circulation for decades or centuries (as in the case of Illuminati conspiracy theories)<sup>2</sup> is indeed legendary and some conspiracy theories may begin as legends, but once the conspiratorial element becomes the central part of a legend, that legend has become a conspiracy theory.

In this chapter, some similarities and differences among rumor, legend, and conspiracy theory were examined to further inquiry as to the genus or genre of conspiracy theory. The next chapter is a detailed examination of the characteristics of conspiracy theory.

## Notes

1. Gulf of Tonkin Incident. On August 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson claimed that North Vietnamese warships without provocation attacked, the U.S.S. Maddox, a destroyer, in the Gulf of Tonkin— a body of water near Vietnam. It was later proven that the United States had been conducting covert commando naval attacks against North Vietnam and had indeed initiated the first attack on North Vietnamese torpedo warships. On August 4, 1964, President Johnson claimed that another U.S. warship, the U.S.S. C. Turner Joy, has also been unjustly attacked by the North Vietnam. It was later proven that there had never been a second attack in the Gulf of Tonkin. However, President Johnson used claims of a second attack to persuade congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which authorized President Johnson to retaliate against North Vietnam and plunged the United States into the Vietnam War. (Prados, John. “40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident.” *The National Security Archive*. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/essay.htm>) (accessed July 7,2017).
2. Operation Northwoods was a false flag operation devised by the U.S Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that proposed enlisting the Central Intelligence Agency and other government agencies to commit acts of terrorism on U. S. citizens and subsequently blame such attacks on the Cuban government. These attacks would then be used as justification for the U.S. declaring war on Cuba. The proposed attacks included but were not limited to: hijacking planes,

attacking military bases, wounding Cuban refugees in the U.S., sinking boats carrying Cuban refugees, detonating bombs in various areas of the United States, and developing a communist Cuban terror campaign. Operation Northwoods was part of a larger project designed to eliminate Fidel Castro called Operation Mongoose. President Kennedy rejected Operation Northwoods; several conspiracy theories cite Kennedy's rejection of this program as a reason for his assassination. ("Pentagon Proposed Pretexts for Cuba Invasion in 1962." *The National Security Archives*. <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/news/20010430>) (accessed July 7,2017).

3. Legend Trip. When people intentionally, and with thrill seeking in mind, visit locations claimed in legends to be haunted or exhibit supernatural activity, these visits are referred to as legend trips. Individuals share their "live experience" of the legend and its claims, and these legend trip experiences add narrative content to the legend of which they are associated.

S. Elizabeth Bird examines legend and legend trip narratives of the "Black Angel," a memorial monument at Oakland Cemetery in Iowa City, Iowa. "The legend trip centers around stories or legends shared among people who travel to a particular place; the legends surrounding it are often disseminated actually at the site" (191). "The Black Angel is an object that historical accident and layer upon layer of narrative and activity have turned into a powerful symbol of ambiguity"

(207). ("Playing with Fear: Interpreting the Adolescent Legend Trip." *Western Folklore* 3, no. 3) (July 1994) 191-209.

Bird illustrates that stories and legend trip narratives about the Black Angel add considerable content; however, like the legend of the Black Angel itself, associated stories and legend trip narratives remain local as well. Also, it is not clear how long legend trip narratives remain part of the local legend narrative. If community demographics change, do prior legend trip narratives remain part of the local legend? If the legend becomes dormant for a period, does legend trip narrative content included prior to dormancy also reactivate with the legend? However, after a period of dormancy, conspiracy theories reactivate with their eyewitness content. For example, whenever JFK theories reactivate or regain heavy circulation, the claims of people hearing shots fired from the grassy knoll also reactivate.

4. Illuminati. The Illuminati was a secret society formed in Bavaria during the Enlightenment by Adam Weishaupt, a professor at the University of Ingolstadt. Weishaupt felt modern societies should not be governed by religious ideas, but by a set of virtuous practices and ideas that were much more "illuminated." "The goal of the Illuminati was to "create a State of liberty and moral equality." Internal conflicts within the organization helped to facilitate its demise as ex-member began to accuse the Illuminati of conspiring against the Bavarian government and organized religion. 1787 the Bavarian government banned the

Illuminati and declared membership in the organization punishable by death.

Although there is no evidence that the Illuminati secret society continued after 1787, it has been accused of plotting the French Revolution and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. (“Meet the Man Who Started the Illuminati,” *National Geographic*. <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/archaeology-and-history/magazine/2016/07-08/profile-adam-weishaupt-illuminati-secret-society>) (accessed July 7, 2017).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Conspiracy Theory**

Véronique Campion-Vincent (2005) in “From Evil Others to Evil Elites: A Dominant Pattern in Conspiracy Theories Today” writes: “The notion of conspiracy implies a group that threatens the very existence of the society in which it has infiltrated” (103), and then maps conspiracy theory content as follows:

1. A specific agent(s) is named, with a clear motivation
2. The agent is evil, the outcome is destructive, which is easy to understand—evil results in evil—and not a complicated and probably more accurate explanation of complex events with unintended consequences of multiple intersecting agents and actions.
3. The evil agent has the capacity for some big event—controls important resources, acts united or with powerful allies, does it in secret, and thus nobody stops it.
4. Conspiracies sometimes do happen, and everyone agrees that they have at times.
5. Some learned, respected, prominent people, not just ignorant marginal people, promote the conspiracy theory—they may be self-serving, but they cannot be ignored. [ . . . ] (105).

Both Goldberg (2001) and Campion-Vincent make astute observations. First, they establish that conspiracy theories are paradigmatic constructions; the conspiracy theory is always about a covert malicious and/or criminal plot by evil “others” who are usually driven by money and power and a need for absolute control. These “evil others” threaten to shape and change events or a way of life to their benefit but to the detriment of those whom they plot against, which is usually an entire population of people.

Good versus evil is a central theme to conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theorists and conspiracy theory activists—those who not only transmit and believe a conspiracy but work actively to expose the conspiracy and its conspirators—are considered on the fringes of society. (Barkun, 2006: 2)

The use of conspiracy theory as pejorative code has led many to conclude that conspiracy theory is outside of the mainstream. This view assumes that, in general, most people who are trying to make sense of events or circumstances do not frame their doubts and suspicions conspiratorially. This perception is fallacious for three reasons: 1) Conspiracy theory has been and continues to be used by authorities and other groups considered to be mainstream. 2) Conspiracy theory is a secular mythology mirroring the secular mythology of the founding of America, which itself mirrors the sacred Christian mythology. 3) Conspiracy theory emerges from, as well as articulates unresolved underlying sociopolitical tensions within a society.

In *Conspiracy Theories in American History: An Encyclopedia*, Peter Knight (2003) enumerates various theories explaining why conspiracy theories are so prolific in the United States. Knight writes:

It's often suggested [ . . . ] that a suspiciousness toward strangers and outsiders (or even just the frightening 'wilderness' itself) is a dominant feature of the early Puritan settlers. Some critics have suggested that the Puritan habit of mind that sought signs and symptoms of the work of the Almighty in tiny, everyday clues was just a short step away from a conspiratorial mentality that tried to read every event for its hidden meaning. In a similar vein, some historians have argued that the nature of the American Revolution has 'conditioned Americans to think of resistance to a dark subversive force as the essential ingredient of their national identity.'

Knight makes a good point here. In the events leading to and during the American revolution, who were the conspiracy theorists? Did only members of marginalized groups—Native American, Slaves, women—create and transmit theories of a plot afoot? Did those later known as the Founding Fathers not express concerns and beliefs about pending conspiracies against the newly forming nation? Was it only the backward and uneducated who articulated fears about possible slave revolts? Was it only paranoiacs

who felt the conscription act was a plot devised to make fighting in the Civil War mandatory for the poor but an option for the wealthy? It seems inconceivable that narratives of suspicion and fear would have been limited to specific small demographics.

Similar questions can be asked today. Do only members of marginalized groups circulate narratives that the United States is becoming an oligarchy? If conspiracy theory is not and was never mainstream, how were so many people's lives and careers ruined by McCarthyism? Is it only the backward who express narratives of President Trump being a fascist and equate his rhetoric and some of his proposed policies to those of Adolf Hitler? Do only paranoid people entertain alternative theories regarding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy?

In fact, it is the use of conspiracy theory in the mainstream, by authorities, that alarmed Karl Popper (2006) and Richard Hofstadter (2008). Popper writes:

The conspiracy theory of a society is widespread, and has very little truth in it. Only when conspiracy theoreticians come into power does it become something like a theory which accounts for things that actually happen [ . . . ]. For example, when Hitler came into power, believing in the conspiracy myth of the Learned Elders of Zion, he tried to outdo their conspiracy with his own counter conspiracy (13).

Popper acknowledges that any member of a society can be an active bearer and believer of conspiracy theory and conspiracy theories among the general citizenry may not be a societal threat. However, if a conspiracy theorist comes into political power, he can cause national and even global devastation. In the same vein, Hofstadter writes:

[ . . . ] the single case in modern history in which one might say that the paranoid style has had a consummatory triumph occurred not in the United States but in Germany. It is a common ingredient of fascism, and of frustrated nationalisms. . . and it can be frequently seen in the left-wing press. The famous Stalin purge trials



incorporated, in supposedly juridical form, a wildly imaginative and devastating exercise in the paranoid style. (7)

It appears that Hofstadter may have shared the same view as Popper regarding conspiracy theory among the general citizenry. Conspiracy theories are always present and may be problematic, but when a conspiracy theorist comes into power or gains a national platform, he can quickly visit a lethal cancer upon society. The coinage of *paranoid style* may be Hofstadter's distinction between a "powerless" conspiracy theorist—a member of the public at large—and a conspiracy theorist with the political power or stature to command a national platform. Hofstadter clearly indicated that the phrase paranoid style was pejorative and that "the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good" (5). Therefore, it is the paranoid style that is illogical, backward, dangerous and is pejorative code with good reason while *conspiracy theory* denotes neutrality and requires each conspiracy theory to be judged on its merits.

Moreover, conspiracy theories generated and promulgated by government may employ rhetoric and exhibit different diffusion patterns; the ways in which these conspiracy theories amass content may significantly vary from those generated by the citizenry at large. Further research into such inquiries is needed but is beyond the scope of the present study. However, it is clear that generation, belief, and transmission of conspiracy theories is common in American society even when people cannot readily identify conspiracy theories reported as verified news and information.

Knight's observations above also support a second point: conspiracy theory is a secular mythology mirroring other secular and sacred mythologies. Knight suggests that events and preexisting beliefs—at least in part—determine the form an oral or written

account of an event will take. The United States was founded through revolution—in which the rebels viewed their cause as noble, just, and morally superior to those that ruled them. These ideas and sentiment are indicated in the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence states “Laws of Nature,” “Nature’s God,” and “Creator,” has bestowed upon man certain “unalienable rights:” life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This implies that the British government was acting in opposition to God’s law or the Law of Nature; those who overthrew the British government were doing so with God’s favor. These assertions point to a secular struggle of good against evil that is connected to the mythological struggle of a good God versus an evil Satan.

The mythological battle is a conspiracy against God by fallen angel Lucifer and his followers. Lucifer and his surrogates conspire to overthrow God’s kingdom and create a New World Order in which evil will reign. This mythological tug of war is performed simultaneously in the spirit and the earthly realms. Belief in this struggle predates the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, but informs both. Allegiance to the side of God in this mythic battle underlies much of the secular myths which serve to form the basis of American identity.

Much of the national mythology of the United States comes from the Puritans. It was John Winthrop that set the premise of the United States as a “shining city upon a hill:” God’s country. Not only was the New World God’s country, but it was to be inhabited by God’s chosen people. There was a strong belief amongst Puritans that they were God’s chosen people and that the New World would now be the New Jerusalem. Folklorist Eleanor Walden (2011) writes:

The widespread belief in American folklore that the United States of America is God's country is an early example of American exceptionalism traceable to American Puritan roots. Many Puritans believed God had made a covenant with their people and had chosen them to lead the other nations of the Earth. Establishing the future Massachusetts Bay Colonies, still aboard the ship Arbella, John Winthrop took his sermon from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:14, their new community would be a "shining city upon a hill", to serve as a model community watched by the rest of the world. Proponents of American exceptionalism often use this metaphor. (Walden)

A few of the early colonies were theocratic societies. Like God's faithful people in the Bible, who were always being tempted or tormented by Satan, so were the Puritans. The Salem witch hunt was a horrific performance of belief in the conspiracy of the devil and his minions against the people of God. The belief was, and still is in many Christian denominations in the United States, that the devil is always trying to attack and destroy God's chosen and faithful people. One had to be on constant guard himself from evil that was guaranteed to attack with frequency. Richard Dorson (1973) writes:

The folklore that the Puritans and other colonists accepted—providences, judgements, apparitions, specters, witchcrafts, poltergeists, compacts with the Devil [. . .] carried a special urgency. Clerical and civic leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony pressed this circulating folklore into their service. Their dedicated purpose lay in establishing a holy society, a covenanted community of saints, in the wilderness where a host of enemies threatened them from within and without. (15).

Leland Ryken (1990) writes that the Puritans equated wealth and prosperity with godliness. Ryken quotes Samuel Willard, a prominent minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony who writes: "[. . .] riches are consistent with godliness, and the more a man hath, the more advantage he hath to do good with it, if God give him the heart to it" (Googlebooks.com).

The amount of material wealth one possessed was in direct proportion to his godliness. Those with great material wealth could be perceived as extra exceptional. This belief is still held today as illustrated by the cultural idolization and fascination with celebrities and wealthy people in society. One can see how belief in the correlation of wealth and can then be applied to the wealth and godliness of a country. In accordance, a nation's immense wealth is proof that the country, and its inhabitants, are exceptionally favored by God. This is underscored in the common saying "God Bless America," and the song, "America, America" with the lyrics, "America, America, God shed his grace on thee." The Pledge of Allegiance was changed from, "One nation indivisible" to "One nation under God." These reinforce the idea of the United States as a good, godly, exceptionally favored, and morally virtuous country that at once abides by and embodies the laws of God.

Many years after the founding of the Puritan colony of Massachusetts, the Founding Fathers envisioned a nation that did not have a national religion, and built into the Constitution separation between church and state. Even so, Puritan beliefs remained in the national mythology. Only the wealthy and property owners were educated and allowed to vote. The wealthy considered the wealthy to be the only ones "fit" to lead and make decisions for the country and all those in it. Moreover, the ideology was that if one worked hard, he would become wealthy and thus, enjoy all rights and privileges afforded his class.

These beliefs about American exceptionalism and America as a utopian heaven on earth play heavily into conspiracy theory. "The Good" (in the Aristotelian sense) utopian heaven-like, godly, and exceptional United States is always the target of evil

others intent on destroying her virtue and bringing her to the depths of the hell: A New World Order. The ideology/mythology of America is a secularized version of the religious mythology of good versus evil. In the secularized mythology of the United States, “Democracy replaces salvation as the goal to be achieved and promises secular salvation through citizenship. With democracy comes political freedom to reinforce the religious freedom already won” (Dorson, 2).

Indeed, this belief is expressed in the images of 9/11. Carl Lindahl (2009) documents the personal narrative of a newscaster “who kept re-seeing the cloud of flame emerging from the Trade Center Tower [. . .] How many of us were burned more than we had to be by re-seeing the fireball countless times before we tried to close our eyes on September 11<sup>th</sup> (221)?” Lindahl also documents people’s associations of fire with the 9/11 attacks. These associations with fire are interesting because one would assume that the collapse of both Towers was more hellacious than the fireball; it is the collapse that resulted in the massive loss of life. However, it is the fire that stands out for many people. One reason for this may be the association of fire with hell and evil. Lindahl writes:

Within two days of the Trade center crashes, the Internet was filled with still photos of the fires from the melted plane that hit the second tower. Accompanying texts asked us to look into the red clouds and find faces in the fire. The webmasters were certain that anyone looking closely enough would find the face of Satan or the form of a dragon. These captions, if far from upbeat, at least offered meanings for the otherwise inexplicable horror of the event. (222)

Alan Dundes (2007) states that folklore contains ideas, premises and concepts that are traditional and expresses aspects of a group’s worldview. Dundes refers to these elements as folk ideas: “traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of humanity, of the world, and of life in the world” (185). The sacred mythology of the

Puritans is mirrored by the secular mythology of America, which in turn, is mirrored by conspiracy theory; Thus, conspiracy theory is secular mythology. Gregory Schrempf (1992) writes:

‘Cosmology’ is used ethnographically to refer not only to a particular individual’s or group’s physical picture of the universe, but to the moral imperatives that are mapped onto the physical picture. As such cosmology has an affinity with worldview: both concepts point to basic postulates about the universe, and the imperatives to action that flow from them. (24)

Karl Popper (2006) compared the conspiracy theory of society to Greek mythological beliefs expressed in the works of Homer; what happened in the lives of men was the direct result of the ongoing conspiracies of the gods (13). Correspondingly, conspiracy theorists explain almost everything in history being the result of the conspiracy of a few powerful people instead of gods. It is the actions of these few people that determine the course of history—what happens in society, a culture, or a country (13).

It is common for conspiracy theories generated by the general citizenry to view governments, oligarchs, plutocrats, and other elites as the “evil other” conspirators. Some examples are: 9/11 as an inside job; the CIA was involved in the assassination of President Kennedy; AIDS is a manmade biological weapon used by the US government to rid itself of unwanted populations—specifically, blacks and homosexuals. In contrast, conspiracy theories that are generated by governments and authorities commonly posit other governments as the “evil other” conspirators. Some examples are: Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction that he intends to use on our allies; McCarthyism—Russian Communist have infiltrated all areas of the government; The Russian

government rigged the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump. Those citizens who disagree with certain government actions may also be posited as “the enemy within.” For example, President Trump’s proposal to create a Muslim registry and database implies United States Muslim citizens are potentially the “evil other” conspirators. On November 6, 2001, President George W. Bush stated in a press conference: “You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror (CNN.com).” His statement suggests that citizens who did not support the war in Afghanistan and Iraq by extension did not support the United States.

This is not to suggest that the general populace may not believe conspiracy theories created by authorities or vice versa. Instead, this is to demonstrate the third point: conspiracy theories emerge from and articulate unresolved underlying sociopolitical tensions within a society.

Charles Briggs (2004) examined conspiracy theories and other public discourse concerning a cholera outbreak in Delta Amacuro, Venezuela. Enumerating the goal of his study Briggs writes:

[It is] not to make conspiracy theories strange but to reflect on features that such theories hold in common with words spoken and written in other places. Official accounts represent a situation that is so depressing and dramatic, and the techniques that they use in suppressing outrage and making death seem normal are so productive that it can be edifying as it is alarming to see how little overt discursive work is needed to turn a medical nightmare, fostered by racialized medical inequalities into something that seems natural and interpretable. (167)

Briggs was in the center of the cholera outbreak both as a participant observer and as a volunteer working to create a cholera prevention program in the indigenous community in Delta Amacuro. Briggs identified how official accounts regarding the

cholera outbreak cited the preparation of a customary food (crabs) of the indigenous population as the origin of the outbreak. The official explanation racialized the epidemic by implying that it was the primitive ways of the indigenous population that caused the outbreak, and therefore, it was only this backward population that was affected by the outbreak; thus, “civilized” people living in the city did not have to fear infection (169).

Briggs notes that conspiracy theories arose that both questioned the government’s account and accused the government of infecting the indigenous people with cholera as an act of genocide to remove them from their lands. However, the racialized official accounts about the origin of the disease allowed government efforts to curtail the spread of the disease to be almost non-existent, which generated more conspiracy theories that criticized the government’s insufficient medical response.

The conspiracy theories generated by the indigenous people were excluded from mainstream media. When indigenous representatives expressed conspiratorial beliefs to criticize the lack of government medical assistance during interviews, “their words were ventriloquized as pleas by pathetic figures unable to obtain government assistance” (178). Briggs concludes: “The political limitations of these conspiracy narratives thus seem to lie less in their epistemological content or narrative structure than in social and material constraints on their circulation” (178).

This observation applies much more to conspiracy theories generated by a group within the general citizenry—specifically, a marginalized group with limited resources. Government generated conspiracy theories will generally not experience such constraints on mass media circulation. However, Briggs captures the conspiracy theory emergent and documents its behavioral, political, and social effects. Briggs also demonstrates that



conspiracy theories are not created in a vacuum. Their structure and content are informed by and represent traditions, customs, beliefs, values, landscape, sociopolitical environment, and histories. Moreover, Brigg's study illustrates how conspiracy theories express sociopolitical tensions within Delta Amacuro, Venezuela: distrust of government, racial tensions, tensions between the indigenous culture and mainstream culture, media representation of marginalized groups, and lack of government resources in a marginalized community.

Myanna Larsen (1999) writes:

[ . . . ] they [conspiracy theories] constitute one tactic among many at play between conflicting interests and views concerning what kind of society and future is wanted, a simple strategy by which to advance interests, including environmentalism, unregulated capitalism and partisan politics. (134)

Many of these same tensions exist in American society and were expressed by citizens in the aftermath of 9/11, as well as in 9/11 conspiracy theories. However, it is common that during and in the immediate aftermath of an unusual event or circumstance, these tensions are sublimated, and there is a window of solidarity amongst citizens. Kay Turner (2009) writes:

Caught unaware, thousands of us saw the destruction with our own eyes. Our first gestures of solidarity were responses to the individual trauma each had suffered: the stunned helplessness of being an onlooker, a survivor in the face of cataclysm, suspended between then and now. Out of sorrow, out of a need I could hardly articulate, I, like so many others, was drawn to Union Square numerous times in the first days after the attacks. [ . . . ] Union Square became the communal point to Ground Zero. (162)

Diane Goldstein (2009) writes: "And while we focus on what happened on that day in the United States, the rippling affect to other sectors of life and other countries threatens to

escape our attention: the war, the wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, the erosion of civil liberties” (146).

Several 9/11 Truth Movement members, to include those represented in this study, express having concerns and questions about aspects of the official explanation of the events and the actors but state that the shock and trauma of the event resulted in their temporarily shelving these concerns. James Fetzer states:

And I’ve tried to reconstruct how soon I was troubled. It may have been immediately that the collapse of these buildings was, you know, absurd. [ . . . ] So, I was troubled. I was puzzled, but it would be awhile before I would get around to doing anything serious about it [2004]. I think like most Americans I felt like something’s wrong, but I don’t know how I can contribute to it yet. I didn’t know yet. [ . . . ]. Something didn’t look right about the collapse of the buildings.

Born Great states:

I really was puzzled at the time, though I didn’t really dwell on it, by the fact that when you looked at the pictures of the Pentagon there was no indication whatsoever that it had been hit by an airplane. Um, if you’ve seen airplane crashes you’ve seen the debris that’s scattered around. You see parts of the airplane. Um, I mean, the kind of hole that was made in the Pentagon and the kind of evidence that was lying on the ground, and I mean, it wasn’t any. I said, Where’s the plane? Where’s the debris? Where’s the luggage? Um, but, that was all. I didn’t really pursue that question in my own mind.

Great also notes that it was not until 2003, when he attended a lecture given by theologian David Ray Griffin, that his questions and concerns about the official account of the 9/11 attacks resurfaced.

Kevin Barrett and David Chandler report similar experiences which are documented in the next chapter. Hence, if an event is particularly traumatic, there may be a shock-induced lull between the event—which may produce a sentiment or need for

unity—and the emergence of a conspiracy theory. Many longstanding sociopolitical tensions are prominent in 9/11 conspiracy theories. These tensions include, but not limited to: corporate greed, Islamophobia and racial profiling of people of Middle Eastern descent; racism; war for oil and corporate profit; government secrecy and corruption; imperialism; the military industrial complex; US foreign policy in the Middle East; United States unconditional and unquestioning support of Israel, and the erosion of democracy and constitutional rights in the United States.

Indeed, conspiracy theories are not the only items of folklore generated after an unusual event or circumstance. Legends related to the event, or said actors of the event, are often generated. Janet Langlois (2005) investigated one such legend called the “Celebrating Arabs.” Langlois writes:

Reports that Arab employees of a Middle Eastern restaurant in the Detroit area cheered and clapped when they saw footage on a television news program that aired during lunch time on 9/11 and that the restaurant was effectively boycotted through an e-mail campaign begun by outraged customers are remarkably similar to accounts discussed by Barbara Mikkelsen, one of the webmasters for the Internet urban legend web site (<http://www.snopes.com>) in the weeks after the attacks. The "Rumors of War" link from the site's home page, Urban Legend Reference Pages, draws users to specific links about businesses so affected. Mikkelsen focuses on the claim that "employees at a Dunkin' Donut outlet desecrated an American flag, and some people of Arab extraction were observed celebrating the terrorist attack on America" in one link labeled "The Hole in the Middle." She also examines a claim that "a Budweiser employee who saw Arabs at a convenience store celebrating the terrorist attacks on America pulled all Budweiser product from that store" in another link labeled 'This Bud's Not for You.' (220)

Peter Burger (2009) illustrates another example of legends in the Netherlands that were in circulation shortly after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States. Burger writes:

In the wake of 9/11, ethnic relations in the Netherlands shifted from lukewarm to overheated. In the national memory, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, stands as the first of three landmark dates that mark shifts in the relationship between the Dutch and the Muslim population, or more specifically, Moroccan immigrants. After 9/11, the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and the emergence of Muslim terrorism on Dutch soil became topics of public concern. (275) In the fall of 2003, a legend-panic about a youth gang bent on rape and mutilation swept through the Netherlands. [ . . . ] As schoolyards and college halls filled up, though, rumors started to buzz. During the next two or three months, students and school children lived in fear of the Smiley Gang, a group of Moroccan youngsters that marked their victim's faces with an ear to ear slash. (276)

In some cases, legends can be used as precursors for or serve as proof for a conspiracy theory. One can readily see how either of these legends can be used to argue the veracity of a conspiracy theory that asserts all Muslims are potential terrorists and the “evil others among us” who are determined to destroy our way of life. Very often when people become the “evil others,” it becomes easier to strip them of their human, civil, and constitutional rights. An example of this would be the Muslim registry and database proposed by President Donald Trump. Another example would be criminalization and subsequent incarceration of U.S. Japanese citizens by the United States government in concentration camps during World War II.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the list of terrorist conspirators and their covert plots seem to grow daily. Examples include Al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, ISIS, the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, and recently, Russian agents who are believed to have rigged the United States 2016 presidential election in favor of Donald Trump, who is believed to be a surrogate of the Russian government. Sabina Magliocco (2004) writes:

Yet the idea of a “sleeper,” the terrorist who appears to adapt to a host culture while secretly harboring plans to destroy it, and evil infiltrator who lives hidden

within a society, clandestinely aspiring to overthrow it, is not new in American culture. [ . . . ] it is part of a pattern of American political discourse that draws heavily from folklore to create an enemy simultaneously alien and internal to the host society, upon whom then political problems can then be blamed. In American history, this discourse has often been used to project evil onto a racial, cultured, gendered, or social Other, allowing the dominant culture to preserve an image of itself as 'pure' and 'good.' It has been used to dehumanize the Other, making it easier to deprive him/her of basic human rights. And by using the language of moral absolutes, of 'good' vs. 'evil,' it has obscured the role of the state in creating the conditions in which political opposition and resistance leading to terrorism can flourish. (14)

Magliocco's analysis returns to three observations presented at the beginning of this chapter about conspiracy theory and discussed throughout: 1) Conspiracy theory has been and continues to be used by authorities and other groups considered to be mainstream. 2) Conspiracy theory is a secular mythology mirroring the secular mythology of the founding of America, which itself mirrors the sacred Christian mythology. 3) Conspiracy theories emerge from and articulate unresolved underlying sociopolitical tensions within a society.

These observations, in addition to an open-minded non-judgmental approach, should be applied in academic studies of conspiracy theory. The study of this folkloric item should not be framed and informed solely by its pejorative code. Such framing has the potential to cause theory blindness, resulting in the pejorative connotation and stereotypes interpreting the conspiracy theory text and not the data. The text is never truly seen as a sociopolitical discourse and the proponents of the text are not actually seen for who they truly are. This is especially important when examining alternative explanations of pivotal historical events such as 9/11. As Diane Goldstein (2009) writes:

Whatever our concerns about the political manipulation of the disaster, few would deny that 9/11, with all its discourses and complexities, has had a severe hand in shaping

this ethnographic moment and many more to come, and few would deny that vernacular culture recognizes 9/11 as a critical defining, world changing, life changing point in personal and collective history. (147)

Critically defining, world changing, and life changing points in personal and collective history usually result in the emergence of conspiracy theories.

## Chapter Four

### 9/11 Truth Movement: The Interviews

There are many people who believe the United States government did not divulge the **entire** truth about events and circumstances related to the September 11, 2001 attacks. There are others who do not believe the government's official explanation about the attacks. However, many of the people in these two groups would not self-identify as 9/11 Truth Movement members. For the purposes of this study, 9/11 Truth Movement members are those who actively promulgate an alternative 9/11 conspiracy theory.

Several themes and issues were consistently raised by 9/11 Truth Movement members during their interviews. Members expressed what they believe are a moral failing and loss of humanitarian values in the culture, that has not only caused sociopolitical tensions, but exacerbated them. The result is a disintegration of human, civil, and constitutional rights. Hence, many members self-identify as activists.

From 2010-2011, I conducted ten interviews with 9/11 Truth Movement activists, nine men and one woman. One interviewee was African American, and the remaining interviewees were white males. All interviewees were intelligent and politically well informed. Excerpts from four of the ten interviews are presented in this chapter. These four interviewees, James Fetzer, Born Great, Kevin Barrett, and David Chandler are middle class professional white males. These interviews were selected for presentation in this study for several reasons. The interviewees do not fit the stereotypical representation of conspiracy theorists. They are highly educated and professional men who are respected leaders and members in the various communities of which they belong. They are not

persons who can be easily dismissed as illogical, uneducated, and paranoid. James Fetzer is a distinguished professor and former United States Marine Corps commissioned officer. Born Great is a minister who holds a Doctor of Divinity degree and a Ph.D. in religious ethics. Kevin Barrett is a Muslim and an Arabist-Islamologist scholar, and David Chandler is a Quaker, physicist, and member of Scientists for 9/11 Truth.

Although each man is a proponent of the controlled demolition theory as the cause for the collapse of the Twin Towers and Building 7 in New York City, there is not a universal consensus amongst them on all aspects of the theory. The interviewees have conducted independent research on 9/11 and interpret their findings through their scholarly, religious, and life experiences. Below are excerpts from interviews with these four 9/11 Truth Movement members.

The interviews were conducted using thirty-one prepared questions (see appendix) in addition to follow up questions I had to a person's response. The thirty-one prepared questions served as a guide only, and therefore, were not asked in any specific order; the questions asked varied from interview to interview depending on the responses of the interviewee. Once I asked a question, the interviewee was allotted as much time as he wished to respond to the question until he exhausted his thought and could take the conversation in whatever direction he chose within that response.

The excerpts chosen were done so because they exhibited recurring themes and issues pertinent to the events both on and related to September 11, 2001.



## **James Fetzer Interview**

James Fetzer was born and raised in Pasadena California on December 6, 1940, “Yeah, a year and a day before Pearl Harbor my dad always referred to my birthday.” Both of his parents attended UCLA. His father majored in political science, and the Fetzer household was frequently abuzz with political discussion which stirred young James’ interest in political issues. “I had many conversations about politics. [ . . . ] and that was the stimulation I think, in many ways, for my becoming interested in what’s going on in the world from a political point of view.”

James Fetzer is a Distinguished McKnight Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. He has enjoyed a thirty-five-year career as a professor of philosophy teaching courses in logic, critical thinking, and scientific reasoning. He is the archiver of the works of renowned philosopher Carl G. Hempel, who also served as his mentor while he was an undergraduate at Princeton University. He is also the co-founder of Scholars for 9/11 Truth. Fetzer has written over twenty-nine books including five in an area he calls applied philosophical research: three on JFK, one on the death of Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone, and another on 9/11, as well as several related articles.

I met James Fetzer at Conspiracy Conference (Con Con) in 2008 after he had given a presentation on an alternative narrative regarding the events of September 11, 2001. As he was the founder of Scholars for 9/11 Truth and a professor of logic and scientific reasoning, I absolutely wanted to interview him and try to discover what motivated him to form Scholars for 9/11 Truth.

**Q: How did you get into philosophy?**

My first year at Princeton, my freshman year, I realized that scientific knowledge was growing exponentially—that you couldn’t possibly master all the knowledge in a field but you could study the principles by means of which that knowledge is acquired, and if you understood those principles, then you could go to any field and understand what is going on in a general methodological way. So, that already my first semester, I realized what I needed to do was to study methods, and theories, and concepts. And I went through the undergraduate catalog and circled all the courses that had to do with methods, theories, and concepts, and it turned out by far the most were in the philosophy department. So, I realized philosophy really was the key, and actually, the philosophy of science. [. . .]

Fetzer began to apply what he calls applied philosophical research in his examination of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

**Q: Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when President Kennedy was assassinated?**

I was anchored aboard [. . .] a landing platform helicopter carrier. [. . .] named the Iwo Jima, anchored out in Kaohsiung Harbor in Formosa when the officer of my deck, [. . .] Fred Rensler, awakened me at 3:30 in the morning to tell me that the president had been shot. And then an hour later, he awakened me again to tell me that they had caught the guy who had done it. He was a communist.

**Q: So, when you’re awakened at 3:30 in the morning and told the president has been shot, what is your reaction? What are you thinking?**

I thought to myself even then that was pretty fast work. And of course, I know today, based upon all my research, that it was easy to arrest the guy that they planned to arrest as the patsy.

September 11, 2001 would prove to be a sort of déjà vu for Fetzer, which found him once again using his understanding of applied philosophical science research to understand and make sense of the events and its aftermath.

**Q: What were you doing on September 11, 2001?**

Well, it's very interesting. My wife and I were just in bed still asleep when one of our daughters called us; she lived in Bradenton, Florida. She said, 'Turn on the TV.' We turned on the TV and the north tower was in smoke. The south tower hadn't been hit yet. And you know, that event was to take place very shortly after we turned on the TV. There was only like a fifteen or twenty-minute interval between the purported hit on the first building and the purported hit on the second.

[ . . . ] I've tried to reconstruct how soon I was troubled. It may have been immediately that the collapse of these buildings was, you know, absurd. In fact, I can give you dozens of reasons why it's not physically possible. It violates laws of engineering, laws of physics, and so forth. But at the time I just think it didn't look reasonable to me [ . . . ] So far as I can recall, the first article I published was in an alternative newspaper in Duluth called the *Reader*. And I was enumerating about, in different categories. Oh, I don't know, sixteen or twenty different categories reasons why 9/11 looked like it was very different than had been presented to us.

I didn't actually get serious until a very prominent figure in the field: very prominent today, a professor of theology actually, and of the philosophy of religion from the Claremont Graduate School by the name of David Ray Griffin of whom I'd never heard of at that point in time wrote me and he admired my work on JFK and wanted to know if we might collaborate on a book where I do JFK and he does 9/11. And that never actually came to pass, but it did lead me to start writing my very first paper in this area which is entitled, "Thinking about Conspiracy Theories: 9/11 and JFK," in where I knew it would be important to explain the principles, the stages of scientific reasoning. [ . . . ]

**Q: So, let's walk through that. You're looking at these buildings on fire; planes have just hit these buildings. At that moment, are you suspicious or are you just more in shock? Do you remember what you were thinking when you were looking at that?**

I think puzzlement would be the right characterization. I was puzzled at what I was seeing because it didn't make a lot of sense.

**Q: What do you mean it didn't make a whole lot of sense?**

[ . . . ] You've got smoke coming out of these buildings but actually they are two of the best engineered buildings in the history of civil engineering, okay. I mean, no steel structure high rise has ever collapsed due to fire. In the past, before 9/11, nor after 9/11—nor if our research is correct—nor on 9/11. [ . . . ]

**Q: But are you thinking all of that at the time?**

No. I'm looking at this. Something doesn't seem right. But it would be quite a while before I'd really start marshalling in all the reasons why it didn't look right. I mean, we were sort of in the grips of this, the psychological impact of these events which were being exploited politically by the Bush/Cheney Administration. And it was very suspicious to me that so fast they had a list of the 19 alleged terrorists.

**Q: What was suspicious about that? What about that caused suspicion?**

It was almost immediate that they had it! I mean, you know, where did they get it? I mean, you know, look, you have these plane crashes and everyone is supposed to be killed and all that. The plane is demolished and so forth. I mean, how could they so immediately and so promptly know who's responsible? That didn't seem reasonable. In other words, there was another case of this being pretty fast work. [ . . . ]

And then the way Bush and Cheney would exploit having the list of the 19. And this was supposed to have come out of Mohamed Atta's luggage??!! And I'm thinking, 'Well that's very funny.' You know, this guy is involved in this elaborate conspiracy and he's gonna try to kill a lot of people using planes as weapons. If I were involved in a conspiracy, the last thing I'm gonna do is write down a list of my co-conspirators.[ . . . ] I mean what a dumb thing to do. And yet the FBI took this as somehow obvious that he had done it [wrote the list of his co-conspirators]

### **The Founding of Scholars for 9/11 Truth**

**Q: So, I have to ask you about your colleague's reaction when you come out, and they know you're very vocal about not believing the official government version of what happened on 9/11. Um because, I know I have run into some faculty here, and in other places, who have said that they are stunned to learn or hear of colleagues who have these beliefs. So, I am wondering how much of that did you run into, and if you did, did that spur you to found Scholars for 9/11 Truth or—?**

Founding Scholars [for 9/11 Truth] arose during an internet discussion with about two dozen others who were interested in 9/11. And it was obvious to

me that some of them had very strong backgrounds, you know, in different disciplines. And the thought crossed my mind that it might be useful to form a society that's a loose affiliation, that might have a website, that might sponsor lectures, organize conferences, publish books, [ . . . ] Put out press releases. And so, I floated this idea to this group and there were two members who dissented and said, no. That would affect their freedom of speech. [ . . . ].

I invited Steven Jones to be my co-chair [of Scholars for 9/11 Truth.] [Steven Jones is a professor of physics at Brigham Young University]. I went ahead and founded Scholars. I actually laid out my background with regard to research on JFK [ . . . ] and of course all of my work in the history of philosophy and science and all my research credentials, 'cause I wanted them to know who I was that I should be founding Scholars for 9/11 Truth. [ . . . ] It was very successful. Within months we had about 300 members. So it was founded in mid-December [2005] [ . . . ] and by mid-2006, it had really made a difference. Before I founded Scholars, articles in the mainstream press about 9/11 was a flatline; it was dead issue. [ . . . ]

And you know by mid-June, Alex Jones was organizing what he called the American Scholars Conference—no doubt inspired by the name of the society—and there were 1200 people in an enormous ballroom. The highlight was a panel discussion on Sunday where Steve Jones, my co-chair, was the first speaker. Bob Bauman, who had directed the Star Wars Research Project under [President] Carter and [President] Ford, was there. Webster Tarpley, one of our foremost experts on covert activities, was there, and I was the fourth. All four of us were members of Scholars. So, the four members of Scholars and Alex Jones were moderating, but CSPAN was there, and they recorded it about an hour and 45 minutes.

They put it on seven or eight different times. And I think that had the effect of shattering what had been a kind of artificial ceiling on public discussion. I think that was the event, because you know, Bush had gone to the National Cathedral and sanctified the official account surrounded by a priest, a rabbi, and a minister, and [ . . . ] suggested we best not ever be distracted by outrageous conspiracy theories as though we were not supposed to recognize that the government's own official account was itself a conspiracy theory. And indeed—to anyone who actually studied the evidence—it is the most easily falsifiable, because it violates laws of physics, engineering and aerodynamics, which means it's not even possible that the government's account could be true. [ . . . ] I have often observed during interviews [ . . . ] that the official account is just fine as long as you're willing to believe impossible things. [ . . . ].

### **Scholars for 9/11 Truth Parting of Ways**

**Q: I have heard several different theories about what happened. Some of them deal with controlled demolition. I have definitely heard about the**

**use of thermite. So, I know that at some point there was tension within Scholars for 9/11 Truth as to what actually brought those buildings down.**

Steve Jones and I had a falling out. [. . .] It really had to do with the breadth of theories we were going to consider. I take a big tent approach. We really don't know how it was done, and we need to consider all the available theories; plus, you can only show one is a better theory than another by comparing them. But Steve Jones wanted to focus on thermite as a principle contribute, as though you could establish that it was a more adequate theory without comparing it with others. So, he and a group of his allies broke off from me, with Scholars at the end of 2006 in December. We had a parting of the ways. [. . .]

**Q: So, just to clarify, okay, you're not discounting that there is a possibility it could have been thermite. But, what you're saying is that we need to look at other theories that are out there—**

I am quite convinced that thermite cannot be the principle cause of what happened on 9/11. It cannot possibly explain the conversion of these two 500-ton buildings into very fine dust. Let me give you a simple reason; thermite is not explosive. Thermite is an incendiary. It cuts through steel [. . .] but explosions occur through the rapid expansion of gases. [. . .] Thermite has no gas expansion capacity and therefore cannot be responsible for the destruction of these buildings. It cannot. So, thermite as to be combined with explosives to have explosive potential [. . .]

**Q: Do you think all of these theories [about 9/11] that are out there weaken the Movement or is it more important that people are questioning?**

It is very common in the history of science that you have competing research groups. So, the fact that the fragmentation [occurred in Scholars for 9/11 Truth] in itself is not bad. What **is** bad is if too many people believe in a false theory. So, if too many people are putting their eggs in the thermite basket and [. . .] if the basket is weak and flimsy then all of the eggs are going to get broken when it falls apart. It can be part of what happened. I mean I don't deny that they could have used thermite. [. . .]

## **Greed**

**Q: Well, let me ask you this question. What do you think really happened on 9/11?**

Well the whole thing was a staged contrived event that was years in the planning. Larry Silverstein who was a private entrepreneur took control of the world trade center six weeks before the events. It was the first time it had been placed in the hands of a private individual. The Twin Towers had a lot of problems with asbestos; the Port Authority had told Silverstein that he needed to have it removed. It would have cost probably a billion dollars to erect scaffolds all around those two 110 story buildings and to get this asbestos out of the buildings. I gather there were some problems with tenancy though I did recently interview someone who worked in the south tower for three years. He told me they had about 90% tenancy. But it seems to would have required a lot of updating for digital technology, for example, that would have been very expensive. In any case, he insured the two buildings for 2.5 billion dollars against terrorist attacks, and because there were two planes, he claimed it was two attacks. So, for an investment of 114 million he went up to making over 4.4 billion dollars from insurance settlements.

## **Militarism and Imperialism**

*[Fetzer is still responding to the previous question. What do you think really happened on 9/11?]*

But, the big picture is this.[A] very influential group called the neoconservatives had come into office with Bush and occupied very important policy positions in the DOD (Department of Defense) especially and these included Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld but also Paul Wolfowitz and Donald Fife, Richard Merle and they had allies in the conservative community Bill Cristol who is the editor of the weekly standard, Charles Krauthammer a syndicated columnist who were arguing that the United States should be attacking Iraq. They had fashioned what they called the Project for a New American Century that was outlining a scheme to seize the opportunity presented by the collapse of the Soviet Union so that now the United States was the sole remaining superpower and they saw this as an opportunity to move aggressively into the Middle East.

What it initially argued of course was that Iraq represented a threat to the United States. The idea of invading Iraq had actually been discussed at the first meeting of Bush's cabinet—much to the surprise of Paul O'Neill the first secretary of the treasury who wrote about this. He said he was astonished they were already talking about invading Iraq. And this is long before 9/11. But of course, among the many arguments we got for attacking Iraq were that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, and they implied that he could deliver them to the United States. No one stopped to ask why anyone would do something like that. [ . . . ] We'd simply obliterate them. So, anyone that's doing that is committing suicide by inviting their own annihilation. Nobody stopped to ask does this make any sense that he would have these weapons of mass destruction and want to use them against the United States. The argument was made that there was collusion between Iraq and Al-Qaeda which also if you stopped and thought about it was ridiculous. [Al-Qaeda represents a] theocratic government whereas Saddam represented a secular government; he was actually tracking down to kill the leaders of organizations like Al-Qaeda. [ . . . ]

So, we're looking at some kind of fakery the question is how was it done. [ . . . ] So this whole thing was contrived [ . . . ] and it was all for political reasons and it was to benefit Israel, take control of the oil and to create a worldwide American empire. None of it was for the benefit of the American people. And it is a reason why today we are, along with our ally Israel, the most despised and reviled countries in the world. We are the leading terrorist states in the world.



## **Born Great Interview**

Born Great, (a pseudonym), was born in Yankton, South Dakota. He is an ordained minister who moved to Indiana in 1985 to pastor the First Presbyterian Church. He became interested in politics while taking a junior high school civics class in the 1960s, a time during which the Nixon-Kennedy presidential debates took place. John F. Kennedy would ultimately win the presidency. The Vietnam War was raging during Great's high school years.

In late 2009, I heard a paper given by Born Great in Indiana. I was really intrigued by his paper which presented reasons why many people will not consider the possibility that the United States government may have had some involvement in the events of September 11, 2001 by either letting it happen on purpose (LIHOP) or making it happen on purpose (MIHOP). I was even more intrigued that a minister was a fierce proponent of an alternative explanation, and I was curious as to how his worldview informs his belief in an alternative explanation for 9/11. How does his faith align, or not, with his belief in an alternative explanation of 9/11 as a false flag operation?

**Q: Um history, 'cause I mean, in sixty-four years you've seen a lot happen in American history and politics. What are some of the incidents that stand out for you?**

[. . .] the Vietnam war really ramped up and um that was a very traumatic period in American history, but it was also a traumatic period for those of us who were potentially eligible to be drafted to serve in the military.

**Q: Did you go?**

I did not go. I would not have gone, because I did not believe it was a moral war. Um, but on the other hand, I probably would not have qualified as a conscientious objector, because I am not opposed absolutely to all wars. I'm not a pacifist. But, that war was certainly wrong. And I had some fellow classmates who actually went to Canada at that time after they graduated from college, a course that I did not think was possible for me because my parents would have been devastated. But as it turned out I felt called to go to divinity school. [ . . . ] So, I lived through all the assassinations, Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, King, Malcolm X.

**Q: What the mood of the country after each [assassination]? Was the mood kind of the same or was it a little different after Kennedy, then you had Bobby [Robert Kennedy] and [Dr. Martin Luther] King?**

[ . . . ] I remember thinking in college as early as my freshman year which was in 1965, in the fall, that we were going through a period of revolution in the country. [ . . . ] I mean, change was just happening. [ . . . ] Unfortunately, I don't think that we made many gains from that period that have endured it seems like. Um, it seems like some of the people like Kennedy who might have been able to secure permanent gains were cut down, so those were lost. Johnson got bogged down in the war. Um, there were gains in civil rights but at a great cost in terms of what happened with the Dixiecrats, and the whole political situation changed in the country. Um, so you know, from 1976 on—well Carter was elected in '76—yeah so that was a bit of a respite certainly from 1980 on there was a huge change. [ . . . ]

### **Remembering 9/11**

**Q: What was that morning [September 11<sup>th</sup>] like for you? Do you remember what you were doing when the planes hit?**

I certainly do. I was working on my Ph.D. in religious ethics, and in that capacity I was a teaching assistant. And that morning I was headed toward class, religious ethics in public life, which was being taught by a faculty member [ . . . ] for whom I was one of the two teaching assistants. And we were meeting in the Fine Arts Building [ . . . ] where they've got TV equipment, projection equipment. And, I walked in—I'd already heard something on the radio about a plane hitting one of the towers. I walked in

and there was the live coverage of the north tower smoking and burning. And um, we just spent the rest of the hour just watching.

Of course, that meant we watched the second plane hit. We watched the second tower come down. And I think we stayed long enough to see the first tower come down. [. . .] And it was very sobering. I had two reactions. One of them was just the horrific nature of this event. You could see people at some point jumping out of the buildings...just imagine how horrible it was for them. The other was, this gives the Bush Administration a blank check to do all the things it's going to want to do, cause I was at that point very distressed at the kind of political agenda we could expect from that administration. But that agenda wasn't being trusted because Bush wasn't very popular [. . .] So, I saw this as a turning point in the sense that the country is going to rally— doesn't matter who the president is—they're going to rally around the president. They're going to come together and this is going to provide pretext for whatever this administration wants to do. Which is exactly what happened and umm which in my view is tragic. [. . .]

**Q: What were some of things you were concerned about with the [Bush] administration to begin with?**

My political views now are best described as liberal and progressive much more than the current [Obama] Administration, um and far, far different from the Bush Cheney Administration. I think that government is to be a servant of the people, and what we have now in this country is government is a servant of the corporations and the wealthy. And I am greatly disturbed by the tremendous disparities in wealth and power which are really undermining our whole democracy. We really don't have an effective democracy anymore in my view because of corporate power. Um, not just private for profit corporations but the corporate power of the military and other entities. [. . .]

Certainly, it was clear that Bush wanted to go in directions that I thought were just the opposite of where the country should be going. What we got—which we didn't even know was waiting in the wings—was the PATRIOT Act. Um, which is a really an infringement of civil liberties. I think parts of it should be considered unconstitutional. Um, we got all sorts of other things later on, torture. I mean it's just hard to fathom that you have the president and vice president and top administrative people in government who admit to committing torture and defend themselves for doing it. They don't use the word torture they call it waterboarding or harsh interrogation methods—whatever that's what it is. These are war criminals! If they were not running the show if they were subject to the authority of other judicial powers they would be subject to prosecution for war crimes. [. . .] This is just unconscionable. It doesn't matter who they were doing it to.

**Q: Now, you're a minister. During that time, they [the media] were interviewing a lot of people from the ministry, and some people were having a spiritual crisis asking how could God let this happen. Did you have that or no?**

No. No. God didn't let this happen. I don't understand God as somebody who has his finger or her finger in the pie stirring everything and making sure it all turns out just the way God intends for it to be. That, that mischaracterizes God. It was a crisis at a later point for me in terms of how I came to understand my country, but that was like 3-4 years later as I began to assimilate what happened on 9/11 from a more critical perspective than the one that was provided by the official narrative of what took place that day. [. . .]

**Q: As you hear the official narrative as it's forming, what are you thinking?**

These guys who we are told flew these planes must have had a worldview that is hard for us to understand that they were going to sacrifice their lives to fly those planes into those buildings. Um, I mean it's one thing to hate other people and be willing to kill and destroy them but it is another thing to be willing to take your own life in the process and to do so knowingly. And, I had assumed at the time that that's what happened. That's what the story was.

I was also concerned however, that this was going to result in some kind of movement for revenge that would be more or less indiscriminate toward those folks, because these people were identified as militant extremists. I was actually scheduled to preach a sermon the following Sunday in Bloomfield, Indiana where there are employees of Crane Naval institution, naval facility, whatever it is there. So, this is a conservative congregation in terms of their politics. And, I did preach a sermon in which I preached against revenge essentially, and for trying to understand the nature of what took place while acknowledging how horrible it was. But nothing that I said that day was really contrary to the official narrative. [. . .]

I didn't really have any strong sense that there was anything deficient about that narrative [government account about the events of 9/11] with one exception. [. . .] I really was puzzled at the time—though I didn't really dwell on it—by the fact that when you looked at the pictures of the Pentagon, there was no indication whatsoever that it had been hit by an airplane. Um, If you've seen airplane crashes you've seen the debris that's scattered around. You see parts of the airplane. Um, I mean, the kind of hole that was made in the Pentagon and the kind of evidence that was lying on the ground, and I mean, it wasn't any! I said, 'Where's the plane?' 'Where's the debris?' 'Where's the luggage?' Um, but that

was all. I didn't really pursue that question in my own mind. It just puzzled me at that point. [. . .]

**Q: So, how did that sermon go over?**

One person interrupted me and protested while I was preaching. Um, I think he had a pretty negative view of Muslims and that was probably the basis for his comment. I don't recall the specifics of it all. ....

**Q: Okay, so you're going along with the official version except that you have this little question in your mind about, hmmm, where is the debris? Where is the [plane] wreckage from the Pentagon? But, you go on with it [continuing to accept the official version]. What happens that makes you say, "This isn't adding up?"**

I became acquainted with David Ray Griffin's work and at some point. I think it was in the fall of 2003 if I'm not mistaken. I went to hear him give a series of lectures in Louisville [KY]. He was working on a book on [...] American Empire and Global Democracy. He had retired as a professor of .... Religion at Claremont School of Theology. [. . .] I met him introduced myself told him I was working on a chapter on him as part of my dissertation and that was sufficient to get me on his email list. [. . .] So, at some point in 2004, I read Griffin's book [*The New Pearl Harbor*]. I saw some stuff on the internet. [. . .] Somehow, I came across a video about 9/11 and the Pentagon and that piqued my interest, and it showed video and still shots that I hadn't really seen before or hadn't studied before. So, those were the two kinds of exposures that began my inquiry into what took place on 9/11[. . .]

**Q: So, when you read Griffin's book, you said this was a compelling case to yourself. At that point is just "a compelling case," or is it, "we didn't get the truth about 9/11," or is it just okay, this is interesting; let me check this out further?**

I was pretty persuaded by that time that we had not gotten the whole truth. It wasn't clear yet to what extent the events of 9/11 may have been allowed to happen to what extent they were coordinated by some elements within the US government, the US power structure, whether it's government or not. Um, and it's

still not clear to what extent that is the case but it is clear to me now that we're not talking about something that was just allowed to happen but that it required high level coordination by persons including government administration officials.

**Q: What is that moment like [the moment you become convinced that the government's explanation of the events of 9/11 is false]? I don't know if anybody can always reconstruct it. What is that moment like when that thought goes off in your mind, "Oh my God!" What is running through your mind?**

I think in my case, because I had this agenda of having to finish a dissertation and defend that I had inklings.[ . . .] So, the process of dawning and realizing that the 9/11 story was bogus um was a bit more gradual. [ . . .] Um I spent a lot of time feeling very depressed about the state of the world and about the state of our government and its actions and what future prospects for democracy may be. [ . . .]

**Q: Is that around the time when you started questioning what is going on with humanity on a spiritual level?**

I wouldn't put it that broadly. I really, um I guess I could say, I've not recovered a sense of long term hopefulness. I have sort of come to terms with we are never going to become the country we aspire to be and probably never were, and things are going to be more bleak as time goes on. [ . . .]

**Q: How do you resolve that? How do you get past the depression? What do you do? Do you get involved? Do you try to make others more politically aware?**

Well it certainly helps to have other people who you can talk these things over with and in some sense, commiserate. We have a local group of folks some of them are affiliated with the university and some are not, but we're all sort of individual researchers and students of 9/11. Um, we share things by email we meet periodically. We function sort of implicitly as a support group although our real purpose stated purpose is to study 9/11 and inform the public about it which we have also done.

Um. I mean for me, um as a person of religious faith, I never felt like the future hangs upon human effort. Ultimately heaven and earth shall pass away to

put it in Biblical terms. You know we are a blip in the larger scheme of things, but I do cherish this blip, and I really grieve what is happening.

**Q: What is the reaction when you try to tell people about 9/11?**

[. . .] a lot of people wonder if what the 9/11 Truth people are saying, ‘Several years have gone by now. Why hasn’t somebody spilled the beans? Why hasn’t somebody said I set the explosives, or I did this or I did that?’ There are different ways to answer those questions, but it’s also true there are people who have effectively spilled the beans. There is a book that recently came out by a woman who was working for the CIA who says that they were alerted months ahead of time that this even was going to happen. But you probably won’t read about the that fact because this book has been written and published, and this person on the inside is telling the story because it is not being covered by mainstream media. [. . .]

**Q: Through your research, what have you found happened on 9/11?**

Well, there are many, many unanswered questions. What is clear is that these two planes that flew into buildings 1&2 were not the reason for the collapse of those buildings. They certainly created fire and may have caused some structural damage and took some lives, but the global collapse of those buildings was caused by demolition. And you can see it by watching the videos. [. . .] You can see that the buildings are exploding; they are not collapsing. [. . .] Building 7 is sort of the clincher because there was no plane impact there. [. . .] You can just see the building collapsing in perfect implosion the likes of which are unknown in the physical world other than through demolition. So, that much we know. Who did it, becomes much more speculative.

What happened at the Pentagon is much more subject to controversy in the 9/11 Movement. [. . .] but there are people in the 9/11 Truth movement who do believe that a commercial airplane hit the Pentagon and it’s hard to resist that conclusion when you consider so many alleged eye-witness reports of a plane flying in that direction. Not so many people saying they saw the impact but quite scores of people, hundred probably, saying they saw a plane flying overhead. So, a lot of people didn’t see any impact. What they saw was an explosion, the billowing of smoke, or whatever at the time when it would appear that the plane would have it. So, it gets really difficult to explain what happened there. [. . .]

So, you have all of these anomalies about what is said to have happened and what actually happened. [. . .] So, I don’t know how to parse all of that out. But there is almost universal agreement within the 9/11 truth movement that all three of the Towers were brought down by explosives. There is a lot more controversy about what happened at the Pentagon. And then flight 93, was it shot down? Was it blown up? The so-called crash site doesn’t look like an airplane

crash site. It's too small. It doesn't have parts that are identifiable as airplane parts. . . . It seems as though the plane blew apart when it was in the air. I don't think that there was enough containment of whatever happened there for anybody to be confident about what took place. [. . .]

**Q: Controlled demolition. What was to be gained by that? Why would someone do that?**

It's not hard to come by a list of who occupied building 7 besides the office of emergency management for the city of New York. I think there was CIA, I think there was FBI, SEC, um, I forget what else there was there but you sort of had all of these government agencies in finances or in intelligence um that um including apparently the records for the Enron investigation that the SEC was conducting. They got destroyed when building 7 came down. [. . .]



## Kevin Barrett Interview

Kevin Barrett was born in Madison Wisconsin and describes himself as, “kind of a participant observer in the 9/11 Truth Movement. “People would say I’ve gone Native.” Kevin Barrett has a PhD and is an Arabist-Islamologist scholar who has taught at several universities including the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2006, Barrett was dismissed from the university after several Republican legislators, who were vehemently opposed to Barrett’s political statements and opinions on the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the War on Terror, demanded the university terminate Barrett’s employment. Thereafter, Barrett has been unable to teach at universities and colleges throughout the United States. He is the author of several books on 9/11. and is the host of Truth Jihad Radio.

While attending Con Con in 2008, I purchased a book from a conference vendor entitled *9/11 and American Empire: Christians, Jews, and Muslims Speak Out Vol. 2*. Through reading the book, I discovered that Kevin Barrett, a former professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, had minored in folklore and is also Muslim. After learning of his podcast radio show Truth Jihad and listening to several shows, I subsequently emailed him and we corresponded via email a few times. I learned that Barrett had lost his teaching position at the University of Wisconsin-Madison because of his refusal to cease publicly questioning the government’s official version of the events of 9/11 and propagating the controlled demolition theory.

Barrett’s termination from the university greatly interested me. Conspiracy theories are often etically viewed as fantasy-like notions and opinions as opposed to beliefs: beliefs that are non-different in conviction from many other self-defining and

behavior informing beliefs such as religious beliefs. Indeed, as in Barrett's case, many people are willing to risk losing their careers, friends, and family relationships rather than compromise on their beliefs. Activism, movements, and organizations are created for the support, testament, and dissemination of beliefs including beliefs in conspiracy theories. I was happy when Kevin Barrett agreed to be interviewed. I felt his story would be both interesting and revealing.

**Q: Do you remember what you were doing that day?**

Yes. I was actually, believe it or not, teaching a folklore course. Yeah, I was actually teaching with Ruth Olsen. She was the lecturer and I was like a sort of like a glorified TA (teaching assistant) although I had my own section of students from that course and I taught them writing. It was part of a writing through the disciplines program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. So, I attended Ruth's lecture along with this huge group of students. And kind of in the middle of the lecture that morning, that 9 to 10am range, some strange rumblings were going around the class. After that, I think it was around ten minutes to 10am, I went to go teach my section of writing students [. . .] and I noticed the students were kind of distracted, unusually so—pulling out their cell phone things. [. . .]

So, then this student said, 'By the way, did you hear about this thing that happened in New York?' And I said, 'No. What's going on?' So, then he mentioned something about this plane hitting the World Trade Center. And then a little later, I think it was towards the end of class, the student said, 'Oh, the tower has collapsed.' You know. And, all of the students were kind of stunned. [. . .] I remember leaving that class and going home. [. . .] We turned on the television and watched some of these images. [. . .] I am very skeptical about television and the first thing that went through my mind was somebody is going to make a lot of money off of this.

So, I guess my first reaction was kind of skeptical. [. . .] And then after mulling it over for a few minutes, continuing to watch the TV coverage, I remember that day, after a few hours, they were blaming Arabs and Muslims. And they were showing Palestinians apparently celebrating the success of the 9/11 attacks. Well, that's what they were saying it was. It later turned out that that footage was just stock footage from a martyr's funeral long before 9/11, but it was being presented on 9/11 as if there were Palestinians celebrating the attacks. [. . .]

Weird things kept appearing in the news that made me even more skeptical even though I wasn't really paying attention. Um, some of those things were one of the hijacker's passport was supposedly found outside of the Trade Center which seemed a little too convenient for me, and there were various other

little things like that that didn't fit. It was late 2001 that Alexander Coburn, a left-wing columnist, published some stuff pointing the research of Justin Raimondo of anti-war.com, who had done a bunch of research about the dancing Israelis: this whole Israeli spy ring that was cleaned up. There were two hundred Israeli spies arrested during the year before and then several months after 9/11. And so, when I read some of that stuff and thought, 'Yeah, it probably was the Israelis, or it could have been Al-Qaeda too. Who knows?' And I kept seeing these things but not being really that excited about it. But, more and more, I thought something was wrong. It was the invasion of Afghanistan; it was blatantly illegal and the real reason for it obviously was not 9/11, because the Taliban had offered to hand over Bin Laden if the US produced any evidence at all against him and Bush refused.

So, that meant that this wasn't really about getting at Bin Laden, it was about something else presumably the drugs and the oil or gas pipeline. I still hadn't figured this stuff out, but I was kinds cynical about it. And then when Bush invaded Iraq in Spring 2003, I was really starting to get angry. By then, you know, the PATRIOT Act and all this stuff. I had Muslims friends in Madison and many of them had been visited by FBI agents. Some had been terrorized and others had been treated very kindly by FBI agents and told, you know, 'We know you guys didn't do this, but we have to go through the motions anyway.' [ . . . ]

So, I was hearing that kind of stuff and I was really getting more and more fed up. And the Iraq war was one of those things that made me fed up and another one was when Paul Wellstone was assassinated. [ . . . ] Wellstone was the biggest opponent of the war in Iraq. He was supposedly privately very, very skeptical about the official story of 9/11. And Cheney delivered a very strong threat to him and less than a week later, with a couple of his family members and advisors, basically was fried. We now know it was taken out by some kind of weapon that basically burned up all the fuel of the plane. [ . . . ]

So, at that point, I realized something was really wrong. And um, then in late 2003, I heard that David Ray Griffin—who is I think—one of the most interesting and really most sensible researchers in academia whose done research on a whole bunch of empirical topics. [ . . . ] uh and I cite him in my dissertation and I heard that he was doing research arguing that the World Trade Center was taken down by controlled demolition, and that uh, whatever happened to the Pentagon, it certainly wasn't a commercial airliner crash. And that was so outrageous to hear that somebody as sensible as Griffin was pursuing these lines of inquiry that I said, 'Well I better sit down and look at these things too.'

So, I got on the computer. [ . . . ] I think it was around some time in December 2003. [ . . . ] I got on my computer and started going around looking up things. Looking up stories and going through the complete 9/11 timeline; that's an archive of all mainstream stories about 9/11 that Paul Thompson had put together. The more I looked at the pictures of the Pentagon and the videos of the World Trade Center, I was just stunned. It was beyond belief. [ . . . ] At that point I had to sit down and think about what do you do about something like this? And I realized that this really could be a major lever for change. Because if the American people were suddenly made aware of this, it could really awaken them

out of a certain kind of trance that could lead to space opening up for a lot of really positive changes.

**Q: I want to go back to your first reaction of skepticism. You were skeptical about who performed the attacks, or were you skeptical about how the buildings came down, that planes would make the buildings come down?**

I accepted the basic story that planes had hit the Towers and the Pentagon [. . .] because at that point, I didn't understand that the media was controlled enough [and] that any other possibility could exist. But at the same time, I was really skeptical about who had really done it. But I just didn't think we would know for sure. People in the Islamic studies field and people who know about the Middle East for the most part are pretty amazed that Al-Qaeda would be able to pull something like this off. [. . .] They can do truck bombs, maybe [. . .] but something like this and having it be that destructive seemed really unlikely. The most respected political commentator in the Arab world is guy named Muhammad Haikal who has written a long list of books. He is probably the single most highly regarded political voice in the Arab world. And right after 9/11 he said this is a complete joke. You know al-Qaeda couldn't have possibly done this. He said, 'I used to be in the government we used to keep track of Al-Qaeda. We infiltrated Al-Qaeda (meaning Egypt) [. . .] the idea that Al-Qaeda would be doing this on their own and get away with this is a total joke.'

And I saw that [. . .] and I tend to agree with that assessment as do most knowledgeable people who know anything at all about the Middle East, who are not brainwashed into not being able to entertain any other possibility about 9/11. So, I was skeptical about who did it. But I honestly couldn't imagine that something other than hijacked airliners hitting these buildings could have happened. And I also thought that controlled demolition of the towers was very, very farfetched and so I didn't look closely at that stuff until I heard that Griffin was actually arguing for it.

**Q: You said when you first started reading David Ray Griffin books and about controlled demolition it was hard for you to accept that. What was hard about that?**

I hadn't really stopped to think about the issues involved. [. . .] What happens when buildings like this are hit by planes? How would they fall down if they were going to fall down? I hadn't really thought about any of that. [. . .]

**Q: At the moment that you realize that something is up with the official version of accounts, what is going through your mind?**

Are you talking about once I started doing the research?

**Yes.**

Once I was convinced that this was a controlled demolition and something unlike an airliner crash had happened at the Pentagon, I thought ‘Well, this is quite stunning and this is not really a very convoluted issue like with the Kennedy assassination” which I had researched before back when I was in high school. [. . .] the Kennedy case is fairly complex. You actually have to sit down and do some hard thinking to figure it out relative to 9/11. [. . .] With the 9/11 issues, it’s one thing after another. It’s really very obvious to me; it’s obvious from the photos that no commercial airplane crashed at the Pentagon, but it’s even more obvious from the videos that the three skyscrapers—most obviously building 7—are controlled demolitions. [. . .]

**Q: Are you able to talk to anybody about your findings or do you keep it to yourself? What is that process?**

I started talking to people about it right away. I started doing teach ins in fall 2004. [. . .] at the University of Wisconsin. But even before that during the beginning of 2004 when I was finishing my dissertation I was talking to people about 9/11. I didn’t really have time to devote myself to activism because I was polishing up the dissertation, but I did talk to people about it, and I got different reactions.

**Q: [Barrett states that attitudes toward alternative explanations of controlled demolition began to change favorably around 2004] What was the cause of that change?**

I think Griffin’s book which came out in Spring 2004 really did a lot for the 9/11 Truth Movement, because before that, it was really dominated by excitable people. [. . .] People had done sort of bits and pieces research, but nobody had put together a coherent account. And Griffin’s book *The New Pearl Harbor* does put together a coherent account of the evidence against the official version. His book on the 9/11 commission [report] came out not long after [the 9/11 commission report] and it just shreds the 9/11 commission report. [. . .] They just wrote sort of a mythological cheap adventure novel and called it a report. [. . .] The biggest effect of 9/11 Truth Movement has been this kind of

helping people trust their own eyes rather than what authority figures tell them. It's like a Marx Brothers line, 'Who are you going to believe me or your own eyes?' [. . .]

**Q: You mentioned that you were publicly attacked by a legislator. How did that come about?**

In 2006, things were really moving fast for the 9/11 Truth Movement. We had a huge conference in June. Actually, there were two conferences in June one of which I helped organize. Also in the beginning of 2006, Scholars for 9/11 Truth forms and by mid-2006 there were roughly already a hundred professors who were supporting 9/11 Truth Movement. And I think that the powers that be were panicked and they would have to fight back. Before that, their strategy had been to just ignore it [the movement] and hope it would go away, because any way of calling attention to the existence of this movement gets more people to look at these issues and then more people come onboard. But by mid-2006, I think the Carl Rove people who were trying to shut down 9/11 Truth Movement realized they were going to have to be active rather than passive in attacking it. [. . .] I think they probably felt well they already got 100 professors in six months; we've got to stop professors from signing on to this so let's hammer some 9/11 truth professor. [. . .]

They had this [Republican Senator] Steve Nass character who makes a living by bashing the university as his political gig come after me. He put out a press release towards the end of 2006 [. . .] urging the university to fire me from [. . .] my teaching job based on remarks I had made on a radio show the previous night. [He] puts out this whole big attack on me at his press conference. [. . .] That made front page headlines in Wisconsin. [. . .] I fought back as hard as I could. I didn't roll over or go away as the university wished I would've. They were hoping I would just shut up and hide out and let it blow over. But I said, 'No way! This is too important to do that.' I did a whole series of TV interviews and stuff during 2006-2007 that made me a kind of notorious celebrity. And that gave me a platform to do the activism. Since then I have been working harder on 9/11 activism than I have anything else.

## **David Chandler Interview**

David Chandler was born in India while his mother was there as a missionary. They left when he was two, and he was raised, and still lives, in California. He lives in the central valley of California which he describes as a red state within a blue state. Chandler teaches high school physics. In the 1980s, he was an activist in the Sanctuary Movement helping refugees from Central America resettle in North America. Chandler is a Quaker and describes himself as having a predisposition to be an activist and reformer. He owns the website [911speak.org](http://911speak.org) which contains videos and interviews produced by Chandler.

My first contact with David Chandler was through an email list of various 9/11 Truth Movement activists of which I was subscribed. When I stated that I was interested in interviewing 9/11 Truth Movement activists for my dissertation research, David Chandler was the first person to grant an interview. He has a history of activism in the Sanctuary Movement, which provided safe-havens for Central American refugees who fled the brutal civil wars being fought in El Salvador and Guatemala. During this time, the United States government passed legislation which made it almost impossible for refugees to qualify for political asylum and many refugees fortunate enough to reach the United States were detained and deported. In response, several religious denominations declared their places of worship sanctuaries and sheltered refugees. Several religious leaders involved in the Sanctuary Movement were arrested and put on trial.

For Chandler, his activism in 9/11 Truth Movement, like his activism in the Sanctuary Movement is in alignment with his faith. As he remarked to me, “Quakers have a history of fighting for social justice.”

**Q: Do you remember where you were and what you were doing on**

**September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001?**

I got up in the morning. I was getting ready to go to school. I was teaching high school at the time. I got on the internet to check the news and check my email and so forth. I had a thing for a news feed that comes up. And right away it showed one of the towers smoking [ . . . ] and they were speculating that something had hit the north tower. [ . . . ] Anyway, I called into my wife and said, ‘You may wanna watch the TV. It looks like it’s going to be a big news day.’ And so, I just got ready and went to school. [ . . . ] And when I got to school, the first person I met was another like-minded person politically speaking and everything. Uh, by the way, I live in a very conservative area of California, the sub central valley of California. I describe it as a red state within a blue state. It’s a very right-wing kind of dominant culture in this area. But there are a few of us that are not. [ . . . ]

Just to give you some background here, I did a lot of work with the Sanctuary Movement through the church I was with in Southern California, prior to this, with the Central American refugees. So, I have seen a lot of instances of the US doing covert operations of various kinds. And the main difference here—basically my comment to this friend when I got to school was, ‘Looks like the chickens have come home to roost.’ And so, my immediate response was that this was payback for the kinds of things the US has been doing around the world—making a lot of people mad at us. I had no problem seeing that the United States does muck around in other people’s affairs and there’s a lot of people out there that do not have a favorable opinion of the US, and I was very conscious of that from my experience prior.

So, my initial interpretation of events was that: that it was sort of a payback type of thing. I guess they call it *blowback* is the term they use a lot. Anyway, I went ahead and conducted class and during the morning, during one of the breaks—anyway, somewhere along the line, someone came in and said the other building got hit. So, then I knew that both buildings got hit, and by that time, they knew it was airplanes. [ . . . ] Well, this was all from word of mouth around the school. And then this kid came in during the break and said the buildings collapsed.

I said, “What?” I couldn’t believe it when he said they collapsed. This was totally unexpected. I had no understanding for how that could even be possible. I wasn’t thinking critically about it at the time. [ . . . ] It was just that I was



shocked [ . . . ] that the impact of a plane would cause a building to come down like that. [ . . . ] I got home that evening and started watching the reruns and [ . . . ] so basically spent the rest of the day [ . . . ] just looking at all of the stuff that was happening on television. [ . . . ] I heard something about a third building coming down, but I never saw it on that first day. I didn't really see Building 7 come down until years later. [ . . . ] They [news media] just get into an endless repeat loop on it, and you just spend all day obsessing on it and not really have information filtering down. [ . . . ] It just seemed like it was not a good use of the time.

**Q: A student comes in and says that the buildings collapsed and your thought is, "How could that be?" Why did you have that thought?**

I have a fair physical intuition. [ . . . ] I was teaching physics. Just puncturing a building with an airplane at a certain point—and the fire I saw—it did not seem like it would just crumble to dust. It just was a shock to me! It wasn't until several years later that I started coming back and questioning the official story in more detail. [ . . . ] 2001 was the event, and it wasn't until probably 2005, 2006 or so that I really engaged with what would be called my participation in the truth movement and probably around 2005 that [ . . . ] I started questioning this stuff. [ . . . ]

**Q: You stated that although in the beginning you questioned how the buildings could collapse from the type of impact, you ran with the official version of events. What happened to change that?**

My sister who is an English professor went to a conference where they were discussing the various theories. I looked at the videos. [ . . . ] I saw a lot of stuff on there that was sort of opening my eyes. I mean a lot of the footage I had not seen the first time around, and one of the things I saw in the video footage were squibs. These little jets that came out of various places lower in the building compared to where the actual explosions were. And they were saying that this is characteristic of controlled demolition. [ . . . ] I started with some skepticism. I thought, 'Well could that have been airbrushed in? Why weren't we seeing these all along?' Then I saw lots of video footage from different angles and it had these squibs, and so I started giving that a little more credibility. The other thing that I noticed in one of the videos of the North Tower coming down [ . . . ] the whole thing mushroomed outwards so much it seemed like a very sideways oriented explosive kind of event rather than just a straight down collapse.

**Q: At the moment you realize, Oh my God! The official story cannot be true.” What is the next thought that runs in your mind?**

I gradually became solidly convinced of this. It was not a big deal to me to think that the United States would do stuff like this. [ . . . ] Because, I knew the US does stuff like this. [ . . . ] I knew what we’d done with the Contras and the whole Iran Contra scandal. I was very politically aware at that point that the United States is not the white knight and shining armor that the myth has it be. I knew that we were out there, *we* being the forces that drive this country the economic power behind the throne, and I knew that stuff was going on. [ . . . ] It was only a shift of where we are doing it. We are doing it here. So, I recognized . [ . . . ] and the Bush administration, I mean give me a break. They are the biggest bunch of criminals you could imagine. So people say, ‘How could the US administration do it?’ [ . . . ] People don’t have trouble seeing the mafia doing stuff like that. If you realize that the people we are talking about are just as criminal as the mafia. I mean, that’s what’s going on [ . . . ] George W. Bush has some deficient moral character himself.

I don’t know if you know the stories about all the business with executions that he presided over in Texas and stuff, and one of them was like a mentally retarded woman and he laughed about it and made jokes about her. It did not trouble me at all to imagine them doing something like this. [ . . . ] It makes me angry. But it wasn’t as though, “Oh my God I’m disillusioned. George Bush is a bad guy.” [ . . . ] He stole the election; it was clear as day. I did a lot of looking into that [2000 election] [ . . . ] So, I knew that these guys were criminals. And this wasn’t motivating my insight on 9/11, but it certainly didn’t stand in the way of it. [ . . . ] I didn’t have sort of an ideological problem that would prevent me from seeing the US doing this kind of thing. There is plenty of concrete evidence of what happened without invoking all this business of the Bush Administration being who they are. [ . . . ] My research is looking at evidence. I think we have lots of it. I think we have overwhelming evidence.

**Q: Why do you think that when many people are presented with this information refuse to consider it?**

[ . . . ] The myth of American exceptionalism, we are the shining light on the hill, and you basically take all the stuff they teach you in history classes in high school and the pledge of allegiance and all this kind of stuff, and Superman truth, justice, and the American way. I mean, everywhere in the culture it’s drummed into us how we are different from the rest of the world. So, it’s a huge disillusionment when you recognize that we’re not different from the rest of the world. That we really are capable of as much evil as anybody else anywhere anytime. [ . . . ]

I was born outside the country my mom was a missionary in India. My Christian upbringing was very much in the line that people are alike. [ . . . ] I did not buy into the whole America can do no wrong kind of an ethic, but I think a lot of people do, and I am appalled at the right-wing branch of Christian fundamentalism in the modern world has brought into equating Christianity with nationalism. And it's such a bizarre twist. [ . . . ] It was a distinction that you can't equate God's will with the nation and the nation is not an agent of God in that sense. [ . . . ] it's not like you can say America can do no wrong. That's idolatry. [ . . . ] There is one level in which people do buy into myth. It's jarring to them to recognize that the US might be capable of this. On another level there is heavy duty propaganda floating out there, and I am sure it is intentionally planted and heavily backed. [ . . . ] [the term] *truthers* is part of the whole propaganda ploy to make us seem like a cult or something and the whole idea of conspiracy theorists as though as that was some sort of a pre-discredited kind of activity that indicates paranoia and all this kind of thing until a person actually gets beyond it and looks at it. [ . . . ]

On a professional level, there is a fear of being seen and painted as a nut case. People value their credibility and they don't want to be associated with something that is being portrayed—being consciously portrayed as something that's not credible, something that is going to damage their reputations or careers. On the other side, you have a lot of people who benefit from the military industrial complex, and they are not going to go there because they can see the implications soon as they start down that road. If you say, 'Inside Job,' what you're saying is the entire enterprise of what this country is about is under question **and** their livelihoods. It's a big deal. I mean, take somebody who is intelligent enough to see beyond just the first step of that path. They know that down that path is major dislocations in their thinking, and they're not ready to do that. So, they stay away.

**Q: What motivates you to get the message out there?**

I am sort of an activist at heart in a sense that I was very much into anti-war activism. I am a Quaker and a pacifist, and so there is a lot of an inclination to be somewhat of a reformer built into me at that level. And so I am offended by lies. [ . . . ] I feel like if we are not being told the truth, I have this urge to speak the truth; it's important that the truth get out there. The whole idea of calling this a truth movement, it might sound arrogant to some people, but it's true. It's a valid thing that truth is important for its own sake, and I have this drive to speak and to be heard. [ . . . ] It is the same kind of drive that got me incensed about the Central American crisis back in the 80s; it's sort of like being appalled that criminals are running this country.

We need to have people speak out from a patriotic motive to make this country what you want it to be—Gandhi’s statement, ‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’ Well, that’s for real. [. . .] I was involved in weekly protests against the Iraq war. [. . .] How can you in a supposedly free country where you have the freedom to speak, the freedom of the press, and I see that as so fundamental you have the freedom to actually be and represent yourself as who you are and what you think and not have to kowtow to somebody’s party line. [. . .] That’s going to go away unless people exercise that. And so, it’s sort of an outrage that we are being lied to so systematically, and I guess I just engaged with that? And the press is just going to lie about this stuff. How do you combat that? [. . .] Well, let’s get the truth out there one way or another. That’s why I went to YouTube, because I saw that as a way that you could actually get to people without having to go through somebody’s censorship to do it. You just put it out there and let people judge for themselves. [. . .] The internet right now is a way to get around corporate controlled media. So, that’s been very significant in this whole movement.

**Q: What is the ultimate goal of the Truth Movement with getting the information out there?**

I am not the grand strategist. The thing is that, I don’t know what’s going to happen. [. . .] There is so much information out there right now. There are enough people out there right now that are awake, that it would be difficult to do—I mean I don’t know how the dynamics play out. I mean ultimately, I would like to see an awakening of the American people. If you buy into, I don’t know, that 9/11 as they say was an inside job, you know. If you buy into that, it’s basically, that’s a revolution, you know. The people in power who are doing this from the inside can’t be allowed to continue to do this. There’s gotta be people who are held accountable for what they did. Not just say, ‘Move forward. Don’t look back,’ this kind of Obama approach to it. There needs to be an accounting of what happened, because they are doing this with impunity. They got away with it with Kennedy, and then another Kennedy, and another Kennedy.

There’s been three Kennedy assassinations. [. . .] John and Robert Kennedy and then John John. His plane going down is highly likely that that was an assassination by airplane. There were a lot of airplane crashes like the [Senator Paul] Wellstone airplane crash and so forth, that it seems to be—I mean there’s not total proof for it but there is a lot of evidence—that things like that are being used to assassinate people. You know they’re doing this kind of thing with impunity. [. . .]

I’m working at this. I have a little tiny niche in the process. What can I do? I can do what I can do, and other people are going to do what they can do. And, how it all comes together is sort of organic. I don’t think there is a governing committee that’s gonna determine how the Truth Movement goes.

There are some attempts of people to try to put all this under an umbrella and have a centralized voice for the truth movement. I think that's a mistake. Movements don't work that way. [ . . . ] If you have it all centered on one person, you can assassinate that person and wipe out the movement.

What can I do? I'm sort of working blind. I'm doing what I can do. I'm getting the truth out. [ . . . ] I really don't know what's going to happen. It's sort of like a blind person feeling their way. And I feel like any movement has to be somewhat sort of that way. [ . . . ] My role is to keep going forward on this. There is a lot of good work out there. There is not just one person. There's a lot of people I highly respect in this movement: lot of good work.

By the way, there's a lot of other people out there that are putting out total crap. [ . . . ] Some of this is so transparently weak and false. [ . . . ] My suspicion is that they are in there for the purpose of disrupting the movement.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Oppression and Tyranny**

Stereotypes often portray conspiracy theorists as poor, backward, and uneducated.

Poor and uneducated are correlates, because usually if one is poor, he cannot afford a high level of education. However, there is a great deal of literature about the nature of conspiracy theory narratives being the domain of oppressed groups— groups who have experienced violations of their civil and human rights, genocide, colonialism, slavery, and Jim Crow. Regarding conspiracy theories about AIDS, Diane Goldstein (2004) writes:

Cultural attitudes are shaped by past experiences—with health, with disease, with politics and economics, with isolation or overcrowding, with bias and prejudice, with power and oppression, and with a host of other potentially relevant factors [. . .] History has laid the groundwork [. . .] The reality and historical narratives of the Tuskegee Experiment and other incidents of medical maltreatment and deception feed conspiratorial thought and become prototypical [. . .]. (36)

Unfortunately, many groups presently continue to suffer some of the transgressions and/or marginalization. The histories and realities of the “otherization” of oppressed groups has resulted in some scholars concluding the conspiracy theories promulgated by such groups as paranoia-within-reason. Indeed, Andrea Kitta writes: “Conspiracy theory as a response to the actions of the past may be a rational way of dealing with these past actions” (86).

What is interesting about the interviewees is that they are all highly educated, middle-class, white males. Usually, when one thinks of an oppressed group of people, highly educated middle-class American white males do not come to mind. However,

these men express considerable concern about government overreach and the suppression of several constitutional rights as demonstrated by, but not limited to, the following: the PATRIOT Act, creation of the Department of Homeland Security, (especially, the name Homeland which is viewed akin to the Third Reich's referring to Germany as the Fatherland), mass and indiscriminate surveillance of American citizens, militarization of the police, and the suspension of Habeas Corpus as it relates to the indefinite detention people suspected of being terrorists at Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. These men believe that the United States government's lack of transparency and manipulation of public fear facilitated the implementation of several unconstitutional policies.

Moreover, corporate greed, the ever-widening wealth gap, erosion of the middle class, and the endless supply of money for the military industrial complex, tax cuts for the rich at the expense of social safety nets for the country's poor and most vulnerable citizens, are alarming for these men. Fetzer, Great, Barrett, and Chandler, assert that the government is a plutocracy where both political parties serve only themselves and the elite. Therefore, these men contend, it is imperative that the truth about what happened on September 11, 2001 is revealed, because that event was used to justify the violation of constitutional and human rights in the United States. Moreover, they believe if the country continues this political trajectory, democracy will succumb to fascism and tyranny, as additional constitutional rights are nullified in the government's effort to keep the country and citizen's safe. In such a political state, the citizens at large become the marginalized "other."

To speak of fascism and colonialism, is to speak of oppression, brutality, and inhumanity. Like some groups in the United States, these men also feel they are being

marginalized, by their government. They are not in positions of political power or possess the financial power of the elites and multinational corporations which could spare them and others from brutality and disenfranchisement. Indeed, Kevin Barrett speaks passionately about how a senator called a press conference to demand his termination from the University of Wisconsin-Madison because of his public stance about the events of 9/11. Barrett, as well as the others, voice concerns about the government harassment and criminalization of Muslim and Muslim citizens and fear for their safety. All fear that their children and grandchildren will not only experience a lesser quality of life than the generations before them, but that they will experience a country vastly different from that of the generation before.

Notice each interviewee contrasts the recent US administrations—Obama and Bush, with that of the Kennedy Administration. Kennedy is described as man of morals and integrity as evidenced by his refusal to authorize the CIA's enactment of Operation Northwoods. President Kennedy is viewed almost as a knight in shining armor, and in popular culture, there is much reference to the Kennedy years as Camelot: analogous to King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table—honorable defenders of truth and justice.

In contrast, President Johnson involves the United States in what Born Great considers a senseless war in Vietnam by using the Gulf of Tonkin false flag incident. Born Great is clear to state that after the assassination of President Kennedy there was a succession of less than moral, truthful, presidents who did not act in the best interest of United States citizens. He notes that the country had a brief respite with the election of President Jimmy Carter, but afterwards the country continued its downward spiral under the leadership of corrupt politicians. These men speculate that some of these corrupt



politicians may have orchestrated the 9/11 attacks using Operation Northwoods as a reference.

In short, these men feel that the average American is being incrementally oppressed and suppressed by a plutocratic government which declares any citizen an “evil other,” if he publicly opposes government actions or policies. This was demonstrated by President George W. Bush at a joint press conference when he stated on November 6, 2001, “that there was no room for neutrality in the war against terror. [ . . . ] You are either with us or against us in the fight against terror” (CNN.com). In this instance, anyone expressing opposition to the war, or the indefinite detention of suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay, could be considered “un-American” which is practically synonymous with “other.” Hence, not only are foreign non-citizens a threat—as in the conspiracy theory also known as McCarthyism, or conspiracy theories around undocumented Mexican immigrants—but the “other” can also be the un-American American among us: believers of alternative conspiracy theories, peace activists, US Muslim citizens, anyone who criticizes the war on terrors, and US foreign policy. Of course, this listing is not comprehensive; however, as Born Great points out, other lives do not seem to have the same value as American lives to Americans. To become un-American under such conditions, is to be in a precarious position that no one, least of all citizens, should find themselves.

### **Conspiracy Theorists Are not a Monolith**

There are several 9/11 conspiracy theory variants, and as demonstrated in the interviews, not all movement members believe every assertion of a particular conspiracy

theory. David Chandler pointedly states that he is not one to say that a plane did not hit the Pentagon. As illustrated in the interviews, there is much debate in the Movement about the events believed to have taken place at the Pentagon of September 11, 2001. The literal division of Scholars for 9/11 Truth is also indicative. Irreconcilable methodological and theoretical disagreements caused Scholars for 9/11 Truth to split into two organizations: Scholars of 9/11 Truth, and Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice.

Credibility and unity of purpose are critically important to movement members. Those who left the organization to form Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice did so because they felt that some of the conspiracy theories being entertained by James Fetzer were scientifically implausible or improbable. It is possible that some of methodological and theoretical disagreements may also be due to differences in disciplinary approaches; Fetzer is a philosopher and Dr. Steven Jones, the co-founder of Scholars for 9/11 Truth, is a physicist. Hence, their approaches and what they deem worthy of consideration may, and obviously did, differ greatly.

### **Self-Identification**

Through these interviews, we get to see who these men are and what they value. Born Great and David Chandler strongly value religious principles of truth, honesty, peace, morality, integrity, and the sanctity of all human life. It is these values that motivate them to expose the truth about 9/11, because they believe the government should be working for the good of all its citizens. Great states that the United States was probably never the city upon a hill it claimed to be, but he feels that we as a country should always be striving to embody freedom and justice for all. Chandler notes that as a Quaker, he cannot idly sit by while the government commits egregious injustices.

Quakers have a history in the United States of fighting violations of human rights. Chandler deeply identifies with that history.

In his interview, James Fetzer values logic, reason, and truth. His ability to use logic and reason to uncover probability, facts, and truth are of great importance to him, as is his military service. He pledged an oath to defend and protect his country, and he continues to try to defend and protect that country, which he feels is slowly being lost because of political deception and corruption. Kevin Barret values truth, justice, and the ability to introduce pressing issues and concerns into the public discourse without censorship. As a practicing Muslim Kevin feels that he, his friends, and other Muslims are being wrongfully criminalized, harassed, persecuted and killed based on US government disinformation. Hence, much of his interview focuses on the United States foreign policy in the Middle East and Islam in the Middle East.

### **Credibility and Belief**

Each interviewee articulates his academic and professional credentials as well as his extensive research and vetting of information regarding the events of 9/11. The education level of many in both Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Scholars for 9/11 Truth and Justice may very well account for the prominence of the controlled demolition theory within the 9/11 Truth Movement. Scholars possess expertise in a specific discipline. They know how to debate how to do research, how to vet credible sources, how to analyze and investigate information, and present it within an academic framework: an acceptable mode for disseminating expert and valid information. Hence, it is not surprising that the theory promulgated by many academics and professionals in the Movement is the predominant 9/11 alternative explanation.

The importance of credible leaders and researchers is demonstrated in the names of various organizations within the Movement. The following list includes but is not limited to: Scholars for 9/11 Truth, Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, Pilots for 9/11 Truth, Firefighters for 9/11 Truth, Clergy for 9/11 Truth, Law Professionals for 9/11 Truth. This list is representative and not all inclusive. There are many academics and respected professionals within the Movement; their credentials deem them credible, trusted, and respected experts by many members of the public at large.

Pilots have expertise in flying aircraft and can speak with authority as to the plausibility of inexperienced or amateur pilots being able to fly planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon with precision. Firefighters are first responders who have experience with fires, heat, and how heat and fire compromise the integrity of a building. Many firefighters can also offer eyewitness testimony in the form of personal narratives if they responded to the scene of any September 11<sup>th</sup> attack.

Having credible and capable experts and professionals leading the Movement, conducting research into 9/11 using scientific methods, prevents the Movement and its conspiracy theory, from being easily dismissed and discredited. The Movement makes every effort to vet publicly disseminated information from others who identify themselves as Movement members. Those viewed as transmitting misinformation or disinformation are called out by other movement members; some do so diplomatically while others are not as polite.

This is an attempt to insure information being disseminated to the public is plausible, because if the scholarship is lacking, it reflects poorly on the Movement and impedes its ability to accomplish its goal: to find out the truth about what happened on

9/11. There is a concern in the movement about those who spread misinformation and disinformation.

Fetzer, Great, Barrett, and Chandler state that as they watched the 9/11 attacks on the news, there was some issue that seemed questionable at the time of the attacks, but they did not give those issues further thought until much later. When a person whom they respect as a scholar and/or as a person shared alternative explanations for 9/11, their questions and suspicions were rekindled. For Fetzer, it was another philosopher; for Great, another theologian, David Ray Griffin; for Barrett, David Ray Griffin, and for Chandler, his sister.

This is how many people have come to either join the Movement and/or embrace alternative 9/11 theories. I heard similar stories while speaking with attendees at conferences like Conspiracy Conference (Con Con) and other similar events on 9/11. People had either read literature, watched videos produced by Movement members whom they felt were credible, or were exposed to an alternative 9/11 theory by someone they trust. Once exposed they usually reported doing further reading and research on their own.

There are many in 9/11 Truth Movement who refer to themselves as 9/11 researchers. This is significant, because when one thinks of researcher, one thinks of a highly informed professional who concerns himself with facts and information—not speculation. “Researcher” suggests that said person does not merely assume a claim or theory to be true. He instead investigates the truth for himself.

### **Proof Feeders—Validation Devices**

As illustrated in the interviews and previous section, the public proponent of conspiracy theory must be someone the public views as trustworthy and credible due to either his expertise or position of authority. This is true whether the conspiracy is generated from the general citizenry or government officials.

The conspiracy theory often contains historical events that add merit to the veracity of the theory, thus, serving as validation. The existence of previous false flag conspiracies serves as “proof” that 9/11 was a false flag operation: particularly Operation Northwoods and the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Histories of proven conspiracies (e.g. Contragate), news, personal experience narratives, eyewitness accounts and other conspiracy theories (e.g. JFK conspiracy theories). Moreover, the death of a person close to the investigation of the conspiracy theory —by either suicide or murder—is a significant proof feeder, because it at once widens the initial conspiracy theory while adding another conspiracy theory to the narrative content. The death of the person is viewed as the conspirators’ efforts to cover-up the conspiracy. Fine examples of this proof feeder are the deaths of Lee Harvey Oswald and his killer, Jack Ruby.

### **Challenging Power**

Jim Fetzer’s asserts that both the government’s official version of events and the alternative explanation of controlled demolition are both conspiracy theories; however, according to Fetzer and other 9/11 Truth Movement members, the government’s theory is far less plausible than controlled demolition. Chandler, Fetzer, and Barrett express the

desire to debate those who debunk the controlled demolition theory. They request public debates (academics do seek intellectual sparring). Public debates would force controlled demolition and the social issues tensions it underscores into the public discourse, thereby, circumventing the censorship inherent in the negative connotation of “conspiracy theory.”

To this point, conspiracy theory is a narrative that is indicative of power relationships. Conspiracy theories from the general populace attempt to pushback and challenge those in power by questioning their statements, actions, and policies. They challenge the motivation and question the integrity of those in authority. Moreover, the conspiracy theory comes with a demand for the truth, in fact a search for the truth, to find the underlying cause(s) and motivations for an event. The conspiracy theory with its proof feeders, relentless and aggressive claims, accusations, rebuttals, and demands and for the truth, serve as a secularized Crusade.

### **Nationalism and Mythology as Reasons for Skepticism and Disbelief**

In his lecture entitled “9/11 and Nationalist Faith,” theologian David Ray Griffin argues that the dominant faith in the United States is not Christianity but nationalism. Consequently, one’s faith is based on loyalty to country, and saints are replaced with national heroes. This renders the United States a fundamentally good and virtuous nation that never intentionally does anything bad or evil. Therefore, assertions that “9/11 was an inside job” cannot be true, because it does not align with nationalist faith. According to Griffin, national faith blinds people from the truth about 9/11 and keeps debate and discourse out of the public arena.

These assertions may have merit. Belief in American exceptionalism is the foundation of a great deal of American identity. It is conceivable that conspiracy theories implicating Americans as conspiring against other Americans would cause cognitive dissonance. How could God's chosen people in God's chosen country be capable of evil? Therefore, disbelief would maintain cognitive and emotional equilibrium.

### **Why I did Not Debunk in this Study**

Many times, when conspiracy theories are being examined for the sole purpose of debunking, the people who generate and/or propagate a conspiracy theory are never viewed as ordinary citizens with beliefs, experiences, and concerns that inform their belief in a conspiracy theory.

Moreover, opportunities to gain answers to important questions are missed. What sociopolitical issues and concerns is the conspiracy theory communicating? What are the issues that are important to people? How do people use conspiracy theories to create or challenge power? Are conspiracy theories an effective strategy for the powerless to gain power? How does the use of conspiracy theories differ between government officials and members of the general citizenry? Why are issues of political power struggles framed as conspiracy theory around an unusual and often tragic event? Why is it that conspiracy theories generated by the public are routinely debunked while those generated by government officials are rarely debunked? How does this disparity effect democracy and the political process? Why was this conspiracy theory created? A conspiracy theory is not just randomly created. Conspiracy theories are beliefs, and values, and beliefs and values inform people's behavior.



These are some questions that could yield some insightful information that is rarely, if ever, procured through debunking. Many studies refer to conspiracy theory as suspicions, but these suspicions communicate a deep distrust of government, sociopolitical and cultural disintegration, the reason for that disintegration, and the possible solutions. Conspiracy theories are indicative and often document the failures of a society and its institutions. Therefore, conspiracy theories should be studied from a position of neutrality and non-judgement as simply theories about a conspiracy.

I am not making an argument here in support of post-truth by any means nor am I saying that debunking should never be done. The argument I am making here is that before any debunking happens it is imperative that one consider the social, political, and cultural struggles as they are part of conspiracy theory and largely responsible for its structure and content. The political environment in which conspiracy theories emerge informs the content of the conspiracy theory, and therefore, must also be considered.

Limiting focus to prove that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone gunman, or that the fire from the jet fuel melted the steel beams of the Twin Towers resulting in their collapse only addresses the causal factors of an event. It is a partial examination of the conspiracy theory, and it assumes that misinformation about the cause of the event results in a conspiracy theory. However, it is the union of longstanding societal disquiet with an unusual and/or devastating event that produce the conspiracy theory.

It is possible that in numerous instances, one may find that debunking is less important than understanding why socio-political issues are framed into conspiracy theories, or if socio-political crises can be predicted and thus, averted through the examination of conspiracy theories in active circulation.

Debunking does not often consider such outcomes; its focus is to discredit claims and allegations through the presentation of data/facts obtained using scientific methods. However, socio-political concerns such as US imperialism, racism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, mass surveillance, perpetual war, war crimes, corporate greed, corporate and government overreach, violations of human and constitutional rights, police brutality, the tremendous wealth gap, a disintegrating middle class, and bleak economic outlook for the 99% expressed in many conspiracy theories are also facts. For many citizens, such facts are not only informational but also experiential.

In short, it is important to keep in mind that folklore is about communication. Rumor, legend, conspiracy theory, mythology, proverbs, etc. are communicating views about ourselves, others, and the world. It is important to be aware of the different levels of communication present in conspiracy theories even if one's purpose is to debunk. However, there will be those for whom conspiracy theory will always remain pejorative code and who will always voice skepticism when they hear the phrase "conspiracy theory." Skeptics are not that different from those who think conspiratorially. Each is holding steadfast to his belief. David Hufford (1982) writes:

Some individuals will be found who are true skeptics, agnostics as it were, who believe that they don't or can't—know the validity of the supernatural premise. But most will be firmly committed to the traditional beliefs of their people: either that there is, or that there is not, a supernatural order. From this perspective atheists are believers as much as the faithful are. The religionist is as much a skeptic of the materialist framework as is the materialist a skeptic of the supernatural. The traditions of disbelief are especially interesting because there are indications that they are surprisingly homogenous across the entire range from genuinely unlettered folk-disbelievers all the way to the most eminently lettered materialist. (48) [. . .] there is one kind of logical error that is the peculiar property of disbelievers: i.e. the priori exclusion of one whole class of hypotheses—the supernatural ones—as unnecessary to consider. 'It can't be so:

therefore, it isn't.' Very few believers ever categorically exclude material explanations from consideration, because their worldview includes both. (53)

Hufford's observations regarding skepticism of supernatural beliefs are also applicable to skepticism regarding conspiracy theory. Every person has an operating belief system. Belief informs behavior and worldview. This does not mean our beliefs cannot change, but when they do, they are exchanged for other beliefs.

More people may change or question their beliefs about 9/11. The persistent activism of 9/11 Truth Movement has resulted in the declassification of twenty-eight pages from a joint congressional intelligence inquiry that document foreign government support for the 9/11 hijackers. Saudi Arabia is the foreign government named in these documents (28pages.org). On September 28, 2016 congress passed the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) allowing "U.S. citizens to sue foreign governments and entities for damages resulting from acts of terrorism committed on U.S. soil on or after September 11, 2001" (Zogby: 2016).

### **What Exactly is a Conspiracy Theory?**

Conspiracy theory is not just descriptions of activities surrounding an event; it is also, and probably foremost, about long standing socio-political tensions and distrust of government. This distrust of government appears to be the result of government's failure to remedy these sociopolitical ills. These ills metastasize throughout society like a cancer which can couch an unusual event into a conspiracy theory.

At the core of this paradigmatic construction is the narration of an event which is often followed by a hypothesis regarding the "real" conspirators of the event and their

motives. The speculated motives of the conspirators are intertwined with the current predominant political struggles. History, mythology, rumor, legend, personal experience, news, information, testimonies, conspiracies, other conspiracy theories, etc., serve as proof feeders that provide merit and support to various claims made in the conspiracy theory. These proof feeders form numerous multi-branched appendages of content that snowball the conspiracy theory.

Although the event may exacerbate sociopolitical tensions, the conspiracy theory attempts to bring the underlying issues into the public discourse for resolution. It can serve as an attempt to move the country or a people toward their “higher calling,” The Good city upon a hill. The conspiracy theory implies that things are not the way they are meant to be.

## **Conclusion**

Conspiracy theory has at times been described as a legend or rumor in several folklore studies. The goal of this study has been to demonstrate that a conspiracy theory is not a sub-genre of legend or rumor but is a separate genre. I attempt to make my case by examining the conspiracy theory emergent in interviews with 9/11 Truth Movement members.

Conspiracy theory is a secular mythological paradigmatic construction that is used as a political strategy to challenge power, question authority, force ignored issues into the public discourse, gain answers to unanswered questions and conflicts surrounding an event, to manufacture consent for actions or legislation that may be unpopular, and to initiate and encourage political activism.

Several characteristics of conspiracy theories have been identified and explained in the previous chapter that distinguish conspiracy theory from both rumor and legend: distinguishing it as a separate genre from legend and rumor. Genres have distinct rhetorical properties that enable them to fulfill their functions and provide a system of checks and balances for sociocultural interactions (Ben-Amos 1976, xxiv). “Each genre is characterized by a set of relations between its formal features, thematic domains, and potential social usages” (Ben-Amos 1976, 225).

The identification of conspiracy as a folklore genre opens it to a deeper and wider area of study. It can be studied “with new eyes,” and discover new avenues of inquiry and examination. Kenneth Goldstein (1976) writes:

But far more important to folkloristics [ . . . ] are those instances when genres *which have existed for considerable time* are formally recognized because changing theoretical perspectives result in the reduction of certain biases and the correction of the academic myopia which did not permit them to be viewed earlier as properly belonging to the domain of the discipline. (7)

Moreover, genre categorization will assist in the identification of conspiracy theories in all the arenas and folk groups in which they appear. As David Coady (2006) writes:

[ . . . ] an explanation is conspiratorial if it postulates a group of agents working together in secret, often, though perhaps not always, for a sinister purpose [ . . . ] Sometimes all the competing explanations of an event will concur in postulating a group of agents working together in secret. [ . . . ] Presumably all explanations of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, for example, will postulate agents working together in secret. Hence, when we label some, but not all, of these explanations ‘conspiracy theories,’ we must be using a different concept. This concept seems to be captured in the following definition: a conspiracy theory is an explanation that is contrary to an explanation that has official status at the time and place in question. (2)

Coady’s observation demonstrates that conspiracy theories speak to power relationships within a society and usually those with political power and influence have the power to label and shape public narratives. Currently, for the most part, narratives that are labeled conspiracy theories are labeled as such by political authorities. Once so labeled, these narratives and the concerns and issues they present, are dismissed from the public discourse. Thus, many people are conditioned to believe that conspiracy theories are narratives exclusive to paranoiacs in the general population. As a result, when conspiracy theories are used by government officials and authorities, the general citizenry is unable to identify them as such and therefore, are not inclined to examine their probability or plausibility.

The ability to critically examine and question authority is essential if democracy and the Constitution are to be observed and maintained. It is this failure to identify the use of such narratives by governments and government authorities that gravely concerned Richard Hofstadter (2008) and Karl Popper (2006). The automatic dismissal of conspiracy theories from the public discourse should also be of concern. This study has shown that conspiracy theories give voice to underlying and unresolved tensions within the society and one of those issues is a growing lack of trust in the government's willingness to act in the best interests of its citizens. Tensions and concerns cannot be resolved if they cannot first be acknowledged and have a thorough public airing.

Hopefully, this study will provoke further studies of conspiracy theory, its creation, use, and function in both general populations and by governments and authorities. There is some indication that its function, structure, dissemination, and rhetoric differ among folk groups. Furthermore, additional studies into other political items and narratives that often employ conspiracy theories—such as propaganda—should also be explored. The goal is to gain new insights into the workings of conspiracy theory not just as a text, but as a belief that informs behavior. As Sandra Dolby (1975) writes:

It is not that modern folklorists who classify, describe, and define genres are uninterested in the genres themselves: it is rather that they are more interested in using the conventions of genre analysis to understand such features as subject, context, form, function, belief and non-belief, as they vary against a constant background. And that background is folklore's list of genres, the 'common frame of reference' that makes a worthwhile exchange of ideas possible. (16)

**Appendix**  
**Interview Questions**

1. Where were you born?
2. Where did you grow up?
3. Tell me a little about yourself.
4. Do you remember where you were on September 11, 2001?
5. What were you doing when you learned of the attacks?
6. How did you find out about the attacks?
7. What were your immediate thoughts when you heard/saw the attack?
8. After learning about the attacks, what did you do the next day and the day after that?
9. Did you lose someone in the attacks? If so who? Can you tell me about the experience of losing a loved one in such a manner?
10. Did you initially believe the official reports about the attacks?
11. Where did you get the information that caused you to doubt the official explanation?
12. What specifically do you doubt about the official version and why?
13. Where do you get your information that supports your concerns about the official reports surrounding 9/11?
14. When and why did you become involved in of 9/11 Truth Movement?
15. Have you been discriminated against or harmed in any way because of your involvement in the Movement?
16. What is your role and/or contribution to the Movement?



17. Please explain what you think happened on September 11, 2001 and subsequent related events.
18. What would be a satisfactory resolution to your doubts and concerns around the official reports and the conclusions about 9/11?
19. What do you think about the 9/11 Commission's findings?
20. Why did you agree to this interview?
21. What do you think is the most common misunderstanding or misinformation people have about 9/11 Truth Movement?
22. Is there any way you can or are addressing these misunderstandings and misinformation?
23. What is a conspiracy theorist and do you consider yourself one?
24. What is your definition of a conspiracy theory?
25. Do you consider your beliefs about the attacks of 9/11 to be a conspiracy theory?  
Why or why not?
26. Do you consider the official explanation a conspiracy theory? Why or why not?
27. Have you heard any other alternative explanations for what happened on 9/11 that you either agree, disagree, or think have merit? If so, please explain?
28. What provides proof that another explanation for what happened on 9/11 is plausible?
29. How do you evaluate your information sources?
30. In what ways does your research findings support an alternative theory?
31. What is your fondest memory?

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**Education**

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
PhD in Folklore

October 2017

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN  
MA in Folklore  
Master of Library Science

2008

York College, City University of New York, Jamaica, NY  
BA in English

2004

**Research Experience**

**Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology**  
Indiana University  
*Doctoral Researcher*

2010-2016

- Conducted qualitative field research of political activists.
- Evaluated and analyzed several theories and methodologies applied in the study of conspiracy theory and propaganda.
- Established conspiracy theory as a genre of folkloric behavior

**Information Science Reference and Instruction**

**Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center Library**  
Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana  
*Supervisor*

2009-2010

- Supervised and trained library assistants in circulation procedures and helping patrons use and access library materials, technology, and services.
- Assisted the head librarian with planning and organizing special events featuring contemporary authors, poets, and special guest speakers.
- Provided reference assistance.

## **Information Science Reference and Instruction (cont'd)**

### **Modern Language Association Folklore Bibliography Project**

2005-2010

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

*Project Coordinator*

- Read, summarized, and indexed peer reviewed publications using controlled vocabulary for inclusion in the Modern Language Association Bibliography Database.
- Performed final review and submission of all citations.
- Wrote and submitted annual project reports to the Modern Language Association headquarters.
- Recruited and trained indexers.

### **University Archives**

2004-2010

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

*Archive Assistant*

- Arranged, described, and created finding aids for various collections.
- Conducted oral history interviews for archive projects.
- Wrote reports that evaluated and identified collections containing records of regional artistic and cultural import for use as a guide for grant writers seeking funding for digitization of such collections.

## **Teaching and Advising**

### **York College, City University of New York**

2002-2004

Jamaica, NY

*Teaching Assistant*

- Assisted students in learning and understanding class assignments.
- Graded assignments.
- Provided individual and group tutoring sessions on writing, evaluating the credibility of primary and secondary sources, developing research projects, and using discipline specific citation formats.

### **University Summer Immersion Program**

2003-2004

York College, City University of New York

Jamaica, NY

*Instructor*

- Taught reading comprehension and writing courses to recent high school graduates preparing to take the City University of New York College Entrance Exam.



## Teaching and Advising (cont'd)

### York College, City University of New York

2003-2004

Jamaica, NY

*Workshop Instructor*

- Conducted three-hour long workshops aimed to prepare college students to pass the City University of New York (CUNY) Proficiency Exam; the conferral of all degrees is contingent upon students passing this exam.
- Instructed students in test taking strategies.
- Administered sample CUNY Proficiency Exams.

## Publications

“AIDS and the Smart Woman Syndrome.” *The Brooklyn Advocate*. New York: F.S. Communications, Feb. 2003 (5) 2.

“Patience: The Power of the Warrior.” *African Voices Magazine*. New York: African Voices Communications, Spring 1994.

“The Many Colors of 125<sup>th</sup> Street.” *New York Newsday*. New York: Tribune, November 1, 1994.

## Service

Middle Way House

2017-Present

*Crisis Hotline Volunteer*

- Provide emotional support, information, and referrals to community services to victims of domestic violence.

Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard

2014-2015

*Volunteer*

- Unloaded delivery trucks, prepared produce, and stocked shelves in food pantry.

## Honors and Awards

Academic Achievement Honors in English, York College, City University of New York

2004

Distinguished Achievement in Literature Studies, York College, City University of New York

2004

McNair Scholars Fellowship, Indiana University  
2004-2009

## **Honors and Awards (cont'd)**

Samuel Clemens Award for General Excellence in English Studies, York College, City University of New York	2004
Buchanan Award, Best Student Presentation, International Society of Contemporary Legend Research	2008

## **Conference Presentations**

“Continuity, Creativity, and Culture of Conspiracy Theories,” October 2012, American Folklore Society Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana

“God, Country, and Conspiracy Theories: The Assassination of John F. Kennedy and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” November 2008, American Folklore Society Conference, Louisville Kentucky

“According to Rumor It’s a Conspiracy: Conspiracy Theory As a Paradigmatic Construction,” June 2008, International Society for Contemporary Legend Research Conference, Dublin Ireland

“The Needs of Non-Traditional Students in the University,” October 2005, National Graduate Student Life Conference, Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri

“Things to Consider When Deciding on a Major,” January 2003, Annual English Department Open House, CUNY—York College Jamaica, New York

“Br’er Rabbit the Epic and Its Components,” March 2003, McNair Scholars Annual Conference, University of Maryland at College Park, College Park, Maryland

“The Social and Educational Impact of Women Studies Programs,” March 2002, York College Annual Women’s History Month Panel, York College City University of New York, Jamaica New York