

Troubling Convictions: Theatre and Conspiracy Theory Culture

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Abstract

This thesis questions relationships between theatre making practice and conspiracy theory culture. It understands conspiracism to be diverse, widespread, politically influential and often reductive, producing dangerous convictions. At the same time, it acknowledges that attempts to address conspiracism are themselves sometimes superficial, approaching conspiracists and conspiracism as homogenous entities when these terms actually describe a heterogenous milieu. I ask how theatre intervenes in this discourse, and what strategies practitioners can employ to establish more thoroughly representative engagements with conspiracism. In particular, this research asks how one can establish critical distance between theatre audiences and various claims associated with conspiracism. The approaches developed in this work are therefore designed to address conspiracy theory culture without either advancing its dangers or marginalising conspiracists.

I begin by observing some core qualities of conspiracism, arguing that conspiracy theory culture encompasses diverse perspectives and positions that span epistemological conditions, geographic boundaries and socio-political spectra. I also discuss its dangers and explore methods employed by theatre makers whose work already addresses these issues. Analysing several notable performances, I seek out strategies and techniques to be developed. In the process, I articulate philosophical and methodological frameworks central to those works and my research, suggesting that autoethnographic theatre allows practitioners to activate concepts of deconstruction, and that doing so provides them with a means to call conspiracism into question. These findings inform the research questions I go on to address in this thesis, and moving on, I explore my intentions to do so through practice research.

I then proceed with three chapters, analysing my own theatre. Interrogating original performances that were developed within this research, each explicates and assesses the techniques and strategies I established when addressing conspiracies, conspiracy theories and conspiracists. Reflecting on my findings, I argue that theatre is able to engage constructively with conspiracy theory culture by employing such approaches, producing uncertainties contrary to its dangerous convictions.

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3. 'Episode 153', *The Strangeness* – episode webpage with streaming audio:
 - <https://thestrangeness.blog/episode-153/>
4. 'Episode 154' *The Strangeness* – as above:
 - <https://thestrangeness.blog/277-2/>
5. 'Episode 155', *The Strangeness* – as above:
 - <https://thestrangeness.blog/155-2/>
6. *The Loom of Athena* – website hosting show notes and fact files reproduced on stage:
 - <https://theloomdotblog.wordpress.com/>

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I dedicate this thesis to Mister Cat, as my friend, familiar and dramaturg.

Declaration

This thesis is submitted to the University of York in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I am the sole author.

No part of this work has previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere.

All sources are acknowledged as references.

1 Introduction

Conspiracy theories propose that powerful organisations work to deceive the public, usually with malicious intent.¹ Such notions have influenced socio-political discourse throughout human history.² Contemporary equivalents shape views on climate science, election results and public health policy.³ By extension, people who promote or believe in these narratives are generally labelled conspiracy theorists (also called conspiracists).⁴ As many such allegations lack evidence, conspiracy theories have been seen to stimulate extremism, vilifying innocent people and inspiring violence towards supposed conspirators.⁵ However, it is important to note that conspiracy theories exist all around the world, draw on various ideologies and span political spectra, and in this sense conspiracism remains diverse.⁶ Referring to the perspectives, practices and social realities associated with so heterogeneous a group as conspiracists, I will be employing the term conspiracy theory culture: a milieu, in which conspiracy theories develop, circulate and sometimes conflict. In this thesis, I will examine theatre as a means to engage with that complex, asking how practitioners can address its more dangerous qualities.

I present this work as a reflection on my creative practice, from 2019 to 2022. As such, the bulk of my writing will focus on three performances presented during that period. In this Introduction, I seek to contextualise the forthcoming analysis by examining conspiracy theory culture and exploring my methods of approach. Section One addresses conspiracism as it is understood by scholars, discussing the impact of this scholarship on my practice. A second section asks how theatre has already approached conspiracism, studying three performances by existing practitioners. Acknowledging the conviction, bias and scapegoating central to conspiracism, each case study seeks to explicate the processes by which these artists have developed performances that open up critical distance between the audience and conspiracy theory culture. Section Three builds on my findings, discussing autoethnography as an approach central to my research praxis. Following this, Chapters One to Three analyse my own theatre, each examining a different performance. I then reflect on that analysis in the

¹ See Marina Abalakina-Paap et al, 'Beliefs in conspiracies', *Political Psychology*, 20:3 (1999), 637-647, (p.637); see also, Michael J. Wood et al, 'Dead and alive: Beliefs in contradictory conspiracy theories', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 3 (2012) 767-773, (p.767).

² See, for example, Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas, 'Conspiracy theories as a part of history: The role of societal crisis situations', *Memory Studies*, 10: 3 (2017), 323-333, (p.325).

³ See, for example, Daniel Freeman et al, 'Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance with government guidelines in England', *Psychological Medicine*, May (2020), 1-13 (p.12); see also, for example, Kelly R. Garrett and Brian E. Weeks, 'Epistemic beliefs' role in promoting misperceptions and conspiracist ideation', *PLoS ONE* 12: 9 (2017), 1-17.

⁴ See Cass R. Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, 'Conspiracy Theories', *Law and Economics Working Papers* No.387 (2008) 1-29, (p.1).

⁵ See, for example, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, *The Power of Unreason* (London: DEMOS. 2010), p.24.

⁶ This breadth can be observed in various encyclopaedias: see generally, for example, Brad Steiger, *Conspiracies and secret societies: the complete dossier* (Canton, MI: Visible Ink Press. 2013).

conclusion, arguing that my research reveals several valuable approaches to theatre practice, helping me to engage with conspiracy theory culture while addressing its complications.

1.1 Understanding Conspiracy Theory Culture and Identifying Its Dangers

I initiated my research by considering my existing views on conspiracy theory culture. At the outset, I was aware that conspiracy theories can be dangerous, leading people to embrace and sometimes act on unsubstantiated accusations.⁷ Nonetheless, as I go on to discuss, a personal fascination with UFOs has elicited my sympathy for particular conspiracy theories (see Chapter One). Those sentiments have also been bolstered by the knowledge that actual conspiracies sometimes take place.⁸ Although these positions on conspiracism were informed by scholarship to some extent, they were very much personally inflected, and, at the same time, they lacked depth. Hence, I sought a more qualified understanding of conspiracy theory culture and its dangers, and began by gathering and synthesizing scholarly perspectives, seeking to broaden my own. In the spirit of thoroughness, then, I attempted to situate conspiracy theory scholarship in its historical context.

As Michael Butter and Peter Knight demonstrate, conspiracy theory research 'is a relatively new phenomenon'.⁹ During the 1930s, political scientists began to connect conspiracy theories to antisemitic propaganda, examining scapegoating as a reactionary practice.¹⁰ This research gained momentum in the 1940s and 1950s, having been discussed by scholars like Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik and Daniel J. Levinson, who concluded that conspiracy theorisation propels totalitarianism.¹¹ To illustrate this, one could examine stereotypes associated with migrants and Jewish people. For example, during the Black Death, disease was blamed on these groups, building on existing biases in Europe.¹² Given the simplicity of this myth, it was easily resuscitated in successive centuries, allowing antisemites to portray Jewish people and nomadic groups as noxious adversaries: a perspective woven into the tapestry of conspiracy theory culture and still widely observable

⁷ See, for example, Michael S. Broschowitz, 'The Violent Impact of Anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories', *Middlebury Institute of International Studies*, 6. May. 2022 < <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/ctec-publications/violent-impact-anti-semitic-conspiracy> > [accessed 03 Jun 2023].

⁸ See, for example, Kristina Chouinard, 'The Watergate Scandal and Its Aftermath', *Journal of Political Sciences and Public Affairs*, 5: 4 (2017), 1-3, (p.1); see also, for example, Eva Campbell, 'MK-Ultra: Mind-Control, LSD and the US Government', *Retrospect*, 24 Oct 2021 < <https://retrospectjournal.com/2021/10/24/MK-ultra-mind-control-LSD-and-the-us-government/> > [accessed 1 Dec 2022].

⁹ Michael Butter and Peter Knight, 'The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary', in *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, ed. by Joseph E. Uscinski, (New York. 2018) 33-64 (p.33).

¹⁰ See, for example, Katharina Thalmann, 'John Birch Blues': The Problematization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era', *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, 15: 1 (2014) 1-17 (p.6).

¹¹ See Theodor W. Adorno et al, *The Authoritarian Personality: Part Two* (New York: Wiley. 1950), p.611.

¹² See, for example, John Kelly, *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (New York: Harper Collins. 2005), pp.131-141.

today.¹³ This canard now takes many forms. For instance, it appears in imagery portraying capitalism as an ideology promoted by parasitic elites with clichéd Jewish characteristics'.¹⁴ Likewise, it is observable in stories about Jewish organisations bent on world domination.¹⁵ Meanwhile, media outlets routinely capitalise on conspiracy ideation, portraying migrants as political antagonists.¹⁶ In this sense, conspiracy theories can be seen to develop over many generations; and where they call on and perpetuate existing scapegoats, these stories produce dangerous metanarratives that further enable propaganda. Acknowledging this, I questioned theatre's capacity to engage with and problematise shallow representations.

In the 1960s, Karl Popper argued that the tendency to dream up convenient antagonists arises from a religiosity central to conspiracism: a superstitious compulsion, antithetical to empirical analysis, in which placing blame helps people to feel confident when confronted by uncertain conditions.¹⁷ Richard Hofstadter built on this theory in his seminal 1967 essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, and, since then, researchers have frequently associated conspiracism not only with reactionary politics but also epistemic delusion; according to these theoreticians, conspiracists mistake conspiracy as history's 'motive force', their accusations informed by speculation as opposed to thorough analysis.¹⁸ This perspective underwrites scholarship in which conspiracism is considered epistemologically unsound due to its 'monological' nature; that is, its tendency to call on grand narratives ignorant of nuance, preferring simple conclusions.¹⁹ Though initially theoretical, these arguments have been supported by quantitative research: conspiracists who subscribe to one theory are demonstrably more likely to endorse others.²⁰ I wondered what conditions facilitate these epistemic complications, and how theatre can expose and perhaps challenge them.

Contrary to early theoreticians, contemporary scholars argue that conspiracy theorisation is not necessarily pathological.²¹ Rather, that conspiracism usually originates with an ambient

¹³ See, for example, Daniel Allington, 'Antisemitic conspiracy fantasy in the age of digital media: Three 'conspiracy theorists' and their YouTube audiences', *Language and Literature*, 30: 1 (2021), 78-102, (p.79).

¹⁴ See, for example, The Antisemitism Policy Trust, *Antisemitic Imagery and Caricatures* (London: The Antisemitism Policy Trust. 2020), p.9.

¹⁵ See, for example, Manfred Gerstenfeld, 'Anti-Jewish Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories in Historical Context' in *The COVID-19 Crisis: Impact and Implications*, ed. by Efraim Karsh (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. 2020), 41-45, (pp.41-42).

¹⁶ See, for example, Sophia Gatson and Joseph Uscinski, *Out of The Shadows: Conspiracy Thinking on Immigration* (London: The Henry Jackson Society. 2018), p.46.

¹⁷ See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge. 1969), pp.93-96.

¹⁸ J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood, 'Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion', *Journal of Political Science*, 58: 4 (2014), 952-966, (p.953); see also Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', *International Affairs* 43: 3 (1967), 615-616, (p.29); see also, for example, Brian L. Keeley, 'Of Conspiracy Theories', *Journal of Philosophy*, 96 (1999), 109-26 (p.124); see also, for example, Alfred Moore, 'Conspiracy and conspiracy theories in democratic politics', *Critical Review*, 28: 1 (2016), 1-23, (p.3).

¹⁹ See, for example, Ted Goertzel, 'Belief in conspiracy theories', *Political Psychology*, 15: 4 (1994), 731-742, (p.741).

²⁰ See, for example, D. Alan Bensley et al, 'The generality of belief in unsubstantiated claims', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 34: 1 (2020), 16-28, (pp.18-19).

²¹ See, for example, Robbie M. Sutton and Karen M. Douglas, 'Examining the monological nature of conspiracy theories', *Power, Politics and Paranoia: Why People are Suspicious of Their Leaders*, ed. by Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014), 254-273, (pp.257-259).

mistrust towards others, and that this leads conspiracists to treat conspiracy theories as generally reasonable.²² Where evidence is lacking, though, conspiracists are seen to give preference to accusations complementary to their existing perspectives.²³ Hence, in conspiracism, speculation supersedes investigation, bias shapes narratives unimpeded, and conspiracists can be seen to embrace unrealistic convictions. Therefore, it seemed logical to approach bias in my theatre, and to address the way personal anxieties can themselves stimulate conspiracism.

Considering a trend towards conviction, psychologists have examined the cognitive processes by which conspiracy suspicions crystallise into baseless certainties.²⁴ For example, Robert Brotherton and Christopher C. French explore 'conjunction fallacy', describing 'a specific error of probabilistic reasoning whereby people overestimate the likelihood of co-occurring events'.²⁵ Indeed, scholars have hypothesised that once someone suspects a conspiracy they will apply this thinking to coincidences in general, sensing 'illusory patterns' and causal connectivity where none exists.²⁶ It should be noted, though, that conspiracy theorists do not seem more susceptible to this mistake than anyone else.²⁷ Rather, many people imagine connections between unrelated events, ascribing meaning to patterns.²⁸ As humans, we tend to associate these with unseen threats.²⁹ As such, patterns give rise to suspicions, and while this was once an evolutionary advantage, it can also be counterproductive, motivating defensiveness and impulsively accusatory attitudes.³⁰ In addition, this process can be seen to accelerate when other factors are introduced, such as a perceived lack of control.³¹ According to van Prooijen et al, that makes conjunction fallacies key to conspiracy theorisation, as 'establishing relevant patterns' helps conspiracists construct narratives about an 'uncertain, and potentially threatening environment', appealing to individuals who already see themselves

²² See Michael J. Wood, 'Conspiracy suspicions as a proxy for beliefs in conspiracy theories: Implications for theory and measurement', *British Journal of Psychology*, 198 (2017), 507-527, (p.523).

²³ See, for example Karen M. Douglas et al, 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40 (2019), 3-35, (p.13); see also, for example, Bradley Franks et al, 'Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: An integrated account from cognitive science, social representations theory, and frame theory', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4: 424 (2013) 1-12, (p.7).

²⁴ See, for example, Michael J. Wood, 'Conspiracy suspicions as a proxy for beliefs in conspiracy theories: Implications for theory and measurement', *British Journal of Psychology*, 108 (2017), 507-527, (p.523-524).

²⁵ See Robert Brotherton, Christopher C. French, 'Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 28: 2 (2014), 238-248, (p.238).

²⁶ See Jennifer A. Whitson and Adam D. Galinsky, 'Lacking control increases illusory pattern perception', *Science*, 322 (2008), 115-117, (pp.115-116).

²⁷ See Sebastian Dieguez et al, 'Nothing Happens by Accident, or Does It? A Low Prior for Randomness Does Not Explain Belief in Conspiracy Theories', *Psychological Science* 26:11 (2015), 1762-1770, (pp.1769).

²⁸ See, for example, Jiaying Zhao et al, 'Perception and Identification of Random Events', *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 40: 4 (2014), 1358-1371, (p.1358).

²⁹ See, for example, Richard A. Friedman, 'Why Humans Are Vulnerable to Conspiracy Theories', *Psychiatric Services*, 72: 1 (2020), 3-4, (p.4).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See, for example, Christina E. Farhart and Philip Gordon Chen, 'Racialized Pandemic: The Effect of Racial Attitudes on COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs', *Frontiers in Political Science*, 4 (2022), 1-10, (pp.7-9).

as victims.³² I sought to address this too, and asked how my theatre could experiment with suspicion and the misinterpretation of coincidence. Hence, I aimed to challenge the way conspiracism overestimates the significance of any connectivity it observes between various entities and events.

As this initial review revealed, conspiracism is indeed dangerous, generating misconceptions that accelerate prejudice. I wondered how performance practitioners can therefore expose and address the epistemic unreliability of conspiracy theories, their origins in anxiety and bias, the impact they have on vulnerable communities and the conditions in which conspiracism takes root. In particular, I was provoked by the way conspiracy theory culture seems able to enamour everyday people with unreasonable ideas. I sought to explore this allure, asking how understandable uncertainties give way to less reasonable convictions. Likewise, I was interested in the prevailing impression that conspiracism encompasses a broad church, including my own personal positions, as well as others, different to mine. I wondered what opportunities theatre might create to synthesize and examine these perspectives. By addressing such concerns, I hoped to call into question the processes by which various communities and individuals are drawn into conspiracy theory culture; and, perhaps, to challenge the forces that promote and prosper from these entanglements. As such, I sought to examine performances in which conspiracism is pitched as something both alluring and epistemically unsound, understandable and nonetheless dangerous.

1.2 Theatre and Conspiracy Theory Culture

Conspiracism is a common theme in entertainment media.³³ Resonating with contemporary political uncertainties, this appears to allow audiences to explore ‘a public fascination with invisible enemies and murky intrigue’, which Gordon B. Arnold connects to political climates rich with secrecy and suspicion, such as our own.³⁴ These themes are equally notable in theatre, producing intrigue since at least Shakespeare, replete as his plays are with conspirators. Elsewhere, practitioners have concentrated on conspiracism as opposed to conspiracies.³⁵ Aware that such examples abound, I was surprised when a preliminary

³² See Jan-Willem van Prooijen et al, ‘Connecting the dots: Illusory pattern perception predicts belief in conspiracies and the supernatural’, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48: 3 (2017), 320-335, (pp.321-322).

³³ See, for example, Michael Butter, ‘Conspiracy Theories in Films and Television Shows’, in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, ed. by Michael Butter, Peter Knight (London: Routledge, 2020), pp.457-468, (p.467).

³⁴ Gordon B. Arnold, *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television and Politics*, (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), pp.9-10.

³⁵ An exhaustive list of works is beyond my present scope, but some exemplary productions are listed below. See, for example, *Take Me*, by Mark Guarino and Strawdog Theatre, 1802 W. Berenice Ave, Chicago, 10 May 2019. Dir. by Anderson Lawfer; see also, for example, *The Department of Distractions*, by Third Angel, Northern Stage, Newcastle, 05 Feb 2018. Dir by Third Angel; see also, for example, *Yankee Tavern*, by Steven Dietz and American Blues Theatre, The Greenhouse Theatre Center, Chicago, 09 Mar 2015. Dir. By Joanie Schultz; see also, for example, Tracy Letts, *Bug*. By Tracy Letts (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006); Dir. by Ben Samuels; see also, for example, *Sasquatch: The Opera*, by Roddy Bottum, Summerhall, Edinburgh Fringe, Edinburgh, 16 August 2017. Dir by Roddy Bottum.

literature review revealed hardly any associated research, with scholars showing little to no interest in theatre's potential to address conspiracies and conspiracism. Nonetheless, my work required a base in analysis, from which new practice could stem. I asked what approaches to conspiracism already exist, which ones may be especially useful, and how practitioners work with them today. In doing so, I hoped to identify questions that my own work could address, and strategies on which to build.

Aware that I would eventually need to represent actual people and their perspectives, I also asked how theatre may approach such a task. In popular culture, conspiracy theorists are often stereotyped as mentally unstable; sometimes as malicious; elsewhere, as heroes with access to suppressed information. However, scholars argue that conspiracism has more to do with social conditions than evidence, malignance or mental health concerns.³⁶ As Douglas et al observe, conspiracism actually arises from epistemic, existential and social motives, and these vary between individuals.³⁷ Furthermore, conspiracy theories are not necessarily inaccurate, leading Charles Pidgin and Matthew Dentith to see conspiracism as a superordinate, encompassing diverse identities, perspectives and claims, some more sensible than others.³⁸ Hence, Dentith argues, we should not dismiss conspiracy theories or conspiracists en masse. Indeed, dismissal can be counterproductive where it minimises conspiracism and could alienate conspiracists, rather than recognising that all humans are susceptible to conspiracy theories, having evolved to seek and associate patterns with material threats.³⁹ In response, I sought works in which practitioners avoid reductive stereotypes, hoping to portray conspiracy theory culture as realistically complicated, addressing its allure, and its capacity to enamour reasonable individuals with unreasonable claims.

The performances I examine below were chosen not only on their critical merits, but also because each demonstrates an approach to conspiracism that avoids such reduction. As I go on to discuss, each produces a nuanced address. Furthermore, I was able to engage with each of these performances either live or as a recording, and published scripts were generally available, making possible more thorough analyses. The first addresses a play by Dominic

³⁶ For conspiracism and delusion, see, for example, Adam J. Fusick, Steven Gunther and Gregory Sullivan, 'The anti-vaccination movement: when does a belief become delusional?', *Journal of Public Health: From Theory to Practice*, 29 (2021), 1301-1302, (p.1301); and for conspiracism and political concerns, see, for example, Jan-Willem van Prooijen et al, 'Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories', *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6: 5 (2015), 570-578, (pp.570-571).

³⁷ See, Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka, 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26: 6 (2017), 538-542, (p.539).

³⁸ See, Matthew R. X. Dentith, 'When inferring to a conspiracy might be the best explanation', *Social Epistemology*, 30: 5-6 (2016), 572-591 (pp.583-585); see also, for example, Charles Pidgin, 'Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom Revisited', in *Secrets and Conspiracies*, ed. by Olli Loukola and Leonidas Donskis (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 126-157, (pp.136-142); see also, for example, David Coady, "'Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational?'" *Episteme*, 4: 2 (2007), 193-204, (pp.202-203).

³⁹ See, Friedman, (p4.).

Orlando, concentrating on the way an autobiographical approach effects his ability to secure conspiracy claims. A second study examines a contemporary theatre piece by Marlon Solomon. I explore the comparisons Solomon makes between his own autobiographical work and less personal approaches to conspiracy theory culture adopted by professional conspiracists. The third study then changes direction, exploring the tension Proto-Type Theatre create between fact and fiction when addressing conspiracies and conspiracism on stage. By gathering and analysing those pieces, I locate the questions I sought to address in my own theatre by building on these existing practices.

1.2.1 Philosophical Concerns

I had to be particular in choosing works to examine. It seems sensible, then, to discuss the concerns that informed their selection. As noted, conspiracy theory culture is preoccupied with claims relating to truth and its distortion, draws on and produces grand narratives, imagines tenuous connections and establishes dangerous convictions where experiences and information are processed through bias. At the same time, conspiracism is subject to positional analysis by scholars, journalists and creative practitioners alike, giving rise to similarly reductive representations (see above). Acknowledging these issues, I sought alternative approaches to conspiracy theory culture, meaning to examine and further develop representations that either eschewed reduction or called reductive practices into question; so, I asked what strategies, theories and ontological qualities should underwrite that work. I combined my existing knowledge with a literature review and arrived at a broadly poststructuralist framework, which I go on to unpack. A deep exploration risks taking up more space than is currently appropriate. In the spirit of brevity then, I outline notable positions in this short section, targeting their relevance to my work.

Given the features of conspiracism discussed, I began by considering the generally held notion that poststructuralism challenges claims to truth and metanarratives by observing the textuality and power dynamics, histories and other such positionalities involved in attempts at definition.⁴⁰ In that context, I drew on Barthes, who argues that the readers, rather than authors, are central to the meaning-making process, i.e. that understanding stems from the unique relationships between things read and individual readers.⁴¹ The implication is that no text can accurately describe reality as each arises from and is always interpreted with readerly positionality – an interesting issue where conspiracists and their detractors each lay claim to concrete truths. Following this line, I began to examine Foucault's response to Barthes. He

⁴⁰ See Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2002), pp.14-21

⁴¹ See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of The Author' in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana. 1997), pp.146-148.

counters that the authorial voice may be diminished according to such logic, as it was by Kristeva and Bakhtin, when they made similar observations. Yet, according to Foucault, authorship persists in its social operation. In short, he argues, in their identification as authors within a given culture, authors are themselves enmeshed in existing social systems, 'assuring a classificatory function', which 'permits one to group together a certain number of texts' and 'define,' 'differentiate' and 'contrast them to others'.⁴² How, I wondered, can theatre examine the way identities (e.g. titles) like conspiracist, sceptic and academic each colour claims to truth? Combined, these perspectives signal that an understanding of claims is contingent not only on our own positionality in relation to their contents, but also on the positions occupied by their originator(s). Hence, I sought works that explore the positionality and classification of audience members, commentators on conspiracies and conspiracism, hoping to identify opportunities establish critical distance between audience members and any reductive portrayals of conspiracy theory culture.

This emphasis on positionality extends beyond authors and readers, encompassing the issue of each text or claim's position in relation to others. As Linda Hutcheon suggests, by exposing and exploring these relationships, artists are able to develop 'intensely self-reflexive' media, drawing attention to the way all narratives are constructed in relation to others, including and omitting elements of each.⁴³ Such an approach suggests that works, like their authors, always call on others, each with similarly limited perspectives; and that all such texts therefore produce similarly limited representations of reality. By extension, Peter Brooker observes, where practitioners acknowledge those relationships, art 'self-consciously problematises the making of fiction and history'.⁴⁴ By encompassing contrasting perspectives then, and producing a 'deliberate refusal to resolve contradictions', artists can eschew dialectics and with them the 'totalizing master narratives' on which we tend to base claims to truth.⁴⁵ Of course, this conceptualisation becomes relevant to my own work where it reveals an opportunity to examine rhetoric and unpick convictions, exposing narrative intertextuality and with it the epistemological quicksand underlying various convictions.

As we have seen, multiplicities of perspective are key to poststructuralist discourse. Deleuze and Guattari develop this further in their commentary on rhizomes. They observe, 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be', positioning books (and all such compositions, including human beings) as assemblies in motion, shaped by the

⁴² Michael Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), pp.381-383.

⁴³ Laura Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.x.

⁴⁴ Peter Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1992), p.229.

⁴⁵ Hutcheon, p.x.

relationships between their constituent parts, travelling between any and all other assemblages with which they interface, and, by extension, between all the past and future dynamics entered into by those different assemblages.⁴⁶ Hence, Deleuze and Guattari conceive of a rhizomatic entity as an amalgamation free from terminal positions, imagining each definition a line of flight, away from all other such lines. In this sense, their idea of a book, or a claim, or a person escapes stasis, fixity and conclusion. Rhizomes evade conviction, and this was deeply inspiring – especially as it suggests that authors and readers also experience positionality as something unsettled. Returning to theatre and conspiracism, I understood this model to be useful insofar as it provides a way of seeing all claims as complex and ephemeral, charting traces but unable to wholly capture phenomenal reality. Moving forward, I looked for creative practices that attempted to activate these ideas.

Drawing together my thoughts, I reasoned that creative practice may find ways to express its own rhizomatic qualities by adopting explicitly intertextual dynamics, and by organising itself according to decentralised networks of information and experience by folding many stories and perspectives into one; and, that, in doing so, theatre might stimulate debate, as opposed to arguing single positions. By exploring such an approach, I imagined, theatre may invite audience members to scrutinise the various claims on which convictions are based, seeing them as positional narratives rather than gateways to truth. Moving forwards then, I sought examples of existing practice that evidence an engagement with these ideas.

1.2.2 Exposing Positionality in *Danny Casolaro Died For You* (2010)

Danny Casolaro Died For You (2010) is a dramatization of witness testimony composed by Dominic Orlando, directed by Nick Bowling and performed by actors from TimeLine Theatre Company.⁴⁷ Orlando uses the piece to discuss his history with Casolaro, an investigative journalist whose body was discovered under strange circumstances on 10 August 1991, at a hotel close to Washington D.C.⁴⁸ As Casolaro was investigating government corruption, his death has since inspired conspiracy theories concerned with a murderous deep state.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum. 2004), p.4.

⁴⁷ *Danny Casolaro Died for You*, by Dominic Orlando and Timeline Theater, Wellfleet Harbour Actors Theatre, Wellfleet, 16 Sep 2010. Dir by Nick Bowling.

⁴⁸ See James Ridgeway, and Doug Vaughan, 'The Last Days of Danny Casolaro', *Village Voice*, 15 Oct 1991, p.34.

⁴⁹ See, generally, Cheri Seymore, *The Last Circle: Danny Casolaro's Investigation into the Octopus and the PROMIS Software Scandal* (US: Trine Day. 2010); see also, generally, Charlie Robinson, *The Octopus of Global Control* (US: Charlie Robinson. 2017); see also, for example, Jim Keith and Kenn Thomas, *The Octopus - Revised And Expanded Edition: Secret Government and the Death of Danny Casolaro* (US: Feral House. 2003).

Orlando opens the script with a note: 'Danny was my cousin. This play is based on true events'.⁵⁰ Similar declarations are made in previews and promotional material, including documents issued to the audience; so, one assumes most audience members will read the play as an autobiographical performance.⁵¹ Dialogue in this work is reconstructed from memory: Orlando recalls conversations with Casolaro and incorporates the memories of others too, drawing on interviews with family and friends.⁵² Here, he works in the tradition of playwrights like Katherine Viner and Gregory Burke, who report on historical events via diary entries and interviews – giving an impression of the real, albeit one filtered through its creators, as the curators of that material.⁵³ At the same time, Orlando's approach is reminiscent of Pnina Gary and Kimball Allen, autobiographical dramatists who explore their own experiences in relation to broader cultural contexts.⁵⁴ Thus, Orlando seeks to present the real, but does so via his person: a central, authorial researcher, and an unreliable narrator, through whose limited experiences that reality must be constructed. It is in this context that he retraces events, arguing that Casolaro was assassinated, and that his murder was covered up by the FBI.

The play is set in a family kitchen, in 1991. Here, actors playing Orlando and Casolaro discuss his ongoing investigation into the theft of revolutionary surveillance software, blackmail, corruption, and a conspiracy involving criminal organisations, politicians and intelligence agencies alike. In some scenes, Orlando restages phone calls between himself and others: conversations with relatives, newspaper editors and government officials, naturalistic in terms of their text, but clearly theatricalised to harness crime-thriller aesthetics. The piece moves between those dialogues and monologues by Casolaro. Presented as flashbacks, these recollections are signalled by changes to the lighting: each flashback begins when the lights fade down on Orlando, leaving Casolaro in a spotlight. As this break from visual realism indicates, Casolaro's past only reaches the audience through its dramatization, recalled and reprocessed by Orlando, then relayed through a perspectival theatre. And by positioning the play as a medium for this biographical material, the playwright signals his influence over the histories staged.

⁵⁰ Dominic Orlando, *Danny Casolaro Died for You*. By Dominic Orlando (New Play Exchange. 2011), p.3.

⁵¹ See, for example, TimeLine Theatre Company, *Danny Casolaro Died For You: Backstory* (Chicago: TimeLine Theatre Company. 2014).

⁵² Orlando explains this in his notes. For details, see Orlando, p.3.

⁵³ For detail on Katherine Viner's use of diary entries, see, for example, Carol Martin, *Theatre of The Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013), pp.127-140; for detail on Gregory Burke's use of interviews, see also, for example, Mark Brown, 'Tales from The Front Line', *New Statesman*, 26 Mar 2007, 44-45, (p.45).

⁵⁴ For Pnina Gary, see, for example, Katie Castellano, 'One woman production depicts epic 'love story'', *The Eagle*, 20 Sep 2011 < <https://www.theeagleonline.com/article/2011/09/one-woman-production-depicts-epic-love-story> > [accessed 20 Feb 2021]; and for Kimball Allen, see also, for example, Heather Beasley, 'Interview with Kimball Allen', *Ecumenica Journal of Theatre and Performance*, Fall (2013) < <http://www.ecumenicajournal.org/interview-with-kimball-allen-2/> > [accessed 19 Feb 2021].

It is important to note that Orlando does not disguise this influence. Instead, it is built into the structure of the piece. For instance, his antagonists never appear on stage: while this advances an impression of secretive conspirators, it also reinforces the idea that Orlando is a central figure, presenting only one angle on a complex history. Likewise, that he doesn't actually know who was involved, or that he may be afraid of libelling particular people or groups. For example, in scenes that bookend the performance, his character is harassed by FBI agents. Speaking from the shadows backstage, they threaten Orlando, warning him to avoid giving congressional testimony. In an aside, he concludes: 'These men have no hearts. And they killed my cousin'.⁵⁵ Then, turning back to the unseen aggressors, he closes, 'I don't care if you *are* the FBI or the CIA, or the Department of Justice or the President himself – I am an American citizen. And you can get the fuck out of my house.' It is easy to read these oppressors as inhuman monsters, but the centrality of Orlando's character also reminds us that those figures are a manifestation of his own perceived victimhood. Intentionally or otherwise, Orlando demonstrates his inability to accurately portray others about whom he holds such deep sentiments. Here then, he signals both his influence and the constraints of a perspective rooted in personal trauma. Thus, an autobiographical approach to conspiracism reveals Orlando's limits as someone commenting on a supposed conspiracy.

Throughout, the dialogue is rich with information: events, names, dates, sums and locations are woven into this narrative about conspiracy and corruption. If this data could be substantiated, it would likely vindicate claims that Casolaro really stumbled across a genuine conspiracy. But as a theatre audience, we cannot check during the play. Other media is less restrictive: we might pause a film, put down a book or look away from an exhibit, reach for a phone or computer and check the veracity of any data presented. However, convention discourages us from doing so in the theatre. Hence, we are issued a bounty of threads to follow on our departure from the performance, should we so wish. Meanwhile, the volume of data is such that we struggle to keep up. And where the material is seen to be autobiographical, we are invited to imagine that Orlando is in a similar situation, having been bombarded with information by his cousin. By refusing to present a complete history then, Orlando invites the audience to look beyond the drama, positioning his work as a limited perspective on events, and thus unable to produce concrete conclusions.

Collected, Orlando's approaches to conspiracism draw attention to his own inability to remain impartial when addressing a theory to which he relates. While he argues his own perspective, the biases Orlando reveals in the process invite his audience to maintain critical distance, remembering that this view on events is necessarily incomplete. I reasoned that my own

⁵⁵ Orlando, p.98.

theatre could draw on this practice, especially where I sought to address my limitations, recognising my personal sympathies with UFO conspiracy theories. Indeed, Orlando is able to be emphatic about supporting conspiracist claims, and he endorses them, all while relativising his position as a source. By borrowing this approach, I would go on to discuss conspiracy theories from my own perspective as a sometime conspiracy theorist, without asking the audience to regard my assertions at face value (see Chapter One). Hence, I sought to develop a similarly autobiographical approach, playing on its capacity to produce uncertainties themselves resistant to conviction.

Despite these interesting qualities, Orlando's work only addresses its conspiracism from a single perspective, and while it gives this position a voice, in doing so, the work also overlooks those accused, denying them a chance to defend themselves when attacked on stage. I wondered where alternative practices might introduce and address suspected conspirators by bringing these entities into performances. And recalling this, I went on to engage not only with my conspiracist suspicions, but with equally notable perspectives produced by the victims of conspiracy theory culture, drawing on further case studies.

1.2.3 Comparing Approaches to Conspiracism in *Conspiracy Theory: A Lizard's Tale* (2018)

In *Conspiracy Theory: A Lizard's Tale* (2018), Marlon Solomon weaves together historical analysis, quantitative data and personal opinion as he charts a history of associations between conspiracy theorisation and antisemitism.⁵⁶ For instance, he discusses publications such as *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* – explaining that these books spread lies about the Jewish people.⁵⁷ Elsewhere, he breaks down relationships between antisemitic propaganda and conspiracy theories, addressing historic depictions of Jewish leaders as infanticidal vampires.⁵⁸ Reflecting on this material in anecdotal asides, Solomon also discusses his personal experiences as someone who has acknowledged and since repudiated his own conspiracism.

⁵⁶ *Conspiracy Theory: A Lizard's Tale*, by Marlon Solomon, Greater Manchester Fringe, Manchester, 26 Jul 2018. Dir. by Marlon Solomon.

⁵⁷ This antisemitic book associates Jewish people with domineering cults. Entrenching existing canards, its claims were widely circulated on their serialisation in Russian newspapers, circa 1903. See, for example, Randall L. Bytwerk, 'Believing in "Inner Truth": The Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Nazi Propaganda, 1933–1945', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 29: 2 (2015), 212-229 (p.212).

⁵⁸ See, for example, *Antisemitic Imagery and Caricatures*, p.11.

As Solomon explains, he grew up listening to talks by conspiracist David Icke.⁵⁹ In addition to publishing books, Icke delivers auditoria tours, combining live music, audience participation and multimedia presentations into theatrical spectacle, thus propelling his claims.⁶⁰ Icke's material tends to revolve around the assertion that various influential people are actually shapeshifting reptilian vampires, conspiring to oppress mankind.⁶¹ Early in the piece, Solomon describes his horror on realising that these theories are actually based on *The Protocols*. As he observes, those bloodthirsty lizards began life as an analogy for the Jewish people: a popular motif in antisemitic propaganda.⁶² He goes on to explore the abuse he received from fellow conspiracy theorists when he started to draw attention to this online, like being called a reptilian-shill by people he once considered friends. It was that abuse, he notes, which led him to develop this performance, in opposition to Icke. As Solomon comments, he hopes to present this work as a critical examination, exploring Icke's baseless accusations and arguing for a more compassionate approach.

Like Orlando, Solomon discloses his personal relationships with conspiracy theory culture and, therefore, invites us to consider his biases. But unlike Orlando, he works in a medium that allows us to engage with his sentiments first-hand. For instance, where Solomon discusses the damage done by conspiracy theory culture, we hear his real voice, its tone suggesting genuine anger and disappointment. Here, Solomon's sentiments bleed through, despite his call to compassion, reminding us that he is a perspectival being whose emotions still influence this presentation. Elsewhere, when Solomon describes the abusive messages he receives on social media, he clenches his fist. When he opens that hand, gesturing to a slide, one can see the impressions Solomon's nails leave in his palm. Although he moves on to deliver comparatively impersonal statistics about the spread of conspiracy theories online, those impressions remain, passing yet present. Accidental or otherwise, this proximal, ephemeral experience draws attention to relationships between lived experience and the impersonal statistics on screen. Hence, the humanity for which Solomon argues is echoed in less personal scenes, carried by the intimate co-presence of our bodies in the space.⁶³ These deeply sentimental expressions remind us that Solomon's work engages with conspiracy theory culture from a vulnerable perspective. And where Solomon draws attention to this, he avoids reducing the worldviews and practices of others to impersonal data. Instead, we are

⁵⁹ See, for example, Jon Ronson, 'Making sense of conspiracy theorists as the world gets more bizarre', *Guardian*, 11 Apr 2021 < <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/11/making-sense-of-conspiracy-theorists-as-the-world-gets-more-bizarre> > [accessed Mon 12 Apr 2021].

⁶⁰ See, for example, David Icke, *Awaken! Wembley Arena, London, 2014. Full 9hr HD*, online video recording, YouTube, 26 Mar 2017 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a8A6Fb0bxQ&t=16861s&ab_channel=JanvanErven > [accessed 31 Oct 2021].

⁶¹ See, for example, Tyson Lewis and Richard Kahn, 'The Reptoid Hypothesis: Utopian and Dystopian Representational Motifs in David Icke's Alien Conspiracy Theory', *Utopian Studies*, 16: 1 (2005), 45-74, (pp.45-46).

⁶² See, for example, *Antisemitic Imagery and Caricatures*, p.7.

⁶³ This took place at a specific performance: see *Conspiracy Theory: A Lizard's Tale*, by Marlon Solomon, Adelaide Fringe, Adelaide, 18 Feb 2020. Dir. by Marlon Solomon.

invited to read everything Solomon presents in relation to his history as a conspiracist, then victim.

These viscerally human moments remind us that Solomon's work concerns real people with whom we might sympathise. Using himself as an example, Solomon considers that conspiracy theorists are able to develop as people, and that, presented with a strong argument, these individuals might assess and even challenge their own dangerous worldviews. As he notes in his closing statement, progressive engagements with conspiracy theory culture could take this into account, combatting the violence of conspiracy theories by inviting compassion, should we consider the human impact of any stories we may go on to tell. Furthermore, by appreciating that his oppressors are also human, Solomon contrasts himself with David Icke, who flattens the realities of alleged conspirators, framing them as inhuman monsters and, therefore, discourages audiences from sympathising with these individuals. Where Icke achieves this by repackaging ideas associated with antisemitism, Solomon sees him give license to xenophobes, keen to turn those theories back into attacks on Jewish people in general. For Solomon, this represents a perilous engagement with conspiracy theory culture, disingenuous in its selection of data, indicative of an incognizant approach to history and convenient for a celebrity who profits at the expense of innocent people. By contrast, Solomon makes his own agenda transparent, inviting audiences to read the performance as exemplary but ultimately incapable of capturing conspiracism without bias. Thus, he compares two approaches to conspiracy theory culture: the propagandist, monological and typically violent rhetoric employed by conspiracists like Icke, rooted in fallacy and speculation, versus his own cognizant, vulnerable model. Solomon's verdict is clear: to his mind, the latter is more socially responsible; made possible by a critical, autobiographical theatre.

By developing the approaches discussed, Solomon capitalises on live theatre's potential to present an audience with personal, proximal and ephemeral expressions, exposing his own vulnerabilities. I went on to address this in my work, exploring the way liveness produces constraints, and copresence humanising effects (see Chapter Three). Where these methods allow Solomon to address genuine trauma, we are invited to dwell on the reality that conspiracism victimises scapegoats; and at the same time, where Solomon's identity is linked to this process, his critique is thoroughly relativised. Furthermore, Solomon is able to compare this approach to the rhetoric central to so much conspiracism, inviting the audience to acknowledge that conspiracists could do more to engage with their own biases, thus resisting the associated dangers. This inspired an autobiographical approach I went on to develop in my theatre, seeking to explore my own relationships with conspiracy theory culture from various perspectives and positions.

Despite these laudable qualities, Solomon's piece has some notable limits: where he concentrates on preposterous theories, which his audience seems likely to dismiss, Solomon criticises baseless allegations as opposed to more convincing concerns. Of course, one cannot expect a single piece to address every angle. Nonetheless, I was able to approach this alternative direction in my own practice, asking what would happen were I to tackle less outlandish conspiracy theories. As such, I sought to position myself somewhere between Solomon and Icke, exploring conspiracy theory culture as a space in which some perspectives are more reasonable than others. In examining these complexities, I hoped to represent conspiracy theory culture as realistically complex, inviting the audience to criticise reductive positions, irrespective of whom they regard.

1.2.4 Combining Real and Imaginary Conspiracies in *A Machine They're Secretly Building* (2016)

A Machine They're Secretly Building (2016) is a performance by Proto-Type Theatre, written by Andrew Westerside with performances by Rachel Baynton and Gillian Lees.⁶⁴ Giving a history of covert surveillance, the piece asks 'how we got to the point where our governments are spying on us'.⁶⁵ The set is minimal from the outset, centring on a table, two chairs, two telephones, a filing cabinet and a television. Lees and Baynton sit silently on stage, dressed in neutral clothes apart from pink balaclavas. In silence, text appears on the television screen: 'Dear Friend,' it begins, 'I do not want to live in a world where everything is recorded,' and continues, 'I do not want to trade my privacy for security'. Additional writing is then attributed, in smaller type, to the whistle-blower, Edward Snowden: 'I can't in good conscience allow the U.S. Government to destroy privacy, internet freedom and basic liberties around the world with this massive surveillance machine they're secretly building'.⁶⁶ The text disappears and on removing their masks the duo begin to speak, launching into a history of mass surveillance technology. Introduced to Lees and Baynton thus, the audience remain unsure as to whether the duo should be seen as fictional characters or simply themselves. As such, Proto-Type open by establishing tension between the real histories discussed and these questionable entities on stage.

⁶⁴ See *A Machine They're Secretly Building*, by Proto-type Theatre, Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield, 20 Jun 2016. Dir. by Rachel Baynton and Gillian Lees.

⁶⁵ Proto-Type Theatre, *Current Projects: A Machine They're Secretly Building* < <http://proto-type.org/projects/current/a-machine-theyre-secretly-building/> > [accessed 03 Oct 2020].

⁶⁶ See Andrew Westerside and Proto-Type Theatre, *A Machine They're Secretly Building* (London: Oberon Books, 2017), pp.13-14.

Occasionally referring to their notes, Lees and Baynton describe the sharing of data between UK and U.S. intelligence communities, beginning in 1943. They explain that this was once an emergency measure, extending to the surveillance of any civilians deemed suspicious during wartime. Over the years, they tell us, those operations became standard procedure. Lees and Baynton continue to explore advancements in data collection, eventually arriving at the present. Here, they observe, telecommunications devices connect us to institutions and authorities at all times, reporting on our activities and allowing governments to intercept our private interactions. This is the machine to which Snowden referred, they state: a matrix of undersea cables, radio antennae, digital nodes and intelligence operatives. They tell us that the scale of this system was never meant to be disclosed, and that, despite its exposure, the machine continues to operate.

The duo do not provide references, but the history they discuss is verifiable, having been heavily examined since 2013, when Edward Snowden initially blew the whistle on mass surveillance technologies developed by the NSA.⁶⁷ These ideas have since entered public discourse, but as Matthew Dentith observes, stories about covert surveillance had already circulated among conspiracy theorists for decades; and as some were uncannily close to Snowden's disclosures, those revelations have since bolstered conspiracism.⁶⁸ The title of the piece suggests conspiracies too, where it implies that unknown players have both the power and inclination to build a clandestine machine. Reminded that such conspiracies take place, one wonders what else may be hidden. As I go on to explore, relationships between real and imaginary conspiracies remain central to the piece, with Snowden's leaks presented as a reason to entertain such concerns.

Discussing developments in surveillance software, Lees and Baynton turn a video-camera on the audience. Connected to the screen, it broadcasts our images back at us. Meanwhile, they claim that government contractors are quietly developing technologies that will determine things about our desires and intentions by collecting data about our actions. Nervous laughter then erupts in the audience as our faces are profiled. A couple kiss. A woman presents her middle finger in mock rebellion. A man behind me is caught picking his nose. And as they scan us, Lees and Baynton improvise, commenting on small details. Here is someone whose moustache looks suspicious. There, an upstanding nuclear family. The camera finds me, and though nothing is said, I am reminded of my position as the only BAME person in the

⁶⁷ See, for example, Reuters, 'NSA surveillance exposed by Snowden was illegal, court rules seven years on', *Guardian*, 03 Sep 2020 < <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/03/edward-snowden-nsa-surveillance-guardian-court-rules> > [accessed 03 Sep 2020]; see also, for example, Glenn Greenwald et al, 'Edward Snowden: the whistleblower behind the NSA surveillance revelations', *Guardian*, 11 Jun 2013 < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/edward-snowden-nsa-whistleblower-surveillance> > [accessed 02 Sep 2020].

⁶⁸ See Dentith, (pp.576-577).

audience.⁶⁹ As the camera moves on, Lees and Baynton describe the ways in which such technology might be used against us. So, our images are cast onto stage without consent, and where the audience are victimized thus, we are encouraged to consider the secret machinations of real authorities and institutions.

Impactful as it is, there is a lack of citation throughout this sequence: the unnamed software might simply be science fiction. Likewise, Lees and Baynton do not claim to possess or use that software. Instead, theatre allows them to emulate its effects. Some audience members will likely read this as allegory – perhaps recognizing a dystopian trope.⁷⁰ However, others might be concerned that these technologies actually exist, and this seems a reasonable speculation given trends in data acquisition and surveillance.⁷¹ Here then, the work drifts into conspiracism where allegations are made about a surveillance-oriented conspiracy without drawing on any new evidence. After all, Lees and Baynton simply state that this software exists, then terrorise us by drawing our bodies into question with their camera. Theatre makes it possible for such processes to take place between ominous fiction and visceral reality. And given the actuality of our abuse this interplay between the real and the imagined helps us to sympathise with conspiracists whose concerns are thus made to seem sensible. Where these anxieties are also underwritten by Snowden's revelations, the work plays on reasonable threats, producing a conspiracism that draws inspiration from real events, but is, nonetheless, still technically unqualified in its claims.

Proto-Type problematise those anxieties when Lees and Baynton don hats made from tin foil, inviting us to read them through a trope in which conspiracists are conventionally presented as paranoid dupes.⁷² Costumed thus, the duo continue to speculate about plans supposedly in motion: ominous schemes for an advanced surveillance state, in which personal privacy will, they claim, be entirely eroded by the combined forces of capital and government. By routing those concerns through a parodic aesthetic, Proto-Type produce critical distance between the performance and its presiding conspiracism, inviting the audience to question the extent to which such anxieties may be undue. Where they have already stimulated our concern with predictions about a future that audience members would do well to oppose, these hats produce new considerations: on the one hand, they signal the folly in rampant conspiracism, despite its understandable roots; and on the other, they reinforce our own victimisation as an audience, where we risk being tarred with the same brush as these timorous entities, having

⁶⁹ This occurred at a more recent version of the performance: see, *A Machine They're Secretly Building*, by Proto-type Theatre, Performing House, York, 13 Feb 2019. Dir. by Rachel Baynton and Gillian Lees.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Peter Marks, *Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp.3-6.

⁷¹ See, for example, Fan Liang et al, 'Constructing a Data-Driven Society: China's Social Credit System as a State Surveillance Infrastructure', *Policy and Internet*, 10: 4 (2018), 415-453, (p.416).

⁷² See, for example, 'Tinfoil Hat', *TV Tropes* < <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TinfoilHat> > [accessed 10 Jan 2021].

sympathised with conspiracists earlier on. One recalls the balaclavas in this light, and given this transition between garments, the audience are invited to ask whether Lees and Baynton perform mask-clad guerrillas (compelling us to resist supposed oppression) or aluminium-wearing paranoids (deluded by conspiracy theory narratives). The implication is that they may be both at once, telling stories that incite violence against the status quo, and perhaps becoming terrorists where they oppressed us with the camera and scared us with various theories. Confronted with these characterisations we are encouraged to read conspiracy theorists thus: as complex people whose imaginations allow us to explore uncertain realities, but fail, nonetheless, to produce wholly accurate reports, all while trending towards various extremes.

By establishing these impressions, Proto-Type invite us to assess conspiracism as something understandable and simultaneously unreliable. Fostering this perspective allows the company to engage with both proven and potential conspiracies, and to do so without engendering dangerous convictions. Rather, they signal the difference between analysis and speculation, destabilising the conclusions one may draw on learning about historical conspiracies. Where Proto-Type combine real and imaginary conspiracies, and where they explore tensions between the two, the company therefore open critical distance between the audience and conspiracy theory culture. Instead of suggesting that conspiracy theories about mass surveillance are necessarily validated by historical precedent, this work encourages us to approach these speculative narratives by contemplating their origins and examining any relatable concerns. Borrowing from that approach, I sought to problematise conspiracism by giving voice to believable conspiracy theories. In doing so, I hoped to invite them to examine themselves as people drawn to conspiracy theorisation, raising questions about the way personal anxieties play into conspiracy theory culture.

1.3 Research Questions

As is often the case in practice research, new directions and lines of enquiry arose as my work progressed. These were often localised to the practice being developed at any given time, relating to specific theatre making strategies, dramaturgical approaches, etc. They were also sometimes iterative in nature. For instance, questions about staging multiple voices emerged from work analysed in Chapter One and were addressed in the ensuing performances (see Chapters Two and Three). Elsewhere, my concerns were unique to individual contexts, e.g. audio drama in Chapter Two. As such, each chapter of this thesis begins by establishing concerns specific to the work it describes. Nonetheless, those questions were informed by the

contexts introduced above. Hence, a series of general concerns underlay the research as a whole. For brevity and ease of reference they are listed as below.

1. What approaches help theatre makers challenge convictions in their work?
2. How can the resulting strategies and techniques be applied in work about conspiracy theory culture?
3. What ontological qualities suit theatre to this task and how can practitioners activate them?
4. How could practices be further developed to capitalise on and advance these opportunities?
5. What does answering these questions reveal about theatre, especially concerning its value as a means to address conspiracism and its dangers?

Despite occasional deviations, those questions remained central to my enquiry and analysis, steering the research as a whole.

1.4 Practice Research Towards Autoethnography

Having examined existing works, identified approaches to conspiracism and arrived at some overarching questions, I aimed to develop responses. Building on the history of practice-based scholarship, Rachel Hann has employed the term 'practice research' to describe creative processes affording 'practice-researchers' 'a method for discovering original insights' through a synthesis of making and its analysis.⁷³ I adopt this terminology henceforth, embracing its capacity to neatly describe my own approach.

Robin Nelson proposes that practice research produces three comingled epistemological components: an embodied 'know-how', an exegetic 'know-what' and an academic 'know-that', with practitioners examining this knowledge, reflecting on their own practices then feeding any findings back into their ongoing work.⁷⁴ This allows practice-researchers to position themselves as 'integral to the inquiry'.⁷⁵ Johannes Birringer describes such processes as 'critical and interpretive' where practice-researchers assess their work in relation to the

⁷³ Rachel Hann, 'Guest Editorial', *Journal of Arts Writing by Students*, 5: 1 (2019), 5-12, (p.7).

⁷⁴ Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2013) (p.37)

⁷⁵ Lia Zografou, 'The gifts of research – playing with phenomenology', *Dramatherapy*, 34: 2 (2012), 83-91, (pp.86-88).

'diverse socio-political contexts' they operate in as individuals.⁷⁶ As Shelly Hannigan notes, one's experience as an artist can thus be entered into scholarly discourse.⁷⁷ Adopting this approach, I hoped to oscillate between theatre-making and studying the processes involved, working towards insightful creative outputs. As I will discuss, these works included autobiographical theatre (continuing to develop approaches demonstrated by Marlon Solomon) as well as an audio drama (actively blurring lines between fact and fiction so as to produce critical uncertainties) and a durational performance installation (designed to enter many perspectives into conversation while demonstrating my own positionality). Thus, I planned to produce new ways to address conspiracism, examining any useful dramaturgical techniques developed in the process.

Similarities can be observed between the introspection involved in practice research and autobiographical theatre produced by the practitioners studied above. As addressing personal experience helped Solomon and Orlando to relativise their engagements with conspiracism, and as engaging the audience in self-reflection was useful to Proto-Type, I asked how my own work could adopt similar methods while taking the practice research approach. Likewise, I wondered what constraints such a process would produce, and whether questioning these may reveal any opportunities available to my own theatre. Furthermore, I sought to examine conspiracy theorists themselves. As Karen Douglas and Robbie Sutton argue, scholars should study conspiracists directly before concluding on their epistemic realities. Meanwhile, philosophers observe that the diversity of conspiracism necessitates a nuanced approach to those studied.⁷⁸ Combining these arguments, it seems sensible to suggest that enquiry into conspiracism may benefit from considering individual conspiracists and specific communities in detail, rather than seeking to address conspiracy theorists as a whole. Here, my own experiences with particular communities seemed a sensible place to begin. While conspiracy theories can be problematic, my sympathies prevent me from dismissing them entirely. By making these sentiments explicit, then, I planned to address conspiracy theory culture while exploring my commentative positionality.

Given this focus on my person, I turned to autoethnography. Where ethnography is the study of people and cultures, autoethnography refers to the accounts produced by people who study themselves.⁷⁹ Autoethnographers use personal experience as a lens through which to

⁷⁶ Johannes Birringer, *Media & Performance; Along the Border* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p.xiv.

⁷⁷ Shelley Hannigan, 'Narrative Inquiry and Auto-Ethnography: Interpretive Approaches to Research', *SAGE Research Methods Cases*, (2014) 2-14, (p.3).

⁷⁸ See, for example, Pidgen, (pp.136-142); see also, Coady, (pp.202-203); see also, Dentith, (pp.581-582).

⁷⁹ See, for example, Susanne Gannon, 'Autoethnography' in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education* < <https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-71> > [accessed 20 Apr 2020].

examine the contexts and cultures in which they operate.⁸⁰ As such, they become research participants at 'the nexus of self and culture', developing insider accounts that fundamentally inform research publications, presentations and performances interested in ethnographic enquiry.⁸¹ Originating with the writing of David Hayano, these methods remained uncommon until the 1990s, when scholars began to develop new autoethnographies as an approach to qualitative enquiry.⁸² In the present, autoethnographers understand that they occupy positions in relation to research, rich in social and historical contexts.⁸³ By acknowledging this positionality in their outputs, autoethnographers avoid making generalisations about cultural conditions, concentrating instead on their own partial experiences.⁸⁴ Therefore, autoethnography represents a relativized approach to research, and, in my case, conspiracy theory culture.⁸⁵

Numerous autoethnographic methods exist, such as introspective analyses, interactive interviews and collaborations between various researcher-participants.⁸⁶ As Ellis and Davis suggest, these contexts create additional opportunities for autoethnography as a practice in which individuals, communities and cultural phenomena might be examined and brought into scholarly discourse.⁸⁷ As someone making theatre about conspiracy theory culture, and having already identified elements similar to autoethnography in the cases examined above, I asked where theatre and autoethnography already meet, what opportunities those encounters produce and how they could enhance my practice research.

I attempted to address those questions when working towards the first of my original works, in 2019 and 2020. In addition to my work in the studio, I undertook an initial review, exploring autoethnographic theatre. I call on that work below, discussing several performances from which I drew inspiration. These works do not necessarily relate to conspiracism. Rather, they evidence the autoethnographic theatre practices I attempted to reproduce in my work, helping me express and examine my own limited perspectives on conspiracism, and to do so in the theatre medium.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Sherick A. Hughes, and Julie L. Pennington, 'Autoethnography: introduction and overview', in *Autoethnography: Process, Product, and Possibility for Critical Social Research*, ed. by Sherick A. Hughes, and Julie L. Pennington (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. 2017), 4-33, (p.9)

⁸¹ See Ronald J. Pelias, *A Methodology of The Heart: Evoking Academic and Daily Life* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. 2004), p.11.

⁸² See David M. Hayano, 'Autoethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects', *Human Organization*, 38 (1979), 113-120, (p.100); see also, for example, Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge. 1992), p.7; see also, for example, Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/ethnography* (New York: Berg. 1997), p.2.

⁸³ See, for example, David Donkor, 'Performance, Ethnography and The Radical Intervention of Dwight Conquergood', *Cultural Studies*, 21:6 (2007), 821-825, (p.823).

⁸⁴ See Dwight Conquergood, 'Performance studies: Interventions and radical research', *The Drama Review*, 46: 2 (2002), 145-156 (p.146); see also See Stacy Holman Jones, 'Living Bodies of Thought: The "Critical" in Critical Autoethnography', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22: 4 (2016), 228-237, (p.229).

⁸⁵ Christine S. Davis, and Carolyn Ellis, 'Emergent Methods in Autoethnographic Research', in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, ed. by Sharlene Naggy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: The Guildford Press. 2008), 283-302, (pp.284-285).

⁸⁶ See, for example, Cristine S. Davis, and Kathleen A. Salkin 'Sisters and friends: Dialogue and multivocality in a relational model of sibling disability', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 34: 2 (2005), 206-234, (p.206).

⁸⁷ See, for example, Davis and Ellis, (p.300).

1.4.1 Destabilising Data

As many scholars argue, research is rendered through the perspectives and positions of any individuals, communities and institutions involved in its production.⁸⁸ Commenting on this, Linda Finlay understands the researcher as ‘a central figure who influences the collection, selection, and interpretation of data’.⁸⁹ Likewise, Himika Bhattacharya observes that ‘researchers will carry with them their own baggage, their history, positions, politics’, creating necessarily limited research outputs, defined by the contexts in which each researcher operates.⁹⁰ The same can be said about theatre. In particular, explicating researcher positionality may be helpful to creative practices reliant on the collection, interpretation and presentation of archival materials, statistics, histories and personal accounts, such as documentary theatre.⁹¹ Thus, practitioners could prospectively address the fact that they must make decisions about what information to include, what to omit, and how that material is to be framed.

Breach Theatre demonstrate such an approach in *The Beanfield* (2015). The company stage a mixture of anecdotes, dance, video diaries and interviews. Through these, they examine their own activity as performers attempting to re-enact the 1985 Battle of The Beanfield, in which a New Age traveller convoy was violently broken up by Wiltshire Police.⁹² Breach play back conversation between company members and Nick Davies, a journalist who documented the events in 1985, as well as a conference-call with members of a re-enactment society. In both cases, interviewees draw attention to the practical, ethical and historiographical complications of re-enactment. Indeed, Davies observes that there is no way to know exactly what happened, nor do Breach possess the resources to authentically recreate these historical events.⁹³ Likewise, members of the re-enactment society argue that Breach will have to sacrifice historical authenticity for a narrativized, pragmatic and physically safe interpretation.⁹⁴ By including this commentary Breach explore the idea that one can never accurately or impartially represent historical events. Having made this apparent, they abandon attempts at a wholly accurate re-enactment, preferring to document and restage conversations with several people who were present at the battle. Thus, Breach tease out deeply personal

⁸⁸ See for example, Morwenna Griffiths, ‘Research and The Self’, in *The Routledge Companion to Research in The Arts*, ed. by Michael Biggs and Henrick Karlsson (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), (p.183); see also, for example, Stephen John Quaye, ‘Voice of the Researcher: Extending the Limits of What Counts as Research’, *Journal of Research Practice*, 3: 1 (2007), 1-13, (p.2).

⁸⁹ Linda Finlay, ‘“Outing” the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of Reflexivity’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 12: 4 (2002), 531-545, (p.531).

⁹⁰ Bhattacharya, (p.315).

⁹¹ See Jay Baglia, and Elissa Foster, ‘Performing the ‘Really’ Real: Cultural Representation, and Commodification in The Laramie Project’, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Spring (2005), 127-145, (p.141).

⁹² See *The Beanfield*, by Breach Theatre, Battersea Arts Centre, April 2015. Dir. by Billy Barrett.

⁹³ See *The Beanfield*, dir. by Dorothy Allen-Pickard and Billy Barrett (Breach Theatre, Vimeo, 2015) < <https://vimeo.com/400348232> > [accessed 23.06.2020], (14:50-15:34).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, (35:18-36:00).

anecdotes, which they restage to create an evocative but evidently selective history. This anecdotal approach became key to my practice: wherever my work drew on data and documents, I was keen to situate these alongside anecdotal revelations related to the materials I presented, emphasising my role as someone involved in collecting and presenting information.

Breach also express their own opinions and perspectives at times throughout the performance. For instance, in the opening minutes, company members note that they have themselves been brutalised by the police, when they were beaten and sprayed with teargas at an otherwise peaceful student protest.⁹⁵ By including this observation, Breach are able to imply that their positions on historical events have already been coloured by personal experience. Indeed, we are left wondering if those experiences were in fact the motivating force behind their work. At other points, performers allude to their positive experiences with nomadism, amphetamines and festivals.⁹⁶ In these moments of reflection, Breach demonstrate a closer alignment with those travellers at the beanfield than with the police who arrested their convoy. As an audience, we are therefore encouraged to question the veracity of their claims, and to read their documentary as an intersubjective complex. Learning from this, I began to interrogate my relationships with various conspiracists and conspiracy theories, so that these could be reprocessed in my work. This approach led me to trace the lineage of my conspiracy suspicions, giving me the impetus to reveal my own experiences as a UFO witness (see Chapter One). Thus, I was able to associate myself with conspiracy theory culture, locating key contexts to explore in my theatre.

Looking beyond documentary theatre, I also considered work by Shonaleigh. As a Drut'syla, Shonaleigh performs in an oral tradition, telling stories passed down by generations of Jewish women.⁹⁷ She welcomes the audience with this information, before launching into *The Golem* (2020).⁹⁸ After several minutes, she pauses. Eyes closed, hands outstretched, she reaches for a detail. Defeated, she sighs, sits on the edge of the stage and explains the situation: she has forgotten the words. Whether this moment is organic or planned, it introduces an autoethnographic dimension to the work, as Shonaleigh delivers a short autobiographical reflection, telling us about her recovery from meningitis, which occasionally prevents her from remembering elements of her stories. She explains that this has challenged her, and that she nearly stopped performing as a result. However, she observes, it also demonstrates something

⁹⁵ Ibid, (02:35-03:23).

⁹⁶ Ibid, (24:41-25:42).

⁹⁷ See for example, *The Diamond Girl*, by Shonaleigh, Performing House, York. 27 Jan 2016. Dir. by Shonaleigh Cumbers.

⁹⁸ See *The Golem*, by Shonaleigh, Performing House, York. 05 Feb 2020. Dir. by Shonaleigh Cumbers.

interesting about the culture with which she works. Referring to the versions of the stories she was taught as a child, she recalls that the language used was specific to the era in which her grandmother lived, as hers is to ours. Using this as an example, she explains that all narratives are subject to the circumstances of those who tell them, and that narratives will only survive through their circulation in contemporary contexts. Shonaleigh tells us that this realisation inspired her to keep performing.

As Shannon Jackson suggests, both narrative and history are subject to the vulnerable and unstable persons through whom they are recalled.⁹⁹ Paul Eakin understands this as ‘the story of the story’, through which the occasional moments of autobiography might create new contexts for narrative work.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, Shonaleigh uses a metatheatrical, autoethnographic device to explore her personal limitations, revealing personally located information about the culture she represents. Regarding this approach, Cassandra Hartblay observes that the practitioner ‘evokes the meaning a course of events holds for a cultural insider, now made legible to a readership that is outside that semiotic world’.¹⁰¹ An insider to her own experience, Shonaleigh occupies a particular vantage point, as the native of a vulnerable body.¹⁰² In the performance of this body and its position in relation to her work, she sets out a wider context in which one might regard that practice as being unique to her person in the time and place of its performance. Thus, she demonstrates the value of embedding introspective commentaries in work which is not otherwise autobiographical.

Drawing on this, and reflecting on my existing thoughts about anecdote, I began to consider myself a cultural insider, not only in conspiracism, but also in my work as an artist. On inspection, each camp had its vulnerabilities, as I would go on to explore: my conspiracism was necessarily speculative; my creative outputs would be limited by the media used, and by my skills and abilities. By acknowledging these complications and attempting to express them, I reasoned that I could relativise claims made in my work, contextualising any associated commentary as entirely perspectival in nature. As such, an autoethnographic development process helped me to develop an ethical approach, concerned with expressing my own inability to accurately represent complex realities. By carrying this over into my theatre, and demonstrating its impact, I hoped to expose the epistemological limits natural to theatre and performance. And applying these to my attempts to represent conspiracy theory culture, I

⁹⁹ See Shannon Jackson, ‘Touchable Stories and the Performance of Infrastructural Memory’, in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, ed. by Della Pollock (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan), 45-66 (pp.51-52).

¹⁰⁰ Paul John Eakin, ‘Relational Selves Relational Lives: The Story of The Story’, in *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*, ed. by G. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 63-81, (p.71).

¹⁰¹ Cassandra Hartblay, ‘This is not thick description: Conceptual art installation as ethnographic process’, *Ethnography*, 19:2 (2017), 153-182 (p.153).

¹⁰² See Elaine Aston, ‘Transforming Women’s Lives: Bobby Baker’s Performances of ‘Daily Life’’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16:1 (2000), 17-25, (p.18).

imagined that the audience would turn their criticism on me, questioning my reliability as a source and thus destabilising the authenticating potential of any data or documents I presented. By doing this, I anticipated, I would be able to explore both convincing and less likely conspiracy theories without converting my audience to conspiracism, otherwise trivialising conspiracy theory culture.

1.4.2 Introducing Multiple Perspectives

When establishing an autoethnographic approach, it became conventional for me to process information through my own perspectives, and the developmental work produced by this process tended to centre around my own voice. This was not necessarily problematic, as doing so allowed me to reflect on my own limitations (see above). However, as Deirdre Heddon observes, such an approach can be undermined, should identity be seen to function as an 'authenticating symbol' or an 'appeal to an unproblematised truth'.¹⁰³ Likewise, Sidonie Smith warns that we should not mistake the experience of any one person as representative of a communicable, universal reality: although our identities might be informed by experiences that are similar to those of others, and might therefore resonate with their experiences, our nature as individuals dictates that no two perspectives are truly identical.¹⁰⁴ As such, practitioners should avoid generalising when making statements about communities including those to which they belong. Hence, I sought ways to introduce alternative perspectives in addition to my own, creating dialogue between my views and others, drawn from the communities whose experiences I would claim to represent.

It seems important to note here that the coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on my process, and particularly my approach to autoethnography. Inspired by the examples I discuss in this section, I had hoped to involve genuine conspiracists in my practice, as well as other academics and artists, teasing out and exploring diverse perspectives during the devising process, and even, perhaps, performing with these people on stage. Doing so, I wished to activate and explore approaches I go on to discuss. This became unfeasible in 2020, as public health policy was particularly mercurial. By the time lockdown restrictions were lifted and my practice could proceed uninhibited, I had already planned to work largely alone, in case the pandemic dragged on. As such, I sought alternative ways to address the approaches I discuss in this section, relocating them to a solo practice.

¹⁰³ Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2008), p.26.

¹⁰⁴ See Sidonie Smith, 'Construing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth-telling in Women's Autobiography', *Studies in The Literary Imagination*, 23: 2 (1990), 145-163, (pp.149-150).

Returning to the case study approach, then, when seeking ways to create an autoethnographic practice comprising multiple people, I considered a performance by married practitioners David Richmond and Jules Dorey Richmond. *Terrorists of The Heart* (2013) explores the exchange between various shared and personal identities. Speaking directly to the audience, the Richmonds lay bare their experiences as collaborating artists, lovers and parents. They present this as a manifesto, discussing their collaborative parenthood, creative practice and married life.¹⁰⁵ The couple dress in uniform, wearing identical balaclavas, wielding identical batons and carrying identical copies of their script, clipped to identical clipboards. However, this uniformity is challenged where David towers over Jules, and building on this contrast, Jules shows us that she can dance, while David struggles with his footwork. Furthermore, while Jules remembers the score, David makes use of his clipboard, complaining that he is terrible at learning lines. Whether these moments are fabricated or organic, the Richmonds capitalise on their differences, drawing attention to their nature as individuals, despite belonging to the same family. This sentiment is drawn out elsewhere too: when they discuss funeral plans, for instance, David seems to feel differently about death than Jules. By highlighting this tension between their own similarities and differences, the Richmonds create an impression that theirs is a complex identity encompassing various positions. Inspired by this example, I sought ways to challenge my role as a representative of conspiracy theory culture, introducing a multivocal approach despite my working largely alone.

Patti Lather understands such work as constitutive of a liminal space: 'a productive site of doubt' in which individuals negotiate with various perspectives, actively exploring shared realities.¹⁰⁶ Practitioners are thus able to compose complex commentaries by entering multiple insider accounts into conversation, thus expressing the complexities and nuance natural to a collective identity. Thus, autoethnographers might stage interventions against the generalisation of those cultures to which they belong. In this sense, the Richmonds do not mine their separate experiences for a singular perspective; instead, they democratise a union, allowing the couple to progress into a collaborative practice over which each has a say. And building on this, I hoped to locate a means to weave alternative voices into my own work, showcasing the variety in community and thus relativising my commentary. This seemed particularly sensible when dealing with aspersions cast against either conspiracists or supposed conspirators. I suspected that doing so could enhance the autobiographical approach already developed by Solomon (see page 22). By multiplying its evidently vulnerable perspectives, I hoped to demonstrate the folly in adopting a monological position.

¹⁰⁵ See *Terrorists Of The Heart*, David Richmond and Jules Dorey Richmond, Cultures of Memory (Conference) at York St John University, York, 19 Oct 2013. Dir. by David Richmond and Jules Dorey Richmond.

¹⁰⁶ Patti Lather, 'Postmodernism, post-structuralism and post (critical) ethnography: Of ruins, aporias and angels' in *Handbook of ethnography*, ed. by Paul Atkinson et al (London: Sage, 2001), 477-492, (p.485).

Alicia Rouverol deepens these approaches in her own practice research. Rouverol explores the facilitation of life-review theatre with prison inmates, suggesting that 'talking about one's life can change one's life,' through 'a dialogic process', in her case, undertaken 'in a public setting'.¹⁰⁷ Engaging in roundtable discussions, her participants learn from one another, interrogating their personal experiences of life before prison and exploring their various perspectives on crime and incarceration. Hence, they give voice to their marginalised identities as prisoners. Using these discussions as a base, they each tease out narratives about the criminal justice system, which they then develop into autobiographical performance texts. Working as a devised theatre ensemble, participants weave these stories together into a unified performance. Then, they stage this for an audience of school pupils, who enter into a post-show discussion with the inmates. In these moments, the pupils are encouraged to discuss the work, its themes and any resonance with their own lives. Although I was obviously unable to explore so richly multivocal an approach, this work with the audience inspired my own, in which I would experiment with participatory practices (see Chapter Three). By creating space for the audience to feed their own responses into the work, then responding to these myself, perhaps even changing my views as a result, I hoped to demonstrate two things: perspectives are mutable, and conspiracy convictions can therefore be challenged by concentrated dialogue.

Rouverol observes the transformative potential in this approach: telling personal stories, retelling them as a community and then passing them on to others.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, in her work, participants establish a practice in which they address the future through collaborative engagements with personal history – as individuals, interacting inside and so shaping wider social formations.¹⁰⁹ Kristen Hastrup understands this as a 'dialectical process', in which 'self and other are inextricably involved', and as Jeffrey Dennis argues, in their entanglement, the 'observer and observed each invariably impact on each other'.¹¹⁰ In this sense, autoethnographic practitioners might enter into 'a shared conversation in which they speak, not for, but with, the community'.¹¹¹ Here, the people involved in this process of telling and feeding back each work towards a transformative, cross-cultural coalition.¹¹² As Rouverol demonstrates, this reflexivity produces a humanising exchange of concepts, emotions and perspectives. It reminds participants and audience members that they are neither isolated nor

¹⁰⁷ Alicia, J. Rouverol, 'Trying to Be Good: Lessons in Oral History and Performance' in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, ed. by Della Pollock (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2005), 19-44, (p.23).

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, (pp.31-32); see also *Ibid.*, (p.23)

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, (pp.38-39).

¹¹⁰ Kirsten Hastrup, 'Writing Ethnography: the State of the Art', in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. by Judith Okely and Helen Calloway (London: Routledge, 1992), 116-133, (p.116); Jeffery P. Dennis, 'The Social Is the Literary: Experiments in Radical Ethnography', *Qualitative Sociology*, 28: 4 (2005), 475-478, (p.475).

¹¹¹ Ronald J. Pelias, 'Empathy and the ethics of entitlement', *Theatre Research International*, 16: 2 (1991), 142-152, (p.151).

¹¹² See Heewong Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 2008), p.57.

independent from the institutions and communities in which their identities circulate. In stimulating equivalent conversations, perhaps with an eventual live audience, I hoped to undermine any authority attributed to my voice as a solo performer, shifting attention to that audience and inviting a critical response.

Rouverol and the Richmonds each produce multivocal autoethnographies, questioning collaborative practices and producing corresponding insights. By involving multiple voices these processes of critical reflection extend beyond the individual and begin to engage with notions of community.¹¹³ As such, practitioners can be seen to enter into dialogue with multiple identities, challenging preconceptions about various individuals, communities and cultural concerns.¹¹⁴ By working in this way artists occupy multiple positions, becoming both researchers and subjects, and thus producing cultural insights.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, live theatre allows one to involve the audience in this work, collaborating in real time as a community that studies its own workings. Hence, I reasoned, including multiple, contrasting voices could help my own autoethnographic theatre establish critical distance between conspiracy theory culture and the audience.

1.4.3 Reflections on Autoethnographic Practice Research

As we have seen, autoethnography enables practitioners to expose and examine relationships between themselves and the issues, ideas and people they address. By articulating these positions, autoethnographic theatre resists conclusions. Adopting this approach in my own practice, I aimed to situate my personal experiences at the heart of my work so as to explicate my own biases and limitations. In as much, I sought to relativise my own attempts, as an artist, to represent conspiracy theory culture.

I also hoped to explore resonance between autoethnography and the poststructuralist framework described above, in section 1.2.1. In focussing on positionality both autoethnography and poststructuralist discourse conceptualise meaning as something personally located and, therefore, also temporal. Likewise, each is concerned with multiplicity and difference: the personal developments examined by autoethnographers can be seen as

¹¹³ See Griffiths, (pp.184-185).

¹¹⁴ See Sally Mackey, 'Applied theatre and practice as research: polyphonic conversations, Research in Drama Education', *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 21: 4 (2016), 478-491, (p.478).

¹¹⁵ See D. Soyini Madison, 'The Labor of Reflexivity', *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies*, 11: 2 (2011), 129-138, (p.136).

lines of flight evading stasis, for instance, in Deleuzian terms.¹¹⁶ Bearing this in mind, I set out to explore my own positions as someone uncertain: a conspiracist critical of conspiracism and, therefore, an identity both comprising and driven by contrary positions. Contrasting any perspectives gleaned through this examination with more diverse positions, both conspiracist and otherwise, I hoped to emphasise my situation as someone whose commentary on conspiracism could only speak to impermanent conditions. I.e. that claims made in my theatre were ephemeral, therefore indefinite. So, where autoethnography would allow me to portray conspiracism, its representations and my own identity each as mutable phenomena, I aimed to present the audience with various rhizomes, resisting totalisation. In activating philosophical concepts central to my research, I hoped this autoethnographic practice could produce critical perspectives on claims about conspiracies, conspiracy theories and conspiracism where each arose in my work.

As someone examining theatre, I would also act on the opportunities autoethnography discovers in performance as a medium: capitalising on copresence, I aimed to open dialogue with audience members, and, likewise, to draw attention to the way an absence of discussion can produce reductive rhetoric (see Chapters One and Two); also, to explore liveness in relation to temporality (see Chapters One and Three). Here I saw potential to deepen the qualities discussed above. In entering many voices into conversation, I would attempt to produce work less preoccupied with seeking or conveying a single truth than with exposing and problematising those practices and processes by which truths are construed. As such, I went on to develop each performance around voices, real or fictional, whose personal histories would be aired in the work, asking what else theatre can do to facilitate that approach.

In general, in each work, I hoped to activate these approaches, characterising various perspectives on conspiracies and conspiracism as necessarily positional and contingent on discourse. Thus, I expected to develop and explore means to encourage uncertainty about conspiracism, resisting its reduction, and, at the same time, undermining conspiracist convictions.

1.5 Thesis Structure and Approach

The following chapters centre on three original performances developed in response to the above. Each chapter addresses a separate piece by establishing its context, discussing my

¹¹⁶ See Deleuze and Guattari, pp.9-10.

goals and analysing the work as it was presented, asking to what extent this material was able to build on the strategies I have discussed.

This research began at a deeply uncertain time for live theatre: small audiences were to be expected during the pandemic (see above) and good quality livestreaming was beyond my resources at the time. Therefore, I decided to focus my analysis on the content and artistic choices involved in each creative submission, as opposed to their reception per se. I documented my practice using a mixture of annotated scripts and scores, drawings, workshop diaries, rehearsal recordings, photographs and video, and this material has since allowed me to revisit and reflect on my theatre making. I now assess that work in this thesis, asking how each performance was able to platform unverified claims, and how specific dramaturgical decisions helped me expose and challenge notable positions and practices associated with conspiracy theory culture.

I acknowledge that, in the absence of any audience research, survey data and so on, I cannot speak for my audience. Hence, I employ an entirely qualitative and generally autoethnographic approach, only ever commenting on audience-experience from my own position as a perspectival witness. This analysis is occasionally informed by observations relating to those audience members whose reactions I could assess from stage – something only applicable in Chapters One and Three, as the pieces explored in each were performed live. Meanwhile, the work studied in Chapter Two was pre-recorded and played back to a remote audience, so the corresponding analysis necessitates greater speculation on my part, at least with regards to the audience. While surveys were not used, that analysis is sometimes informed by a sustained dialogue with select audience members after each production, such as my academic supervisors. I acknowledge that, while qualified, this remains a small base for analysis. For the most part, then, the ensuing critique is located in my own experiences and responses to the work – an approach I review in my conclusion before suggesting some future directions.

2 Chapter One: *Conspiracies* (2021)

Conspiracies (2021) was a ninety-minute solo performance presented on 15 July 2021, in The Black Box Studio at the University of York, UK. I wrote, directed and appeared in the piece, which comprised a pre-show and two acts (each containing three scenes) separated by a short intermission. The performance centred around my personal experiences and perspectives as someone sceptical of conspiracy theory culture but nonetheless attracted to it. This work was largely autobiographical, exploring my waning confidence in experts and institutions, immersion in the conspiracy theory community and conflicted fascination with Alex Jones. At times, that material was augmented with reflection on issues of representation – particularly during my consideration of a performance about conspiracy theory culture by the artist Marlon Solomon. Elsewhere, I expressed my concerns about the treatment of conspiracists in academic literature and reflected on the impact of conspiracism. This content built towards an exposé of my personal experiences as a UFO witness, exploring my introduction to conspiracy theory culture: additional contexts in which my work could be read. Throughout, spoken material was performed alongside videos, photographs, documents and silhouettes, each shown on a video wall that spanned the breadth of the stage. This was accompanied by amplified audio, including soundscapes, extracts and original music, composed and arranged by me. Taken together, this material sought to develop positions identified in my emerging research, investigating theatre as a means to generate critical engagements with conspiracy theory culture.

Conspiracies was developed over nineteen months beginning in December 2019. At its initiation this work drew on my research into conspiracy theory culture. Studies showed conspiracism to be variously inflected, complex and socially impactful – especially where conspiracy theories have been seen to encourage baseless convictions and generate scapegoats, often empowering demagogues and propagandists (see page 11). At the same time, I considered questions about the representation of conspiracy theorists in academic literature, as raised by the prominent conspiracy theory scholars Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton. They argue that social scientists have rarely involved real conspiracists in their studies of conspiracism, and that they should do so in future, interfacing with the conspiracy theory community rather than studying its participants from a distance; that by doing so, one might produce more rigorous insights into conspiracy theory ideation.¹¹⁷ This suggestion is reinforced by positions in contemporary critical ethnography, suggesting that we

¹¹⁷ See Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton, 'Why conspiracy theories matter: A social psychological analysis', *European Review of Social Psychology*, 29: 1 (2018), 256-298 (p.289).

should involve communities in the studies that concern them, thus relativising researchers' perspectives and avoiding the totalisation of diverse groups of people.¹¹⁸ In doing so, our attempts to represent conspiracism could be more thoroughly informed, and also more socially responsible. Having encountered these ideas at the outset of my practice, I was motivated to ask: can the voices of actual conspiracists be heard in the theatre, and, if so, do they approach conspiracy theory culture via any recognised ethnographic methods?

A review of conspiracist media revealed numerous performative strategies employed by public conspiracy theorists. Examples include Alex Jones, who performs an exaggerated persona for effect, and David Icke, whose lectures sometimes incorporate music, dance and visual media, made by artists sympathetic to his ideas (see page 22). These performances are theatrical in their spectacle and extravagance, but they are rarely described as theatre by the people involved.¹¹⁹ Instead, these public conspiracists tend to present themselves as investigators, researchers and anti-establishment pundits: dealers in supposedly factual information. This can be dangerous. For example, Jones' assertions about the Sandy Hook Massacre bolstered convictions among his audience, leading to violence against innocent people; meanwhile, Icke seems similarly reckless in repurposing antisemitic canards, notable in his references to the discredited publication, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.¹²⁰ Considering these dangers, I turned my attention to practitioners who portray themselves as artists first and foremost, comparing their performances to work by Jones, Icke, etc. Indeed, my analyses of several exemplary pieces showed theatre to be valuable where it is able to cultivate uncertainties and problematise truth claims (see Introduction). As I go on to discuss, this created a context in which to examine Marlon Solomon in *Conspiracies*, contrasting him with Jones and Icke. Reflecting on the threats posed by such conspiracists, I wanted to invite my audience to ask what conspiracy theory culture is, who represents it, who among its participants exerts influence, and how this affects other people.

In the following sections, I will ask how those questions were raised by *Conspiracies*, studying my dramaturgical choices and scenography by analysing exemplary scenes. This investigation will be split across two sections. First, I will consider my theatre design, exploring

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Andrew Ryder, 'Critical Ethnography and Research Relationships: Some Ethical Dilemmas', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 46: 2, 300-314, (pp.300-301); see also, for example, D. Soyini Maddison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 3rd edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. 2019), p.9.

¹¹⁹ It is notable that Alex Jones has been considered a performance artist, though only by his lawyers when faced with litigation; also, that he has refuted this position: see, for example, Will Worley, 'InfoWars' Alex Jones is a 'performance artist playing a character', says his lawyer', *Independent*, 18 Apr 2017. < <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/infowars-alex-jones-performance-artist-playing-character-lawyer-conspiracy-theory-donald-trump-a7687571.html> > [accessed 02 Feb 2022].

¹²⁰ For more on *The Protocols*, see footnote 50, page 19. For Alex Jones' impact, see, for example, Hyzen and Van den Bulck, 'The most paranoid man in America': Alex Jones as celebrity populist', *Celebrity Studies*, 12: 1 (2021), 162-166, (p.163); and for David Icke's relationships with antisemitism, see, for example, Daniel Allington et al, 'Antisemitic conspiracy fantasy in the age of digital media: Three 'conspiracy theorists' and their YouTube audiences', *Language and Literature*, 30: 1 (2021), 78-102, (pp.83-84).

approaches to space, sound and image. Here, I will examine relationships between conspiracism and spectacle, discussing the impact of different videos, silhouettes and images, presented on a multiscreen video wall. Likewise, I will consider the division of the stage into zones and my approach to organising images, asking what opportunities this created. The second section will explore attempts to undermine my own authority in *Conspiracies*, asking how this can open a richer, more critical inquiry into conspiracism. Doing so, I will question my portrayal as a fallible source of information, considering expressions of untrustworthiness, inconclusion and personal limitation in a piece frequently presented as autobiography. Uniting these sections, I will ask how the audience were positioned to question conspiracism and its representatives, wondering what theatre can contribute to that task.

2.1 Designing a Complex Stage

In *Conspiracies*, I set out to locate and examine the techniques employed by conspiracists like Jones, when they play on reasonable suspicions to promote unsubstantiated conspiracy theories. By exposing these rhetorical devices and demonstrating their operation in my own theatre, I hoped to invite questions about the processes by which public conspiracy theorists sow dangerous convictions in the audience.

Scholars like Richard A. Lanham have argued for the existence of an attention economy: advances in communications technology are seen to expose us to an exponential barrage of information, rendering our attention an increasingly scarce resource.¹²¹ Capturing it in the context of contemporary communication is therefore at a premium. In a 2019 article, communications scholar Jennifer R. Mercieca describes a personal experience with Alex Jones, who invaded a media event at which she was a panellist.¹²² According to Mercieca, Jones yelled at the presenters through a megaphone, but when he was invited to join the panel, the conspiracist refused. Instead, she claims, he continued to protest from the wings, continually interrupting proceedings. Here and elsewhere, Jones has relied on his bombastic, audacious persona, preferring expressive diatribes to sustained dialogue or debate.¹²³ Mercieca refers to this as ‘weaponised communication’, an approach developed by ‘dangerous demagogues’ who use devices like Jones’ megaphone to create spectacle,

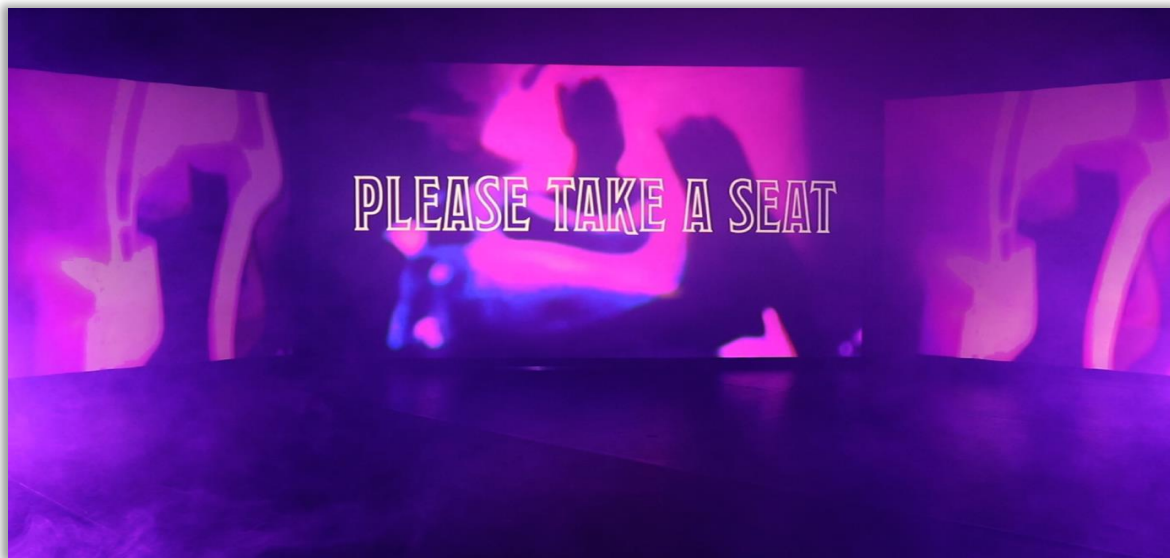
¹²¹ See Richard A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in The Age of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2006), pp.xi-xii; see also, for example, Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Boston, Mas: Harvard University Press. 2001), pp.vii-ix; see also, for example, Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2015), p.11.

¹²² See Jennifer R. Mercieca, ‘Dangerous Demagogues and Weaponized Communication’, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 49: 3 (2019), 264-279, (pp.264-265).

¹²³ See, for example, Alex Jones, *Alex Jones’s WILDEST Outbursts*, The Young Turks, YouTube < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WnJT-mX6i8&ab_channel=TheYoungTurks > [accessed 22 Nov 2022].

dominating spaces and eclipsing alternative perspectives.¹²⁴ Indeed, spectacular performances seem to win conspiracists notice, commanding our already limited attention; and with it, influence over democratic discourse.

These notions informed my approaches to media and space in *Conspiracies*. For instance, I set out to experiment with the framing of spectacle, choosing to work in the University's versatile performance space, The Black Box. The studio features an arena at ground level, measuring eighteen by twenty metres. Walkways run around its perimeter, recessed beneath a mezzanine gallery. When curtained, these create wings and backstage areas. I capitalised on these features, reimagining the auditorium labyrinthine. For instance, at the beginning of the piece, audience members entered this space by walking down one of those enclosed wings, lit with purple neon. On reaching its end, they proceeded through a gap in the curtains, into an area five meters deep and ten meters wide. This region was both enclosed and illuminated by a towering video wall, made from three screens: a central panel with two smaller wings. A video played across these, bombarding the audience with footage assembled from various news broadcasts, tinted purple, and sped up beyond the point of recognition.



Above: screens seen from the audience perspective on arrival. Taken from Preshow.

The original audio was also distorted, chopped up and arranged over a beat with frequent signature changes to match the sensory assault of these disjunctive visuals. Already then, the audience were presented with an overwhelming stream of information: a theme on which I would build. The video wall loomed throughout, standing three metres tall and nine metres wide. This also divided the stage into two zones: one visible, between my audience and the

¹²⁴ Mercieca, (p.266).

screens, the other obscured by their bulk. This construction masked the masked the true size of the studio – an impression enhanced by the smallness of the seating area, comprising less than ten chairs. Hence, *Conspiracies* began in a curious, intimate space, dominated by a confusion of media. While this gave a sense of key themes, such as spectacle, bombardment and facade, it also created an uncertain environment, inviting questions from the outset.

Spectacle was explored further in the preshow. This centred around a five-minute montage, opening with fifteen short clips of Alex Jones. These focussed on repetitions of phrase, gesture, and tone, common to his outbursts.¹²⁵ As well as signalling Jones' importance to the ensuing performance, those repetitions suggested a performative rage, which I hoped would raise several questions: to what extent does Jones perform; is his persona manufactured; and if elements of his character are inauthentic, then what is this fakery designed to achieve? The conspiracist could not be avoided, his voice amplified to uncomfortable levels. Likewise, everything was scored with heavy dance music, accompanied by smoke, billowing around the video wall and lit with more pulsing neon. This spectacular array helped magnify Jones' already exaggerated persona. Moreover, it was deliberately grandiose, seeking to parody his excess. In this sense, the video wall operated as a multimedia analogue for those megaphonic, weaponised performances associated with conspiracy theory culture. I was then able to return to this as a reference. For instance, early in the piece, I compared Jones to L. Frank Baum's Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*.¹²⁶ In the novel and film, Oz is a charlatan whom Dorothy and her friends expose: spectacle may have fooled his followers, but Oz's act is compromised when the protagonists look behind a curtain, revealing his deceptive performance.¹²⁷ After describing this moment, I went on to portray 'Jones The Great and Terrible' as a conman, hiding behind his own media platform and more interested in personal gain than the revelation of actual conspiracies.¹²⁸ In making that comparison, I sought to raise concerns about the nature of personalities like Jones, inviting the audience to imagine their media a front concealing undeclared motives. In this sense, the video wall functioned as both a symbolic and practical device, allowing me to demonstrate elements of conspiracy theory culture, then to call these into question.

My comparison of Jones and the Wizard was made while I was only visible as a silhouette, displayed on the centre screen. My similarity to those figures was thus insinuated, with my identity masked and my practice mediated by spectacle. Sometimes, I used videos recorded

¹²⁵ The montage can be viewed at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1QrwPSuxDw2Dfs78XD-empgyJ_E5FBHZC/view?usp=sharing

¹²⁶ See L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago: George M. Hill Company. 1900).

¹²⁷ See, for example, *The Wizard of Oz*, dir. by Victor Fleming (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939). [01:28:50-01:29:16].

¹²⁸ This and all following quotations from *Conspiracies* are drawn from an unpublished script, performed at the premiere of the piece, on July 15. 2021.

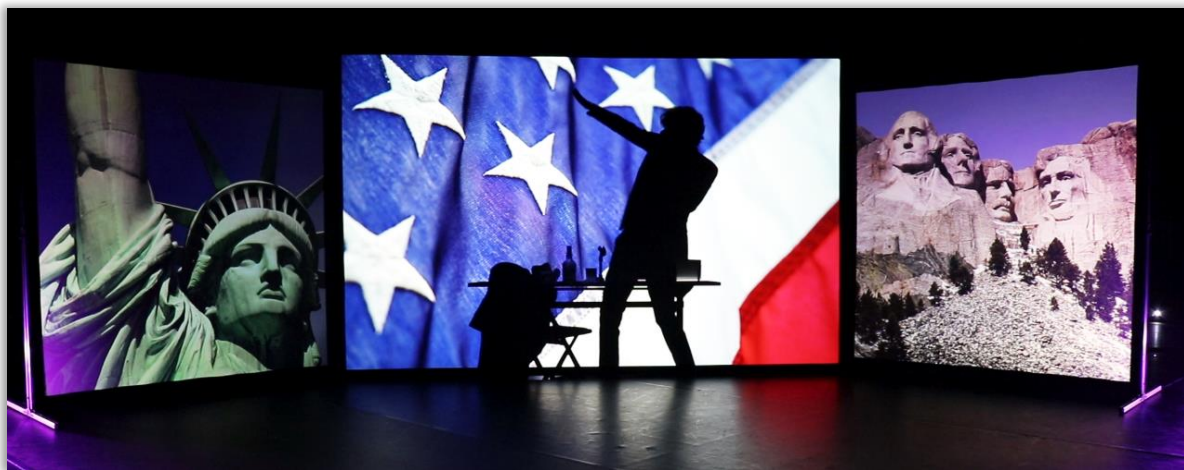
in advance; elsewhere, I performed in the zone behind screens, casting a live impression. For example, on my introduction, I spoke into a microphone backstage, relaying my conflicting perspectives on conspiracism (discussed below). During this section, four videos of my silhouette appeared at once, and while this visual metaphor suggested a complex persona, it also demonstrated my ability to represent myself through the apparatus of the screens. Afterwards, those images collapsed into one: a single live silhouette, in situ throughout the first act. Collected, this treatment of space, light and sound worked to distance me from my audience: my mouth could not be seen, and my words were delivered over loudspeakers, hidden in the rafters. Thus, my voice was dislocated from the images on-screen. Furthermore, all my silhouettes were necessarily opaque, creating ambiguity about my person. Here then, the usual sense of connectivity between performer and text was disrupted, making me seem less present, and less realistic by extension. Where this approach eschewed theatrical conventions, it could actually have been an illusion, with everything captured in advance, then played back, pretending at liveness. Hence, a facade allowed me to invite doubts about my work, and with them, concerns about my own trustworthiness as a commentator on conspiracism.

In Act Two, I moved into the zone between the screens and my audience, becoming fully visible. There, I discussed the derision faced by people with conspiracist perspectives, explored during a section on my experiences as a UFO witness. After claiming to have been mocked by a series of experts, I noted that my resultant alienation may have been a radicalising influence, driving me into the conspiracy theory community and towards increasingly extreme positions. It is worth noting that this story was partially fabricated: although I really did see a UFO, I never told any medical doctors; rather, I appropriated experiences relayed to me by conspiracists online, merging them into a narrative about alienation. While this helped establish an intimate space, as I go on to discuss, the forgery went undeclared, and it is reasonable to assume that an opportunity was missed in these moments. Had I gone on to reveal such a deception, I could, perhaps, have deepened any existing questions about my reliability – and that of other such performers by extension.

In contrast with earlier scenes, on entering the forward zone, attendees could see my expression. I looked them in the eyes one by one when discussing my experiences, establishing connections unique to live performance. Capitalising on this, I was able to target individuals in the crowd, challenging academics in place of my supposed abusers. 'I'm aware we have doctors in the audience,' I said, 'representatives of estimable expertise.' Here, I appeared to expose my biases, impressing those sentiments on an audience who could not escape them any more than I could escape their gaze. And by victimising them thus, I hoped

aimed to emphasize convictions associated with my ostensible victimhood, recontextualising my existing comments about experts, institutions and the radicalisation of conspiracists by suggesting a retaliative violence, informed by my own insecurities. Furthermore, having relied on opaqueness in the first act, suggesting depths inaccessible to the audience, I was now able to demonstrate an alternative approach, drawing attention to differences between the two. As such, I signalled theatre's ability to do something that conspiracists often seem to refuse; that is, to provide access to the vulnerable identities through which any performance is conveyed.

In both acts, I used a handheld presentation device, sending slides to individual screens. This produced a series of triptychs: assemblages, each comprising three images.



Above: a wide shot of my work, demonstrating the Triptych. Taken from Act One, Scene Two: *Amerikkka(n) Dreams*.

Triptychs usually feature a centrepiece, focussing attention on a key identity or idea, and two wings of auxiliary material, folding out towards viewers.¹²⁹ This tradition was initiated by medieval artists, where it was used to aestheticize the godhead, collecting themes, topics and identities into symbolic orders.¹³⁰ I adopted and magnified that approach in *Conspiracies*, exchanging Christian iconography for imagery associated with conspiracism. For instance, placing Jones at the centre in the preshow helped establish his importance early on. Then replacing him with my silhouette reinforced my own centrality to the performance, drawing attention to my position as a medium for everything presented. In addition, I was able to bombard my audience with material from multiple angles, emulating the overwhelming spectacle associated with conspiracists like Jones, thus permitting our comparison. And in the

¹²⁹ See, for example, Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Crucifixion and other Scenes*, c.1302-1308 < <https://www.rct.uk/collection/400095/triptych-crucifixion-and-other-scenes> > [accessed 04 Dec 2019]; see also, for example, Noëlle L.W. Streeton, 'Jan van Eyck's Dresden Triptych: new evidence for the Giustiniani of Genoa in the Borromei ledger for Bruges, 1438', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 3: 1 (2011), 1-17, (p.1).

¹³⁰ See Lisa Thomas et al, 'A life story in three parts: the use of triptychs to make sense of personal digital data', *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, 22 (2018), 691-705, (p.692).

second act, those wings also worked as an enclosure: disturbing boundaries between stage and stalls, which further emphasised my proximity to the audience.

Triptychs can also express narrativity: since Hieronymus Bosch, panels have focussed on the premises, developments and conclusions of stories.¹³¹ Elsewhere, artists have complicated that approach. For instance, Ernst van Alphen argues that Francis Bacon ‘violates two conventions of the triptych: the left-right progression, and the consistency of viewpoint’.¹³² This is notable in *Triptych* (1972) where Bacon paints similar events from different perspectives, rendering their sequence uncertain.¹³³ In both styles though, triptychs can be seen to impart a sense of complexity, suggesting hierarchies, chronologies and perspectives, and sometimes challenging these – establishing dialogue between their constituent parts.



Above: Francis Bacon, *Triptych*, 1972.

I played on that potential in *Conspiracies*. In Act One, for example, where I claimed a homoerotic obsession with Alex Jones, a key slide sent an image of aluminium foil to the centre-screen, calling on a recognisable trope in which conspiracists are seen to be paranoid dupes.¹³⁴ Throughout the act, this picture was superimposed with my live silhouette, inviting the audience to approach my performance with this characterisation in mind. Slide Two was

¹³¹ See, for example, Lynn F. Jacobs, 'The Triptychs of Hieronymus Bosch', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 31: 4 (2000), 1009-1041, (pp.1020-1022).

¹³² Ernst von Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.25.

¹³³ Francis Bacon, *Triptych*, August 1972 < <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bacon-triptych-august-1972-t03073> > [accessed 17 Oct 2022].

¹³⁴ See, for example, 'Tinfoil Hat', *TV Tropes* < <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TinfoilHat> > [accessed 10 Jan 2021].

an image of Jones looking bearishly handsome, shown on one side. Meanwhile, Slide Three pictured a woman whom I introduced as my fiancé, Mercedes, opposite.



Above: Jones, my silhouette and Mercedes. From *Conspiracies*, Act One, Scene Three: *Me and Mister Jones*.

As the scene progressed, I psychoanalysed my attraction to Jones. He and Mercedes were juxtaposed throughout. For example, Mercedes was presented as a petite woman, while Jones was evidently not. Likewise, she was pictured in a bedroom: somewhere associated with my actual love-life; meanwhile, Jones was seen in the Infowars newsroom; the site, I said, of my conspiracist fantasies. Thus, contrast was created by the differences between two subjects of my supposed desire. Here, my focus was not on a narrativized flow, organised in series, but on the parallel perspectives from which I considered myself as an individual. Thus, the triptych helped me reinforce an impression that my identity was both complex and inconclusive, being complicated by divergent perspectives; and this continued to strengthen a dynamic important to the piece: my oscillation between conspiracism and its alternatives.

That dynamic was deepened elsewhere. For example, in Act Two, I discussed relationships between Marlon Solomon and David Icke, mirroring earlier material concerning myself and Jones. Here, I projected extracts from the Antisemitic text, *The Protocols of The Elders of Zion* (see footnote 50, page 19). I then discussed its republication by conspiracists like Bill Cooper, and later Icke himself – best known for his theories about a cabal of shapeshifting reptiles manipulating global affairs.¹³⁵ Observing that I was now paraphrasing Solomon, I connected Icke to the history of antisemitic propaganda, in which Jewish people have often been portrayed as reptilian monsters.¹³⁶ Images of Solomon were shown throughout, sometimes to my left, and sometimes to my right. Whenever his picture was exchanged for an alternative slide, Icke’s photograph appeared shortly after; and when Icke’s disappeared, it was often

¹³⁵ See, for example, David Icke, *The Biggest Secret* (Isle of Wight: David Icke Books. 1999); see also, for example, Jon Ronson, ‘Beset by Lizards’, *Guardian*, 17 Mar 2001 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/mar/17/features.weekend> > [accessed 12 Oct 2022].

¹³⁶ See *Conspiracy Theory: A Lizard’s Tale*, by Marlon Solomon, Greater Manchester Fringe, Manchester, 26 Jul 2018. Dir. by Marlon Solomon; see also, for example, The Antisemitism Policy Trust, *Antisemitic Imagery and Caricatures* (London: The Antisemitism Policy Trust. 2020), p.6.

replaced by Solomon's. By shifting the two back and forth, left to right, right to left, I hoped to raise questions about the complex political realities associated with each. After all, Icke postures as a progressive, but he flirts with a neo-Nazi audience; meanwhile, Solomon considers himself a socialist in exile, having been decried as a 'Zionist Shitlord'.¹³⁷ Thus, the two oscillated, never settling on one or another of the wings; and on whichever remained free, more pages of *The Protocols* appeared. All the while, I attempted to situate my own position, supposedly somewhere between Solomon and Icke. Cycling through images, I discussed the history of reptilian beings in folklore, connected this to the UFO mythos, and attempted to dissuade the audience from associating all such stories with antisemitism. But those pages from *The Protocols* remained: a spectre, haunting the scene. The triptych was deployed thus, its elements in flux, and in disagreement, not only with each other, but also with my text. So, wherever my presentation seemed to strive for conclusion, this was promptly undone by those conflicting images.

Each new triptych contained elements of the last: every click of the presentation device produced a new slide, supplanting only one of those in play. *Conspiracies* contained 333 such slides, woven into a series of 256 distinct triptychs: an overwhelming quantity of material, through which I moved rapidly. This was intentionally hard to apprehend, having been designed to convey the slipperiness of conspiracism and the complexity of the personae discussed. Sometimes, new slides would map over their predecessors. For example, in the section about my fascination with Jones, each image was pasted over a picture seen earlier in the piece: the painting, *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree* (1926) by Alphonse Mucha.¹³⁸ Peeking out around the edges of each new slide, it referred the audience back to an earlier scene in which I had used the painting to symbolise the exclusive fraternity Bohemian Grove.¹³⁹ There, I had discussed Jones' allegations about Grove members, including accusations of occult paedophilia.¹⁴⁰ By returning to this image here, I was able to signal my own prevailing interest in the narrative. As the section progressed, new slides grew increasingly smaller, until they were almost engulfed by the painting. Thus, I hoped to invite the impression that Jones' ideas were pervasive, gaining traction in my unconscious and eclipsing attempts at their eradication, even as I criticised their source. In this sense, the

¹³⁷ For Icke's audience, see, for example, Daniel Allington and Tanvi Joshi, "What Others Dare Not Say": An Antisemitic Conspiracy Fantasy and its YouTube Audience', *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism*, 3: 1, 35-53, (pp.44-48); and for Solomon's perspective, see *Conspiracy Theory: A Lizard's Tale*.

¹³⁸ Alphonse Mucha, *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree* < <https://www.alphonsemucha.org/oath-of-omladina-under-slavic-linden-tree/> > [accessed 19 Oct 2022].

¹³⁹ This secretive club has been frequented by many notable individuals, including heads of state, politicians, business leaders, and celebrated artists. Its exclusivity and occultic aesthetics have attracted conspiracy theories about satanic cults and a Global Elite. See, for example, Elizabeth Flock, 'Bohemian Grove: Where the rich and powerful go to misbehave', *Washington Post*, 15 June 2011 < https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/bohemian-grove-where-the-rich-and-powerful-go-to-misbehave/2011/06/15/AGPV1sVH_blog.html > [accessed 9 Oct 2022].

¹⁴⁰ See, generally, *Dark Secrets Inside Bohemian Grove*. Dir. by Alex Jones (Infowars, 2000) [DVD].

triptych allowed me to produce call-backs to earlier moments, signalling relationships between the many ideas, histories, claims and identities discussed in *Conspiracies* where these were entered into collage. For instance, I made use of a recurring theme in which each photograph featured a raised hand, suggesting some secret association was thus unveiled. However, I did not elaborate on this. In addition, then, this layering process also helped me to demonstrate Jones' approach, bombarding the audience with superficial connections.



Above: two examples of layering and the raised-hand gesture in *Conspiracies*. Taken from slides in Act One, Scene Two: *Amerikkka(n) Dreams* (left) and Act One, Scene Three: *Me and Mister Jones* (right).

As I have demonstrated, set design and scenography were vital to *Conspiracies*. A multimedia approach to presenting information allowed me to expose and explore strategies developed by public conspiracists, with a particular focus on spectacle. Hence, the piece concentrated on grand designs and grandiose figures, demonstrating their capacity to mask questionable identities and information. By incorporating these techniques, I was able to hold them up for inspection, inviting the audience to consider their impact. This was enhanced by a design in which different spaces and sources of information entered into continual dialogue with each other, demonstrating an approach to conspiracism different to that of conspiracists like Jones, Icke, etc. Here, uncertainty was paramount, leaving the task of conclusion to the audience, who were invited to critique the work and its figures, rather than simply accept them. Many claims made were rendered dubious by the media, spaces and styles of performance through which they passed. Thus, conspiracist demagogues were exposed as fallible entities, suggesting that one should not take such presenters at face value. Rather, *Conspiracies* proposed, we should scrutinise the machinery by which conspiracy theories are conveyed, its ability to distort perceptions, and its relationships to the identities by whom these narratives

are processed. Here then, *Conspiracies* established a model in which the weaponry of conspiracism was unpicked and examined, revealing its capacity for deception, inaccuracy and superficiality.

2.2 Challenging My Authority as The Central Voice

In addition to its work with space and media, *Conspiracies* was designed to express and address my role as someone commenting on conspiracy theory culture. Hence, I aimed to explore my role as a perspectival voice and, in doing so, to address positionality as something important to conspiracism and its representation.

The philosopher Matthew Dentith argues that conspiracy theories are not necessarily unreasonable, as conspiracies are actually commonplace.¹⁴¹ He cites several examples, from 'the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964' to 'the Snowden revelations of 2013' and 'the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015'.¹⁴² And knowing that conspirators have often operated inside powerful institutions, it is easy to see why many mistrust mainstream narratives. As the psychologist Michael J. Wood demonstrates, 'conspiracy suspicions' create traction for those perspectives, increasing the appeal of 'conspiracy beliefs'.¹⁴³ Indeed, public conspiracists seem to thrive in these conditions, promoting views alternative to the mainstream narrative.

As presenters like Jones can play on reasonable suspicions, I sought to challenge the authority of conspiracist demagogues by drawing attention to my own unreliability as someone processing information through my own conspiracy suspicions. As I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis, autoethnography presents some useful opportunities for the destabilisation of authority – especially where autobiographical practitioners explore the formative effects of personal experience. Furthermore, by presenting contradicting autobiographies one can create tensions that resist easy conclusion, revealing each voice to be perspectival and thus relativising any claims made in each (see page 32). I set out to engage with these ideas, looking for ways to problematize my own conspiracism. Therefore, I opened the first act by signalling an autobiographical approach, disclosing my personal positions in relation to conspiracy theory culture. For example, I claimed to be an artist, developing strategies to interrogate conspiracy theory culture on stage; an academic, sceptical of conspiracists; and, also, a reluctant conspiracist, concerned about mainstream narratives, therefore driven to alternative sources. Later in the performance, I expanded on

¹⁴¹ See Dentith, (p.576)

¹⁴² Each involved a coverup by multiple parties, making them authentic conspiracies. *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ See, Michael J. Wood, 'Conspiracy suspicions as a proxy for beliefs in conspiracy theories: Implications for theory and measurement' in *British Journal of Psychology*, 108 (2017), 507-527 (p.522).

and complexified those positions. For instance, in a subsequent scene, I discussed my life as someone making commercial theatre, observing that my work has a lucrative fanbase in the conspiracy theory community. Here then, I presented myself as someone incentivised to promote conspiracism, further complicating my position as a source. Developing on this, I delivered bombastic renditions of Jones' theories about Bohemian Grove, and, later in the piece, I mimicked Icke's ersatz scholarship when lecturing on the history of reptilian humanoids in folklore. Here, I signalled two more positions: the evangelist, where I used spectacle to promote those narratives, and the critic, where I reflected on my own coercive enthusiasm. 'Should I be more transparent,' I mused, 'about the dangers associated with conspiracist theatre?' Others included the sceptic, demonstrated by an homage to Marlon Solomon, in which I questioned the motives behind unlikely antisemitic conspiracy theories; and the victim, when I discussed my alienation from the mainstream after witnessing the UFO (see page 45). Thus, I was able to expose a range of entangled perspectives. Moreover, there was conflict between these positions. For instance, I was clearly suspicious of official narratives, but as an academic, I was also involved in producing them; and, I was critical of Jones, but I was drawn to defend him, etc. In effect, this rendered me uncertain.

That uncertainty was further reinforced where my perspectives were neither clearly or formally organised. There was no hierarchy of views, for example, from most conspiracist to most sceptical, or vice versa. Indeed, I made no attempt to chronicle my progress in any particular direction, denying closure. Here, then, my identity was deliberately complicated, with perspectives being meshed and unmeshed, throughout. Therefore, attention was drawn to my instability as a source: conspiracy theories were presented, but only after having been processed through an explicitly mercurial lens, rich with mutative, transformational bias. And where so much of the piece was concerned with other conspiracists, that focus on my own unreliability invited similar readings of Jones, Icke, etc. Therefore, I was able to demonstrate differences between myself as an artist and those public conspiracists who attempt to turn suspicions into certainties: rather than trying to convince the audience of my positions, I attempted to problematise conspiracy theories by demonstrating that the people who promote them are themselves complex and uncertain.

Despite its complications, this autobiographical content was presented with sincerity and its claims to reality were also reinforced by my text. As noted, at the beginning of Act Two, I entered the forward performance zone. In this space I reminded the audience, 'I'm not a character and this isn't a costume: these are my actual clothes. I'm real, and so are these stories.' I did not expect these statements to be taken at face value; after all, one anticipates criticality from an audience of performance academics. Instead, I wanted to use them as a

base from which to invite questions about the rhetoric involved in approaching the audience thus, encouraging attendees to ask not whether those claims were truthful, but why one might make them in the first place, and why in particular ways. With that in mind, it may have been sensible to have worked harder at divulging the deception involved in my appropriating these claims from online sources and presenting them as my own, as producing and then revealing this a deception could perhaps have accelerated those concerns. In doing so, I could also, perhaps, have produced concerns about authenticity regarding public conspiracism.

Theatre scholars Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford discuss authenticity effects: the ‘techniques and modes of representation’ and the ‘resultant perceptual responses’ that lend theatre a sense of unmediated reality.¹⁴⁴ Examples include archival material, the testimonies and interviews that underwrite verbatim performances, and performers who present themselves as real people, as opposed to fictional characters.¹⁴⁵ Theatre makers sometimes act as though these authenticity effects facilitate ‘direct access to truthful, sincere or unmediated speech, selves or bodies’.¹⁴⁶ But as Garde and Mumford note, practitioners might also challenge authenticity effects, producing scepticism about theatre’s ability to do anything but represent limited perspectives.¹⁴⁷ Excluding the oversight already discussed, I attempted as much in *Conspiracies*. When I performed in silhouette, I presented myself as a source who believed himself a target, given his access to truths supposed by the performance. Thanks to this mechanism, my facial features were wholly obscured, hence, pose and gesture became my principal approaches to nonverbal communication. For example, in the first act, my bearing gradually transformed from a confident stance when talking about Jones, to a defeated slouch when discussing Sandy Hook, a defiant fist for his antiauthoritarianism, and a drawn-out pinch of the brow while summing up my conflicted position. Moreover, I exaggerated these expressions to compensate for the flattening effect of the screens. Here, my autobiography was clearly processed through distorting apparatus, producing monotone images. Access to a clear sense of authenticity was limited, not only by the physical screens, but also by the magnification of particular positions, stances and perspectives. As such, the audience were encouraged to view this autobiographical work as curated and necessarily incomplete, inviting them to ask why I might choose to promote some elements of those stories over others. Thus, I engaged with my role as editorialising influence, despite the authenticity effects associated with autobiography.

¹⁴⁴ Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford, *Theatre of Real People: Diverse Encounters at Berlins Hebbel am Ufer and Beyond* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.69-72.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.73

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.73-78.

I built on this approach elsewhere. For example, later on in Act One, I recounted a tale about my supposed collaborator, Jonathan, and our time in Gruyere, Switzerland, where, I claimed, we had undertaken research for a new performance, focussing on Nazi conspiracies. Throughout, I showed pictures of the Alps and other places mentioned. However, these could easily have been read as stock images as neither of us appeared in the photographs. Thus, I hoped to seed questions: were these pictures unoriginal, and, if so, why did I choose them; was I ever in Switzerland at all?



Above: Stock images of Switzerland, which were presented in lieu of originals.

Over the course of the same scene, I gave an account of my and Jonathan's adventures, discussing his encounter with the conspiracist David Chase Taylor. I began by telling the audience that I had come down with the flu, leaving me comatose in our room. For that reason, I explained, Jonathan had met Chase Taylor alone, and had relayed the experience to me afterwards. This created an initial distance from 'the truth', which was expressly unknowable to me. Likewise, I noted, Jonathan had requested anonymity. Here, I showed a photograph of a silhouetted figure, but as with the previous silhouettes, there was no way to prove this was Jonathan. Once again, then, the audience were unable to access an original source. Rather, it was implied, they would have to trust a mediating process over which I had ultimate control, fixing me at the centre of this narrative.



Above: Image alleged to be Jonathan, shown during the performance. Taken from *Conspiracies*, Act One, Scene Two: *Our Man in Gruyere*.

Developing on that situation, I stated that Jonathan was unable to join us. Therefore, I said, I would voice him in the ensuing account. I went on to play both Jonathan and Chase Taylor in a dramatic rendition of their conversation, which, I alleged, was all verbatim. This allowed me to platform conspiracy theories third hand: supposedly passed by David to Jonathan, by Jonathan to me, and only then to my audience. Here, I performed Jonathan as charismatic and composed, adopting a confident drawl and taking great care when handling props. This contrasted with Chase Taylor's characterisation as an unstable paranoid, for whom I employed a stuttering New York accent and erratic gesticulations. His hair was thoroughly mussed, and the lapels of his anorak were turned up as if to evade pursuers. By creating these caricatures, I signalled my influence as a dramatist, able to accentuate elements of each where it suited the performance. As the scene progressed, its claims became increasingly ridiculous, matching the inanity of those caricatures: according to Jonathan, I said, Chase Taylor alleged the survival of the Third Reich, its migration to Antarctica, and a relationship between Nazi occultists and a race of winged sorcerers from Alpha Centauri. Reflecting on these absurdities at its close, I noted that this was, indeed, an anecdote about an anecdote, so I had no idea how much of it was real. After all, I could not verify Jonathan's tale, which, I noted, could all have been a feverish dream: 'You'd have to be insane to believe this,' a pause, and then, 'or delirious with some sort of flu'. On the one hand, this mixture of unverified sources and perspectival presenters allowed me to demonstrate the natural instability of conspiracy

theories, mutable in their passage from one identity to another. On the other, it emphasised my centrality as an influence on information. Here, I hoped to invite three observations: that everything had to pass through my person and perspectives, that I was capable of manipulating information according to my own agenda, and that I was by no means omniscient. Thus, my authority was undermined, and where I adopted styles associated with public conspiracists, I presented their claims as dubious by extension.

As the examples in this section demonstrate, *Conspiracies* called attention to various techniques by which I was able to problematise the authority of conspiracist presenters. Throughout, I capitalised on my role as dominant voice in the performance and the only live performer on stage, signalling my inability to provide concrete data, secure knowledge or unbiased perspectives. This invited uncertainty about the material performed, and where that material related to conspiracism, my uncertainty served to distance me from personalities like Jones (as we have seen, public conspiracists tend, instead, to enforce their views, working to engender convictions amongst the audience). In hindsight, though, it is notable that this mostly took place in my first act, when operating behind the screens, and more work could have been done to problematise my authenticity in Act Two. It seems reasonable to argue that a I could have been more thorough, perhaps showing the join between real anecdotes and manufactured accounts, calling more attention to these rhetorical illusions. Nonetheless, by otherwise destabilising various ideas, personae and narratives, especially in Act One, I was able to invert the approach taken by those conspiracists who work to engender convictions. As such, I held a mirror up to conspiracism, embracing its tendency for suspicion and turning this onto conspiracists themselves, drawing their supposed certainties into question. In this sense, *Conspiracies* succeeded in discovering and developing approaches to the representation of conspiracy theory culture in theatre, demonstrating that practitioners can invite criticality without adopting wholly or explicitly sceptical positions. Indeed, we are able to process conspiracist perspectives and narratives through unstable identities, with recourse to uncertain sources, exposing the complications associated with that culture while expressing our own relativity as commentators. Harking back to my analysis in the Thesis Introduction, this could be viewed as a particularly responsible approach to conspiracism, resisting some of its dangers.

2.3 Critical Reflection on *Conspiracies*

In *Conspiracies*, I attempted to show how the narratives presented by conspiracists remain questionable, despite the persuasive rhetoric with which many conspiracy theories are communicated. I achieved this by presenting myself as a conspiracy theorist making claims

about conspiracies, using various dramaturgical techniques to interrogate weaponised communications while expressing and playing on my positionality as a source. Thus, I demonstrated theatre's potential to produce uncertainties about conspiracism, opening critical distance between my audience and the theories I presented on stage.

When designing the performance, I also strove to include the voices of genuine conspiracists so as to relativise my work (see page 34). Although this motivated an autoethnographic approach in which I drew on personal experience and exposed my own positions as someone involved in and observing conspiracism, my process strayed from its original goals where I failed to thoroughly pursue the inclusion of voices other than my own. Instead, the piece concentrated on my relationships with public figures whose work was easy to access, especially given various logistical limitations related to the coronavirus pandemic (see page 31). Although this approach was useful in its own right, I could certainly have done more to involve and assess more private but nonetheless legitimate voices, extending to conspiracists other than those cited in the work. By introducing these additional perspectives, the performance could, perhaps, have drawn attention to the way conspiracy theory narratives develop, circulate in and influence the conspiracy theory community. For instance, had I included a section about the conspiracy theorists I have encountered online and their approach to theories promoted by Jones et al, I could have stimulated questions concerning the way weaponised communications shape conspiracy theory culture. By doing so, I might have more thoroughly demonstrated the influence exerted by public conspiracists.

In retrospect, I could have developed such an approach without even needing to gather additional data, as I already drew on such accounts when presenting on my marginalisation (see page 42). However, by choosing to disguise these perspectives as my own, I failed to draw attention to my sources. Taking an alternative approach, it would have been easy to set up such an impression before working to undo it. Doing so, I could have opened a conversation about authenticity effects. Hence, I could perhaps have created space to compare and contrast different approaches to data collection, assessing differences between the strategies employed by public conspiracists and critical ethnographers. In addition to expanding the horizons of my work, such an approach may have helped me to demonstrate complications with the way information about others is produced and framed by various presenters, inviting questions about positionality complimentary to the performance and its aims.

On the one hand, *Conspiracies* lacked consistency in its handling of authenticity effects, especially where I failed to undermine impressions of my own trustworthiness. Likewise, the performance could have expanded its scope to address the conspiracy theory community

more broadly. On the other, my work achieved its central goals by producing concerns about claims made by public conspiracists. Acknowledging the limits of my own knowledge, I was able to present myself as both a conspiracist source and a source on conspiracism, with tensions between these camps producing a persistent uncertainty. This went some way to propose and demonstrate that presenters should not be treated as reliable, as they are, in fact, perspectival media. For this reason, the piece suggested, we should always question the claims made by conspiracists. Furthermore, by showcasing the ways these issues impacted my own presentation, I was able to compare myself to conspiracists like Jones, implying that what was said about my own work and its lack of reliability went unspoken in theirs. This drew attention to the processes by which those individuals package speculation as factual information; and in that sense, *Conspiracies* encouraged a critical approach to public conspiracism, showing theatre to be useful where it stimulates and sustains those uncertainties on which conspiracy theories seek to conclude.

3 Chapter Two: *The Strangeness: A Podcast Exploring Unsolved Mysteries And Inexplicable Events (2022)*

The Strangeness: A Podcast Exploring Unsolved Mysteries And Inexplicable Events (2022) comprises three instalments of a serialised audio drama, centring on a fictional podcast, and its host, Adrian Esahi. Episodes were made available to my assessors online from 21 March 2022. Throughout, Adrian engages with authentic source material and draws on conspiracy theory culture, discussing cold cases and interviewing witnesses (explored below). I wrote, directed, and performed in this work, voicing Adrian and one of his interviewees. No other performers were involved, but voices were occasionally sampled from sources external to the fiction, as I will go on to examine. Imitating a real podcast, this content can be streamed or downloaded from a website featuring case notes, written in Adrian's voice.¹⁴⁸ Like the audio, this writing mixes fictitious information about Adrian with nonfiction material including maps, historical photographs, and extracts from conspiracist publications. As a whole, the production aimed to explore audio drama as a means to address conspiracy theory culture, and particularly online conspiracism, due to the increasing popularity of podcasts speculating about supposed conspiracies, as I will discuss.

Set over five weeks in 2020, and presented as podcast episodes 153, 154 and 155, *The Strangeness* chronicles Adrian's attempts to investigate a series of missing persons cases associated with The U.S. National Parks Service.¹⁴⁹ Spurred on by emails from his audience, Adrian starts to question official records while working towards his own conclusions. Doing so, he draws on research by David Paulides, a real investigative author whose books concern mysterious disappearances.¹⁵⁰ Paulides has also argued that many strange cases have been covered up by government agents.¹⁵¹ Although Adrian initially eschews conspiracism, the investigation brings him into contact with conspiracists, and, over time, he becomes entangled in conspiracy theory culture. Considering the dangers of contemporary conspiracism and theatre's potential to address them, I aimed to raise questions about online media, its creators, their audiences, and the ways that conspiracism arises in each. Likewise, I wanted *The Strangeness* to address the interconnectivity of digital platforms and the opportunities these

¹⁴⁸ See 'Episode 153', *The Strangeness*, 07 Aug 2020 < <https://thestrangeness.blog/episode-153/> > [accessed 13 Jan 2023]; see also, 'Episode 154' *The Strangeness*, 14 Aug 2020 < <https://thestrangeness.blog/277-2/> > [accessed 13 Jan 2023]; see also, 'Episode 155', *The Strangeness*, 29 Aug 2020 < <https://thestrangeness.blog/155-2/> > [accessed 13 Jan 2023].

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Roger Marsh, 'Missing Person Cases: Never Be Last in Line', *Huffington Post*, 26 Sep 2017 < https://www.huffpost.com/entry/missing-person-cases-neve_b_3984127 > [accessed 20 May 2022].

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, 'How it all began: the books', *Missing 411* < <http://www.missing-411.com/about> > [accessed 21 Jan 2023].

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Jon Billman, *The Cold Vanish: Seeking the Missing in North America's Wildlands* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2020), pp.117-119.

networks create for conspiracist narratives. In doing so, I hoped to propose models for how online media construct credible stories, and to encourage criticality from an audience who might engage with such material themselves.

The above concerns arose early in the development process. At its inception, my practice drew on reports that the internet has excited conspiracism.¹⁵² For instance, some researchers argue that digital networks have led to a rise in conspiracist thought.¹⁵³ Meanwhile, others, like Uscinski et al, present contrasting evidence, suggesting that conspiracism was similarly prevalent at other times in history and has merely adapted to modern conditions.¹⁵⁴ Nonetheless, there exists a growing consensus amongst scholars that internet culture is important to conspiracism in its present form, as conspiracy theories can be seen to develop and proliferate in online networks.¹⁵⁵ As Anna Heft and Killian Buehling propose, 'digital information ecologies' are rich with unregulated sites, populated by autonomous content creators; and given the ease with which one can now produce and broadcast material, amateurs and other uncertified individuals have become increasingly involved in the distribution of unverified information.¹⁵⁶ As well as being relatively unpoliced when compared to traditional media platforms, sites such as YouTube, Soundcloud and Patreon allow content creators to reach international audiences with unprecedented ease. As such, the internet facilitates conspiracy theory culture where its narratives are easily accessed, circulated and emboldened online. With these circumstances in mind, my practice began to focus on radicalisation, asking how digital creators might move from healthy curiosity to blinkered obsession, and what effects such transitions could produce.

Those questions led me to podcast media. As I go on to discuss, podcasts are important to contemporary conspiracism and, at the same time, they share key features with audio drama: audio is essential to each, serialisation is common, and where these productions lack visual components, audiences are invited to imagine unseen worlds (discussed further, below). It was my suspicion, then, that one might play on these similarities, inviting listeners to criticise

¹⁵² See, for example, David Klepper, 'Choose your reality: Trust wanes, conspiracy theories rise', *Associated Press*, 09 Jul 2022 < <https://apnews.com/article/covid-technology-health-government-and-politics-new-york-cfb56a95aec23dadbabcf3ebbe839f05> > [accessed 10 Jul 2022].

¹⁵³ See, for example, David De Coninck et al, 'Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation About COVID-19: Comparative Perspectives on the Role of Anxiety, Depression and Exposure to and Trust in Information Sources', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12 (2021), 1-13, (p.2).

¹⁵⁴ See Joseph E. Uscinski et al, 'Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?', *PLOS ONE*, 17: 7 (2022), 1-19, (pp.15-16).

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, Eileen Culloty, 'Evaluating conspiracy claims as public sphere communication', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 25: 1 (2021), 36-50, (pp.36-37); see also, for example, Dominik A. Stecula, and Mark Pickup, 'Social Media, Cognitive Reflection, and Conspiracy Beliefs', *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3 (2021), 1-8, (pp.1-2); see also, for example, Katja Valaskivi, 'Circulation of conspiracy theories in the attention factory' in *Popular Communication*, 20: 3 (2022), 162-177 (p.172).

¹⁵⁶ Annett Heft and Kilian Buehling, 'Measuring the diffusion of conspiracy theories in digital information ecologies', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 28: 4 (2022), 940-961, (p.941).

online conspiracism while engaging with its theatrical analogue. Meanwhile, I wondered whether my work could exploit differences between the two: where conspiracism tends to seek answers, theatre could, I reasoned, easily raise more. Hence, I hoped to develop audio dramaturgies that might encourage the audience to interrogate conspiracist claims, rather than simply accept them.

Moving ahead, I will consider my approach to those aims. An initial section will explore key theoretical perspectives. Here, I will discuss conspiracism in podcasts, then audio drama as an approach to developing a critical listenership. Following this, I will analyse my own work, episode by episode, asking how key dramaturgical decisions allowed me to raise questions about conspiracy theory culture. The analysis of 153 will regard my emulating online conspiracism, asking how this invited criticality from the audience. A subsequent section will focus on 154, considering Adrian's approach to his sources. This material will consider the distance I sought to establish between the audience and conspiracy theory culture, asking how this could cause listeners to become uncertain about claims associated with the piece. Then, a discussion of 155 will explore Adrian's growing conspiracism and the implications of that arc, exploring his eventual radicalisation and what this may suggest about conspiracism. I will then conclude on the performance, discussing the value of audio drama as an approach to conspiracy theory culture, in its capacity to encourage questions about online media, conspiracists and their audiences.

3.1 The Podcast as Form: Addressing Online Conspiracism Through Audio Drama

Before initiating work on this second performance, I deemed it sensible to investigate the history of those media my work concerned. Hence, I undertook a literature review, examining the origins and impact of conspiracy theory podcasts. At the same time, I reviewed audio drama as an approach to theatre, asking what so similar and yet different a medium might offer my work. In this section I explore some findings from that work, setting up my approach to making *The Strangeness*.

Conspiracy theories pervade human history and conspiracism has thus developed with emerging technologies. Rumours predated the printing press, for instance, spreading in response to external threats and crisis situations.¹⁵⁷ At that time, conspiracism found a vehicle

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Jan-Willem van Prooijen, and Karen M. Douglas, 'Conspiracy theories as a part of history: The role of societal crisis situations', *Memory Studies*, 10: 3 (2017), 323-333, (p.326).

in published writing.¹⁵⁸ Later, conspiracy theories thrived on the radio, which gave rise to legendary voices like Art Bell and George Knapp, presenters whose compassionate interviews with witnesses and whistle-blowing audience members drew attention to supposed conspiracies on one of the most listened to shows in North America.¹⁵⁹ Radio also enabled Bill Cooper, 'Granddaddy of American Conspiracy Theories' and host of the conspiracist programme, *The Hour of The Time*.¹⁶⁰ Considering these developments, I wondered how this programming has transitioned into online media, and how internet culture might influence its scope. Hence, I considered a mass communications technology exclusive to the digital ecosystem: podcasts.

Podcasts are episodic audio releases, with peripherals such as notes and images, distributed via websites from which instalments can be streamed or downloaded. The medium originated in the early 2000s, when broadband internet and advances in audio data compression made it possible for creators to share sound files online; meanwhile, RSS feeds permitted the delivery of serialised episodes to subscribers, automatically downloaded to playback devices.¹⁶¹ In 2023, it is not uncommon for podcasts to include video too, though longform content still appears to prefer audio, likely given its ease of dissemination. Current data suggests that there are around 4.1 million podcasts in existence, comprising more than 75 million episodes.¹⁶² It is beyond the scope of this study to quantify conspiracism in that milieu. However, examples are easily located.¹⁶³ Podcasters can also be seen to source information from their audiences, inviting listeners to engage with unverifiable information drawn from equally questionable individuals, and with little to no critical scrutiny.¹⁶⁴ Podcasts can therefore be seen to play an important role in contemporary conspiracism, communicating conspiracy theories to increasingly broad audiences while doing little to question their substance.

¹⁵⁸ See, for example, Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (California: University of California Press. 2003), pp.99-101; see also, for example, Alan Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America* (Yale: Yale University Press. 2001), p.216.

¹⁵⁹ See, for example, Marc Fisher, 'The outer limits: A lone voice in the desert lures 10 million listeners', *Washington Post*, 29 March 1998 < https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/the-outer-limits-a-lone-voice-in-the-desert-lures-10-million-listeners/2013/10/28/95615598-3ff6-11e3-9c8b-e8deeb3c755b_story.html > [accessed 25 Jan 2022].

¹⁶⁰ Mark Jacobson, 'The Granddaddy of American Conspiracy Theorists', *Rolling Stone*, 22 Aug 2018 < <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/william-cooper-conspiracy-theory-711469/> > [accessed 22 May 2022].

¹⁶¹ See, *Technical History of Podcasting*, Blubrry < <https://blubrry.com/manual/about-podcasting/history-of-podcasting-new/technical-history-of-podcasting/> > [accessed 25 Jan 2022].

¹⁶² See Colin Gray, 'Podcast Statistics & Industry Trends 2023: Listens, Gear and More', *The Podcast Host*, 5 Jan 2023 < https://www.thepodcasthost.com/listening/podcastindustrystats/#How_Many_Podcasts_Are_There_Right_Now > [accessed 02 Feb 2023].

¹⁶³ See, for example, *Tin Foil Hat With Sam Tripoli* < <https://samtripoli.com/tin-foil-hat/> > [accessed 12 Feb 2023]; see also, for example, *OK Talk* < <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/ok-talk-paranormal-tales-of-mysterious-travels/id1018710197> > [accessed 12 Feb 2023]; see also, for example, Powerful JRE, *The Joe Rogan Experience #1315 - Bob Lazar & Jeremy Corbell* < <https://youtu.be/BEWz4SXfyCQ> > [accessed 14 Feb 2023].

¹⁶⁴ See, for example, *The Confessionals* < <https://www.theconfessionalspodcast.com/> > [accessed 12 Feb 2023].

It is clear that anyone with access to a recording device and an internet connection can now create conspiracist material comparable to conventional radio shows, and that they can make this available to millions of prospective audience members, without special resources or experience. Hence, where once there were monumental personalities like Bill Cooper and Art Bell, there are now myriad imitations, deviations and mutations of their personae and programmes; and where there were societies, book clubs and lecture circuits, there are now podcasts with associated message boards, forums and applications, connecting listeners to each other as well as to podcast creators themselves. I wondered whether theatre could examine these developments and their implications, and how to approach this in practice.

Considering potential approaches, I turned my attention to audio drama, which has thrived similarly online.¹⁶⁵ Like conspiracy theory podcasts, audio dramas centre on sonic as opposed to visual media, are normally serialised and accessible on personal devices in private, and nowadays often on demand.¹⁶⁶ However, while conspiracism invites listeners to entertain claims to truth, theatre tends to explore perspectives and raise questions. Bearing this in mind, I wondered whether an original audio drama could recreate the conspiracy theory podcast experience, and, at the same time, invite questions about its own claims: an analogue, encouraging concerns about conspiracy theory culture.

Audio drama is an unusual approach to theatre: as it lacks visual imagery the point of departure is imagination.¹⁶⁷ In this case, 'the site of the drama' is the mind, and as audiences 'turn inwards' to locate corresponding images they have been compared to dreamers, imagining idiosyncratic worlds.¹⁶⁸ In this space, reality can be suggested with ease (e.g. with convincing sounds effects).¹⁶⁹ But these illusory impressions are also challenged by the absence of any tangible evidence, reliant as they are on imagination. As audio drama listeners we imagine ourselves observers: we engage with imaginary spaces in which convincing audio creates a realism that remains uncertain, as the invisibility of characters makes them hard to thoroughly assess. An unseeable drama thus suspends its audience between potential realities, leaving us unable to conclude on its theatrical mechanisms or the veracity of any associated effects. By drawing attention to these uncertainties, one may activate critical listeners, as I go on to explore.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, Toby Lichtig, 'The podcast's the thing to revive radio drama', *Guardian*, 24 Apr 2007 < <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/apr/24/thepodcaststhethingtoevi> > [accessed 20 Mar 2023]; see also, for example, Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge), pp.21-26.

¹⁶⁶ See, for example, Lance Dann, 'Only Half the Story: Radio Drama, Online Audio and Transmedia Storytelling', *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, 12: 1-2 (2014), (p.141-142).

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Richard J. Hand and Mary Traynor, *The Radio Drama Handbook* (New York: Continuum. 2011), pp.65-66.

¹⁶⁸ Martin Esslin, 'The Mind as a Stage', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1: 3 (1971), 5-11, (p. 7).

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Hand and Traynor, p.44; see also, for example, Andrew Crissel, 'Better Than Magritte: How Drama on the Radio Became Radio Drama', *Journal of Radio Studies*, 7: 2 (2000), 464-473, (p.468).

One might also consider the transmissibility of audio drama. Unlike live theatre, listeners are not required to attend a physical location at some given time. Rather, we usually engage with this material when and where we wish, hence the same audio drama can be listened to in numerous locations, and at separate times, by various audience members.¹⁷⁰ In this sense, audio drama can be a private experience, personal to listeners. Here, opportunities may exist to problematise relationships between podcasters and their audiences, where the tendency to address listeners directly may make us feel close to presenters personally. Such an approach could be particularly useful when addressing conspiracy theory podcasts, as they often create the illusion of spontaneous, intimate and exclusive testimony by presenting personal accounts in ways mimicking private conversation (see below). Of course, these interviews are not private at all, and audio drama may be able to approach this by drawing attention to podcasting as a mass communications medium. Hence, one could perhaps invite listeners to observe its tendency to produce illusory proximities; an idea I put into practice, as I will discuss.

These observations informed my approach to *The Strangeness*. I aimed to play on the similarities between audio drama and conspiracist podcasts, developing a fictional analogue able to express the scale, transmissibility and unreliability of online conspiracism. At the same time, I acknowledged that this form would limit my work to audio and its peripherals, so I would need to identify ways to invite questions in this medium. To this end, I set out to borrow and build on the techniques discussed above, designing my audio to produce tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions, by which the audience would be encouraged to listen actively. Hence, I hoped to invite these listeners to interrogate conspiracist podcasts and conspiracy theory culture by extension.

3.2 Developing A Critical Analogue for Online Conspiracism in Episode 153

As I note when introducing this thesis, conspiracy theories can seem reasonable under some circumstances. I set out to address this in my work, and where I aimed to explore a descent into conspiracism, it seemed sensible to open on a precipice, anticipating Adrian's decline. I sought a conspiracy theory with broad appeal, to which rational people might be attracted. For that reason, 153 centres around Adrian's thoughts on work by David Paulides, an investigative author who suggests that a suspicious relationship exists between unsolved missing persons cases and the U.S. National Parks.¹⁷¹ In interviews with various podcasters, Paulides claims

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Rachel Rochester, 'We're Alive: The Resurrection of the Audio Drama in the Anthropocene', *Philological Quarterly*, 93: 3 (2014), 361-381, (p.367).

¹⁷¹ See, for example, David Paulides - When the HUNTERS become the HUNTED - Missing 411', *Coast to Coast AM*, YouTube [00.01.26-00.04.11] < <https://youtu.be/1sZCy5sb-Uc?t=86> > [accessed 09 May 2023].

to have submitted requests to the National Parks Service, asking for a list of missing persons in the Parks, and that these requests have been denied.¹⁷² As Paulides accurately notes, the Parks Service do not actually keep a database of cases, and many seem to go unrecorded.¹⁷³ Hence, Paulides argues, the Parks Service may be complicit in obfuscating evidence, and could even have something to hide. This work has attracted conspiracists, having inspired theories ranging from a prospective coverup to reassure tourists, to less likely schemes, including secret government experiments and the concealment of mysterious beings.¹⁷⁴ Adrian acknowledges these narratives early on but avoids discussing them directly. Instead, he states his own intention to concentrate on data and seems reasonable by comparison. On the one hand, this signals distance between Adrian and conspiracism; on the other, by mentioning such conspiracism the piece gestures to its prevailing proximity. Hence, tension is produced between Adrian's seemingly rational beginnings and conspiracy theory culture, signposting directions he might take.

After introducing Paulides and his work, Adrian examines three cases in detail. For instance, when exploring Aaron Hedges' disappearance, he provides thorough background information including geographical reports, climate conditions, timeframes and distances, and he details techniques used by the search and rescue teams involved. He claims to have compared data published by Paulides with information printed in newspapers and police reports at the time, and to have found no inconsistencies. Here, Adrian's work is presented more like a true crime podcast, calling on substantial data to outline strange events, rather than declaring a grand conspiracy per se. The same applies when Adrian examines other cases, and this lends him credibility despite the fantastical notions associated with Paulides. This is reinforced when he claims to focus on 'history as much as mystery'. Hence, Adrian is initially portrayed as a rational person with reasonable concerns, more interested in analysis than speculation.

Nonetheless, Adrian's personally held positions sometimes bleed through. For instance, when concluding on these cases as a whole, he supposes a 'conspira—', catches the word part way through, reconsiders, then speaks again. This time, Adrian says that a 'coverup' seems increasingly likely. Apprehended, this moment speaks volumes. Perhaps, it suggests Adrian

¹⁷² See, for example, 'David Paulides - Missing 411 Interview - 9-22-13', *Where Did the Road Go*, YouTube [00.03.08-00.04.45] < <https://youtu.be/sAh02EB7SNI?t=188> > [accessed 09 May 2023].

¹⁷³ See, for example, Vanessa Nason, 'Response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request NPS-2018-00465', United States Department of the Interior, 16 Mar 2018 < <https://www.muckrock.com/foi/united-states-of-america-10/missing-persons-national-parks-48542/#file-180253> > [accessed 01 May 2023].

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, '3.20 | National Parks: Containment Theory, Missing 411', *Belief Hole* < <https://beliefhole.com/3-20-national-parks-containment-theory-missing-411/> > [accessed 13 Feb 2023]; see also, for example, 'EP: 150 Missing 411 the UFO Connection with David Paulides', *Blurry Creatures* < <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-150-missing-411-the-ufo-connection-with-david-paulides/id1526885135?i=1000597499317> > [accessed 13 Feb 2023]; see also, for example, The Lore Lodge, 'Missing 411 and The Nephilim Theory', YouTube < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQxg4UAPh6E&ab_channel=TheLoreLodge > [accessed 23 Feb 2023].

recognises conspiracism as generally disreputable, even where its claims may have substance; and, therefore, that he selects a less contentious term. But this only produces more questions: where Adrian is seen to correct himself so as to seem reputable by comparison, attention is drawn to his capacity to deceive or self-censor, and where a potential deception is observed, suspicion is stoked in the audience. Hence, the piece hints at what else Adrian thinks but manages not to say, and how his apparent proximity to conspiracism might discretely inform the selection and representation of data in his podcast. In retrospect, it is notable that this is the only occasion on which Adrian catches himself thus, and among so much other material, this may be too subtle. Therefore, I could and perhaps should have produced more such instances – a motif designed to emphasise Adrian’s deceptive qualities.

A similar approach is taken where Adrian’s podcast starts with a genuine advert for authentic home-security service SimpliSafe (audio I sampled from YouTube). This has some notable implications: on the surface, that Adrian’s listenership is large enough to attract sponsors; and that those sponsors have a stake in his operation. Furthermore, by referencing an authentic company the piece indicates that genuine podcasters are likely faced with the same issues as Adrian: a mirroring made possible by audio drama, given its capacity to imitate the form. This style also reinforces a contemporary setting in which targeted marketing is to be expected, and in such a world, the mechanism also implies that Adrian’s fictional audience may already be prone to security concerns, contingent as such adverts are on their appeal to a captive audience. As the episode begins to address conspiracy theories, then, the advert can be imagined as pandering to, fuelling or maybe even manufacturing paranoia, motivating conspiracism. Hence, its inclusion signals Adrian’s influence over a fictional audience, alludes to his responsibility as someone accepting sponsorships, then reflects those concerns back onto conspiracy theory podcasting in general.

Elsewhere, Adrian comments on his expanding listenership, claiming thousands of downloads per episode. Likewise, he thanks Patreon subscribers at various points in the episode. Without their support, Adrian observes, he would be unable to produce the show. Taken alongside the sponsorship, this deepens Adrian’s portrayal as someone with significant reach, and, one imagines, relative influence. Also, perhaps, as a person with status to lose. As with the advert, relationships between these issues and conspiracy theory culture remain implicit during Adrian’s introduction (although I expose them in subsequent episodes). At this stage in the drama, then, the initial emulation of actual podcasts helps establish key contexts in which conspiracism can be understood when it ensues, facilitating questions about Adrian and conspiracist podcasters by extension.

At other times, Adrian's fallibility is exposed. For instance, he apologises for a typo in artwork associated with this episode. As the letter 'e' has been omitted, the title now reads, 'The Strangness'.



Above: artwork with which each audio file is encoded, demonstrating Adrian's typo. Taken from: *Episode 153*

According to Adrian, the issue was brought to his attention by listeners, and he has had problems amending it since. On the one hand, this indicates a willingness to listen to criticism, suggesting humility. On the other, it exposes his limits: as signalled, Adrian runs a small operation, lacking editorial oversight. Mistakes are evidently possible. Furthermore, they can clearly go undetected by Adrian, and can also be difficult to remedy. Though the typo is small, its presence suggests that more issues could arise elsewhere. Little more is made of this in 153. However, the typo is returned to in successive episodes, where this mistake, although innocent, ignites a conspiracist fantasy (discussed below). Likewise, it suggests a mutual relationship between Adrian and his audience, who seem able to inform as well as to influence him themselves: the latter is reinforced where Adrian notes that he is actually covering Paulides because his audience requested this. When considered alongside the advert, and its suggestion that Adrian has a specific listenership, these interactions with the imaginary audience help to illustrate the ways that Adrian can be motivated to promote ideas important to an unseen community. Hence, Adrian is presented as a realistically complex individual, susceptible to the same complications as genuine podcasters. And at the same time, a base is developed from which he can progress into a personal conspiracism.

Like many real podcasts, the episode also incorporates both music and sound effects. For instance, it opens and closes with an instrumental version of the Stevie Wonder single *Superstition*.¹⁷⁵ Conspicuous by their absence, its lyrics, recalled, suggest, in Stevie's words:

When you believe in things you don't understand, then you suffer.

This intertextual approach creates an ironic tone by foregrounding Adrian's nascent conspiracism with a warning about its dangers; and in doing so it signals contrivance: consider, its inclusion suggests, that the irony was deliberate, especially given the way it summarises Adrian's narrative arc. This also produces a metafictional lens through which to read the performance with a perspective distinct from Adrian's, drawing attention to the way its audio was designed to express metatextual positions. The audio can then be read in terms of its rhetorical qualities, whether mine (as above) or Adrian's (as a supposedly real person). For instance, when Adrian explores Paulides' key cases, a mixture of nature sounds and windchimes can be heard, punctuated with bass booms each time he produces compelling information. Likewise, when discussion turns to Jaryd Atadero, a mournful theme plays, as if designed to elicit sympathy from the audience.¹⁷⁶ So, by drawing attention to the intention involved in selecting these sounds, using the irony mentioned above, my work demonstrates Adrian's ability to manipulate his listeners. And in doing so it also highlights the dubious nature of any claims made in equivalent audio media, wherever style generates allure. Thus, I signal the way conspiracy theory podcasters may use evocative scoring to crystallise their appeal, and more generally even, I draw attention to the way any such media is influenced its creators' perspectives. This approach allows me to maintain and even deepen a productive realism by emulating real podcasts while also reflecting on methods real podcasters employ and limitations they face. Where this pertains to conspiracist claims platformed in the piece, then, it establishes distance between my audience and conspiracist convictions.

As the introduction to a series of episodes, 153 establishes Adrian as a lens turned on digital conspiracism, albeit a particular type: conspiracist podcasts in the making. With Adrian at its centre, this instalment concentrates attention on a prospective conspiracist, not wholly committed to conspiracy theories, but certainly willing to entertain them, as I will go on to discuss. Playing on similarities between audio drama and podcasts in general, I was able to reproduce the structures, styles and identities associated with genuine podcasts, and especially those in the true crime genre. This realism was then deepened where the design

¹⁷⁵ Stevie Wonder, *Superstition* (Motown: 1972).

¹⁷⁶ This is common practice in sound design. For conventional approaches to generating atmospheres and provoking emotional responses through music, see, for example, Stephen Di Benedetto, *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre* (London: Routledge. 2011), pp.128-133.

and portrayal of Adrian engaged with scholarly perspectives on conspiracy theory culture, avoiding stereotypes by presenting a protagonist who might yet become conspiracist, despite his relatively reasonable approach to the material. Where comparisons can clearly be made between Adrian and actual podcasters, positions them as similarly complicated. So, where questions about Adrian are invited, they extend to those creators. Furthermore, by developing and then maintaining tension between Adrian's uncertainty and emerging conspiracism, I was able to refuse conclusions, paving the way for a developing narrative. Hence, this initial episode avoids dismissing conspiracists, and, instead actively recognises that conspiracy theories can appeal to reasonable people, influence their work, then circulate easily online. In this sense, 153 achieves its goals by presenting Adrian and his show as realistic analogues for online conspiracism, thus problematising conspiracy theory culture.

3.3 Problematising Sources in Episode 154

Podcasters sometimes spread conspiracism by platforming conspiracist guests, even where hosts remain unconvinced. Examples include *Sasquatch Chronicles* and *The Confessionals*.¹⁷⁷ In each of these cases, audience members email in personal accounts and are subsequently interviewed by phone, detailing their own experiences with cryptozoological creatures, paranormal entities and UFOs. Sometimes, those interviews stray into conspiracism: guests occasionally speculate about clandestine activities associated with their encounters, such as alleged coverups.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, these productions tend to coalesce into networks in which hosts tend to promote each other's platforms, thus galvanising conspiracy theories.¹⁷⁹ Drawing on these observations, 154 explores relationships between Adrian and third parties. Beginning with leads emailed in by fictional audience members, this second instalment seeks to raise questions about the podcasters Adrian represents, problematising common approaches to sources whose claims risk igniting conspiracism. The episode then seeks to address cross-promotion, incorporating a fictional interview with *Sasquatch Chronicles* host Wes Germer. By collecting these voices and showing the influence each exerts on Adrian, I attempted to activate concerns about the way sources are called on by conspiracy theory podcasters.

¹⁷⁷ See, generally, *Sasquatch Chronicles* < <https://sasquatchchronicles.com/> > [accessed 12 Feb 2023]; see also, generally, *The Confessionals* < <https://www.theconfessionalspodcast.com/> > [accessed 12 Feb 2023].

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, 'Episode 144: The DUMBs (Deep Underground Military Bases)', *The Confessionals* < <https://www.theconfessionalspodcast.com/theconfessionals/episode-144?rq=144> > [accessed 01 May 2023].

¹⁷⁹ For swap-casts, networks and cross-platform collaborations between the podcasts mentioned above, see, for example, *Sasquatch Chronicles* < <https://sasquatchchronicles.com/strange-familiars-the-cowman/> > [accessed 01 May 2023]; see also, *The Confessionals* < <https://sasquatchchronicles.com/the-shape-of-shadows-with-wes-germer-and-tony-merkel/> > [accessed 01 May 2023]; see also, < *The Confessionals* <https://www.theconfessionalspodcast.com/the-blog/listen-sasquatch-chronicles-episode-581-horrorhound-weekend-interviews?rq=sasquatch> > [accessed 01 May 2023]; see also, *The Confessionals* < <https://www.theconfessionalspodcast.com/the-blog/listen-strange-familiars-episode-111-swapcast-conspirinormal> > [accessed 01 May 2023].

Like the previous episode, 154 opens with a sponsorship segment. Another genuine advert (also downloaded from YouTube) promotes the Lancehead Crossbow. Delivered in an American accent and described using imperial measurements, the bow seems aimed at an American audience. As my work was primarily distributed to listeners in the UK, this keeps Adrian's fictional audience at a distance. Likewise, these Americans are separated from Adrian by his English accent. The sponsorship therefore suggests that a geographically and culturally distinct community already invests in Adrian, implying some unspoken similarity between his interests and theirs. Furthermore, as the advert suggests, this community may be interested in weapons, making them seem dangerous, and, by extension, hinting at a dangerous dimension to Adrian. But given the distance established, listeners cannot exactly conclude on this; despite the connections, Adrian is not inside that community per se, and its members remain broadly inaccessible except through Adrian's work. As opposed to expressing concrete terms then, the advert sets up a frame in which Adrian and his sources each become questionable, inviting a cautious approach to these characters and the claims they go on to produce.

This distance then deepened by the emails Adrian discusses, early in the episode. They also tend to come from Americans, and when reading out an example, Adrian adopts an awkward Appalachian accent. A deliberate approach on my part, this impression is noticeably inaccurate, underlining the distance between Adrian and his sources. At the same time, though, the inaccuracy signals that audio can be deceptive: yes, Adrian may be bad at accents, but should the inverse have been true, it suggests, he could have easily faked a source, as too could real podcasters. In hindsight, I could have taken a different approach, with Adrian pulling off an impressive imitation before revealing his deceit, making it hard to trust other voices when these appear in the episode (see below). Nonetheless, this substandard impression foregrounds other sources soon heard from in the piece, suggesting that a listening audience cannot actually know from where those voices originate. For instance, when Adrian plays back audio attributed to sasquatch in the Sierra Mountains, it is impossible to determine whether or not this material was fabricated by the source Adrian cites. In turn, concerns are invited about Adrian's own willingness to accept and platform unverifiable information.

These concerns are then turned on conspiracism when Adrian addresses the mysterious Man in Plaid. This figure appears in numerous messages supposedly mailed to Adrian by listeners, each associating him with strange disappearances. That correspondence leads Adrian to imagine the Man in Plaid a prospective antagonist. This creates questionable narrative, as the

supposedly secret operative seems to dress in the same outfit on numerous occasions, thus outing his secret operation, implying that the story is unrealistic or otherwise more complicated than it may seem. In that vein, it also nods to contemporary folklore regarding the mysterious Men in Black, imbuing the narrative with a supernatural tone.¹⁸⁰ Of course, Adrian may have invented the Man or borrowed the idea from elsewhere. As such, when the same character is mentioned by guests later in the episode (see below) their reality is also made dubious.

The Man in Plaid is discussed in two such interviews, each alleging his role in a coverup. The first concerns Claire, who claims to have seen sasquatch in a National Park, and to have been threatened by such a man afterwards. Unlike the mail read by Adrian, Claire's testimony is verbatim, drawn from an interview on *Sasquatch Chronicles*.¹⁸¹ Adrian's lines were simply added afterwards, imitating genuine conversation. I was careful not to reveal this technique, hoping to maintain the realism already discussed. This helped me to muddy the waters by leaving the likelihood of a possible deception open to interpretation by the audience. However, in doing so, I also sacrificed an opportunity to emphasize Adrian's capacity to editorialise interviews, which may have sown more doubt about his claims. Later in the episode Adrian seems to discuss the Man in Plaid with Wes Germer, who hosts the genuine *Sasquatch Chronicles*. In each case, material is borrowed from authentic sources, adapted, and relocated to fictional scenarios. Contrasting with Claire's section, this second interview is more obviously edited, with Adrian commenting that a complete version exists on his Patreon. Of course, this is inaccessible to the real audience who can only speculate on its reality. But as paywalls are relatively common, and as interviews are often abridged, their most interesting elements harvested to meet formal restraints like runtime and ad breaks, I preserve the possibility that this material is authentic, once again eschewing conclusions. Collected, then, this work with The Man in Plaid maintains tension between the more and less credible claims made in the episode, problematising Adrian's sources and his approach to them throughout.

I sought a similar outcome when selecting voices to use in these interviews. Such is her faltering tone that Claire seems believably shaken, and Wes has an authentic accent, lending him a realistic aspect. At the same time, each produces incredible claims, such as the existence of mysterious hominids and a conspiracy to silence key witnesses, making them seem relatively dubious. As established, Adrian can edit audio and could, therefore, have fabricated these conversations; else, his guests may be real in the world of the fiction, but

¹⁸⁰ These beings are common in folklore and the trope may be recognisable to some listeners: see, for example, Jerome Clark, *Strange Encounters* (Santa-Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. 2000), pp.170-172.

¹⁸¹ See 'EP:515 | Shouldn't Be Alive', *Sasquatch Chronicles*, 15 Feb 2016 < <https://sasquatchchronicles.com/sc-ep515-i-shouldnt-be-alive/> > [accessed 20 May 2022].

nonetheless mistaken in their claims; one could even be meant to read these notions as real, in the world of the fiction, despite their strange implications. No clarity is provided on this issue though, keeping reality ambiguous. The resulting mystique is then accentuated by differences between Adrian's approach between episodes 153 and 154. Previously he drew on public data, citing materials the audience could seek out and assess in their own time, including the National Parks Service website, books by David Paulides, and genuine data regarding missing persons cases. By contrast, in this instalment, Adrian relies on a small pool of sources whose claims remain entirely unsubstantiated. Hence, listeners are entered into an uncertain space, in which conspiracists become questionable, despite their apparent sincerity.

Where these questions arise, Adrian is portrayed as less reliable than he initially seemed, amplifying claims made by his peers and listeners with relatively little inspection. Indeed, a quickened pace and staccato intonation during the introduction to this episode each imply Adrian's excitement and his eagerness to engage with sources like Claire. This contrasts with the steady tone he maintains throughout 153. Moreover, he now appears to welcome conspiracism where it arises from his interviewees, asserting its plausibility. This contrasts starkly with his reflections on more conventional explanations for the missing persons pattern: on opening the episode, Adrian comments that such theories are not as realistic as they may seem, such as serial killers and cartels; and though he gives reasons for this, it is notable that the explanation lacks detail. Meanwhile, the material he gravitates to is more unusual than those initial suggestions. As such, Adrian becomes increasingly questionable by latching onto one narrative in specific, without thoroughly exploring alternative options. Thus, it is suggested that Adrian may have rushed his assessment, abandoning investigative diligence to pursue more spectacular explanations.

This approach draws attention to issues of competence, underlined by Adrian's recurring reference to the 'Strangness' typo, about which he apologises again. Likewise, where Adrian seems keen to spend more time pushing conspiracy theories and promoting his peers than debunking them, questions arise about his biases: commercial, conspiracist or both. Here, Adrian can be seen as a gatekeeper of sorts, selecting particular sources and approaches to them without a critical approach. Hence, his reliability continues to diminish in relation to a burgeoning conspiracism.

Despite Adrian's dwindling trustworthiness and his questionable sources, the work avoids wholly dismissing these characters. For instance, when listeners are transported to a National Park, it is through Claire's experience as a British tourist. She mentions this often, referring to the foreignness of her surroundings and the way she is treated by locals: as the Man in Plaid

is said to have asked, 'Do you have police where you come from?' Here, like with the American adverts and accents, audio drama demonstrates its ability to convey its listeners to unusual places while maintaining an essential distance. Where our senses are limited, we visit with the unknown, and perhaps this relationship makes some dubious claims more palatable, their extraordinary implications less strange when compared to and contained within equally strange worlds. That is to say that a grand conspiracy might seem easier to imagine because it appears to be happening elsewhere, in places where things might work differently and which we can only access in a limited capacity. After all, we cannot know what could and cannot occur in these national parks, because we are not really there and only listen to a representation. Hence, sources like Claire are able to invite listeners down ever more uncertain paths without appearing completely delusional. Here then, by harnessing the audio medium and playing on its reliance on imagination, the audience are encouraged to speculate, to defer conclusions and instead remain open about conspiracism in podcasts such as *The Strangeness*. So, Adrian's conspiracism is made to seem acceptable so long as its subjects remain inaccessible; a lure, setting up issues to be addressed in the next episode, when Adrian explores equivalent claims about strange disappearances in the UK.

154 builds on ideas introduced in 153, encouraging audience members to remain critical as Adrian descends into a conspiracism which might otherwise lure them after him. Throughout, audio drama demonstrates its capacity to create a sense of separation between the real audience and its imaginary counterpart, producing various effects: on the one hand, this distance establishes uncertainties that invited concern; on the other, it discourages the wholesale dismissal of conspiracy theories in the episode, despite the relative untrustworthiness of the various sources cited by Adrian. This work advances the narrative in ways that resist conclusion, maintaining a sense of mystery that encourages consideration by listeners. At the same time, it indicates a path Adrian may take, suggesting that he may continue to call on dubious data and thus promote unsubstantiated theories. In that sense, this episode deepens questions about conspiracy theory podcasts by demonstrating the unreliable foundations on which many conspiracy theories are based. Likewise, it criticises the networks from which conspiracy theories arise, authenticating unreliable testimony in platforming Claire then directing listeners to *Sasquatch Chronicles*. The approach therefore emphasises Adrian's complicity in contributing to conspiracist echo chambers.¹⁸² In hindsight, though, this could have been explored more thoroughly in the episode, otherwise addressed

¹⁸² For more on echo chambers and conspiracism, see, for example, Hilde Van den Bulck and Aaron Hyzen, 'Of lizards and ideological entrepreneurs: Alex Jones and Infowars in the relationship between populist nationalism and the post-global media ecology', *The International Communication Gazette*, 82: 1 (2020), 42-59, (pp.46-47); see also, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, "Digital fluency": towards young people's critical use of the internet', *Journal of Information Literacy*, 6: 2 (2012), 35-55, (p.37).

more directly. For instance, Germer could have offered to promote Adrian's podcast, and by introducing such an idea, I may have drawn out deeper concerns about the motives behind Adrian's choice of sources. Nonetheless, work in this episode establishes the idea that associating exclusively with conspiracist sources brings about a change in Adrian; an idea picked up on in 155. In this sense, 154 invites questions about Adrian and the authentic podcasters he represents, problematising relationships between these presenters and their sources.

3.4 Addressing Radicalisation in Episode 155

According to Karen Douglas, conspiracism is usually motivated by concerns about the unknown.¹⁸³ Indeed, conspiracy theories provide 'cognitive closure', allowing conspiracists to conclude on uncertain circumstances by imagining underlying structures.¹⁸⁴ This can be dangerous, though. In a 2010 publication, communications scholars Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller show that, in addition to their capacity to spread misinformation, conspiracy theories can also be a 'radicalising' influence: by imagining clandestine antagonists and establishing communities of opposition, these narratives create 'demonologies', 'delegitimise and condemn voices of dissent and moderation', and occasionally act as 'a spur to violent action'.¹⁸⁵ Meanwhile, as Michela Del Vicario et al demonstrate, online networks help conspiracists to 'aggregate in communities of interest', reinforcing 'confirmation bias, segregation, and polarization'.¹⁸⁶ Although these processes are not always associated with violent extremism, research demonstrates a connection, showing that those who promote conspiracism are prone to radicalisation, becoming increasingly susceptible to extremism.¹⁸⁷ Bearing this in mind, 155 set out to explore Adrian's concerns when addressing a mystery he cannot solve, observing his reliance on increasingly ambiguous sources, and the extreme conclusions he draws when treating these voices as credible leads. By examining Adrian in this context, I hoped to raise questions about the dangers of online conspiracism, and particularly its potential to radicalise individuals entangled in unsubstantiated claims.

¹⁸³ See, for example, Karen M. Douglas et al, 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', in *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40(1) (2019), 1-33, (pp.7-11).

¹⁸⁴ Patrick J. Leman, and Marco Cinnirella, 'Beliefs in conspiracy theories and the need for cognitive closure', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4(378) (2013), 1-10, (p.1).

¹⁸⁵ Jamie Bartlett, and Carl Miller, *The Power of Unreason*, (London: DEMOS, 2010), p.24.

¹⁸⁶ Michela Del Vicario et al, 'The spreading of misinformation online', *PNAS*, 113: 3 (2016), 554-559, (p.558).

¹⁸⁷ See, for example, Abdul Basit, 'Conspiracy Theories and Violent Extremism: Similarities, Differences and the Implications', *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 13: 3 (2021), 1-9, (p.9); see also, for example, Francesco Farinelli, *Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE* (Luxembourg: Publications Office for the European Union. European Commission, Radical Awareness Network. 2021), pp.6-7; see also, for example, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Marc-André Argentino, 'The QAnon Conspiracy Theory: A Security Threat in the Making', *CTC Sentinel*, 13: 7 (2020), 37-44, (pp.41-42).

Like previous instalments, 155 opens with an advert. On this occasion, the product and company were each entirely concocted, albeit in the style of the genuine commercials I borrowed in my previous episodes. This material promotes night-vision goggles, made by a fictional company. Delivered in an American accent, which I performed, it advises prospective buyers to 'keep an eye on your property', 'hunt your territory', and that these goggles are 'now available online', implying that they can be purchased anywhere in the world. The episode returns to these suggestions during its conclusion, when Adrian discloses his intention to use a sample set of goggles, mailed to him by his sponsors Black Owl. As Adrian notes, he plans to watch the woodland opposite his home: armed with the crossbow previously advertised, he anticipates strange men wearing plaid. Here, the piece draws on techniques already developed, revisiting home security concerns in relation to Adrian's mounting anxieties. The medium made it easy enough to fabricate an advert suited to my aims. Thus, I maintain the realism established earlier and continue to underline the foreignness of sources drawn on by Adrian in the two previous episodes; and at the same time, I am also able to steer the drama towards particular ends. Combined with Adrian's personal narrative, for instance, these ideas produce new implications: where conspiracism migrates to his back garden, it seems to come home to Adrian, and perhaps to his audience by extension. So, when Adrian imagines his house besieged by conspirators, he is presented as an altogether different victim, encircled by the very theories from which such notions arise: someone lured, snared, and eventually drawn to extremes by his own emergent conspiracism. Moreover, by implying that the goggles can be purchased overseas, then returning to them at its close, the episode invites concerns about conspiracy theory culture's transmissibility online, suggesting that a global audience may be vulnerable to the same pitfalls as Adrian, should they take his lead.

Similar impressions are encouraged elsewhere in the episode, for instance, in audio supposedly recorded a week before its premiere. Here, attention is drawn to the crossbow several times while Adrian conducts primary research at an abandoned quarry. He notes that he probably should not have brought a firearm – an observation soon contradicted by Foley sound, in which Adrian can be heard to load the weapon anyway. Hence, tension is produced, between Adrian's erstwhile rationalism and his increasingly extreme concerns. The bow is then mentioned again on his terrified departure from the scene, when he asks:

'What the fuck was I going to do with a fucking crossbow? Shoot a bigfoot? Shoot a government contractor?'

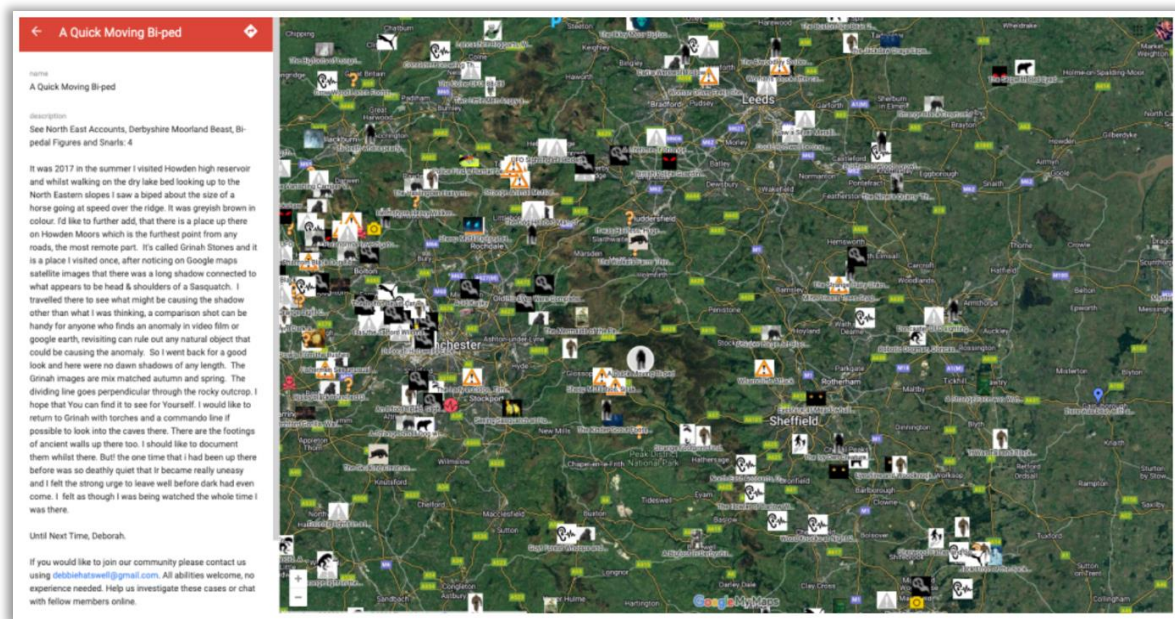
Here, too, Adrian seems unable to decide whether or not he really did encounter something strange, positioning him as not wholly committed to a conspiracist narrative, but swayed by

one, nonetheless. This suspension between positions reveals a trap into which Adrian may fall. And where audio supposedly captured at the quarry is presented as having been recorded a whole week before its release, Adrian's uncertainties here, and his concerns that he *might* have shot at someone in the Peaks, contrast with his ensuing *intention* to fire on imaginary intruders (see above). As such, the episode highlights Adrian's accelerating decline from a rational position into one much more extreme and even violent.

The episode's structure expresses a similar trend towards conviction. Rather than aping previous instalments by introducing a hypothesis and plan to investigate, Adrian diverges from the established approach by opening 155 with a much more personal update. Voice shaking from the start, Adrian claims that someone has been deleting his uploads, that the typo, 'The Strangness', was an attack on his credibility perpetrated by mysterious agents, and that he has, since the last episode, discovered the same conspiracy at work in the UK. He does not support these assertions with evidence but sounds vehement, nonetheless. Those claims are unusually speculative, and in contrast with the questioning tone established across previous instalments, Adrian's newfound convictions suggests his increasing instability. In hindsight, I could have drawn more attention to this by having Adrian admit a lack of supporting data before proceeding to speculate anyway. Perhaps considering his own change of tack, Adrian stops himself after a few moments, saying it seems sensible to discuss recent events, so as to validate his less credible claims. He then backtracks through material recorded in the interim between episodes, such as the quarry investigation, before returning to the same conclusions at the close. These leaps back and forward are indicated by a mixture of announcements regarding Adrian's location: the car, a pub, the Peak District, etc. Likewise, time and location are each indicated by the audio texture, as all supposedly primary research recordings were created using foley sound, contrasting with contemporary reflections from Adrian that each feature his conventional background music (see page 68). Thus, a frame is established around Adrian, allowing listeners to explore his transformation since the previous episode by retracing his personal steps. In general, then, the shift away from case studies and towards Adrian himself draws attention to his emergent conspiracism and its influence on the podcast.

This retracing process begins with a regurgitated conversation between Adrian and the mysterious Nathan. Aside from his name, Nathan is presented as an anonymous source on a telephone line. From the outset, Adrian notes that he has applied modulating effects to this voice, as Nathan requested anonymity. While this seems reasonable, it also reinforces his ambiguous origins and could also stimulate concerns about Nathan's reality. After all, Nathan could be played by a deceptive Adrian. As I perform both characters, the process also works to disguise my voice. Furthering this, I adopted a convincing Northern accent when playing

Nathan, and was careful to ensure that this remained detectable despite the modulation. While this distinguished the voices, avoiding a break in the realism, the regional dialect and inflection also suggested Nathan's origins in Yorkshire, and thus his proximity to Adrian compared to the Americans previously featured. Building on this, Nathan speaks about a map, to which Adrian then directs listeners, comprising thousands of encounters with sasquatch and other strange entities, including several experiences in the UK Peaks.



Above: the map as it appears on Adrian's website. Taken from: *Episode 155*. August 29, 2020

Although its claims are not at all verifiable, this map is not exclusive to the drama, can be examined by a curious audience and seems relatively genuine in that sense. Nathan is less tangible by comparison, and where Adrian only grants access to him through a distorting medium, this new voice becomes increasingly questionable. Nonetheless, Adrian accepts Nathan's claims, treating them as leads as the episode develops. This process refers back to the introduction, in which Adrian claims to have hit a dead end prior to meeting Nathan, contextualising his apparent susceptibility to the whims of someone whose claims he is cannot properly assess. Here then, Adrian reveals his willingness to pursue a unlikely leads so long as they appeal to his existing concerns, both commercial and personal, and where this indicates a desire to reach conclusions, unlikely though they may be, this process highlights issues with conspiracism in general. At the same time, there is a presiding insinuation that Adrian knows more about Nathan than he discloses in the episode, having access to the unedited recording. Hence, a wedge is driven between Adrian and his listeners, distancing him from my own audience by extension.

As the phone call continues, Nathan is shown to be relatively extreme in his conspiracism, at least compared to Adrian. Presenting ideas new to Adrian, he suggests that strange disappearances, sasquatch and the Man in Plaid may be connected to biblical events, then claims that this conspiracy is more widespread than even Adrian imagines. Here, Nathan can be seen to coax Adrian towards progressively unusual commitments by promising more information and an opportunity to evade the dead end – so long as Adrian helps him in return, by broadcasting his theories on the podcast. The scheme seems to work. Like Nathan, Adrian starts to engage with biblical apocrypha. Likewise, he begins to entertain supernatural explanations for strange disappearances, imagining the Man in Plaid a spectre also present in the UK, as opposed to a purely human agent. Indeed, Adrian follows in Nathan's footsteps; quite literally too, insofar as he is drawn to the quarry. Here then, Adrian's connections to the broader conspiracist community are demonstrated via Nathan, as are the effects these networks have on his position. This constructs a *mise en abyme*: Nathan is reflected in Adrian, suggesting that, as he leads Adrian on, so too may Adrian drive his listeners deeper into conspiracism. And where Adrian has already been made questionable (see above) this suggests that genuine listeners should choose an alternative path, questioning the extremes to which Adrian travels and their introduction by Nathan, a motivated party.

At the end of the episode, Adrian observes that, if the existence of strange disappearances and anomalous hominids are being concealed in multiple countries, there must be some overarching authority responsible for so grand a conspiracy. He has no evidence to support this, having returned from the quarry empty handed, but he still commits to the idea. Likewise, where Adrian can be seen to promote these tropes, pertaining to secret governments and clandestine international fraternities, he expresses ideas commonly associated with dangerous conspiracy theories, such as a global cabal. As these perspectives arise only after the conversation with Nathan, more attention is drawn to Nathan's radicalising influence and the way those networks Adrian plugs into then drive him to progressive extremes.

Here, the episode signals a potential destination, suggesting Adrian's arc is incomplete and may yet carry him to more problematic conclusions. That destination remains prospective, though. After all, Adrian is still not wholly committed to the narratives he presents; although it is clear that conspiracism has altered his world, he is not completely convinced of any particular claim, remaining suspicious and, therefore, open to further exploration. As he comments in his closing remarks, 'I plan to get to the bottom of this.' In this sense, the work explores Adrian's willingness to entertain wild theories, but also avoids concluding on them, maintaining those mysteries with which Adrian is fascinated. Mirroring this, Adrian invites his audience to come to their own conclusions. And where he notes a need for additional data,

which he says he intends to gather from more interviews and expeditions, listeners are reminded that, like Adrian, they have nothing concrete to work with. Even Adrian's primary research is dubious: where listeners experience the quarry through audio alone, they can only *imagine* conspirators, or perhaps their insubstantiality. Nonetheless, Adrian encourages the audience to engage with successive episodes. Hence, questions remain as to Adrian's fate, as well as the direction of his work. Where these combine with his commercial motives (marketing his Patreon and so on) as well as his increasingly unusual suspicions, the work encourages concerns about online conspiracism; about its motives, its insubstantialities, the mysteriousness that sustains its allure, and how this can enable extreme perspectives.

155 portrays conspiracy theory culture as a radicalising influence, showcasing the processes that sometimes transform people like Adrian into dangerous extremists. Doing so, the episode builds on strategies developed previously: where earlier episodes produced distance between Adrian and his sources, making him seem rational by comparison, Adrian draws closer to those sources in this instalment, adopts their questionable perspectives and is then himself distanced from the audience. As such, he approaches unusual extremes. This is useful, as it suggests listeners would do well to maintain scepticism about Adrian, also distancing them from his conspiracism. Activated thus, the audience are positioned to criticise the processes by which conspiracism becomes a radicalising influence. As an open end to the series, then, 155 wraps ideas up without a decisive finale, implying Adrian's ongoing descent and hinting at the eventual destination. Here his conspiracism is portrayed as roundly dangerous, suggesting that irrational speculation and threatening convictions can arise from our fears and uncertainties, and from a desire to locate security in conclusions, even where evidence is lacking.

3.5 Critical Reflection on *The Strangeness*

The Strangeness aimed to explore audio drama as a means to address conspiracy theory culture and particularly online conspiracism. Taking conspiracy theory podcasting as a key example, I used audio drama to address issues related to the production and distribution of such content, raising questions about the ease with which conspiracism proliferates online, the trustworthiness of sources called on by conspiracists, and the processes by which conspiracy narratives sometimes stimulate radicalisation. By concentrating on these issues, the work was able to draw attention to concerns associated with conspiracy theories and their circulation in the contemporary media landscape.

Audio drama proved valuable to this process where it allowed me to emulate and raise questions about approaches typical to podcasts themselves, such as serialisation, unverifiable sources and intangible evidence, evocative music, relationships between creators, their listeners and sponsors, and the transmissibility of digital information. Here, a realistic representation of the media in question was vital, and this extends to Adrian as host. By portraying Adrian as neither wholly conspiracist nor sceptic, but someone seemingly caught between the two, I was able to suspend the audience between possibilities, provoking questions about Adrian's direction and the influences he encounters en route to an eventual conspiracism. In creating a convincing reproduction, then, Adrian becomes analogous to genuine podcasters, and I was therefore able to develop a podcast examining podcasts, suggesting that a theatre audience engage critically with real conspiracy theories and the technologies that enable their circulation.

Meanwhile, I capitalised on audio drama's call to imagination, generating distance between the foreign, intangible conspiracies discussed, and the comparatively concrete world in which listeners engaged with my work. As such, my audience were presented with genuine conspiracy theories without being compelled to arrive at convictions, their prevailing mystique sustained by an exotic setting and episodic structure, each resisting conclusion. Then, by relocating the narrative to the UK, I worked to collapse that distance, relaying its previous uncertainties through the seeming unlikeliness of such a conspiracy occurring under more familiar circumstances. This closeness then contrasts with the way evidence is kept at a distance, mediated as it is by Adrian; so its questionability deepens. Critical listening is thus encouraged as Adrian progresses towards increasingly extreme perspectives. By moving easily between locations then, and embracing the serialisation conventional to audio drama, my work plays on the medium's capacity to connect audiences to fantastic worlds that contrast with listeners' own. In turn, this helps demonstrate the allure of conspiracism before discouraging audience members from aligning with unreasonable claims. As such, listeners are positioned to question both intrigue and insubstantiality as aspects central to online conspiracism.

Although I played on audio drama's qualities in these ways, I could also have done so more extensively at times. In retrospect, I should have developed my work with accents and voices to produce direct questions about audio trickery. Although I chose to work alone on this piece, I could realistically have employed cast, playing Adrian's sources. Had pandemic conditions

worsened, we could still have recorded sections remotely.¹⁸⁸ This would have allowed me to develop convincing interviews, only to have Adrian mention, afterwards, that he has started working with actors who give voice to his email conversations. Hence, I could have positioned these voices as evidence before drawing this into doubt. Extending this logic, had I written Adrian a line about other podcasters working similarly with actors, I may have been able to redirect these concerns to programmes in the same vein. Elsewhere, I could have been more explicit about cross-promotion. By including additional content concerning Adrian's relationships with creators in the podcasting sphere, I may have stimulated concerns about the networks at play in conspiracy theory culture. While these relationships were sometimes implied and are discussed in more detail on the website, a more explicit approach could perhaps have produced questions concerning conspiracism in the online ecosystem, opening up additional critical distance between my audience and conspiracy theory culture, especially podcasts. I should also note the limitations of so thorough a commitment to realism: although realistic aesthetic produced some useful effects, I could eventually have signalled the true nature of this work. By revealing itself as a fiction, my work may have more fully impressed on its audience the deceptive potential in audio. Bearing these observations in mind, opportunities were clearly overlooked, and, had the changes suggested here been implemented, the piece could have been more effective in activating critical listeners.

Where I set out to question online conspiracism, I discovered and implemented audio dramaturgies by which a listening audience were invited to criticise conspiracy theory podcasts as a wide-reaching medium, populated by creators who produce questionable claims. Rather than dismissing these wholesale, *The Strangeness* concentrated on the issues that make narratives in this realm so unreliable, including the positionality of podcast hosts, the intangibility of audio as a medium and the way online networks help theories to spread without critical oversight. This was particularly the case where I was able to develop approaches to audio, narrative and compositional structures each mirroring conspiracy theory podcasts, thus exposing those qualities that render podcasters' claims unrealistic or simply difficult to substantiate. Changes could certainly have been made, and these would have added to the overall experience, but the work was still largely effective in using audio drama to problematise conspiracism in the digital media ecosystem.

¹⁸⁸ At the time this work's initiation I anticipated further disruption such as travel restrictions, studio closures, etc. The audio format created opportunities to make theatre despite these complications; as such, I could have worked with a cast from the outset.

4 Chapter Three: *The Loom of Athena* (2022)

The Loom of Athena (2022) was a durational performance installation presented on 6 July 2022, in The Black Box Studio at the University of York, UK. I wrote, designed and appeared in the production which ran for six hours, comprised a variety of physical and digital media and was attended by 46 audience members. Building on my previous outputs, I wanted this third piece to address epistemological questions about conspiracy theory culture: how do conspiracy theories process knowledge, where does our knowledge about them originate and what does this suggest about conspiracism?

I commenced pre-production by continuing my research into how conspiracy theories are constructed and what types of knowledge these processes call on. Neal Levy demonstrates that conspiracy theorists are actually more interested in collecting and assessing data than people who subscribe to official narratives.¹⁸⁹ As Levy observes, this empiricism helps conspiracists question 'epistemological authorities', positioning themselves in opposition.¹⁹⁰ Of course, the resulting claims are rarely as robust as those made by professional researchers, who tend to work in regulated fields with methodologies designed to deliver reliable results. Indeed, private investigations are prone to mistakes and bias, and they often lack expertise, especially where studies do not pass through the conventional systems by which scholarly knowledge is validated.¹⁹¹ Hence, I asked how conspiracy theorists locate and organise information, how this supports conspiracy allegations, and how these relationships with data can lead participants to endorse dubious claims. These questions began to shape my practice, which became increasingly interested in how we establish narratives about conspiracies and conspiracism.

Conspiracy theories appeal to a desire to locate and explain patterns.¹⁹² As such, conspiracy theorists often base their allegations on data.¹⁹³ However, conspiracy theories are not necessarily contingent on data analysis; more often, these narratives stem from the instinctive suspicion that correlations imply causation, traceable to clandestine schemes.¹⁹⁴ This notable lack of analysis also helps explain the scapegoating widely associated with conspiracy theory

¹⁸⁹ See, for example, Neil Levy, 'Do Your Own Research!', *Synthese*, 200: 356 (2022), 1-19, (p.2).

¹⁹⁰ Levy, (pp.15-17).

¹⁹¹ See, for example, Keith Harris, 'What's epistemically wrong with conspiracy theorising?', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 84 (2018), 235-257, (pp.252-254).

¹⁹² See Karen M. Douglas et al, 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26: 6 (2017), 538-542, (p.539).

¹⁹³ See Levy, (p.2).

¹⁹⁴ See, for example, Richard A. Friedman, 'Why Humans Are Vulnerable to Conspiracy Theories', *Psychiatric Services*, 72: 1 (2020), 3-4, (p.4).

culture.¹⁹⁵ I set out to examine these processes, observing patterns in data related to conspiracism and assessing their origins. By drawing attention to these issues in my theatre, I hoped to problematise the human tendency to conflate coincidence with causality when engaging with conspiracy suspicions.

Given these aims, I needed to locate appropriate data to process. I began by gathering data related to relatively commonplace branches of conspiracism, concentrating concerns regarding clandestine surveillance, institutional corruption and military secrets.¹⁹⁶ Likewise, I drew on scholarship exploring relationships between conspiracism and paranoia, the threat conspiracy theories pose to democratic life, etc.¹⁹⁷ Acknowledging that all representation is necessarily subjective and selective, I also understood that my history with these topics would inform my analysis.¹⁹⁸ Bearing this in mind, I set out to address my own biases when working as an analyst. I therefore aimed to demonstrate the instability of any observations I made when presenting on conspiracism, hoping to encourage the audience to question my theatre despite its recourse to data. And in establishing this approach, I also hoped to draw attention to the ways we produce and qualify claims about conspiracism.

The ensuing production was divided into six 50-minute performance-sections, separated by 10-minute intermissions. Throughout, I improvised miniature lectures about conspiracism, each lasting approximately five minutes. 57 were given in total. This work took place on a stage 163 square-metres in area, beneath a large digital banner displaying the name of the performance, superimposed on imagery discussed below. Nine white plinths were positioned along three edges of this space, and a different hat or mask was placed on each. As I went on to explain during the performance, three were associated with theatre productions about conspiracy theories, three represented seminal studies on conspiracism, and three signified metanarratives prevalent in conspiracy theory culture (see the table below). By working in factors of three, I aimed to sow the notion that patterns were key to the performance, creating a quasi-numerological aesthetic and establishing themes to which I could return.¹⁹⁹ A network of string was suspended tautly above this space. Comprising 35 individual lines, the web

¹⁹⁵ See, for example, Jan-Willem van Prooijen, 'Conspiracy thinking: A scapegoat is always useful', *The UNESCO Courier*, 2021: 2 (2021), 42-45, (pp.43-44); see also for example, Daniel Allington, *Conspiracy Theories, Radicalisation and Digital Media* (Global Network on Extremism and Technology. 2021), p.5.

¹⁹⁶ Having already addressed such issues in my literature review as well as in previous work, I was equipped to revisit them in new contexts.

¹⁹⁷ Examples can be found earlier in this thesis (see pages 11-12).

¹⁹⁸ See, for example, Morwenna Griffiths, 'Research and The Self', in *The Routledge Companion to Research in The Arts*, ed. by Michael Biggs and Henrick Karlsson (Oxon: Routledge. 2010), pp.167-185 (p.184).

¹⁹⁹ For more on the relevance of threes, see, for example, Emory B. Lease, 'The Number Three, Mysterious, Mystic, Magic', *Classical Philology*, 14 (1919), 56-73, pp.56-58; see also, for example, Roland A. Laroche, 'Popular Symbolic/Mystical Numbers in Antiquity', *Latomus*, 54: 3 (1995), 568-567, (p.570).

connected each plinth to all others, visualising those patterns and producing an arena in which I was then able to explore the connections I constructed in *The Loom*.

Plinth	Garment	Association
1	Pink Balaclava	Theatre by Proto-Type, who wear pink balaclavas when they address the suspicions real conspiracies can ignite (see page 24).
2	Yarmulke	Theatre by Marlon Solomon, whose autobiographical work about antisemitism regards bias, scapegoating and extremism in conspiracy theory culture (see page 21).
3	Fedora	Theatre by Dominic Orlando, whose testimonial drama alleges corruption and conspiracy inside U.S. law enforcement agencies; the fedora nodding to film noir aesthetics (see page 18).
4	Goblin Mask	Scholarship in which conspiracists are seen to be superstitious. ²⁰⁰
5	Aluminium Foil Hat	Scholarship proposing that conspiracism is paranoid. ²⁰¹
6	MAGA Cap	Scholarship arguing that conspiracy theories stimulate radicalisation. ²⁰²
7	Military Side-cap	Claims that defense agencies are privy to alien intelligence. ²⁰³
8	Witch's Hat	Claims that elite institutions have been infiltrated by occultists. ²⁰⁴
9	N95 Medical Mask	Claims that the coronavirus pandemic was premeditated. ²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ See, for example, Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1963), pp.94-95

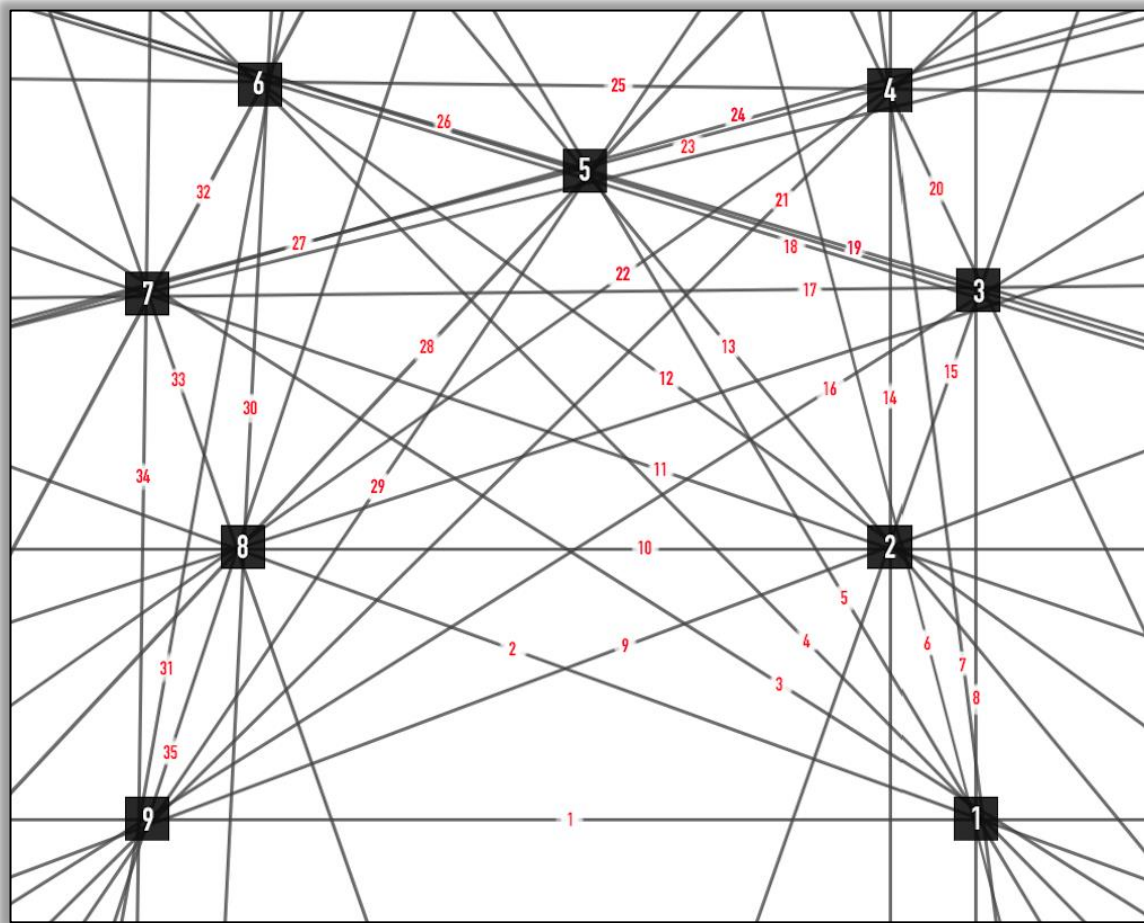
²⁰¹ See, for example, Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', *International Affairs* 43: 3 (1967), 615-616, (p.29)

²⁰² See, for example, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, *The Power of Unreason* (London: DEMOS. 2010), p.24.

²⁰³ See, for example, Curtis Peebles, *Watch the skies! : a chronicle of the flying saucer myth* (Washington : Smithsonian Institution Press), pp.245-253.

²⁰⁴ See for example, Günseli Yalcinkaya, 'Demons, blood harvests and occult rituals: inside the new Satanic Panic', *Dazed*, 02 Dec 2022 < <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/57670/1/satanic-panic-doja-cat-mainstream-4chan-conspiracy-adrenochrome> > [accessed 07 Dec 2022].

²⁰⁵ See, for example, *Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19*, dir. by Mikki Willis (Elevate Films, 2020).



Above: drawing created during my development process, demonstrating my pattern-making approach by showing the studio layout, including nine plinths and 35 lines tied between them.

Each lecture was improvised in response to a uniquely numbered cue card, selected by rolling dice, a crucial activity as I will discuss, generating values between 1 and 120. After each roll, I retrieved the associated card from a filing cabinet upstage, containing 120 such prompts. In general, cards addressed conspiracy theories, associated media and research on conspiracism. Each displayed an image and title suggesting a different issue, though many addressed the same themes as others, introducing new perspectives. QR codes were printed on the reverse, as I go on to discuss. Before moving on, I showed each card to the audience, using a camera attached to a large television upstage. The ensuing improvisations were then supported by my lecture notes, prepared in advance and piled neatly on a desk upstage-centre. On the completion of each, the corresponding card was clipped to the string above, between two plinths of my choosing. In selecting these locations, I noted how the lecture in question related to the garments on each side. As such, the space evolved as the performance progressed, gradually populated with cue cards.

Signage suggested that audience members should come and go as they liked, with seating able to accommodate up to 27 attendees at a time. This was organised into three zones, level with the performance space. Developing on the patterns discussed above, nine chairs faced inwards midstage left, nine downstage centre and nine mid-stage right. This layout allowed audience members to look across the installation at one another, inserting attendees into the work as part of its overall aesthetic. Likewise, this design made it easy for me to engage directly with audience members, whom I spoke to without a fourth wall, asking questions during lectures. While some were rhetorical, other questions necessitated answers (examples discussed below) thus constructing a participatory dynamic. Building on this at the end of each performance section, I verbally invited the audience to enter the performance space and explore, scanning the codes on cards during each 10-minute intermission. This mechanism allowed attendees to examine notes unique to each lecture at a website accompanying the work. As I go on to explore, each note contained links to others on the site, as well as connections to relevant websites, articles, etc. This feature introduced a digital rhizome, connected to the physical installation – an exercise borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, by which I sought to invite the impression that this performance was merely one offshoot of some vast, seemingly perpetual web of perspectives.²⁰⁶ In physicalising this virtual network, the production became a gateway to information that I would then attempt to encourage my audience to scrutinise, and which they would, nonetheless, be unable to thoroughly examine, given its scale and the relative time constraints. Taken together, these approaches sought to bring the audience into the work, thus to demonstrate their centrality to the meaning-making process – participant in cultural practices to which the performance alluded, but incapable of comprehending conspiracism in its entirety.

I will analyse this work in the following sections. Section One will focus on connectivity as an epistemological structure central to conspiracism, asking how I explored dynamic and evolving relationships in *The Loom*. I will begin by discussing relationships between the plinths, cue cards, and digital media in my design. Next, I will question my attempts to examine the same connectivity during lectures and interactions with the audience. In each case, I will ask how *The Loom* examined conspiracism as a phenomenon interested in patterns, connections and knowledge. Section Two will then focus on the rules, instructions and guidelines I set up as a framework to respond to in order to. I will ask what limitations these produced and how these helped me to demonstrate various constraints experienced by conspiracists, scholars and artists addressing conspiracy theory culture. Analysis in this section will examine the

²⁰⁶ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia' trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum. 2004), pp.23-24.

conventions governing my engagements with the installation and its audience, considering my approach to improvisation, the rituals this work established, durational constraints, the rules governing my relationships with data, and instructions regarding my conversations with attendees. In general, work in this section will examine the dramaturgical mechanisms that made questionable any data and perspectives explored. I will then conclude on *The Loom*, discussing its capacity to invite criticism about epistemological processes associated with conspiracy theory culture.

4.1 A Theatre of Connections: Inviting Questions About Existing Perspectives on Conspiracism and Its Complexities

Scholarship has traditionally characterised conspiracism as the impression that everything is connected to some overarching scheme.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, research shows that such totalizing worldviews can enhance existing anxieties and especially concerns about outsiders, as well as political opponents, making it easy to imagine that those groups collude to advance their collective causes.²⁰⁸ In truth, it may be unrealistic to portray conspiracism thus, as data recently analysed by Colin Klein et al demonstrates that most conspiracists are comparatively discerning.²⁰⁹ Although these individuals do not necessarily buy into all claims, nor connect all events to one narrative, conspiracism nonetheless exhibits a tendency to correlate phenomena, then associate imagined causality with clandestine antagonists. Hence, connectivity remains central to conspiracism, preoccupied, as it is, with hidden networks.

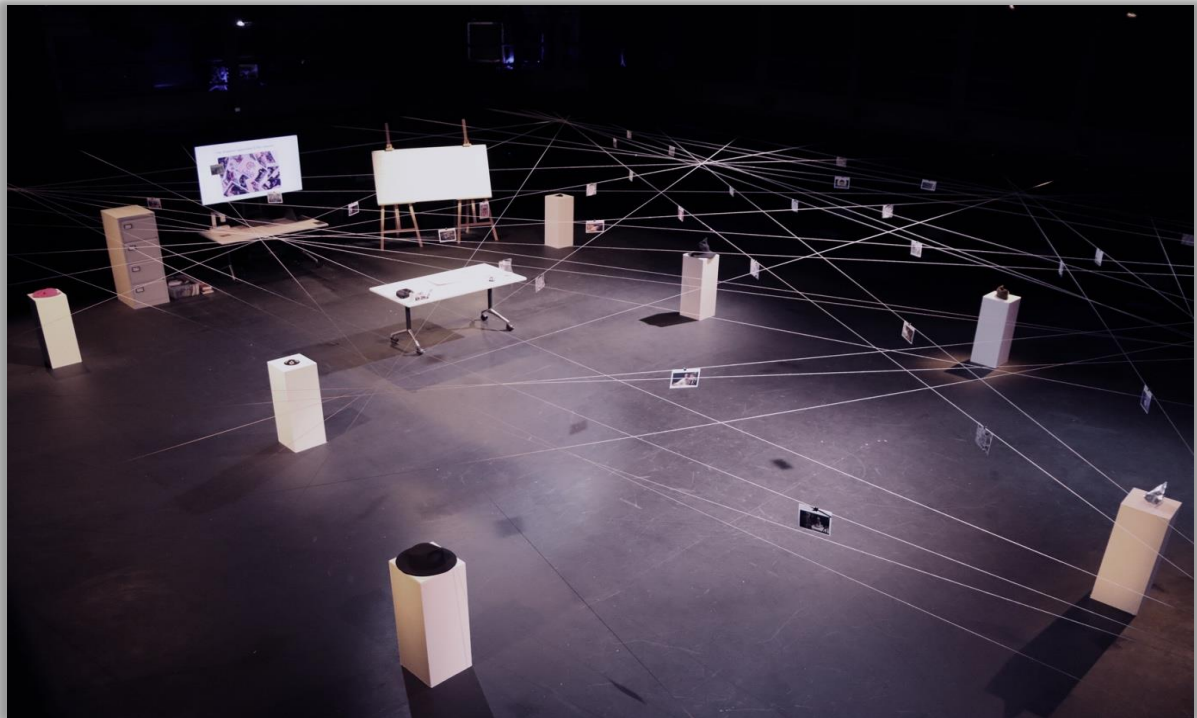
This focus on connectivity fundamentally informed my design. On arrival, attendees were confronted by the installation, already in situ. Aside from the hats and masks, most equipment adhered to a simple colour palette: a black space containing white desks, white paperwork, white plinths and white string. My costume was similarly greyscale, including a white shirt, grey trousers, black shoes and a gunmetal wristwatch. By contrast, the garments, cue cards and digital media were relatively brightly coloured, distinct from this monochrome set. Given the size of the studio, these elements were each situated several metres apart, creating

²⁰⁷ See, Richard Hofstadter, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', *International Affairs* 43: 3 (1967), 615-616, (p.29); see also, for example, Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1963), pp.94-95; see also, for example, Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since The 1950s* (London: Routledge. 2019), p.40.

²⁰⁸ See, for example Brian L. Keeley, 'Of Conspiracy Theories' *Journal of Philosophy*, 96 (1999), 109-26 (p.124); see also, for example, Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham, 'Political paranoia and conspiracy theories', in *Power, Politics and Paranoia: Why People are Suspicious of Their Leaders*, ed. Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Paul A. M. van Lange (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014), pp.218-236, (p.221); see also, for example, Alfred Moore, 'Conspiracy and conspiracy theories in democratic politics', *Critical Review*, 28: 1 (2016), 1-23, (p.3).

²⁰⁹ See, for example, Colin Klein et al, 'Topic Modeling Reveals Distinct Interests within an Online Conspiracy Forum', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9: 21 (2018), 1-12, (p.11).

islands of vibrance on an otherwise cavernous stage. Lit from above, the string connecting each plinth to the others also stood out, drawing attention to the connections it visualised between plinths, thus establishing connectivity as a key theme. By producing this symbolism from the outset, I enshrined notions central to the work and created a premise on which to question connection as a process essential to conspiracism.



Above: the performance space during a break, pictured from an overhead gantry. Note: while this image demonstrates the scale of the installation, attendees were restricted to ground level.

Above all this, and always visible from nearly everywhere in the space, a huge screen displayed the title of the work, imposed on a pre-Raphaelite image by John William Waterhouse, depicting a woman reclined on a wall in a coastal garden.²¹⁰ On the one hand, including fine art in the piece helped to establish a gallery aesthetic already suggested by the plinths, bolstering the impression that my work was concerned with collecting components into a composite whole; and on the other, it introduced new information about my work. For instance, the woman could easily be mistaken as Athena, as was suggested by the title, signalling an ironic relationship between knowledge and speculation, in relation to conspiracism as an emerging theme. Likewise, this material foregrounded a foray into myth (see below). Having invited the audience to make that connection, I was quick to undo the assumption: as I explained once attendees were seated, the subject was not actually Athena; she was Ariadne, abandoned on Naxos by Theseus, after she helped him escape the

²¹⁰ John William Waterhouse, *Ariadne*, 1898 < <http://www.jwwaterhouse.com/view.cfm?recordid=74> > [accessed 2 Jun 2022].

Labyrinth. By inviting then countering an initial impression associated with the piece, I signalled that other connections expressed by the design may have been more complex than they seemed, suggesting the same about those connections I went on to produce.



Above: imagery above the performance space. Note: as visitors were limited to ground level, they would have looked up at these visuals through the installation.

I also used these opening moments to introduce the garments atop plinths: on completing my commentary on the Waterhouse, I worked my way around the plinths, beginning at Plinth One (as it was nearest the entrance) and proceeding counterclockwise to Plinth Nine. Doing so, I explained how the garments were associated with various perspectives on conspiracism, summarising my relationships with each. For instance, when commenting on the witch's hat on Plinth Eight, I noted my history as a politically progressive person who also has a magickal practice, making me the target of conservative witch hunts. In the same moments, though, I acknowledged my own attraction to conspiracy theories regarding the occult.²¹¹ In this sense, I expressed connectivity between personal history and conspiracism, foregrounding my work with bias, explored as the piece progressed (see below). Each plinth received equivalent treatment. This created a base from which to proceed by introducing perspectives key to the work and establishing my positionality. That said, when collected, the introductory material consumed approximately 12 minutes; and as new audience members entered at will, some sections included multiple introductions. Indeed, the performance was especially busy

²¹¹ For instance, my personal concern that UFO coverups relate to the way sightings and abduction testimonies align closely with religious and paranormal experiences, relating to occultic practices: a fairly common association with substantial roots; see, for example, Christopher D. Bader, et al, *Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture*, (New York: NYU Press. 2017), pp.115-117.

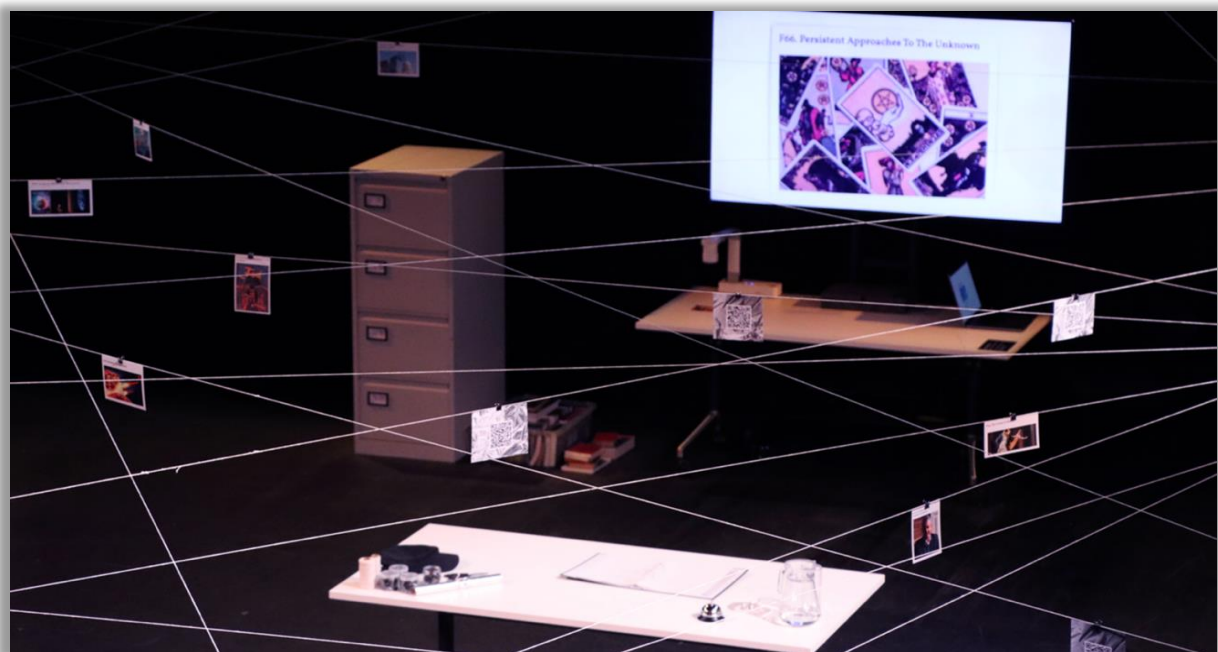
between 12.00 and 13.00, when people were presumably taking lunch, and during this period I delivered an introduction on three occasions, leaving me with only 20 minutes to give lectures. On reflection, I could have developed alternative approaches to this process, as I go on to discuss.

Having introduced the piece, my first dice-roll produced a 26, leading me to select cue card 26, with the title 'Oppositional Communities: Vaccine Refusal and The Political Spectrum'. I then spoke on this topic, drawing on the notes on my desk. Throughout the performance, lectures like this addressed conspiracism from various angles, discussing scholarly perspectives, newspaper articles and entertainment media concerned variously with conspiracies, conspiracy theories, conspiracists, conspiracism, etc. During each, I situated the associated card between plinths: conceptual anchors around which to construct the corresponding lectures. Cards were placed at my discretion. In this case, I clipped card 26 onto a line between the surgical mask (symbolising concerns about planned pandemic) and the MAGA cap (addressing conspiracism as a radicalising influence) while explaining the significance of each. This process allowed me to explore relationships between the issues symbolised by garments. For example, I considered allegations that the pandemic was fabricated to promote a malevolent vaccine, then connected this perspective to research regarding an increased susceptibility to conspiracism in marginalised groups. Doing so, I discussed the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and conspiracy theories endorsed by African Americans, whose suspicion about public health policy seems understandable given historical malpractice.²¹² In turn, this led me to address conspiracism as a response to abuse, noting that genuine conspiracies can undermine trust in experts and thus impact issues such as vaccine uptake. Building on this approach as the performance continued, successive dice rolls allowed me to establish more connections between plinths, addressing cue cards in lectures, then contextualising each by discussing and combining perspectives on conspiracism. As such, processes of presentation, visualisation and accumulation helped me demonstrate the complex relationships between issues addressed in my work.

This process had its limits: each card could only be connected to two perspectives at any given time, reducing my capacity to illustrate the wholly radial connectivity one might imagine at work in conspiracism. Even so, the chance involved in using dice made it possible to roll the same numbers on multiple occasions. Indeed, later in the performance, I rolled a second

²¹² The Tuskegee Syphilis Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male was a medical research programme conducted between 1932 and 1972. Participants were lied to about its dangers by those institutions involved, and more than 100 were killed. See, for example, Allan M. Brandt, 'Racism and Research: The Case of The Tuskegee Syphilis Study', *The Hastings Centre Report*, 8: 6 (1978), 21-29 (pp.21-22).

26. This time, I established a connection between the surgical mask (a planned pandemic) and the fedora (allegations made in a play by Dominic Orlando) and this led me to examine theatre as a means to address corruption in the pharmaceutical industry. As the card was already in the network, I had to remove and then relocate it. Doubles could have been made so that this would not disturb the installation and to proliferate the connections. However, in my moving the card, it was made apparent that I was readdressing issues already discussed, from an alternative perspective. Commenting on this when it happened, I noted that unseen traces exist, in addition to those visualised. Although this helped me portray a deeper connectivity initially hidden from sight, attendees needed to witness this moment or else miss the observation entirely. Even so, the fact that such events happened relatively organically gave me scope to then address happenstance (see below) as another theme central to the work.



Above: lectures linking plinths, visualised by cue cards hanging from my loom.

Acknowledging that cards might change position, I wrote all numbers rolled on a whiteboard upstage, noting the corresponding garments beside each. This process helped me track those connections I made across the day despite some cards moving around. It drew attention to patterns produced entirely by chance. For example, a coincidence occurred in my rolling the number 83 five times in so many hours. This was quite serendipitous as it corresponded to a card titled 'Connecting Dots: Aliens, Bigfoot and Ghosts from Space', centring on an article, by Katy Waldman, about coincidences and the meanings we ascribe them.²¹³ Each time this

²¹³ See, Katy Waldman, 'It's All Connected: What links creativity, conspiracy theories, and delusions? A phenomenon called apophenia', *Slate*, 16 Sep 2014 < <https://slate.com/technology/2014/09/apophenia-makes-unrelated-things-seem-connected-metaphors-paranormal-beliefs-conspiracies-delusions.html> > [accessed 24 Jun 2022].

happened, I returned to Waldman's name, noting its concomitant association with my interest in sasquatch.²¹⁴ Expanding on this, I called on a book written by Mike Clelland, *The Messengers: Owls, Synchronicity and the UFO Abductee*.²¹⁵ Exploring themes central to his work, I discussed my own tendency to perceive meaning in coincidence, highlighting the significance I sensed in this tenuous connection to my research (see Chapter Two). I then turned that criticism on the audience, asking attendees whether they had ever experienced any such tenuous convictions themselves. This question was rhetorical, spoken to the room rather than any individual attendee, and I moved on before anyone had time to respond. In doing so, I attempted to raise questions to which I would return. Indeed, I revisited this issue during the ensuing break, speaking to several attendees about their own illogical superstitions, and, in that case, going into significantly more depth without disrupting the piece. I was then able to redirect our conversation to conspiracism, suggesting that many of us share common ground with conspiracists, evidenced by those meaning-making processes. In highlighting these similarities, I implicated audience members in conspiracist ideation, bringing them closer to material that could otherwise have seemed distant from their own experiences. Hence, I worked to relativise perspectives on conspiracism by suggesting audience members should examine themselves as people similarly interested in connectivity.



Above: a selection of books referred to during the performance, stacked in small piles near my desk.

²¹⁴ As I observed at the time, the name Waldman originates with the antique word weald, meaning forest, suggesting a person of the woods: a wild man per se; and this term is commonly associated with early sasquatch reports. See, for example, Robert E. Bartholomew and Brian Regal, 'From wild man to monster: the historical evolution of bigfoot in New York State', *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*, 35: 3-4 (2009), p.13.

²¹⁵ See, for example, Richard M. Dolan, 'Foreword', in Mike Clelland, *The Messengers: Owls, Synchronicity and The UFO Abductee* (Richard Dolan Press. 2015), pp.3-7.

By the time most audience members arrived, there were already many cards in the network above. Depending on when they entered, there could have been up to 57 such, suspended between various plinths, drawing attention to the way this installation was composite, comprising elements too distant for attendees to examine without entering the performance space themselves. The hats and masks were similarly mysterious, as most attendees arrived partway through a lecture and no information about them was given in advance. Hence, the image encountered on arrival was reminiscent of a web, in which those components were snared, inviting future interrogation.



Above: cue cards as seen from the performance space.

As no one sat through the whole performance, audience members usually entered a space populated by traces, signified by those cards left over from previous lectures. However, I did create opportunities for attendees to examine these during intervals. By scanning the QR codes on each card, one could access a secondary network, exploring my notes. Although this material was auxiliary to the live production, its existence was integral to the design, with the codes operating as a visual reminder that much more information exists than could be captured by such a performance, and that this material circulates in spaces extending beyond the work. Attendees could thus discover things overlooked in my lectures, contest sources, etc. For example, during a break, one audience member questioned my citation of a study concerning medical history that they argued was redundant, instigating a conversation about

pharmaceutical corporations and the influence they exert on academic research. I encouraged those attendees to seek additional information online, but given the ten-minute window, they were unable to do so at the time. Indeed, by linking to a complex outside the performance, my work expressed its own limits. I was therefore able to draw attention to my fallibility as someone assessing perspectives on conspiracism, demonstrating the epistemological difficulties one encounters when collecting and attempting to address so much information.

In *The Loom*, I attempted to introduce claims about conspiracies and conspiracism, examine the underlying data and ask how this informs our perspectives as practitioners addressing these topics. Thus, I hoped to raise questions about the knowledge possessed by conspiracists and those who comment on conspiracism. In response, I wove exemplary perspectives into a tapestry demonstrating its own radial connectivity. Then, I added datapoints to this network, showing how various perspectives interrelate. A physical installation was central to this work, visualising connectivity throughout. Lectures proved similarly important, as they allowed me to build on the symbolic visuals while discussing that data in detail. Hence, I was able to closely examine those relationships to which I drew attention in the piece. Meanwhile, in exposing limits created by this design, I problematised my own observations, expressing the fallibility of an individual voice. In turn, this demonstrated complications with the methods employed by both conspiracists and people commenting on conspiracism. Hence, my problematised the way we assemble information according to personal positions and how this informs conspiracist epistemologies amongst others. At the same time, hinging key expressions of connectivity on randomness sometimes prevented the work from achieving its full potential, as only some attendees were present at times when those relationships were established. My repeating the introduction also hindered the work by slowing things down and distracting from its flow. Nonetheless, by situating multiple lectures inside a complex theatre design, and cultivating uncertainty about my own role, I was able to manufacture connections that attendees were then invited to assess, establishing critical distance between my audience and the knowledge expressed on stage.

4.2 Guidelines: Using Rules, Instructions and Durational Constraints to Motivate Critical Perspectives on Conspiracism

In addition to addressing connectivity as key to conspiracism, I sought ways to address the limits of conspiracy theorisation, exploring the idea that conspiracy theories arise from various epistemological and circumstantial constraints (see page 13). I asked how theatre can demonstrate those limitations, and whether doing so might aid me in problematising conspiracy theory culture. Experimenting with that idea, I aimed to develop a performance in

which to explore knowledge production and its complications, asking how this influences conspiracism.

In a broad sense, live performance is understood to be practice 'at the threshold of the present', expressing its intrinsic ephemerality where events take place and then pass into memory – leaving only traces of themselves.²¹⁶ This is what Auslander considers 'the default definition' of 'liveness', underwriting more complex conceptualisations unique to individual disciplines.²¹⁷ As Lara Shalson observes, by playing on this liveness, theatre makers can draw attention to the way various processes play out on stage, exploring constraints related to space, time and bodily limits, as well as uncertainty and the development of residues, structures and systems associated with their work.²¹⁸ Live performances have, therefore, been seen to call on 'rules of duration', exposing tensions, limitations and questions natural to its immediacy.²¹⁹ Indeed, Beth Hoffman concludes that our watching artists work towards something 'exacerbates the problem of knowing where the live art work begins and ends, frustrating the desire to master the 'whole' of the performance'; therefore, 'the process itself becomes the work'.²²⁰ Hence, liveness draws attention to generative practices, meaning that live performances are conveniently positioned to address issues related to incompleteness. Attempting to activate these ideas, I worked to establish a process-based practice in which knowledge associated with conspiracism could be exposed as necessarily limited.

This line of enquiry led me to ask how a piece could be designed to problematise the ways we process information about conspiracies, conspiracy theories and conspiracism, showing how this happens in real time. Seeking approaches in which liveness would be emphasised, I began to experiment with improvisation, wondering whether my tasking myself to process data on stage might draw attention to my limits as someone curating information, perhaps exposing constraints on knowledge and its production. Indeed, as Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling observe, improvisations are bound to their creators, 'conditioned by' performers' 'mannerisms' and 'physical abilities' as well as 'horizons of expectation and knowledge, patterns of learned behaviour', etc.²²¹ Applying this conceptualisation to the improvisation involved in task-based work, Hans Ulrich Obrist notes that instructions necessitate creative interpretations, and that works expressing these relationships can lead audiences to realise that processes are unique

²¹⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Oxon: Routledge. 1997), p.27.

²¹⁷ Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture* (Oxon: Routledge. 2008), p.62.

²¹⁸ See, for example, Lara Shalson, *Performing Endurance: Art and Politics since 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018), pp.1-10.

²¹⁹ Paul Alain and Jen Harvie, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* (New York: Routledge. 2006), p.83; see also Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge. 2006), pp.155-156.

²²⁰ Beth Hoffman, 'The Time of Live Art', in *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, ed. by Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.37-64, (p.47).

²²¹ Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: a critical history* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2006), p.10.

to creators, even when those individuals work according to identical prompts.²²² It follows, then, that creative practitioners may be able to play on this, applying the same instructions to various materials; and where this would conceivably produce patterns in the work, they would, perhaps, bely positionality. Considering this, I set out to create a performance in which interpretation was key – aiming to use improvisation as a means to draw attention to my own positionality and its limits. By extension, I hoped to turn this attention onto the data I would then address, inviting questions about my capacity to accurately represent and process information. I also thought about rules: where improvisations rely on instructions, I wondered what prompts would allow me to stress my own limits as someone handling knowledge, and whether exposing attendees to those constraints could encourage questions about any knowledge expressed. Suspecting that this was possible, I worked to develop rules by which to generate processes similar to those at work in conspiracism, such as private investigation, superstitious thinking and pattern analysis (see page 13). In doing so, I hoped to generate questions about the way conspiracists process knowledge and how this shapes claims associated with conspiracism.

Rules were not always made explicit to the audience. Rather, unspoken instructions dictated my work, which the audience were then free to interpret, whether they perceived any guidelines or not. This was the case throughout, beginning with my welcome to the audience. According to guidelines established during my development process, attendees were to be greeted on arrival. Hence, when a group turned up midway through one lecture, I said hello to each person directly. Then, I let these visitors know that I would provide some information about the piece on completing the interrupted analysis. In this sense, I was able to establish the immediacy of my performance by recognising that audience members operated in the same space and time as an evolving installation. Other rules, permitting entry to the piece at any time, meant that such events were commonplace, and interactions like this occurred often, so attendees encountered this process first as its targets, then as its audience. This hinted at some underlying structure, drawing attention to the unspoken instruction.

Having completed this process, I hurried ahead with the work at hand, as another unspoken rule dictated that each lecture should last no more than five minutes. It is worth noting that this rule may have benefitted from explication. Perhaps an alarm (on my watch for example) could have drawn greater attention to the immediacy discussed above, perhaps illustrating the time constraints in play and suggesting that these, too, limited my ability to engage in any sustained

²²² See Hans Ulrich Obrist, 'Introduction', in *do it: the compendium*, ed. by Hans Ulrich Obrist (New York: Independent Curators International and Distributed Art Publishers. 2013), pp.16-17.

dialogue without undermining other active processes. I moved on nonetheless, according to additional guidelines. One led me to introduce the installation's various components each time I had an influx of attendees. Here, I addressed the Waterhouse by retelling Ariadne's myth: as the story goes, Ariadne gave string to Theseus, allowing him to escape the labyrinth on Crete, commissioned by the despotic Minos to ensnare human sacrifices conveyed from recently conquered Athens.²²³ As I explained, some versions have Theseus leave Ariadne as she is deemed unsuitable to the Athenians.²²⁴ As I noted at the end of this tale, despite its knowledge, Athenian culture can be utilitarian, indifferent, and sometimes even cruel. This led into a second tale, recounting Arachne's duel with Athena, noting that the goddess is associated with the spinning of tapestries.²²⁵ In my reconceptualization, Arachne paralleled conspiracists, using her skill as maker of garments to weave a story in which the gods were depicted as conspirators, manipulating human affairs, such as those of Ariadne and Theseus. The iteration was largely sympathetic to these concerns. Likewise, I emphasized Athena's arrogance, echoing the sentiments of conspiracists who mistrust authorities and experts. Here, I was able to play on existing relationships between Athena and academia, using her actions as an analogue for scholarly work on conspiracism. This foregrounded a question I asked attendees each time I completed my version: are we, as academics and practitioners, approaching conspiracism with the nuance it deserves, or are we retaliating to its dangers too fiercely and thus undermining our own approaches? Hence, rules dictating the routine telling of stories and their emphases helped me to express tensions at the centre of my work, establishing dynamics key to the performance.

Another rule stated that, before moving on, I should always repeat a notable phrase and gesture: gently touching the web above me with one hand, I commented, 'But this is not the loom of Athena. Neither is it Arachne's. It is like Ariadne's thread, though it does not always lead us out of the Labyrinth. No, this is *my* loom, spinning similarly questionable knowledge about conspiracies and conspiracism.' As I went on to explain each time, I sympathise with Ariadne and Arachne, and with conspiracists too, in my capacity to mistrust authorities who can be cruel like Athena; and at the same time, I am also an authority figure in the Athenian tradition, criticising conspiracy theories while working on a PhD. In first creating tension between these camps, then connecting myself to both, my stance on each became curious, inviting concerns about my own biases and their effects on the work. Likewise, each time I

²²³ See, for example, Bethany Williams, 'Rewriting Ariadne: What Is Her Myth?', *The Collector*, 02 Aug 2021 <<https://www.thecollector.com/ariadne-and-theseus-myth/>> [accessed 18 Jun 2023].

²²⁴ See, for example, Thomas B. L. Webster, 'The Myth of Ariadne from Homer to Catullus', *Greece & Rome*, 13: 1 (1966), 22-31, (p.26); see also, for example, Hyginus, 'Fabulae 43', in *The Myths of Hyginus*, trans. by Mary Grant (Kansas: University of Kansas Publications in Humanistic Studies. 1966) <<https://topostext.org/work/206>> [accessed 11 Aug 2023].

²²⁵ See, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics. 1986), pp.121-125; see also, for example, Michael Vincent, 'Between Ovid and Barthes: Ekphrasis, Orality, Textuality in Ovid's "Arachne"', *Arethusa*, 27: 3 (1994), 361-386, (pp.362-367).

brushed the string above me, the whole network swayed with my touch, disturbing cue cards all around the space. As such, rules shaping my interactions with the installation helped me demonstrate my influence on its shape, signifying my power as a central figure and thus positioning attendees to read all ensuing lectures as personally inflected.

These guidelines on introduction were clearly useful. However, they also produced some structural issues (such as frequent repetitions and interruptions) and these could have been formulated differently to keep the work moving at good pace (see page 89). Nonetheless, as this material was delivered many times, it attained a ceremonial quality complementary to the overall aesthetic, informed, in part, by my initial reference to a deity. In this sense, it was suggested that the performance space was a reliquary in which strange artefacts were enshrined, its plinths like altars bearing offerings to Athena, my loom, or even the audience themselves. In addition, and enhancing this impression, a third rule insisted that I take a delicate approach to all items in the space, like I was handling holy relics. Hence, I was always careful to roll dice so that none would spill from the desk, I opened the filing cabinet so precisely that the ball bearings in its sliding mechanism produced the same sound every time, and cue cards were always extracted gently and shown to the audience, scanning slowly left to right. Likewise, I took care when placing these into the network, setting the metal arms on my clips to face downwards, exactly in the centre of each card. Although these rules were all relatively implicit, they resulted in observable behaviours, such as a perceivably obsessive carefulness. This suggested my having assigned some value to those materials, while also keeping its nature private. As such, rules dictating a mysteriously precise approach produced notably idiosyncratic actions, drawing attention to my presence in the work and thus signalling that any information presented was always processed through my person.

Nicholas M. Hobson et al observe the way repetitions become rituals when they are imbued with symbolic meaning.²²⁶ Some processes were designed with this in mind. For instance, I rang a bell at the conclusion of each lecture, pausing until its tone diminished. Always, while waiting on this, I drank water from a glass on my desk, then I carefully refilled the glass, using a pitcher to my left. Then, I placed the pitcher and glass back in their original places, atop dots pencilled on the table to ensure they were exactly positioned. Once this process was complete, I moved on. These rules produced patterns of activity the purpose of which remained opaque, and as this served no obvious purpose it signalled a symbolic relevance. However, I went on without commenting on this, making the process obscure. Where scholars have shown that participation in rituals can act as a socialising influence and help to establish communities,

²²⁶ See, Nicholas M. Hobson et al, 'The Psychology of Rituals: An Integrative Review and Process-Based Framework', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 22: 3 (2018), 260-284, (p.261).

one can also invert the logic: when we encounter unfamiliar rituals, we are positioned as cultural outsiders, drawing attention to differences between ourselves, as an uninitiated audience, and active participants in those rituals.²²⁷ Hence, instructions like those described here led me to undertake processes that distanced me from the audience, problematising the information I presented by imbuing it with such uncertainty.

Meanwhile, I worked to develop instructions that would lead me to explore the causality imagined by conspiracists. I tasked myself with tracking all dice rolls (see page 90) and developing on this, I created an additional rule, stating that my lectures were to dwell on any coincidences noticed. It is worth noting that this was implicit, and that a more explicit approach may have been more useful to the work, drawing attention to its ritual aspects. For example, I could have incorporated a moment at the conclusion of each lecture, noting the number of coincidences observed. Despite the missed opportunities, unspoken rules still allowed me to accumulate coincidences on which to reflect as the performance progressed. For example, I rolled the number three a third time at 15.21, leading me to a card concerned with the Georgia Guidestones.²²⁸ I took down card 3, which was hanging in the loom, and approached the whiteboard to examine its history. Here, another rule dictated that I should observe any chance patterns. Noting the recurring threes, I commented on its place inside a wider pattern on the board, as cards relating to the occult often contained a three, had been drawn often and tended to end up connected to theories about aliens. Hence, I observed, it would be strange to ignore the relationships between magic, aliens and conspiracism, both in terms of conspiracy theories about UFOs and occultists, and regarding xenophobic conspiracy theories. Having said as much, I placed this latest card between the witch's hat (conspiracy theories about occult fraternities) and the side-cap (conspiracy theories about military agencies and the UFO phenomenon). Although the Guidestones probably have little to do with the military or UFOs, this association arose from the instruction to acknowledge coincidences generated by the dice. Hence, I was repeatedly driven to revisit relationships, in conspiracism, between occultism and aliens. Indeed, by the end of the performance, the string around the witch's hat and side-cap was especially rich with cards, and my attempts to organise knowledge were thus portrayed as vulnerable to superstitious thinking. In this sense,

²²⁷ See, for example, Christine H. Legare and Mark Nielsen, 'Ritual explained: interdisciplinary answers to Tinbergen's four questions', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 375: 1805 (2020), 1-5, (pp.1-2).

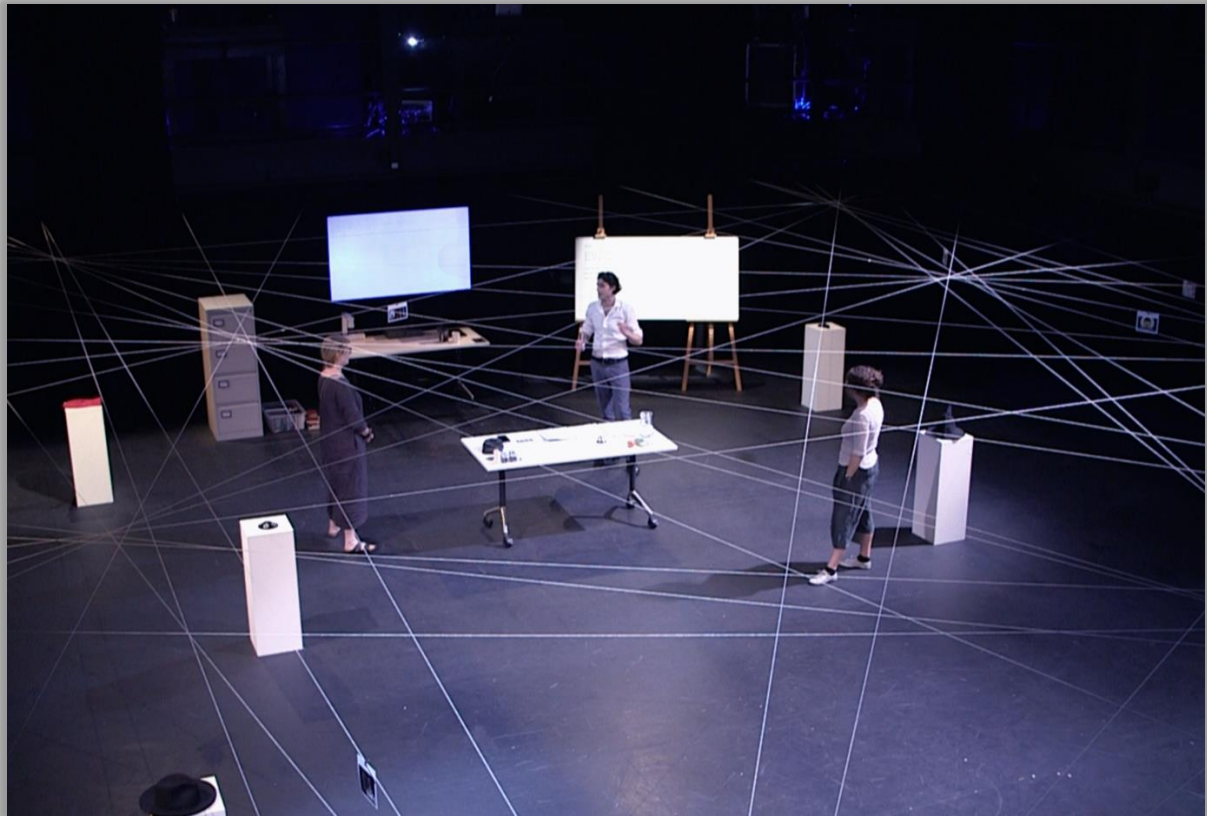
²²⁸ Commissioned and constructed in 1980 by the pseudonymous Robert C. Christian, this monument stood in Elbert County, Georgia, until its destruction by vandals in July 2022. It comprised several granite monoliths inscribed with instructions on rebuilding society in the wake of an impending calamity. This attracted conspiracists who supposed the stones may have been created by the advocates of a new world order, as a prophecy of sorts. Likewise, the monument annoyed some Christians, who associated its design and function with pagan ritual sites. After having been vandalised on numerous occasions the stones were eventually blown up by persons unknown. For details see, for example, Jeff Amy, 'Georgia slabs called satanic by some torn down after bombing', *WIRED*, 6 July 2022 < <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-oddities-religion-georgia-92400e093db648d605f65228ef79cfdb> > [accessed 19 May 2024].

instructions helped me draw attention to issues with conspiracism, and particularly its relationships with chance and coincidence.

At times, I asked attendees questions, and these were also governed by instructions, designed to generate brief moments of spontaneous dialogue. I set the additional guideline that, during lectures, these conversations with the audience should remain focussed on topics at hand, and that my own contributions should remain rhetorical in nature. Hence, when covering card 5, 'Operation Paperclip part one: Nazi Occultism, NASA and the CIA', I asked an audience member to guess how many Nazis secretly emigrated to America as part of a programme targeting leading academics and intelligence operatives; and when the attendee guessed well below official numbers, I challenged this estimation, asking whether they thought this data may actually vindicate conspiracists. Having posed that question, I continued the lecture. In this case, my rules were implicit, providing structure that kept the piece moving while allowing me to involve the audience, weaving them into the loom and its processes. At the same time, the pace denied attendees chance to respond truly discursively at the time. By taking this approach, my theatre both demonstrated its temporal limits, and drew attention to various attempts to coerce audience members into adopting my own unspoken positions.

Other time-related rules were more explicit, designed to expose constraints associated with durational practice. For instance, intermissions were clearly scheduled and announced in advance, as noted on posters outside the performance space. Conversation during these breaks was governed by a different set of rules. Here, I instructed myself to strike up conversations tangential to the material discussed, teasing out concerns held by audience members so I could bear these in mind in future lectures. For instance, in one such conversation, a small group gathered around my desk, and the conversation turned to UK politics. When a debate began between two attendees, spurred on by card 24, 'Anti-vaccination on The Left', our roles effectively reversed, and I became a de facto audience, listening as these participants relayed their own contrasting perspectives. However, this was short lived, as the ten minutes were soon up, and I went back to rolling dice, drawing cards and giving lectures. I was able to return to those concerns, though, when discussing card 31, 'Women and Vaccines: Ambient Uncertainties', drawing on perspectives expressed during that conversation. Hence, these moments created a forum for discussion, and opportunities to feed that commentary back into the piece as it progressed. I should note, however, in retrospect, that more could have been made of my constraining these moments to ten minutes. For instance, I could have transitioned back to the lectures with more ceremony. Doing so may have drawn additional attention to the way my work brooked no contradiction, and to my

position as a slave to those rules. On the one hand, this allowed audience members to contribute to the piece without distracting from its thrust or delaying its progress. On the other, their contributions were limited, leaving much unaddressed. By making this apparent, then, the work emphasised its own limitations, reminding audience members that theatre is not necessarily best placed to conclude on conspiracism, but might rather motivate debate.



Above: interactions with audience members during one of the breaks.

It is worth noting that some rules created issues I had not anticipated, such as those related to the whiteboard. In addition to my recording numbers, another guideline dictated that I should keep notes on the board, charting ideas that arose in conversations with the audience. I could then return to these where appropriate during lectures. However, I wrote in relatively large characters, failed to give myself rules limiting the length of notes recorded on the board and therefore quickly ran out of space. As a consequence, I wiped the board down multiple times, effectively eliminating past traces, thus limiting its capacity to illustrate patterns in the numbers (see page 90). It may have been more productive, instead, to create stricter rules concerning notes, or to abandon the whiteboard as a surface on which to document dice rolls in general, replacing it with an alternative medium. For instance, I could have used a spreadsheet, which might, in turn, have generated more thorough records, interesting charts, graphs, etc. As this

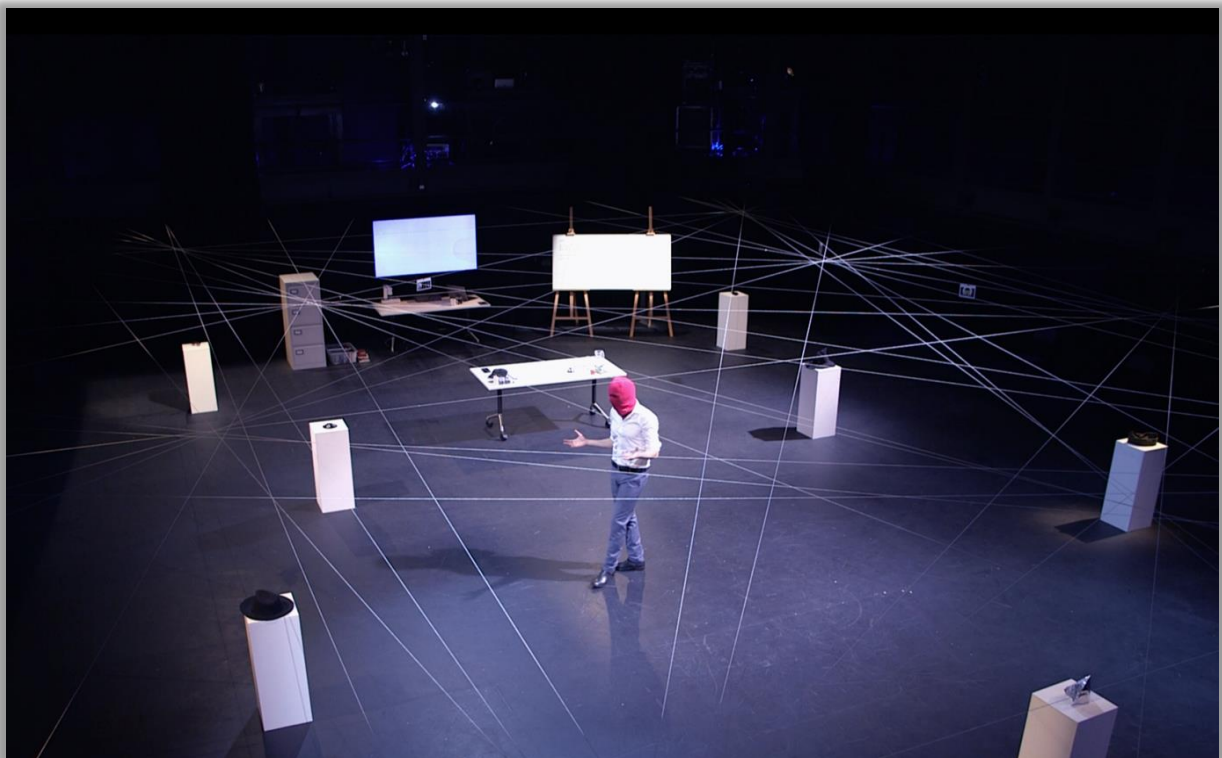
issue reveals, rules were vital to the piece, but could sometimes collide, undermining my original intentions.



Above: the whiteboard, pictured during my performance.

Despite occasional oversights, my guidelines were generally thorough. For example, I developed extensive rules addressing my approach to the plinths: on drawing each card and positioning it somewhere in the space, I was to discuss the garments on either side, donning each, in turn, while explaining its relevance to the card. The ensuing lecture would then build on this activity. Thus, I sought to utilise the garments by activating their symbolic potential. For instance, I drew card 25, 'Radicalisation part one: Becoming Conspiracist', which I positioned between the pink balaclava (associated with Proto-Type Theatre) and the MAGA cap (marginalisation and conspiracism). On this occasion, I switched back and forth between garments before combining the two into a single costume. This allowed me to explore similarities and differences between various conspiracists, leading me to address the alternative-right as a faction opposed to mass surveillance, not unlike Proto-Type, whose messaging leans to the left (see page 26). An additional rule dictated that I should draw on personal experience while enacting this process, folding anecdotes related to these perspectives into the ensuing lecture. Hence, I went on to discuss my own history as an activist, and the conspiracy theories I encountered while engaged in disruptive practices, noting the way narratives about surveillance united people with diverse political views. As

these stories were explicitly perspectival, the data I discussed was presented as distorted by my positionality and was therefore relativised, drawing its factuality into question. Meanwhile, my costume (a white shirt, grey trousers, black boots) remained neutral, allowing me to switch between personae, adopting garments and perspectives as described, ever fully dressing as any. As such, a mixture of rules and conventions around clothing helped me to produce distance between myself and the perspectives discussed, maintaining my interlocutory position.



Above: discussing my personal history with violent activism and my views on surveillance culture and radicalisation, while wearing the pink balaclava.

When working with rules regarding plinths, it became normal for me to revisit and reassess my source material from different perspectives, combining various contexts. For example, according to my records, I returned to the conical hat fifteen times across the day. This cyclical approach suggested that my work could continue indefinitely with every connection explained multiple times, building on previous iterations and explanations inside an evolving milieu. As such, I was able to indicate the scale of conspiracy theory culture and the complexity of associated perspectives, again signalling my own inability to capture this in full, but also demonstrating that knowledge generally resists stasis (see page 17). Hence, rules relating to the garments encouraged attendees to question the information presented, acknowledging its openness to debate. In this sense, the perspectives, knowledge and experience associated

with the conspiracism I examined were not flattened by a totalising approach and were instead entered into dialogue, inviting critique.

One overarching guideline encouraged me to steer attendees towards the accompanying website, at least once per section, in whatever ways seemed appropriate at the time. For example, during the first hour, I did this while discussing card 38, 'Stories in the Shadow of Bill Cooper: Behold a Pale Horse'. Here, I clipped the card to a line between the fedora (symbolising a piece by Dominic Orlando) and the yarmulke (one by Marlon Solomon). Doing so, I noted that, like Cooper, these practitioners have each played on the conspiracist maxim: 'do your own research'.²²⁹ At this point, I explained that I, too, ask my audience to do research, encouraging them to access my website during breaks. Hence, I suggested, attendees were free to use my work as a springboard, looking into these matters in their own time. As the rules guiding this introduction were open to interpretation, I was also able to find other opportunities to involve the website. For instance, on several occasions while discussing the pandemic, I encouraged audience members to scan codes, noting that people seem more used to the process since public health policy has accelerated contactless culture. Likewise, it was easy to invite access to the website when conversing with attendees during breaks. Where they took up this invitation, audience members became participants, diminishing my own centrality as a source. Rather than presenting myself as an authority on conspiracism then, this rule about introducing the website helped invite investigation.

I made the decision to let the piece finish without a grand conclusion. No additional rules were created to govern this event, and the final section ended like all the others, with ten minutes during which any lingering audience members were able to examine cards. This lack of closure seemed appropriate, implying that, were it not for a rule dictating its duration, the piece might continue forever. Thus, this response to a necessary constraint gave rise to an implication: the work of connecting all these dots was insurmountable, at least in conventional theatre, and perhaps in general too. Here I played on the conventions of durational performance: as I was physically exhausted after speaking for six hours, my performance had gone a little flat, my energy levels low.²³⁰ This was expected and welcome, as I hoped these deteriorations would demonstrate the human vulnerabilities common to anyone attempting to process so much information. Where I was tired, and my task was unfinished, the work of knowing conspiracism was similarly incomplete. Rather than really trying to capture its entirety, then, the work drew

²²⁹ See, for example, Levy, (p.1); see also, for example, Clare Birchall and Peter Knight, 'Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 89: 3 (2022), 579-605, (p.1), see also, for example, Livia Gershon, 'JFK's Assassination and "Doing Your Own Research"', *JSTOR Daily*, 20 Apr 2023 < <https://daily.jstor.org/jfks-assassination-and-doing-your-own-research/> > [accessed 23 Jun 2023].

²³⁰ See, for example, Karen Gonzalez Rice, *Long Suffering: American Endurance Art as Prophetic Witness* (Ann Arbor, MICH: University of Michigan Press. 2016), pp.1-2.

attention to those processes by which knowing occurs, suggesting we should treat them as similarly vulnerable.

When developing *The Loom*, I asked how a performance based on rules and instructions could invite questions about various epistemological processes associated with conspiracism. As I discovered, a task-based approach produced valuable limitations, emulating those active in conspiracism. These structural and durational limitations helped to establish sleek procedures, keeping me on track in an otherwise sprawling performance. As such, I was able to navigate the excess of reality produced by a piece in which anything and everything could be connected to everything else, while complicating the relationships discussed by demonstrating the way my own positionality influenced those connections. Some rules could have been more thoroughly composed, so as to avoid distracting from others. Meanwhile, others were occasionally so implicit as to go unnoticed, missing opportunities to signal constraints and limitations. Even so, the structure expressed by these guidelines, explicit and otherwise, contributed to a broadly ritualistic performance producing questions about idiosyncratic interpretations and the influence these impressions exert on our expectations about various phenomena, including the data and anxieties to which conspiracy theories respond. In this sense, my work problematised those processes by which we produce knowledge about conspiracism.

4.3 Critical Reflection on *The Loom of Athena*

In making *The Loom of Athena*, I hoped to address and draw into question the knowledge we associate with conspiracy theory culture, problematising perspectives on conspiracism and the convictions to which these relate. The performance managed this by using a mixture of design features and rules to expose and explore connectivity as something on which conspiracists call, showing this to be problematic where the relationships, perspectives and positions established were demonstrably subjective. Although this approach achieved much, my decisions sometimes limited its scope.

On reflection, the piece could have been introduced differently. To avoid its more burdensome repetitions, I could have extended the use of scannable codes, maybe placing one on each plinth, and even on the artwork above, so attendees could learn more about these elements without my pausing to explain them. Likewise, I should probably have restricted introductions to dedicated times, perhaps several minutes into each new section. This may have allowed me to discuss the Waterhouse and garments periodically without dampening an initial mystique. Indeed, by omitting these introductions, the connections between plinths may have

emerged more organically. This could have benefitted the work in two ways, with the audience invited to wonder at mysterious connections, generating intrigue, and my being able to process more cards during 50-minute sections, demonstrating more connectivity overall.

Elsewhere, I could have developed on the value in repetition. For example, I could have worked with 40 cards as opposed to 120 and altered my approach to dice similarly. This would have produced a performance in which I was more likely to land on the same cards on multiple occasions, compelling me to revisit and reprocess key data frequently throughout. Doing so, I may have been able to more explicitly signal revisions and adaptations to the knowledge produced, emphasising its mutability in relation to the various perspectives addressed in the performance. Where such an approach would likely produce and draw attention to more contradictions than the piece did in its initial performance, it would probably have helped me to better express the positionality involved in assessing conspiracism, alluding to its epistemological effects. Hence, I could have built on my previous works, in which I showed that resisting conclusions can help to distance the audience from dangerous convictions.

Reducing the cards may also have produced new complications: the space could have seemed sparse, for instance, were the pace to have picked up, with only up to 40 cards in play. However, it is in this capacity that duplicate cards may have been helpful. With the above alterations, the inclusion of doubles could have been more workable than I suggested in my earlier analysis, as a reduced pool of cards and the resulting repetitions would make redundant my previous concerns that attendees could miss my revisiting data. At the same time, a smaller pool of cards would allow me to reproduce the work on a more intimate scale, freeing the performance from any necessity to be presented in so large a space as the Black Box. While this venue was in no way a hindrance to the work described above, there is also no harm in recalibrating such work to make it more versatile, and ultimately more widely presentable.

Ritual was clearly useful to the piece, though it seems fair to say that this approach was not fully developed, or, perhaps, that it was not exploited to its maximum potential. While ritual activity was useful in establishing an esoteric aesthetic, emphasizing my positionality and generating intrigue, ritual has many other qualities on which I could have played when addressing conspiracism. For example, the connectivity between supernatural beliefs and conviction could have been more thoroughly signalled using ritual. Existing allusions to Greek myth could have also been coupled more firmly with ritual performance. For instance, as opposed to presenting myself as a lecturer so consistently, I could have portrayed myself as more the high priest, experimenting with different aesthetics of authority. Doing so, I might have established extra theatre images and undertaken more nuanced actions, differently

expressing ideas central to the piece. Indeed, much was made of Athena, Arachne and Ariadne's relative positions with regards to the power relations on which conspiracy theory culture fixates; and given Athena's status as a deity it seems reasonable to say that the performance could, therefore, have expanded on these aspects, developing analogues through ritual practice and consequently deepening its value to the work. Elsewhere, I could have explored sacrifice as a theme complimentary to this dynamic. Doing so, I might have bolstered my work by developing ritual actions highlighting the way conspiracy theories typically sacrifice sound conclusions, preferring comfortable convictions. Furthermore, as Cristine H. Legare and Mark Nielsen observe, sacrificial rituals demonstrate a willingness 'to incur personal cost', producing 'a powerful and reliable signal to others that you are committed to the group', otherwise to some other entity or cause.²³¹ And bearing this in mind, I could have also explored ritual in relation to community and status, perhaps inviting the audience to wonder what we give up when we align ourselves with various perspectives related to conspiracism. As such, I could have developed a more complexly ritualistic piece, emphasising and building on ideas expressed elsewhere in the performance.

In addition to the proposed changes involving card placement and rituals, the performance may have benefitted from a different approach to its visualising cumulative data (see page 105). As my developing a website and using digital screens proves, a piece of this scale could easily have incorporated a more technologically complex means to display the imagery and information collected and connected throughout. One could argue that the screens and computers present in the space were not used to their full potential, as it would have been quite possible to create a digital collage and display this in tandem with the website, incorporated into the design. Thus, the screens showing Ariadne and visualising cards could have been put to more use. Doing so would perhaps have contemporised the aesthetic, and this could, in turn, have helped invite questions about knowledge and its transmission in virtual spaces. While that idea was expressed by the website and its hyperlinks, it seems to have been eclipsed by the physical piece.

Taking this discussion into account, *The Loom of Athena* appears to demonstrate numerous strategies useful to practitioners who seek to assess the epistemological complexities one associates with conspiracism. In hindsight, a version with fewer cue cards, additional digital components, more complex approaches to ritual and less interruptions could enhance an already complex performance capable of problematising knowledge and inviting its audience to critique conspiracism by extension. By incorporating those changes, the piece may have

²³¹ Cristine H. Legare and Mark Nielsen, 'Ritual explained: interdisciplinary answers to Tinbergen's four questions', *Philosophical Transactions*, 375: 1805 (2020), 1-5, (p.2).

capitalised more fully on its potential. Nonetheless, this work remains valuable in its demonstrating approaches to conspiracism by which the theatre audience may be invited to criticise issues central to conspiracy theory culture.

5 Conclusion

This thesis has selectively examined theatre's capacity to address conspiracy theory culture, considering approaches that negotiate its dangers. I have developed and critically reflected on three original performances, each exploring various approaches to this task. In particular, my work has treated conspiracy theory culture as a complex phenomenon, comprising many questionable perspectives, positions, anxieties and responses to uncertainty. Hence, I have concentrated on conspiracy theory culture as one concerned with establishing certainty in an uncertain world. I have therefore attempted to generate critical distance between the audience and conspiracy theory culture, problematising its tendency to produce unreasonable convictions.

My analysis has concentrated on my own creative practice, which responds to an initial analysis of existing practitioners. That review discovered useful approaches to conspiracy theory culture, addressing my first and second research questions by locating strategies and techniques on which to develop. It also contributed answers to my third research question, locating the value in ontological qualities of theatre, such as its liveness and capacity for copresence, which I went on to explore. Findings from the above each made possible a response to my fourth question then, foregrounding my practice research.

Though my creative outputs share themes and concerns, individual performances centred around particular approaches, allowing me to prioritise various issues in each. Leveraging multimedia performance in *Conspiracies*, I explored weaponised communications, illusion and spectacle, problematising the persuasive techniques employed by some public conspiracy theorists. *The Strangeness* drew attention to the way conspiracism thrives in online media, using dramatic realism to replicate and call conspiracy theory podcasting into question. I approached separate concerns in each episode: suspicions in 153, dubious sources in 154 and radicalisation in 155. Taking a different approach in *The Loom of Athena*, a visually and conceptually complex durational performance helped me address the spurious connectivity imagined by conspiracists, exploring the ways imaginary connections are shaped by experience and perspective. This breadth of activity addressed my second, third and fourth research questions, exploring techniques and strategies established by numerous practitioners, then building on those methods. Indeed, by gathering these approaches, I was able to address conspiracism from multiple angles, contemplating diverse concerns, practices and processes associated with conspiracy theory culture.

Much of this work was presented as autobiography, seeking to challenge testimony as an 'authenticating symbol' stimulating conspiracy beliefs.²³² When examining performances by Marlon Solomon and Dominic Orlando, I noted that autobiographical theatre helped each draw attention to the way commentary is rendered through personal history. As those practitioners demonstrate, perspectives on conspiracies and conspiracism can never be entirely secure (see page 23). Responding to this, an autoethnographic methodology helped me unpack my own biases in *Conspiracies*. By acknowledging my personal 'baggage', I was able to portray myself as someone whose experiences as a UFO witness have led them to distrust authorities.²³³ Thus, I signalled my positionality as a person sympathetic to conspiracism. And by addressing those sympathies throughout, I drew attention to the way personal history can influence conspiracy theories and perspectives on conspiracism. Hence, my claims were made dubious, as were those of conspiracists by extension. I took similar approaches in *The Loom*, exploring my genuine interest in connectivity and coincidence, thereby demonstrating my capacity to imagine causality where none is actually likely. In addition to this autobiographical element, I used durational performance to signal my limitations when attempting to collect and assess data about conspiracy theory culture, exposing my inability to apprehend and assess source material without being selective. Combined, these autoethnographic approaches produced an incomplete picture of conspiracism. This helped to expose the futility in anyone's attempting to approach conspiracy theory culture and its concerns from anything but a limited perspective, undermining the certainty conspiracists impress on an uncertain world.

Although autobiography was less notable in *The Strangeness*, I adopted a loosely autoethnographic methodology in basing Adrian's identity on my own. This was masked by dramatic realism. Nonetheless, my emphasis on monologues and Adrian's centrality as an unreliable medium each foregrounded the emerging complexities of a single but shifting perspective. This helped me portray conspiracism as generally unreliable in its assessment of reality. All three works were thus processed through identities whose authority I called into question, whether by exposing my limits as an artist or those associated with characters like Adrian. By destabilising these identities, I was able to undermine the claims made in each piece, inviting an uncertainty antithetical to the dangerous convictions conspiracism can produce.

²³² Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2008), p.26.

²³³ Bhattacharya, Himika, 'New Critical Collaborative Ethnography', in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, ed. by Sharlene Naggy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: The Guildford Press. 2008) pp.315-319 (p.315).

When making theatre informed by my personal experiences, I also discovered an impetus to dwell on and criticise my own anxieties, such as my concern about authorities, and my idiosyncrasies, like those pertaining to chance. Hence, an autoethnographic mode of enquiry produced insights about my personal relationships with conspiracism, leading me to question my own susceptibility to conspiracist rhetoric. For instance, I observed in myself a capacity to endorse grand narratives, underpinning my autobiographical reflections in *Conspiracies* and *The Loom* and informing Adrian's character-design in *The Strangeness*. Likewise, my views on conspiracism developed over time, as I came to realise my own positionality and assess its implications through practice. Although a thorough review of my process was not within the scope of this thesis, it should be noted that developing this work had an impact on me as a person, leading me to be more cautious about my conspiracist sympathies and the way I communicated those sentiments. Channelling this caution back into the work, I established a reflexive approach. My own mutability was a reminder that conspiracy theory culture is not static, and neither are its agents. Hence, I was motivated to examine that culture as a spectrum encompassing both reasonable suspicions, inspired by my own, and unreasonable convictions, like those I was sometimes drawn to. By exploring my own suspension between these positions, I was able to demonstrate the nuance observable in conspiracy theory culture, and to explore and examine relationships between its various participants.

Alternative opportunities arose in my exploring similarities between conspiracism and documentary theatre. Understanding that conspiracists and documentarians can produce 'authenticating sign systems' by calling on external sources, I sought ways to cite and problematise the sources drawn on in each performance.²³⁴ In *Conspiracies*, the triptych helped me to visualise a dialectical process by presenting parallel citations, exposing contrasting perspectives I could then synthesize and assess while on stage. By positioning myself between these sources, I presented myself as someone involved in collecting and interpreting conspiracy theory culture and its concerns. Then, in addressing this process, I was able to offer up my own uncertainties as an alternative to the convictions expressed by conspiracists, and particularly those who use citation to produce authenticity effects. Building on this in *The Strangeness*, I drew on cases documented by David Paulides and combined these with testimony and interviews extracted from existing media. Playing on the distance produced by an audio medium, these sources were situated at a remove, complicating attempts to assess their veracity. And where the claims made by those sources gradually became less reasonable, so too did Adrian's conspiracism. Equivalent approaches were

²³⁴ Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary theatre in the United States: an historical survey and analysis of its content, form, and stagecraft* (Westport, CONN: Greenwood Press, 1999), p.31.

further problematised in *The Loom*, where I organised citations into a physical structure, expressing the complex connections one can establish between various data, positions and perspectives both in and on conspiracy theory culture. By installing these sources in the space, I drew attention to the labyrinthine narratives conspiracists create and the processes by which they are produced. And by situating myself as a questionable authority whose work included arranging those connections, I signalled the positionality involved in all acts of citation. Where *Conspiracies* challenged public conspiracy theorists by addressing rhetorical citations, and *The Strangeness* invited questions about the uncertified sources relied on by conspiracists, *The Loom* concentrated on constraints, portraying conspiracism and its sources as personally inflected and therefore epistemically unreliable. In each of these cases, then, the claims made by conspiracists were dislodged where it was signalled that the audience would do well to approach assertions with caution, adopting a critical stance.

Returning to my third research question in relation to this practice, we can observe some ontological advantages conferred by theatre, particular to explorations of conspiracy theory culture. Indeed, theatre is broad enough a discipline to have permitted diverse experiments with form, varying with each performance. In *Conspiracies* a multimedia theatre practice helped me to demonstrate the way professional conspiracy theorists call on pageantry to dupe unsuspecting audiences. By emulating the showmanship of conspiracists like Alex Jones, I demonstrated that claims easily evade analysis when they are delivered via bombastic diatribes, busy media and arresting presentations. In particular, I was able to play on liveness, exploring the implications of a practice that cannot be paused, nor, therefore, truly apprehended. By moving into a more intimate space, I was then able to call into question the sympathies practitioners can ignite by positioning themselves as victims. Contrasting these rhetorical approaches with Solomon's autoethnographic style, I worked to undermine conspiracist demagogues by showing that spectacle can be dangerous. *The Loom* then approached conspiracy theory culture in a live art context, in which I was less of a character when presenting a version of myself. By stripping-back the pretence, I presented myself as a genuine person, replete with genuine vulnerabilities. And where these were also emphasised by a durational performance based around rules and guidelines, my limitations as a source were emphasised. Again, this was made possible by the liveness of the work. Chiefly I used this to draw attention to my own fallibility, echoing that of the conspiracy theory community. At the same time, the loom's visual complexity allowed me to address the proposition that, in conspiracy theory culture, everything seems to be connected. By demonstrating this, and doing so in a space that afforded reflection, I was able to invite scrutiny from the audience, regarding both conspiracy theory culture and the circumstances from which it arises. Thus,

several approaches combined to reveal epistemological complications central to conspiracism. As these examples each demonstrate, theatre creates opportunities to imitate and then call into question the environments in which conspiracy theories circulate, thus problematising conspiracy theory culture.

At times, my work stepped out of the studio. Audio drama allowed me to emulate conspiracy theory podcasting in *The Strangeness*. Here, the complications encountered by Adrian became analogous to those experienced by actual podcasters, and where his claims were presented as unreliable, foregrounding a slide into irrationality and extremism, the realism involved in this approach made it easy to show that genuine conspiracists could perhaps descend similarly. Contrasting with the contemporary theatre of *Conspiracies* and the performance art mode explored in *The Loom*, this approach eschewed liveness, inviting a different sort of scrutiny from its audience. By providing them with auxiliary notes that linked to real conspiracy theory media, which they could examine thoroughly in their own time, *The Strangeness* permitted its listeners to dig into conspiracy theory culture as researchers themselves. Hence, the audience were presented with an abundance of material made questionable by presenters whose authority was undermined by qualities particular to the audio medium. Like my other two outputs, then, this work played on its own elusive qualities, albeit differently. And in taking these three works together one might observe the strength of such intrigue. Where *Conspiracies* problematised authenticity effects, and *The Loom* drew attention to epistemological concerns, *The Strangeness* demanded speculation. Nonetheless, in each piece, the uncertainty generated worked to discourage the dangerous convictions one locates in conspiracy theory culture

Despite these contributions, there is still scope to develop this practice. Advancements could focus on multivocality and the thorough integration of conspiracists and their detractors into the work. For example, *The Loom* is demonstrably interactive and this quality could be deepened in new iterations: specific demographics could be reached through targeted marketing and preshow questionnaires, making it possible to organise audiences according to diverse opinions. Hence, one could more directly curate dialogue, during breaks, between conspiracist audience members and those who disagree with them. That dialogue could, of course, be steered away from dialectics and towards its own positional uncertainties, undermining convictions in each camp. As that suggestion signals, by involving more voices in the process, theatre makers could continue to deepen practices in which participants and audience members are more directly invited to challenge conspiracism.

Future directions may also consider audience research. Though I eschewed this approach for reasons already discussed, one could go on to examine impact, etc. Opportunities are perhaps most notable in *The Strangeness*. As the work exists online it could be distributed widely. And given its themes and focus it seems reasonable to assume it may initially appeal to a conspiracist audience, despite its more complicated nature. Using the website to fullest effect, one could establish communications with listeners at the point of access, during the listening experience and afterwards, during which time targeted questions could investigate its reception. A more conventional model could also be employed, relying on audience surveys, and these could be incorporated into any future reperformances of the work developed, not limited to the podcast medium. In taking this approach, one could perhaps discover more about the strategies developed in each performance, examining their potential, complications, etc. Likewise, one could discover opportunities to develop the pieces in new directions themselves, deepening the reflexivity involved in the research overall.

The work undertaken in this thesis approaches my fifth and most summative research question, assessing theatre's capacity to address conspiracism and its dangers. Throughout, I have explored numerous approaches to conspiracy theory culture, demonstrating the value in producing and embracing uncertainty. Foremost, my research indicates that the reflexive practices discussed can help theatre makers address conspiracism as a complex phenomenon, emphasising the importance of a discerning approach to any perspectives, practices and claims associated with conspiracy theory culture. Likewise, the range of my theatre was such that I could employ various approaches, each suited to examining different aspects of conspiracy theory culture. By experimenting with diverse forms, I alluded to a realistically heterogeneous conspiracy theory culture with relative nuance. Of course, this contrasts with the tendency for conspiracy theory culture to produce reductive conclusions. As such, and despite its limitations, the solo approach can be seen to be effective, so long as creators relativise their work. With that goal in mind, the practices I have developed here problematise the unreliability of conspiracy theory culture, drawing its dangerous claims into question. By resisting the certainties produced by conspiracism, my work demonstrates theatre's transformative potential and applies this to conspiracy theory culture, exposing and challenging its dangers.

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