

Zahid R. Chaudhary

Paranoid Publics

ABSTRACT This article takes up the recent insurrection in Washington, DC, and the paranoid politics of QAnon. It analyzes the gamification of paranoia across QAnon and related paranoid publics. Taking seriously Sigmund Freud’s insight that delusional formations are attempts at recovery, this article reads QAnon as a part of a symptomatology of the social world.

KEYWORDS conspiracy, paranoia, QAnon, play, neoliberalism

There is no freedom without opinions that diverge from reality, but such divergence endangers freedom.

—Adorno, “Opinion Delusion Society”

Disinformation is necessary.

—Q

Witness the self-professed QAnon influencer and shaman, shirtless, with painted face and feral hat who took to howling in the Senate chamber after breaking into the Capitol building along with the rest of the mob on January 6, 2021, to “stop the steal”: a surreal display of a primitivist fascism in its experimental and speculative form. What are the conditions of this scene’s possibility? The shaman concretizes the storming of the Capitol as an elaborate spectacle, intended to “stop the steal” but also intended for the eyes of ubiquitous digital cameras. There is the mixed crowd of Trump supporters—small business owners, middle managers, white supremacists, ex-military personnel—from which the shaman emerged; there are the multiple politicians who tacitly or explicitly lent support to the crowd and the narrative of election fraud that galvanized it. The theatrics of January 6 shocked in part because scenes of play-acting, phoniness, and collective fun appeared dissonant with an event that demonstrated all too

HISTORY of the PRESENT ■ A Journal of Critical History ■ 12:1 ■ April 2022

DOI 10.1215/21599785-9547248 © 2022 Duke University Press

spectacularly the damage to democracy that had been ongoing in less visible ways over the last three decades.

The imagined injury—a stolen election—is all the more galvanizing for being unreal and is a cipher for multiple other investments: being wronged, of seeking justice, acting in the interests of an aggrieved self, and of feeling dispossessed in one’s own country. Indeed, a recent study of the demographics of those arrested or charged with participating in the Capitol attack found that 95 percent were white, 85 percent were male, and most came from regions that have seen an increase in nonwhite populations (Pape). The actually dispossessed could not afford a trip to Washington, DC. Since almost all charged or arrested were professionals, narratives of economic immiseration, of being “left behind,” are not sufficient explanations for what motivated their radicalization. I want to argue that so-called radicalization took forms of misrecognitions and conjuring—of injury, grievance, and malevolent enemies—that constitute paranoid ideation. When an imagined injury, or an injury to one’s fantasies of nationhood or collective belonging is the effectual element in one’s political participation, we are clearly in the presence of powerful psychodynamics. It is the transit from paranoid ideation to political action that interests me in this article.¹

The January 6 crowd represented an amalgamation of paranoid publics: QAnon, antivaxxers, various militia groups, and so on. The insurrection was also a carnival, a logical endpoint for the libidinal and spectatorial politics that installed Trumpism as a political symptom of American politics. The oft-repeated QAnon dictum, “Enjoy the Show,” is key both to Trumpism as well as to the media ecology in which QAnon germinated. The combination of performance and fun (posing for pictures, playing dress up) with deadly intent (killing a person with a fire extinguisher), the conjuncture of paranoia and political mobilization, and the spontaneous collective effervescence of the crowd coupled with a premeditated effort by some participants to monetize the digital livestreams of themselves at the Capitol all suggest that the psychodynamics of this event are indissociable from their economic and political aspects.

In this article, I am interested in reading paranoia’s collective political life as an element of a larger symptomatology of the social world. Instead of assuming false consciousness on the part of paranoid publics, or dismissing them as merely delusional, I consider paranoia as a symptom illuminating the social formations that produce it. Paranoia and anxiety are not in themselves pathological, but they can become the outlets for pathology. If my analysis risks pathologizing paranoid politics, I hope it will be clear that such an analysis is aimed at taking these politics seriously if only because

collective pathologies are a serious business. Limning the terms of these mass psychological phenomena and the forms of subjectivation, self-cultivation, and world-building they mean to make possible is critical for understanding the contemporary conjuncture of right-wing extremism, the devaluation of truth, and the increasing exposure of the polity to various forms of risk.

I will repeatedly return to QAnon as my example not because it is the most effectual or exceptional form of contemporary paranoid politics but for the following reasons: it has assimilated other conspiracies into its multiverse, making it a “big tent conspiracy”; it has grown organically out of the mediascape in which it germinated and its growth is instructive for understanding the powers of new media; it shares features with other paranoid politics such as antimask, antilockdown, antivaxxing movements but also with evangelical Christianity and millenarian movements; its membership overlaps with extremist movements such as Proud Boys and Boogaloo Bois; QAnon is one product of Trumpism and a valuable lens on this political strain that is likely to outlive Donald Trump himself and also likely to outlive QAnon itself.² Like all historical phenomena, there is something about contemporary conspiracy thinking that is unique to its historical conditions but also invokes (often literally) other golden ages of conspiratorial fantasy.³ Paranoid politics are wayward forms of counterknowledges involving scrutiny of the self and also of the world, discharging psychic tension even as such scrutiny stimulates it. The conspiratorial explanation represents a fear that is simultaneously a desire; it is a wish-fulfillment doubling as a warning. As Robyn Marasco puts it, “conspiracy theory is a love affair with power that poses as its critique” (238). However irrational its own forms of reasoning, it assumes that the powers and authorities it is exposing operate rationally and are not merely powerful but all-powerful—that is to say, ideal and pure forms of power.

One of the guiding principles of my exploration of paranoia’s recent mass psychological forms is Sigmund Freud’s insight in his analysis of Daniel Paul Schreber—whose 1903 *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* would become an urtext for later psychoanalytic accounts not only of paranoia but also psychosis, proto-fascism, and delusional ideation—that paranoia represents an effort at holding together a world that seems to be disintegrating. Noting that ideation around “world catastrophe” attends many cases of paranoia, Freud writes:

we shall not find it difficult to explain these catastrophes. . . . The end of the world is the projection of this internal catastrophe; his subjective world has come to an end since his withdrawal of his love from it. . . . He builds it up

by the work of his delusions. *The delusional formation* [wahnbildung], which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery [heilungsversuch], a process of reconstruction. (SE XII: 69–70)

Paranoid delusions are a *heilungsversuch*, or a “healing attempt” that entails a reworking and refashioning both of the self and the world. Delusional formations (*wahnbildung*), insofar as they are a type of *bildung*, entail not only projecting idealized fantasy images on to the world but also transforming and cultivating oneself by means of such projection. Paranoia, in its obsessive scrutiny of external signs and patterns, might appear to be directed outwards, but it is at the same time a form of self-recuperation and self-cultivation. Even the paranoid are not the radically autonomous and voluntarist subjects of liberalism; they too are subject to historically particular limits and practices of self-formation and moral solicitation. Paranoid formations are not a break from reality as such but an accentuation and intensification of its features.

Critiques of paranoid publics expressing alarm at the fact that distortions and untruth have entered the sphere of politics, supposedly inaugurating a new “posttruth age,” are not helpful for understanding what is at stake in paranoid politics. These accounts, even when not delivered in a nostalgic or elegiac tone, nevertheless remain tone deaf both to the historical existence of other eras of truth-demolition and also to the fundamentally adversarial relationship between truth and politics. Theodor Adorno observed that mass delusions arise from opinions that have sedimented into a semblance of truth. Reason, like opinion, has its subjective origins: “The moment called cathexis in psychology, thought’s affective investment in the object, is not extrinsic to thought . . . but [is] rather the condition of its truth” (*Critical* 109). This suggests that the discursive, ideational, and affective traffic between the real and the unreal, the rational and irrational, the past and the present already exists in one’s navigation of social relations. We operate with all manner of normative delusions, some of them “healing attempts” akin to Schreber’s. There are no easy correctives to mass delusions, then, if one understands the problem of mass delusional formations as only an epistemological one, shorn of its historical and psychological conditions.

Politics of the LARP

History and psychology, therefore, point us to extra-epistemological dimensions of mass delusions; political economy does so as well. In this section, I will develop the psycho-historical and political economic groundwork for understanding contemporary paranoid publics. My wager is that we are

witnessing the gamification of paranoia. The ludic grounds of paranoid ideation include new forms of economic necessity as well as psycho-historical processes entailing the constitution of enemies. The problem of collective paranoia persists stubbornly in the inequities of an administered world that promises the good life; but for QAnon, the question concerning epistemology is transformed in light of the ludic tendencies of contemporary paranoid publics. “Delusion” derives from the Latin root, *ludere*, meaning “to play.” From this perspective, the paranoid publics of previous eras might also appear in a new light, as collective formations activated by what Roger Caillois called the “play instincts.”

LIVE ACTION ROLE PLAY

These instincts are now solicited from users of contemporary digital platforms, which are not mere tools that preexisting paranoid publics deploy; rather these new media solidify paranoid publics. They may not originate paranoia but feed it, sometimes lending credence to delusory ideation because the algorithms favor more extreme content that has some resonance with previously engaged content. QAnon’s central doctrines seem designed for the clickbait era: politicians, the film industry, Jews, and “elites” form a cabal that thrives on ritual sexual abuse and murder of children, whose blood these elites drink to renew their vitality; Trump plans to put an end to all this by arresting or executing the cabal; the day this happens is called “The Storm.” As QAnon began to grow and received significant press coverage,⁴ Qopined on media critiques of QAnon, questioning why resources were being spent on discrediting something that mainstream media claimed was a conspiracy theory: “ALL FOR A LARP?” The acronym stands for “live action role play,” a kind of game in which players assume an identity and perform scenarios in real life (think “Dungeons and Dragons”). In internet parlance, LARP has accrued an additional meaning: it refers to someone whose online persona paints them as privy to an exciting secret or an interesting life though in reality they may be Mr. Generic who lives next door. For users of 4chan—where QAnon initially took hold as a collective phenomenon—a LARP is someone pretending to have inside governmental or political information. Before Q there were other well-knownLARPs posting on 4chan, with names such as “CIA Anon,” “High Level Insider,” and “Highway Patrolman.” Their pronouncements on 4chan were delivered as aggressive truth-telling, and the necessity of both aggression and truth-telling presupposed a hostile world of opaque signs, duped citizenry, and oblivious politics. The persona of the truth-teller would become a central libidinal attachment for QAnon participants.

The term “LARP” performs important interpretive work, suggesting a host of relationships between performance and community formation, play and reality, and between public, private, and anonymous selves. A LARP assumes not only a make-believe subject position but also a make-believe world in which that newly assumed identity resides: its environment, its web of relationships and their orders of hierarchies, and the possibilities of action in the alternate universe. LARPing fuels the attention economies of platforms like reddit, the chans, and alt-tech platforms, not only at the level of content (users pretending to be fictional people) but also as economic exigency. Deployed as a theoretical formulation, what I am calling “the politics of the LARP” can provide critical sightlines into formations of paranoid publics and the conditions of emergence they share with other related cultural and political phenomenon. Such an understanding of LARP as a conceptual category helps us to see the conjoint operations of economic necessity, affective commitments, and subjectivation. In D. W. Winnicott’s account of play, make-believe blends the real with the fantastical to train the self to be able to tell them apart—this game mediates distinctions between fantasy and the real. In the world of LARP, this distinction is lost.

Mimicry and role-playing are the LARP’s fundamental techniques. The original LARPer—communities of sword-carrying real-life role-players—dress up in costumes they often make themselves and together act out a narrative whose key points are decided in advance but whose central themes are fodder for improvisation and elaborate play-acting. This close imbrication of theater and spectacle with gamification—play in all of its senses—endures in all the multiple meanings and practices of LARPing taking place not just on fringe platforms like 4chan but regularly on mainstream platforms. The selfie, the thirst trap, the vlog confessional, the well-observed nature scene, the photograph of the airline wing in air, the viral tweet are all fodder for LARPing. Thus LARPing itself is a phenomenon far larger than 4chan or QAnon. Paranoid publics emerge out of such familiar everyday LARP practices of digital life: Twitter and Instagram users, YouTube personalities, and of course influencers, regularly engage in a game of pretend, meeting the demands of increasing user engagement and donning the required persona for followers. The fact of knowing that online life is often filtered, enhanced, and contrived for the spectacle changes nothing in the fundamental operations of the LARP. The self is dispersed between the real one and the online image, which is further split between the anonymous and the nonanonymous persona, and variegated across the moods and protocols of different online platforms. Such dispersal of subjectivity is taken as given and is key

to paranoid subjectivation because even as one participates in make-believe the knowledge that one's environment is the product of others' make-believing is never successfully repressed.

Influencers are more likely to be aware of their own participation in a world of playacting than the average user of Instagram, because they are fully aware of their roles as content providers. One can participate in a LARP without having any awareness that one is participating in a LARP, and even if one has such an awareness, the power of LARPing is not much diminished for the cultivation of personal and collective worlds of make-believe. Influencers, for all their awareness of the staginess of the life they represent online nevertheless must not call out this online existence as a LARP, not because it would break the spell but precisely because it is assumed that online life is contrived, yet such contrivances continue to exert influence nevertheless. Indeed, when LARPing becomes a generalized phenomenon, no opprobrium attaches to the figure of the influencer; this figure's mysterious powers of influence have become an aspiration. LARPing is a quotidian solicitation and practice for users of new media and definitely not restricted to the fringe regions of the internet. The horned and winged LARPer of yore had a clear demarcation between the space of play and the space of reality; digital platforms blur this distinction. Such a convergence of the unreal with the real is critical for the formation of paranoid publics.

The sense of community offered up through play is another mechanism for such convergence. QAnon is first and foremost a community, however diffusely and heterogeneously constituted.⁵ The user interface on 4chan, where QAnon began, is deliberately low-tech and user-unfriendly, reinforcing a sense among users that they are a part of the 4chan community, with unique skills to navigate the platform. People outside of this community are "normies." Q encouraged community formation by indicating in parentheses that certain words, such as "timberwolf" and "warlocks" were "inside terms," codes for particular people or particular alliances.⁵ 4chan threads are up-ranked based on user engagement, which in /pol/ (politics) and /b/ (random) boards indexes how incendiary or offensive the remark or meme is found by other users. This may or may not, however, be someone taking actual offense at a post, since a mood of supreme irony rules all terms of engagement and anyone taking a meme or post at face value can and often is publicly shamed by other users. A spirit of the LARP already underwrites participation in the chans, whether or not one is a part of QAnon. A given member of QAnon might hold fast to some or none of the core doctrines. The game, such as it is, entails sharing content that either creates an overall mood

of outrage or moral panic or offers new interpretations of the Q's cryptic posts. Insofar as the Anons are participating in a LARP, paranoia marks the affective script of the game or the mood in which this game is to be played. Put simply, the game solicits paranoia from its participants, whether as performance or as "true belief."⁶

In a LARP, the participant is both actor and audience, aiming to fascinate themselves, other participants, and anyone on the outside looking in. In QAnon land, the outrage and offense expressed by "normies" is a part of the show. Thus, even the nonparticipants in the LARP are included in it, and the scope for play expands far *beyond* the boundaries of the playground or the stage, if you will.⁷ For this politics, the ordinary world has the character of being itself temporary, and the people in it all players in spite of themselves. Since the whole world has now become a play space, the LARPer of QAnon insist they are not a LARP. Q's mocking statement, "All for a LARP?" suggests that the powers ranged against QAnon understand its central doctrines as the truth rather than make-believe, and this rhetorical flourish interpellates those powers as players. "All for a LARP?" has become a refrain in QAnon forums. As an utterance, it is a feat of paranoid projection and an invitation into the rabbit hole: QAnon knows the truth, and this knowledge is imputed to those who seek to criticize or de-platform QAnon precisely because they do not want the truth to come out. Thus "All for a LARP?" reaffirms the truth QAnon already knows and suggests that none of this is a game. The world is reduced to a belief already suspected, but at the same time this utterance also belies the anxiety it is intended to repress, that all is in fact make-believe. The Anons are often fascinated with their newfound role as truth-tellers and search for opportunities to develop it further, all the while being ready to discard or transform it as the requirements of the performance shift. QAnon does not require belief in the sense of an enduring conviction whose propositions can be taken at face-value; instead, belief is a provisional matter, like the temporary world of the game, held in relation to the demands of the game and discarded or revised as these demands shift. The adventure of the game and corollary to this, the cultivation of the self, are the primary drivers of participation.

The fun in LARPing consists of a simultaneous break from one's ordinary self—its expansion and assumption of another identity—and the release of one's true self. Its power resides in the existence of the true in the guise of the false. Arguably, this is the case for all fictions and fictionality, but in a LARP, this power is focalized around self-making and world-making. The real world is a cipher for a hidden world that exists alongside it, and

one's actions in that hidden world—now magically visible everywhere—consolidate the true (previously hidden) self and reaffirm the terms of the game. Such are the adventures of QAnon-style healing attempts: this entire endeavor is a feat of collective projection and all the more riveting and fun for being so.

Projection is a psychic defense against the limits imposed on one's life-world by reality. It names a neutral operation by means of which people rid themselves—often unconsciously—of a desire, thought, or feeling by displacing it onto an external entity, where it appears changed from its original form. LARPing entails projection in the sense that all play involves projection: the world is reinvented through make-believe while simultaneously “found” anew, as if it existed there all along (Winnicott 712). An internal excitation is experienced as an external perception; this can become pathological, curative, or remain simply neutral depending on the context in which it occurs. Projection can be at work in paranoid experiences but it is not reducible to paranoia, which itself makes use of projection as one among other psychological mechanisms. By means of paranoid projection, the subject masters an original unease, and paranoid desire aids in orienting oneself in the world, however temporarily. Freud suggests that paranoid projection entails shifts within ego formation, often giving rise to a sense of megalomania, ego aggrandizement, paired with epistemic certainty (*SE XII*: 62–63).

“LARP-ONOMICS”

Such are the psychodynamics of the LARP at the level of subjectivation, but as I suggested earlier, LARPing also entails political-economic processes that feed the expansion of paranoid publics. Contemporary paranoid ideation is riveted to dominant forms of neoliberal governance, not only in the existence of literal revenue streams but also in the often-deleterious ludic dynamics of economic calculation. The influencer represents the gamification of performance, of the imbrication of economic logics with the realm of performance and make believe—of “LARP-onomics,” if you will.⁸ It was Friedrich A. Hayek, the arch-priest of neoliberal thought, who described economic operations as a game—“namely, a game partly of skill and partly of chance” (71). This “game of catallaxy” depends on liberty and encourages improvisation, and although “undesigned,” it still proliferates information and advances progress. Naturally Hayek's vision of this game is a utopian one, deriving as he does the word “catallaxy” from the Greek word *katallatein*, “which meant, significantly, not only ‘to exchange’ but also ‘to admit into the community’ and ‘to change from enemy into friend’” (108). Grounded

on agonism (competition), the game nevertheless delivers a reconciliation or adequation of diverse needs. Crucially, the game rewards not effort but strength, skill, or discernment: “It would be nonsensical to demand that the results for the different players be just” (71).⁹ Hayek refers to calls for the redistribution of wealth as “unjust” because these calls invoke an authority other than the inexorable laws of the market. By figuring market imperatives as the impersonal and objective demands of a game, Hayek explicitly sequesters these imperatives—emanating from the oracular diktats of the market—from the sphere of ethics. In a game, just as “truth” is the result of the game’s various rules, and “belief” is a lever for improvisation and subject to reinvention, “justice” can only be understood as an end that conforms to the operations of the game. In the attention economy, “gaming” the algorithm to increase engagement is a mark not of the cheat but of the skilled player. Gamification cedes ethics in the service either of rule-bound action or of improvisation, depending on the kind of game at hand. In either case gamification—like politics—is fundamentally inimical to factual truth.¹⁰

The algorithmic up-ranking of posts, the clamor for user attention, the desire to be viral all feed into circuits of monetization that make participation in the LARP a central necessity not only for the influencers within paranoid publics but also for tech companies that profit from the platforms and the advertisers the platforms serve. LARPing is therefore a cultural, political, and economic logic. QTubers perform alongside influencers, Qvangelists, entrepreneurs, online-only warriors, vigilantes, interpreters (known in QAnon parlance as “bakers”) for user attention. Participation options abound and are always flexible. Increasingly, as QAnon has entered the world of the wellness industry (“pastel QAnon”), it can resemble lifestyle marketing. There is always merchandise and swag to consume and multiple books for sale describing *The Great Awakening* or *The Coming Storm*. QAnon has also seen success at the ballot box, in Georgia (Marjorie Taylor Greene), Colorado (Lauren Boebert), and Oregon (Jo Rae Perkins, who did not win the election but won the Republican primary). Its growth into multiple positions of institutional and cultural influence is a mark of successful improvisation, with its attendant willingness to bend the rules. Caillois described games of make-believe as being fundamentally free of strict rules—as he put it, “*mimicry* is incessant invention” (23). The flexibility of the QAnon multiverse—its accommodation of all past conspiracy theories and openness to new ones, its adaptation to various political and economic spaces—is nevertheless underwritten by norms that entail a fundamental adherence to a political game that tacks right.

On January 6, 2021, some people erected a scaffold with a noose on the mall outside the Capitol building, suggesting a prehistory of the LARP in the American tradition of lynching, complete with its carnivalesque forms of enjoyment. The storming of the Capitol was a LARP similar to the white supremacist march on Charlottesville in August 2017 that had marked the spiritual inauguration of Trump's regime. The specter of the noose haunted, as well, the scene of the hapless St. Louis couple anxious to defend their property against imagined BLM threats, taking the opportunity to act out the fantasy that attends gun purchases. The noose also hangs over incidents too numerous to count of an enraged white person threatening a person of color. Karen, that perennially anxious and enraged figure of contemporary racial capitalist modernity, has elective affinities with the QAnon shaman. LARPing gives rise to the expression of latent desires and wishes.

One member of the January 6 melee had brought homemade napalm in his truck for the fight. Another texted his friends a picture of himself in blackface with the note "I'm gonna walk around DC FKG with people by yelling 'Allahu ak Bar' randomly" (NBC Washington Staff). Such are the Schreber-like healing attempts that aim to rebuild the world: manifestations of the political unconscious of the American gothic—crafts made by tinkering in the garage, the nostalgia for blackface and playing dress-up, the enjoyment of adolescent sadism. TheseLARPs involving napalm, blackface, and "Allah ak Bar" are of a piece with the hanging noose—all components of a fever dream in which violence against racial minorities at home is a project contiguous with American imperial wars abroad, including its ongoing "war on terror." Cold War paranoia, which had authorized American imperial wars since the Second World War, had morphed into hysterical anxiety about the so-called "New World Order" in the nineties and eventually returned after 9/11 to the classic paranoid form it had in the Cold War: an anxiety that persecutes the entity it claims to be persecuted by. Concurrently, voter suppression, the rise of incarceration rates, and the persistence of police impunity eroded civil rights gains. These associative links were apprehended by the January 6 rioters in their zeal to oppose Black Lives Matter, Jews, Muslims, and "communism." In their political theology, these profanities all require elimination. Hence, some members mockingly reenacted the murder of George Floyd even as the Capitol was stormed a short distance away. The LARP involving racialized murder is a part of the same game that attacks democratic symbols. At stake in these performances is the "making real" of forms of aggression cultivated over time, often online.

A wished-for performance, including one of losing self-mastery, took the opportunity for embodied action. As Jim Watkins, the owner of websites that hosted QAnon, said at the scene of the Capitol's storming: this began as a LARP and "it became real. It's American history now" (Hoback).

By means of its rhetorics of extreme unseriousness, irony, and pastiche, overlaid on a current of aggressive ideation, QAnon forums reproduce aspects of what Theodor Adorno analyzed as psychological features of fascist propaganda: the glib jokiness that "is not so much an obstacle as a stimulant in itself" (*Psychological Technique* 80). The deindividuating experience of being in a group facilitates destructive forms of disinhibition, but with the addition that for a politics of the LARP such disinhibition also meets the requirements of the game.¹¹ The online culture of "lulz," with its conscious attempts at offending sensibilities combined with the cultivation of extreme irony and the drive to outperform other posts in sheer engagement through a greater show of aggression or prurience all appeal to conscious and unconscious wishes and affective needs of the users. Such demonstrations of the violations of norms—often for the sake of the performance—serve to bind the audience as a paranoid community, with access to otherwise opaque truths and now linked to one another by the libidinal glue of shared aggression, made permissible because the game requires it.

As a form of play, LARPing aids in integrating oneself to a larger whole, with all the libidinal comforts and tensions that come with such integration. The gaps in logic, the phantasmatic nature of friends and enemies, and the associative links across different claims, personages, and events, all indicate a deferred plenitude that is the endgame for QAnon participants. The piecemeal nature of the information available on the internet is enticing for would-be Anons because it extends the experience of half-conscious accrual of a conspiratorial plot. The repetition of stock tropes, the expressions of nationalist sentiment, and the insistence that the world is in a sorry state as a result of the cabal's activities all take place in the half-light of conscious conviction similar to the state of consciousness Freud discovered in his experiences in hypnotizing patients. Subjects under hypnosis are prone to a strange regression in which the emotions they are experiencing under hypnosis are both fully present and yet understood as phony: "Some knowledge that in spite of everything hypnosis is only a game, a deceptive renewal of these old impressions, may, however remain behind and take care that there is a resistance against any too serious consequences of the suspension of the will in hypnosis" (*SE XVIII*: 127). Adorno would read this moment in Freud's account of group psychology as an account of how the phoniness at the heart of fascism becomes integrated into the social world.¹² QAnon demonstrates

that such phoniness results from the operations of the game but this is so because the game is not “only a game.”

Group Psychology as Mass Psychosis

ANXIETY AND PROJECTION

What accounts for the destructiveness at the heart of the politics of paranoia? How does play become oriented toward a twofold destruction, of the world and of oneself? While answers to these questions are already implied in the account given above of the dangers of make-believe, I would like to draw out the implications of the LARP's psychodynamics more explicitly. In *Group Psychology*, Freud indicated that fundamentally group psychology is akin to the psychology of the individual because “only rarely . . . is individual psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others” (*SE XVIII*: 69). Freud concerned himself in this book not with aberrant or exceptional social organizations but mundane ones, including the army, the family, and the church. To such ordinary forms of collective experiences we might add the nation and nationalism. Benedict Anderson's classic account of nationalism, though not explicitly addressing group psychodynamics, highlighted a critical affective and psychological need that imagined communities have served. Nationalism takes over from religion as a form of collective imagining, a secular belief in transcendence. The political theology of nationalism is “a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (Anderson 11). Such collective imaginings—not specific to nationalism—are forms of psychic suturing that allow accidental and contingent facts to become significant for collective life. Anderson puts it well in his pithy statement, “it is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny” (Anderson 12). It creates continuity between the dead and the unborn, inserting both into national history. It also integrates one's immediate experience with collective history.

Already in Anderson's account, nationalism resembles a collective delusion, or to put it more specifically, a collective projection. The continuity it forges between the self and the group allows one to transmute one's own powerlessness and contingent existence into a supreme force understood as collective will and destiny. The same dynamics are present in a formation like QAnon. Such an installation of authority arises in tandem with the rise of capitalism. For Adorno, it was precisely this confluence of capitalism with collective being that prepared the political and affective ground for fascism, since capitalism demands that people submit to its economic necessities, resulting in a gradual repudiation of the very subjective autonomy that democratic ideals foster (*Critical* 98). Critical to such an experience is that repu-

diation itself *feels* like subjective autonomy; the middle classes have long provided support for atavistic and counterrevolutionary politics, yet their reasons for doing so are historically contingent.¹³ Hence the dubious itineraries of “freedom”—reconceived in our contemporary political climate as the right to “free speech” even when such speech is a ruse for the suppression of social critique and social change or sometimes an outright call for violence. Daily adaptation or identification with the status quo—even when it poses as its demolition—prepares the ground for the acceptance of authoritarianism. As in a LARP, people are incentivized “to preserve themselves only if they renounce their self” (*Critical* 98). That is, the dissatisfactions and disappointments of capitalist reality, in stark opposition to what democracy had promised, means that “people remain indifferent to democracy, if they do not in fact secretly detest it” (99). The psychodynamics of the group offer intoxicating possibilities of projection, introjection, and the surrender of freedom.

Ressentiment, which imagines that others steal the rightful satisfaction of one’s own desires, seeks gratification by destroying the perceived enemy through the same actions that rebound on the self’s own destruction, names one dynamic for channeling collective anxiety, and there are others. Freud understood anxiety as a vital component of survival mechanisms because it prepares one for situations of danger, priming the organism for its fight/flight reactions in response to an anticipated external danger. When danger is present in the external environment, anxiety is a natural and even necessary response. Neurotic anxiety, on the other hand, is triggered not externally but internally; it suggests a libidinal disturbance causing sensations that feel like danger but the effect of which is far in excess of any reasonable external danger (*SE XVIII*: 396). Franz Neumann, a contemporary of Adorno, was among the first thinkers to consider the political, mass psychological implications of anxiety. Neumann suggests that if Freud is correct that for masses of people identification with a leader is a means of identification with one another as well, it means identification is a mechanism for mastering anxiety. The leader is idealized as being capable of addressing one’s distress, and corollary to this is the positing of certain others as the source of distress (618). Neumann argues that the word “scapegoat” is inaccurate for describing the subject-position of the enemy whose elimination promises to assuage a shared collective anxiety, because scapegoats are “substitutes whom one only needs to send into the wilderness” (619). The libidinal cathexis involving the-enemy-within spells the end of figuration and the hardening of conviction, what Neumann refers to as “false concreteness.” True historical anxiety—the result of inequality, hunger, or war—transmutes into neurotic anxiety, which is then assuaged by renouncing the ego through a

false concreteness secured through identification. Since the enemy is fundamentally evil, singular, and therefore un-substitutable and exempt from the play of signification, one's conviction about the enemy's guilty and rotten nature cannot be shaken. Projection entails a conjuring of such truths to which one must hold fast because their certainty is the grounds not only of the self but also of the group. The noose erected in front of the US Capitol stood as a warning to Black people, Muslims, Jews, immigrants, "globalists," and the "cabal" of elites. These enemies, for all the differences among them, constitute a single facticity against which the mob constituted itself as united in order to "Stop the Steal."

The slogan "Stop the Steal" serves a tripartite purpose: it is a projective utterance that disavows its own kleptomania; it marks a libidinal cathexis with Trump as leader; it is a cry for political action. In all three functions it serves as a form of ego aggrandizement. While attachment and identification with Trump as leader might aid such aggrandizement, as in Freud and Neumann's reading, a leader is not a necessary condition for the sense of megalomania that attaches to paranoid formations like QAnon. This might seem a surprising claim given Q's scriptural authority and Trump's halo, but following the projective itinerary of the Anons will clarify what I mean.

Projection is a defense against an originary anxiety for Melanie Klein, who also emphasized play as a critical feature of psychoanalytic practice. Crucially, for Klein it is the pressure of the death drive (understood not as a vague biologicistic notion but as a mode of social relation) that gives rise to anxiety, which is "felt as fear of annihilation (death) and takes the form of persecution" (4).¹⁴ Such a fear becomes externalized—projected, for babies, onto the mother's breast (the object at hand). Should the breast be withheld when it is needed—an inevitable course of events—it is experienced as a bad object; when it gratifies physical need, it is introjected as a good object and idealized, as capable of delivering limitless gratification. Such is the experience of what Klein calls the "paranoid-schizoid" position. Key to understanding Klein's account of projection is to understand that both extreme idealization of the good object and demonization of the bad object are forms of repression. Idealization represses the unease created by the bad object, and demonization of the bad object represses the persecutory anxiety that this object had unleashed. Thus, both idealization and demonization are forms of adaptation to changing realities, and such splitting of the world into idealized Manichean forms entails a split within the ego itself. Such extreme forms of splitting weaken the ego itself, increasingly bereft of a sense of self which it now experiences as disintegrating, "falling to bits," and dispersed and dissociated. Such dispersal of the self and de-individuation that

attends projective identification is an experience of psychosis that can be overcome if the good object had been successfully introjected, but even so, it remains an ever-present potential in interpersonal relations. Ego integration is an ongoing project, and the stark appearance of the polarized world—divided between those who are good and those who are evil—originating in psychic splitting, remains an ever-present danger.

PSYCHOSES

Whether in the form of nationalism, racist hatred, delusional paranoia, or conspiratorial explanation, projection marks a narrative reversal for the subject caught in its thrall, who can then guarantee itself the upper-hand. Such a position longs to remake the world in the image of the psychotic illusions it has already deemed to be truth. Even a cursory consideration of the recent political discourse in light of collective projection brings to mind the denigration of truth as “fake news”, the longing to consolidate executive state power by invocations of a shadowy “deep state”, railing against “cancel culture” while ensuring that some viewpoints or voices do not find a home in the public sphere, trying to “Stop the Steal” by attempting to steal the election, proclaiming a conspiracy at work to conspire, and so on. Projection is a psychological mechanism that operates in an obscure zone between epistemology and phenomenology; when indulged in the grip of paranoia, it replaces knowledge with knowingness. In the internet age, its privileged genres are the headline and the meme. Destructive forms of mass projection are an elaborate LARP, investing the world with forms of the group’s psychic needs and wishes, but such a solution spells disaster because it ensures that the image of the world reflected back to the paranoid subject is a repetition of itself, caught now in pathological forms of symbol formation that assure certitude but fail to relieve anxiety. New data is easily assimilated into the schema as a repetition of the self-same because for the paranoid all evidence confirms what is already known¹⁵ and all that is contingent becomes necessary.

Freud’s account of group psychology turns on his account of authority and its surrogates: totemic forms, collective ideals, and the figure of the leader provide focal points for an otherwise dispersed collectivity. These forms of authority appeal to the individual’s narcissism insofar as identification with these forms promises the fulfillment of narcissistic fantasies (aiming at becoming an ego-ideal, being in the know and therefore superior) and binds the individuals to one another. Authority does not operate in group psychology as a form of coercion or brute power but rather as a promissory note or a lure. For the Anons, the failed prophecy is always about to come true, if only you “Trust the Plan.” Adorno follows Freud even as he revises

him in his analysis of the group psychology of fascism: “The leader image gratifies the follower’s twofold wish to submit to authority and to be authority himself. . . . The people who obey the dictators also sense that the latter are superfluous. They reconcile this contradiction through the assumption that they are themselves the ruthless oppressor” (*Culture Industry* 142). This assumption of ruthless capacities is the beginning of the LARP. The ego aggrandizement entailed in these psychodynamics relies on the transfer of authority from the leader (an external reality) to the self’s internal capacities and powers. Thus begins the adventures of paranoia in the realm of self-cultivation. Trump is simultaneously just like his followers and also positioned as an ideal. It is not that leaders are adept at techniques of mass psychological manipulation in any conscious way such that one has to impute brilliance and calculation to leaders who are indeed often incompetent and even faintly ridiculous. Rather, it is the repeated voicing of an uninhibited latent wish of the group that proves so effective for mass mobilization. This explains why the fascist and quasi-fascist leaders’ arguments operate not by means of rationality but rather by means of association, as in paranoid formulations. Wearing one’s unconscious on one’s sleeve becomes a strength for the leader—what Adorno refers to as making “rational use of his irrationality”—and language serves as a form of magic rather than rational signification (*Culture Industry* 148). It provides cathexes even as it signifies.

Leaders and demagogues function, therefore, as phantasmic forms. In libidinal politics, the putative powers of the leader do not require military control, intellectual prowess, and certainly not a life already lived according to the group’s shared ideals. It would therefore be fruitless to search for explanations for libidinal politics in the personalities of particular historical leaders. The logical conclusion to be drawn from Freud and Adorno’s accounts is that the leader or demagogue’s necessity to a group is short-lived at best, and specific leaders are superfluous with respect to the libidinal politics that they might have helped to focalize.

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion went as far as to posit a leaderless theory of group formations, locating group psychology not in the centrality of a shared locus of authority but in the (Kleinian) dispersive and self-disintegrating mechanisms of psychosis. Leaders and figures of authority that might seem to draw to themselves collective projections are, Bion argues, merely symptoms of a preexisting psychotic social formation. Bion’s critical insight into group psychology—key to understanding contemporary paranoid publics—is that the requirements of a leader is “to be devoid of contact with any reality other than the reality of the basic-assumption-group demands” (178). In other words, the leader is a placeholder for the

emotions of the group; leaders are like phantasmatic forms, invented and reinvented over the history of the group. For QAnon, insofar as LARPing is a game, the hierarchies within its formations are necessarily contrived and subject to reinvention. A dispositional psychosis attends all collective actions, Bion suggests, and while such psychotic experiences can be necessary steps for an eventual integration of the self with reality, such integration is not guaranteed. In groups, emotional release and spontaneous action correspond to psychotic anxieties similar to primal object relations. Bion states categorically that it is this *earlier* form of object relations, in the paranoid-schizoid mechanisms of infantile anxiety, that the “the ultimate sources of all group behaviour” reside (189). Bion’s reflections on group psychology are particularly helpful for understanding contemporary paranoid politics, whose invocations of messiahs, leaders, or demagogues are less vociferous than their insistence that the unreal is real, and also whose fundamental forms of understanding are nimble enough to incorporate contingency (as in QAnon).

The End of the World

Recall that infantile anxiety in object relations theory stems from the intrusion of the death drive, which, in an elaborate and shuttling drama of projection, introjection, and splitting, results in the division of both the ego and the objects it encounters. Such splitting, an attempt at channeling the disturbances of the death drive, makes possible the expressions of sadistic and masochistic release. Projection, introjection, and splitting are, in other words, mechanisms of recovery central to the project of reparation that would follow in Klein’s account of the depressive position that ensues when, in the fantasies of the paranoid-schizoid position, the ego’s objects have been damaged. The deliberate flouting of norms and the ratcheting up of offense as a collective project for QAnon has imbued this paranoid formation with a psychotic anxiety always at the ready for fight/flight. This has persisted well past QAnon’s de-platforming. To follow QAnon channels on Telegram means to enter a Manichean world in which an immediate fight/flight response is necessary. QAnon shares this aggressive quality with militia groups such as The Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, and Boogaloo Bois, who have installed aggression more explicitly as their *raison d’être*; anti-lockdown protests and antivaxxing demonstrations not only share members with some of these other groups but also they increasingly occupy the same psychodynamics. The Boogaloo Bois do not have a leader and are a decentralized group, unlike the Proud Boys, with whom they share an apocalyptic sense that the United States government needs to be overthrown, a new civil war fought, and new forms of

freedom therefore made possible. Although Anons looked to Q for “crumbs” that would help them play the game of paranoid truth-seeking, Q was only one node in the game that took on a life of its own and continues to evolve in spite of his extended silence. Although adherents of QAnon exalt Donald Trump, their arcane interpretations of everything from Trump’s misspellings to Melania Trump’s wardrobe only underscores the truth of Bion’s understanding of group leaders as phantasmic part-objects that conform to collective projection. Not being beholden to a specific leader is a strength rather than a weakness to such a politics of the LARP. Such politics are equally available to extreme groups as well as mainstream politicians, industrialists, funders of “dark money,” and political parties who encourage extremists and feel energized by them.

Considering the conjoint problems of paranoid publics, posttruth, political polarization through group object relations illuminates several key points. The alarm over the neoliberal corrosion of communication systems and information ecologies—a staple of discussions of posttruth—conceals a longing for an order of authority that was itself an invention of group psychological dynamics. The catastrophes of the twentieth-century invent not only their own forms of abolishing factual truth but also the latent psychoses within the mass delusion of nationalism that consistently find expression in the constitution of new enemies, internal and external. This was the case not only for Europe and the United States but also for recently decolonized countries whose own intellectuals presciently warned of the pitfalls of nationalism. The Cold War division of the globe into blocs—a profoundly paranoid-schizoid formation—was all the more effective for channeling collective aggression and building the conditions for ongoing aggressions in the form of capitalist exploitation. So while the contemporary crises of democratic rule are not exceptional, they differ from twentieth-century crises in that the forms of idealization-as-repression are undergoing a change. After the fall of competing Cold War utopias, the pretext for new wars in Afghanistan and Iraq claimed “freedom” and “democracy” as the reasons for aggression. Domestically, the roll-back phase of neoliberalism extolled the virtues of “choice” and “freedom” as it stripped workers of basic protections. The idealizing of freedom as well as democracy in these instances served to undermine both, domestically as well as globally. Still, such idealization appealed to utopian aims even if it did so cynically. QAnon and the militias that have surfaced in recent years seem attached to such fascist utopias. Their endgame is “the storm” or some similar vision of catastrophe that is not simply to be welcomed passively but rather to be actively precipitated as quickly as possible.¹⁶ The overriding affect of their politics is the thrill of

vengeance paired with the practice of a scandalous freedom that evades accountability, destroys existing law, and overturns the existing order—such are the pleasures of *jouissance* as proffered by QAnon. The imminent “storm” is also a world-historically entertaining show.

Such LARP fantasies are collectively cultivated through performative iterations of memes and expressions of outrage; the performative LARP of online projection prefigures the politics of the LARP to be embodied on the ground: tiki torches carried by white supremacists in Charlottesville, the storm arriving in an attack on the Capitol, the GOP closing party ranks to ensure impunity for Trump’s actions. As Freud explained long ago, the death drive operates in a fugitive manner, often appearing in forms that can feel freeing. “Question Authority” shows up regularly as an exhortation on QAnon paraphernalia, and Lauren Boebert, a QAnon congresswoman recently tweeted, “Never let anyone tell you that you shouldn’t speak up for what you believe in. The ‘powers that be’ fear our voice more than anything. That’s exactly why we need to be more vocal than ever.” These exhortations are not subversions of the freedom-seeking impulses at the heart of well-worn American platitudes but expressions of the fascist apocalypticism that had always underlain their banal repetition.¹⁷ In the QAnon multiverse, the world to come is only possible after the fearsome yet desirable cataclysm, one that can be hastened with increased calls to punish the evildoers. Such calls are simultaneously expressions of ego aggrandizement. To be sure, dystopian visions are also a form of idealization and enact their own forms of psychological and political repression, but it is dystopian imagination that undergirds the unease of contemporary politics. Even social movements that aim for a more genuinely egalitarian world express their protests by holding up a mirror to contemporary forms of inequality: “We are the 99%”; “Black Lives Matter.” For the occupy movement, for BLM, and also for climate activists the storm is already here and has been brewing for decades. “I Can’t Breathe” expresses racial injustice, and it also speaks—emblematically—of all manner of uninhabitable worlds. World catastrophe, then, is a critique of the existing order for one politics and the solution to worldly ills in another. Whether it is an orientation toward a dystopian cataclysm or a mirror held up to one already occurring, it is dystopia that lends politics its charge.

In Freud’s analysis of Schreber, he notes that megalomaniacal ideation tends to become haunted by images of world catastrophe, of everything being burned to the ground, of the world falling away to make room for a new order, and so on. Such visions of the ruined world are an acknowledgment of an unconscious withdrawal of libido: “The projection of this internal catastrophe; his subjective world has come to an end since his withdrawal of love from it.” Recent news images of climate disasters and even more recently

the footage of COVID-19 lockdown-induced emptiness in world cities have not only demonstrated that classic filmic tropes of dystopian fantasy are now available in the form of reality—the objective world appearing in the garb of the LARP—but also intimated how the storm might look for an imagination given to delusional paranoia. A recent QAnon meme showed the face of Donald Trump pasted on the head of a US soldier in full body armor, leading his prisoner (Joe Biden) across a blighted landscape. The figure of the US soldier remains heroic in the mythology of QAnon and the militia groups—indeed the militia groups in particular have a significant membership drawn from former members of the US armed forces. “Support our Troops,” the jingoistic imperative of post-9/11 America that was often weaponized against critiques of American imperial wars, has in some memes come to mean support the overthrow of the US government, in the most literal-minded way of bringing the war home. The Anons are as phantasmic as Richard Nixon’s “silent majority”—a phrase they have begun to recirculate—and no less powerful for being so. They are even infected with similar moral panics. They are least delusional when they refer to themselves as the storm. For all their putatively fringe existence, they share in the same forms of idealized subjectivation that neoliberalism makes available: the entrepreneur, the influencer, the Instagram and YouTube star, and the hustler who has mastered the art of “pivoting” (in neoliberal parlance, an injury displayed as virtue or skill). The forms of subjectivation—not specific to extremist groups—is how the politics of the LARP transit from the virtual to the real. The Anons claim the certainty but also the challenge of conspiracy, whose Latin root we would do well to recall in the age of COVID-19 and the cracks in democracy it has accentuated; *conspīrāre* means “to breathe together”—provided that one can breathe. ■

Zahid R. Chaudhary is an associate professor of English at Princeton University. This article is drawn from his forthcoming book, *Unruly Truth: Libidinal Politics and Crises of Authority*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have benefited from the wisdom of the following readers: the editors of *History of the Present*, Ben Conisbee Baer, Rey Chow, David Eng, Asli Igsiz, Jarrett Moran, Gayle Salamon, Robyn Wiegman, Joanna Wuest, and seminar participants at the CUNY-Graduate Center’s Committee of Globalization and Social Change and Princeton’s Society of Fellows. I am grateful for their guidance and insights.

NOTES

- 1 As Richard Hofstadter noted in his 1964 analysis of what he called “paranoid style” in American politics, paranoia has a life outside the sphere of psychology, as a tendency of political thought. Hofstadter draws too sharp a distinction, however, between the

- pathological and nonpathological, and his designation of “paranoid style” as an explicitly pejorative term assumes liberalism (and moderation) as a grounding and normative principle. See Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*.
- 2 Even as I write, QAnon, banned by mainstream platforms, is fragmenting across alt-tech platforms such as Gab and Telegram, among others.
 - 3 Fredric Jameson has read conspiracies as attempts to solve the aesthetic-political problem of representing an increasingly complex social totality (Jameson 3). Following on his provocation, Timothy Melley reads conspiracy as a manifestation of what he calls “agency panic” (Melley 14). For both Jameson and Melley, conspiracy represents a solution to an impossible problem: representation of social totality (Jameson) or the apprehension of individual autonomy (Melley).
 - 4 A May 2021 poll found that 15 percent of Americans believe that a cabal of satan-worshipping pedophiles are in control of the world, and 20 percent believe that a cataclysmic storm would wipe out these evil elites. QAnon beliefs have become as popular as some religions (Russonello).
 - 5 It is notoriously difficult to assess how many people are adherents of QAnon (Kight).
 - 6 Commentators have increasingly noted the resemblance between QAnon participation and role-playing games (Berkowitz; “QAnon Is an Alternate Reality”; “QAnon”). These analyses miss that LARPing is a generalized phenomenon not specific to QAnon but a part of an emerging cultural and political logic.
 - 7 What Johan Huizinga in his classic 1938 study, *Homo Ludens*, referred to as the “consecrated spot” or “temporary worlds within ordinary worlds” in which the rules of the game obtain, is no longer distinguishable as such for a politics of the LARP (Huizinga 10).
 - 8 Thanks to Ben Conisbee Baer for suggesting this neologism. The recent corporate scandals of WeWork and Theranos involved LARPing tendencies that have become increasingly normalized for start-ups.
 - 9 Seemingly unaware of the affinities between deluding and playing, and the resulting contradiction between truth and gamification, Hayek deludes both himself and his adherents. On Hayek’s profound antipathy to those he called “social justice warriors,” see Wendy Brown’s insightful discussion in *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, 30–39.
 - 10 Hannah Arendt explains that the hostile relationship between truth and politics is an ancient conflict, explained by qualities intrinsic to each: the work of politics requires a reduction of truth, and truth requires impartial investigation free of self-interest. See “Truth and Politics” in Arendt.
 - 11 For the classic account of de-individuation and group psychology (see Le Bon).
 - 12 See “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda” in Adorno, *The Culture Industry*.
 - 13 Wendy Brown’s discussion of repressive desublimation brilliantly explains how this occurs under neoliberalism (see Brown).
 - 14 Klein’s most sustained discussion of projection is her essay, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms” (1946).
 - 15 Such a sense of epistemological certainty and mastery is the grounds for new fantasies of dominance. Adorno and Horkheimer describe this well: “The closed circle of perpetual sameness becomes a surrogate for omnipotence. It is as if the serpent which

- told the first human ‘Ye shall be as gods’ had kept his promise in the paranoiac. . . . His will permeates the whole universe; nothing may be unrelated to him” (Adorno and Horkheimer 157).
- 16 For an insightful account of conspiratorial apocalypticism (see Guilhot). Guilhot’s argument that the QAnon shaman seeks to rebuild a destroyed world resonates with my argument here, though Guilhot and I differ on our assessment of psychosocial explanations.
 - 17 For recent accounts of the resurgence of fascism (see Harootunian; Toscano).

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, 2nd ed., edited by J. M. Bernstein, London: Routledge, 2001.
- Adorno, Theodor. *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Stars Down to Earth*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. 1st ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. 6th ed. New York: Verso, 1983.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Berkowitz, Reed. “A Game Designer’s Analysis of QAnon.” *The Street/Phil’s Stock World*, January 22. www.thestreet.com/phildavis/news/a-game-designers-analysis-of-qanon.
- Bion, W. R. *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
- Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Carrie Lee Rothgeb. “Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of A Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides).” In vol. 12 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 1–82. London: Hogarth Press, 1958.
- Freud, Sigmund, James Strachey, Anna Freud, and Carrie Lee Rothgeb. “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.” In vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 65–144. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
- Guilhot, Nicolas. “Bad Information.” *Boston Review*, August 23, 2021. [bostonreview.net/politics/nicolas-guilhot-bad-information?utm_source=Boston+Review+Email+Subscribers&utm_campaign=1e97b2bobf-MC_Newsletter_8_26_21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2cb428c5ad-1e97b2bobf-40733269&mc_cid=1e97b2bobf&mc_eid=20bc04a1d1](https://www.bostonreview.net/politics/nicolas-guilhot-bad-information?utm_source=Boston+Review+Email+Subscribers&utm_campaign=1e97b2bobf-MC_Newsletter_8_26_21&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2cb428c5ad-1e97b2bobf-40733269&mc_cid=1e97b2bobf&mc_eid=20bc04a1d1).
- Harootunian, Harry. “A Fascism for Our Time.” *Massachusetts Review*, January 6, 2021. www.massreview.org/node/9428.
- Hayek, Friedrich A. *Law, Legislation, and Liberty, Volume 2: The Mirage of Social Justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

- Hoback, Cullen, dir. *Q: Into the Storm*. New York: HBO, 2021.
- Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.
- Kight, Stef W. "Poll: One-Third of Americans Are Open to QAnon Conspiracy Theories." *Axios*, October 21, 2020. www.axios.com/poll-qanon-americans-belief-growing-2a2d2a55-38a7-4b2a-a1b6-2685a956feef.html.
- Klein, Melanie. *The Collected Works of Melanie Klein, Volume 3: "Envy and Gratitude" and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
- Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1895.
- Marasco, Robyn. "Toward A Critique of Conspiratorial Reason." *Constellations* 23, no. 2 (2016): 236–43. doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12222.
- Melley, Timothy. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000.
- NBC Washington Staff. "Armed Man Threatened Violence against DC Mayor in Texts to Family, Friends: Feds." NBC4 Washington, January 13, 2021. www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/armed-man-threatened-violence-against-dc-mayor-in-texts-to-family-friends-feds/2540682/.
- Neumann, Franz L. "Anxiety and Politics." *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism, and Critique* 15, no. 2 (2017): 612–36. doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v15i2.901.
- Pape, Robert A. "Opinion: What an Analysis of 377 Americans Arrested or Charged in the Capitol Insurrection Tells Us." *Washington Post*, April 6, 2021. www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/06/capitol-insurrection-arrests-cpost-analysis/.
- "QAnon: A Game That Plays People." *Think*, January 21, 2021. think.kera.org/2021/01/21/qanon-a-game-that-plays-people/.
- "QAnon Is an Alternate Reality, But It's No Game." *New Yorker Radio Hour*, January 15, 2021. www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/segments/qanon-alternate-reality-its-no-game.
- Russonello, Giovanni. "QAnon Now as Popular in US as Some Major Religions, Poll Suggests." *New York Times*, May 27, 2021. www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/us/politics/qanon-republicans-trump.html.
- Toscano, Alberto. "Notes on Late Fascism." *Historical Materialism*, April 2, 2017. www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism.
- Winnicott, D. W. "The Use of an Object." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 50 (1969): 711–16.