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Identifying with Conspiracy Theorists: Uncovering Rhetorical Questions in the QAnon  
Movement

by

Jenna Morris Harte

Under the Direction of Michael Harker, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2023

## ABSTRACT

Inspired by Kenneth Burke's call to understand even the most distasteful rhetorics, this project directly explores arguments imagined by contemporary conspiracy theorists within the modern QAnon movement. After careful analysis of the rhetorical questions posed within "Q drops," this project understands conspiracy theories to be a rhetorical act that narrates a socially constructed reality in opposition to an imagined or real "other," recognizing the narratives to be the articulation of an inquisitive and collective positionality that attempts to provide answers to difficult questions. This definition guides my empathetic reading of the conspiracy theory's origins, but also provides critique of the act as the creation of an often harmful narrative of division.

The first chapter of this project analyzes the term "conspiracy theory" from multiple disciplines, including rhetorical studies. Next, I provide a detailed literature review of the scholars who have studied Q drops before me, finding that few scholars have taken on the task of directly analyzing the rhetoric. The third chapter details the methods and methodology of my study of Q's drops, defining more precisely how Burke's work on identification and dialectic informs the project. From there, I explain my findings, focusing much of my analysis on questions that begin with "how" or "why," which represent the most common kind of question Q poses. The concluding chapter initiates a conversation regarding the role of questions in composition studies—especially relating to the way instructors generate writing prompts. I suggest that instructors of First-Year Writing pay careful attention not just to teaching students how to ask questions, but also to countering the impulse to generate narratives of division by facilitating acts of rhetorical listening, a method of deliberately considering arguments made by others rather than harping on the creation of one's own, individualized claims.

INDEX WORDS: Rhetorical theory, Conspiracy theories, QAnon, Kenneth Burke, Rhetorical questions, Dialectic, Composition studies, First-year writing pedagogy

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2023

Identifying with Conspiracy Theorists: Uncovering Rhetorical Questions in the QAnon  
Movement

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August 2023

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## PREFACE

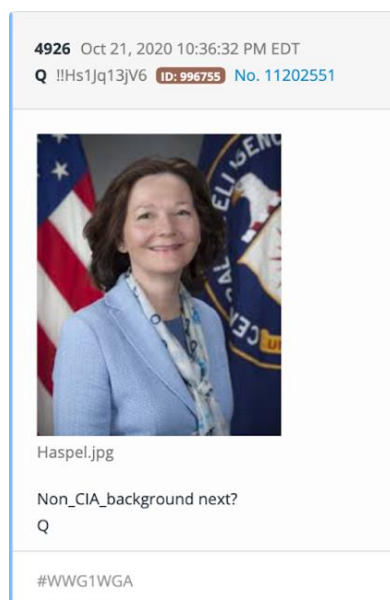
*“Question what you read [from every source]. Use discernment.” - Q*

The first time I encountered the website, QAlerts.app, an immediate sense of wrongdoing prickled in my chest. Part of this fear stemmed from the fact that I was accessing the website while using a computer owned by a public institution of higher education in Georgia, and I was “on the clock,” but I also had the sense that this dark corner of the internet did not deserve my attention—it was taboo. I wondered, too, if the act of typing “QAnon” into the search engine linked to my Google account would put me on a government watch list—this was as good a time as ever to turn on “incognito mode” on my browser. Regardless of these anxieties, I had two reasons to make this search: one personal and one professional. It was the year 2020, and in trying to verify some outlandish claims I had seen circulating on social media, and even hearing in my classroom as a lecturer of First-Year Writing, I began my own version of internet sleuthing and ran across the word “QAnon.” What began as an initial hunt for “proof” that these stories were untrue led to larger questions, such as where and why these ideas originated, how they spread, and how someone could be convinced by them. To my dismay, I realized that there was a larger, more nefarious voice behind the claims than I could have initially anticipated.

In 2020, it seemed like all at once that I began seeing, thinking, and hearing about QAnon; at the same time, as a Ph.D. student taking courses in Rhetoric, the intersections between the persuasive power of language and the appeal of conspiracy theories were all too clear. I recognized early on that QAnon offered a discourse community, a sense of belonging, and even a sense of righteousness, to its believers. Again, it was more than dark curiosity that led me to QAlerts.app; rather, as I realized that my research regarding the intersections of Rhetorical Studies and conspiracy theories was leading me to discuss QAnon as a case study for this

dissertation, I knew I would need to seek out Q’s posts (termed “Q drops” by followers) to analyze them from a rhetorical point of view, to untangle tenants of their persuasive appeal.

When I first accessed the website, QAlerts.app, I was inundated, like many Americans before me, with a wide variety of claims, including hundreds of memes of politicians and government employees. While I hoped it would be easy to discount the claims—this was my first knee-jerk reaction, to sift through and debunk individual arguments—I instead experienced a sense of confusion. In some cases, the drops included pictures of people who I, someone who considers herself to be a fairly informed citizen, was unable to name or recognize. I distinctly recall running across the drop pictured below. The person was vaguely familiar to me, though I had not heard the name “Haspel” before, which is the title of the .jpg image. I “went down a rabbit hole” immediately, eventually discovering that Q, for reasons still not entirely known to me, had falsified a story regarding the kidnapping of the CIA director.<sup>1</sup>

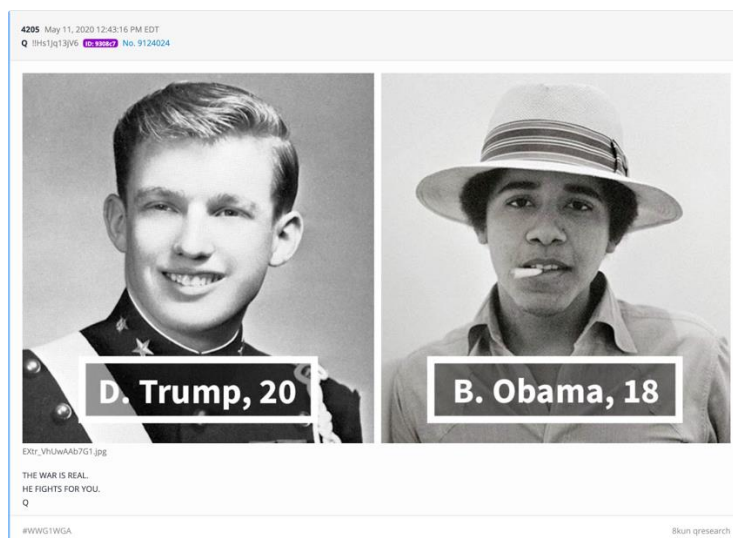


*Figure 1: Drop 4926*

<sup>1</sup> Q’s followers claimed that “five special forces troops and a CIA official were killed in the raid and Haspel was flown to Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp (GITMO) where she was treated and ‘received a tribunal for treason.’” See Reuters Staff for more.

After spending too-much-time looking through web articles debunking (or, in some cases, reinforcing) this particular QAnon conspiracy, I began to panic for a couple of reasons: on the one hand, I began to see Q's power to "drop" anything and have it take off as truth for readers, and on the other, I worried about myself as a researcher—how would I ever chase down, analyze, or even begin to conceptualize all the arguments made within the nearly 5,000 drops? In order to feel confident in my position that Q operates as a kind of rhetorical trickster, I began to wonder if I would have to become the opposite of Q: an internet vigilante who meticulously disproves his arguments using logic and sound evidence. I hoped, in many cases, the false claims would be easy to debunk, but something else began to nag me as I looked at the thousands of arguments and insinuations made in the drops: what if in trying to prove Q's lies, I actually discovered truths? Could Q be "right" in some cases? While I knew there were egregious and harmful arguments being made within the drops, I feared that there might be nuggets of "truth" that could be more difficult to debunk. In short, I was overwhelmed.

While many Q drops cause a "falling down the rabbit hole" sensation, some of the drops lend more easily to debunking, with the arguments obviously weak and biased. These were the kinds of arguments I expected to see when encountering the Q drops. For example, the drop below shows a young Barack Obama with a cigarette and Donald Trump in what looks to be military clothing. The phrase beneath the pictures read: "THE WAR IS REAL. HE FIGHTS FOR YOU."



*Figure 2: Drop 4205*

It takes a quick Google search to confirm both that Donald Trump never served in the military and that Barack Obama does smoke cigarettes—something he discusses candidly in his recent memoir. The drop seems to imply that Donald Trump was a patriotic young man, while, in contrast, Barack Obama spent his youth addicted to vices.

In another less sophisticated drop, Q shares what looks to be an old newspaper that discusses a motion by Hitler to “defund the police.” This post was shared in September 2020, amidst legitimate civil unrest regarding interactions between police officers and people of color. Q comments: “The truth is right in front of you/Past playbook used today?/The truth is right in front of you.”



Figure 3: Drop 4650

Also overtly biased, the Figure 4 clearly critiques major media outlets and suggests collusion with the “Democrat Party.” Notably, Q spares Fox News from critique.

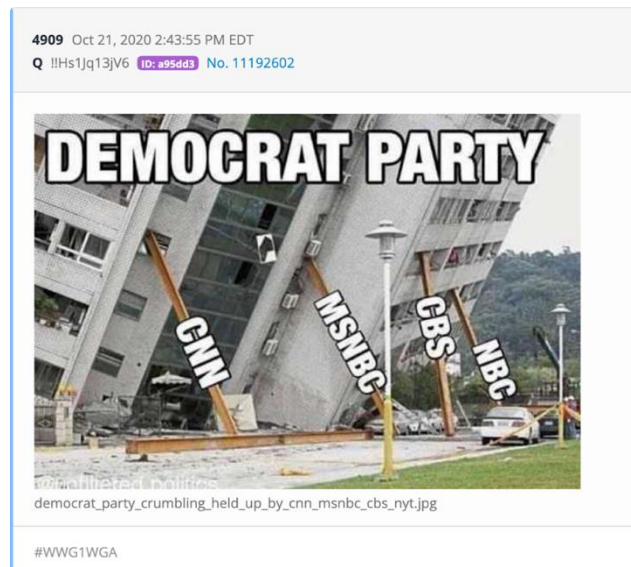


Figure 4: Drop 4909



Finally, a Bible verse about the armor of God, might cause concern when you read Q’s use of the verse as a God-ordained command to participate in violence. The caption to the post reads “Keep firing, Nancy,” a jab at Nancy Pelosi, insinuating that she is “the evil one” in question.

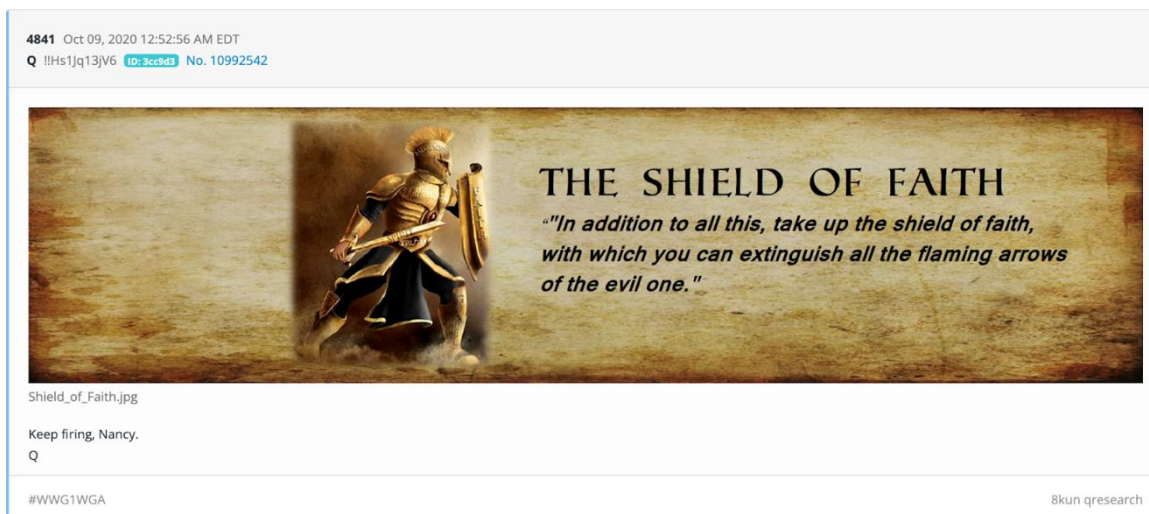


Figure 5: Drop 4841

To put it simply: when I first heard about QAnon, specifically, arguments regarding “Pizzagate” and the “Wayfair Scandal,” I was surprised that anyone would believe these stories, and I still find the aforementioned drops to be unconvincing. Yet when confronted with the corpus of the rhetoric itself, I had a near-immediate change of perspective on the QAnon movement. Even the memes above, which I suggest make unconvincing, surface-level arguments, do occasionally speak to complexities—to attempt to prove that media outlets are completely unbiased, for example, would not only be impossible, it would require a book-length argument. Viewing Q drops required me to change my perspective on the movement, to recognize complexity behind the claims and to acknowledge a powerful impulse towards believing them.

I must admit a personal bias when it comes to this particular study, because I can imagine an alternate reality where I too may have been a victim of Q’s nefarious rhetoric that creates division and depends on fear of “the other.” Before I attended a public institution for college, I

was homeschooled in a way that, while perhaps well-intended, limited my worldview—and by this, I mean I was never encouraged to identify with anyone who was not white, cisgender, and Christian. Put another way, I had never been permitted to associate with anyone radically or even marginally different from myself. More than a decade later, I can recall being a first-year college student in my Introduction to Political Science class where I voiced an opinion on a social issue that I now deeply regret. After making this comment, something I would have been praised for articulating at home, a classmate gently pointed out a different, more empathetic perspective on the issue based on their own experience. I was struck by my own lack of knowledge. To put it plainly, I entered college with a certain level of privilege as a white woman, and I didn't know it.

While I was fortunate enough to find an experience in education that would prepare me to more deliberately identify with others, many of my friends and family members did not have the same experience—even the ones who also went to college. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, I found myself surrounded by people close to me who were compelled by conspiracy theories and who shared their fears with me. I cannot say I approached these conversations with grace; in fact, I avoided these discussions, feeling like a failure because even as a scholar of rhetoric, I did not know how I could reach across these newly realized and profound differences. These “conspiracy theories” found their way into my classroom as well; I felt that at every turn, I was trying to convince someone that President Joe Biden is not a robot or that vaccines do not “cause Covid-19.”

This project discusses the QAnon movement, but it also initiates a larger call to consider what ways we, in our academic communities, might have the impulse to “other” believers of conspiracy theories. More broadly, I argue that conspiracy theories emerge in an effort to identify against various institutions, some of which are social institutions of power and

knowledge, and also against people of different beliefs, race, or ideology. Through this project, which focuses on the benefits of dialectical exchange, I suggest that authentic acts of questioning and listening are necessary not only for “Us” to understand the “Other,” but that they also inspire the work we do as teachers of rhetoric, preparing students to encounter a world where “Pizzagates” will continue to appear.

The first chapter of this project analyzes the term “conspiracy theory” from multiple disciplines, including rhetorical studies. This review situates my definition of the term—which is that conspiracy theories are socially constructed realities hinging on an imagined or real other. Next, I provide a detailed literature review of the scholars who have studied Q drops before me. The third chapter details the methods and methodology of my study of Q’s drops, defining more precisely how Kenneth Burke’s work on identification and dialectic informs the project. From there, I explain my findings, focusing most of my analysis on questions that begin with “how” or “why,” which represent the most common kind of question Q poses. The concluding chapter initiates a conversation regarding the role of questions in composition studies—especially relating to the way instructors generate writing prompts. I will suggest that instructors of First-Year Writing pay more careful attention not just to teach students how to ask questions, but also how to facilitate acts of rhetorical listening, a method of deliberately considering arguments made by others rather than harping on the creation of one’s own, individualized claims. Doing this work produces more authentic acts of collective meaning-making, and also pushes individuals to recognize what motivates another’s beliefs, even when those beliefs are incredulous or even harmful.

## 1 CHAPTER 1: DEFINING “CONSPIRACY THEORY”

QAnon provides a sense of community for his readers through the creation of a common enemy. This phenomenon of “othering” is not unique to QAnon: at its essence, conspiracy theories depend on the idea of an imagined, or real, enemy, to whom the theorists identify themselves in opposition—Sandy Hook deniers, for example, believe that the school shooting was faked as a plot by government officials to enforce strict gun laws, and members of the “9/11 truth movement” argue that the American government orchestrated the 9/11 attacks to justify a Middle Eastern war. In many cases, the “villain” takes the form of a large, official organizing body or agency. In keeping with this pattern, QAnon celebrates being on the fringe of larger organizations of information—such as the CDC and “mainstream media,” while also rejecting the Democratic Party (whom Q refers to as “D”):

One party discusses God./One party discusses Darkness./One party promotes God./One party eliminates God./Symbolism will be their downfall. /The Great Deceiver(s)/ WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you witnessed a **[D]** party leader being Patriotic **[exhibiting National Pride (love of Country)]**? (drop 4627).

In this drop, Q explicitly “villainizes” at least three kinds of individuals: ones who are not religious, those who are Democrats, and those who do not outwardly “exhibit a love of country.” QAnon offers a space for “like-minded” dialogue that attempts to intellectually validate skepticism of the “other.” “Others” to the Q community include Democrats, Republicans who do not support Donald Trump, people who are not Christian, scientists, the media, people who are not “patriotic,” and members of the Black Lives Matter movement, to name a few.

Recognizing that conspiracy theories depend on the articulation of an “other” reveals the tensions inherent to the act. This foundational concept—that conspiracy theories depend on

conflict—means that conspiracy theories can actually be focused on legitimate social issues, but they may also amplify tensions and become the source of the conflict itself; in other words, conspiracy theories can point to legitimate grievances, but they can also go so far afield that the foundation in reality can be difficult to decipher. Whatever the case, conspiracy theories are imaginative, and often even rigorously determined and shaped by kinds of evidentiary or research-based process that can rival—or, at the very least, parody--academic processes of research and discovery. At its essence, a conspiracy theory emerges as a desire to “know” or “uncover” something regarding another’s motivation, making them a cite ripe for efforts to consider the role of rhetoric when coming to a common ground.

Timothy Melley, a scholar of conspiracy theories and American literature, suggests that conspiracy theories derive from a fear of losing one's agency amidst powerful political and social structures. Melley says a real “conspiracy,” or a confrontation of structures of power, generally occurs when an individual “represses their own desires and aims for a set of communal goals” (10). A conspiracy theory, by contrast, expresses the individual desire for autonomy; in other words, a conspiracy theory “begins with individual self-protection, with an attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order” (10). Melley finds what he calls “agency panic” to be real and valid, emphasizing that while we must not “open our arms to all manner of conspiracy theories,” we must instead recognize that they “develop from the refusal to accept someone else’s universal social good or an officially sanctioned truth” (13).

Melley further unpacks this argument, that conspiracy theories function to regain a sense of autonomy, by saying “[t]o understand one’s relation to the social order through conspiracy theory...is to see oneself in opposition to society” (10) and that sense of “diminished human agency” or a feeling that “individuals cannot effect meaningful action” drives the conspiracy

theory (11). Importantly, rather than reducing conspiracy theories to a symptom of paranoia, Melley emphasizes the effort required to create a cohesive conspiracy theory, saying, “Paranoid thinking could be viewed as logical development—where all events feel interpretable so that nothing seems accidental and everything appears consciously intended” (19). Melley is not the first to recognize legitimate motivations for constructing and believing conspiracy theories. Michael Butter suggests that our modern understanding of conspiracy theories is a product of the Enlightenment, when innovations in science provided a framework for a worldview removed from divine providence and focused more on human power to affect reality. Butter makes a compelling argument that the origin of conspiratorial thinking might be rooted in puritanical ideals, wherein conspirators were “instruments” created by God to “punish sinners” (13). For Greeks and Romans, too, fate and chance had a role to play that could overwhelm humans as agents (13). Yet, since the 18th century, “conspirators are in control—history unfolds according to their plan” (11).

Despite important contributions from scholars like Melley and Butter, others tend to overlook the complexity behind impulses toward conspiracy theories. Much of the reduction of conspiracy theorists stems from Richard Hofstadter’s essay “The Paranoid Style of American Politics.” Published by Harper’s Magazine in 1964, this essay, which became the titular essay of a later-published collection, essentially pathologized believers. Current scholars of conspiracy theory research criticize Hofstadter for largely “othering” believers in conspiracy theories, not providing an empathetic sense of how their systems of belief emerged. For example, Jesse Walker, a contemporary scholar of American politics and conspiracy theories, points out that Hofstadter’s marginalization of conspiracists—and his suggestion that conspiracy theories were particularly right-leaning—led to a “distorted picture in which the country’s outsiders are

possessed by fear and its establishment usually is not” (12). Similarly, Joseph Uscinski, who argues for *Taking Conspiracy Seriously*, accuses Hofstadter of disrupting the potential intellectual study of conspiracy theories, emphasizing that the narratives are an important tool to hold those in power accountable for their actions (20).

Though scholars have illuminated biases within Hofstadter's body of work, there still remains an impulse toward reduction. For example, historian Jennifer Olmstead suggests that “[c]onspiracists come to believe in their theories the way zealots believe in their religion” (11). In saying this, Olmstead implies that “faith” in a conspiracy is without reasonable cause. More damning, Olmstead suggests that “[c]onspiracy theories are *easy* ways of telling complicated stories” (6 emphasis added). In contrast, conspiracy theories are often “complicated ways of telling easy stories,” and do not always make matters simple for believers. Frequently, the “truth” offers a much easier-to-digest, less exciting narrative, and the conspiracist’s theories have the complexity we might traditionally associate with ideology, not mere “zealotry.”

Other scholars are more antagonistic toward conspiracy theorists. Rhetoricians Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakous argue that the discourse of conspiracy theories cannot be “grounded” because there is always a believer of “fantasy,” and a non-believer, the “pragmatic” (300). Still, Goodnight and Poulakous reject Hofstadter’s idea that believers of “fantasy” are entirely misguided, making an advanced claim that “it may even be held that all discourse—other than that spoken by a small but knowledgeable group—dangerously indulges the fantasy and thereby coopts judgment, conceals knowledge, and misguides action” (301). Yet though perhaps all rhetoric “indulges the fantasy,” the authors provide a distinction for the conspiracy theorists, saying an “inversion of traditional rhetorical appeals imparts to some conspiracy-believers a paranoid quality, for if allowed to grow unrestrained, the skepticism devours all

differing points of view” (307). In other words, traditions of rhetoric—like evidence and proof—are only useful for the believer of “fantasy” as long as they maintain a predetermined cognitive bias. Though Goodnight and Poulakous do identify with conspiracy theorists to some extent in their efforts to describe the presence of fantastical thinking behind all rhetoric, they reinforce an “us” versus “them” dynamic within the discourse, making it difficult to perceive any pathway toward common ground.

Sharon Crowley briefly touches on conspiracy as a tenant of apocalyptic thinking in *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*. Crowley’s work makes important contributions to understanding the ideological divide between the “Christian Right” and “Secular Humanism,” but like Goodnight and Poulakous, she explicitly views the those who believe in the apocalypse as an “other.” Crowley suggests that when it comes to literal interpretations of apocalyptic events—a kind of conspiracy theory—that the believer “mandates a style of argument that does not risk engagement. Its proponents believe that they possess the truth, and they legitimate this assumption by claiming direct access to a superrationality that trumps human reason” (170). While Crowley makes this damning statement with regards to apocalyptic conspiracy specifically, this reduction—this imagining of apocalyptic belief as “without reason”—risks minimizing the complexity inherent to belief more generally.

The impulse to criticize and treat conspiracy theorists as “other” has an alluring appeal since distinctions between “empathizing” or “accepting” can be difficult to determine. For example, in *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, Joseph Uscinski takes an openly sympathetic approach to conspiracy theorizing. Though he acknowledges that conspiracy theorists are “often wrong,” and can impede “critical progress,” especially as it relates to scientific advancements (17), his edited collection largely minimizes the threat they cause. In the introduction to the



collection, Uscinski goes as far as to support conspiracy-theorizing when he says, “If conspiracy theorists do not test established truths, who will do it?” (20), thereby not only establishing an “us” versus “them” dynamic, but also suggesting that no one else, besides conspiracy theorists, would question established truths—even though this work is an important function of academia at large.

Uscinski goes further to say: “How can we know an idea’s strength unless we allow it to compete in an open field?” (20). One might counter this question by asking, to what end must we entertain “ideas?” Are all “ideas” worthy of taking seriously? Overall, while Uscinski’s volume does provide important insights to the field of conspiracy theories broadly, only one of the chapters discusses issues of race with any depth—despite the fact that many conspiracy theories depend deeply on issues of “the other;” in other words, this volume does not address the risks conspiracy theories pose to already marginalized people. In other words, Uscinski’s strategy risks too closely identifying with conspiracy theorists.

In *Republic of Lies: American Conspiracy Theorists and Their Surprising Rise to Power*, Anna Merlan empathizes with believers, but also unflinchingly points to the threat that conspiracy-theorizing poses to minorities. Similar to Melley, Merlan explains that conspiracy theorists look for “someone to blame” when they are crippled by inequality in terms of class stratification (9). She specifically says this urgency to place blame can be due to “a frustratingly opaque healthcare system, a vanishing social safety net, [and] a political environment that seizes cynically on a renewed distrust of the news media” (9). Merlan most obviously departs from scholars like Uscinski when she claims that modern conspiracy theories are emerging in tandem with “a very real resurgence in nationalism and white supremacy” (29). Merlan calls a few of these theories out specifically:

The worst corner of this flourishing conspiracy culture amounts to a deeply regressive view of the world. It denounces immigrants as the advanced army of some hidden globalist agenda. It calls Black Lives Matter activists liars and Soros-paid actors, while the victims of mass shootings and their grieving families are condemned as fakes. It confidently announces...that liberals are planning to spring a “Second Civil War” (30).

Merlan places much of the blame on these specific kinds of narratives on voices like Alex Jones—Merlan mentions that he “denounced feminism as a globalist plot” (30). For Merlan, former president Donald Trump also finds a “new enemy to target every week” (30). Trump is not alone in finding enemies—or “others.” Each of the conspiracy theories mentioned in Merlan’s list depends on seeing a group of individuals as “other.” These are not the only conspiracy theories that are racist and sexist—Holocaust denial being another more obvious case, but Merlan reminds us that in addition to Jewish people, “Catholics, Freemasons, Mormons,” and even one’s own neighbor, in the case of the Salem Witch Trials, have been accused of conspiracies of grappling for power (34).

Despite the ethical conflict of devoting attention to harmful rhetorics, rhetoricians must deliberately engage with conspiracy theories, not only to recognize them as a persuasive discourse through which the public finds meaning, but also to consider ways to make our own rhetoric—our academic discourse and pedagogy—distinct from the rhetorical trappings of conspiracy theorizing. Further, Rhetorical theory offers an appropriate lens from which to gain a better sense of the appeal of conspiracy theories. Rather than submitting to reduced, long-held beliefs, this project first seeks to reveal that despite differences, the rhetorical underpinnings of what we might call “critical” and conspiratorial thought have similar motivations and methodological processes, especially when it comes to acts of questioning and inquiry. For the

purposes of this project, my definition of “conspiracy theory” will be: a rhetorical act that narrates a socially constructed reality in opposition to an imagined or real “other.”

### **1.1 Rhetorical Contributions to Conspiracy Theory Research**

While conspiracy theories have been largely overlooked by scholars of Rhetoric, there have been recent, important contributions to the conversation. Jenny Rice’s book, *Awful Archives: Conspiracy Theory, Rhetoric, and Acts of Evidence*, offers the first view from our field that explicitly takes on discussions of conspiracy theories. Rice bleakly notes that Wayne Booth is one of the only rhetorical scholars who tangentially discusses what “to do” with those who believe in “things like UFOs,” a kind of belief which Booth feared to be the cause of disagreement wherein “interlocutors think the other side is simply wrong, bad, evil, stupid, or misled” (145). Because of this inattention to conspiracy theories from a rhetorical view, Rice admits to facing challenges when approaching her project as a rhetorician. Despite the challenges, Rice thoroughly discusses the evidence-making strategies of conspiracy theorists. Rice models a dual view of the evidence that makes up conspiracy theories, not to go toe-to-toe with presenting both sides of the argument, but instead to ask “What is this evidence of?” “This,” for Rice, is the act of accumulating evidence for the purpose of supporting the design of a conspiracy theory. With this view, the evidence presented by conspiracy theorists says more about the believer and the situation than the theory itself.

Rice discusses previous work in evidence and conspiracy theories by Young and Launer, who argue that “[c]onspiracy theory discourse is thus a pretender to true evidentiary process, a sham passing off narrative as evidence” (5). While Rice agrees there is something hollow in many conspiracy theorists’ representation of “facts,” she calls into question what we mean when we call something “evidence,” suggesting that there is more than the burden of logic at stake

when accumulating it. After describing “evidence” as “our thing,” or, a thing belonging to the subject matter of rhetorical studies—Rice quotes Richard B. Gregg’s *A Rhetoric of Evidence* which claims that evidence is not “raw material” that leads to “logical conclusions” (5). Indeed, Rice says there is a “thingness” associated with evidence, thanks to Aristotle’s inartistic proofs, but she also argues that etymologically, contemporary understandings of the term “evidence” differ from the Greek and Roman usage. Our English word, “evidence,” comes from the Latin word “evidentia” which means something like “obviousness,” “vividness,” or “distinctness” (7). Evidentia means something is palpable, slightly differing from the Greek’s parallel word “enargeia,” or “a bringing before the eyes.” The key for Rice is that “enargeia” derives from an oral culture, whereas “evidence” comes from a “print-based” culture, making them similar but different in terms of their tangibility. Ultimately, Rice argues that conspiracy theorists are not “performing” evidentiary processes in terms of relying only on artifacts, but rather that “performative conjuring recalls evidentia’s mesh of poetics and evidential truth” (8). A kind of imaginative abstraction motivates conspiracy theorists—though Rice does not directly compare this process to the design and intangibility of mythos, the idea merits further consideration.

In recovering definitions and interpretations of evidence, Rice bravely risks compromising her own ethos in making comparisons between herself and conspiracy theorists. When looking at an archive of “evidence” collected to prove a “hollow earth” conspiracy theory, Rice describes two parallel experiences of reading the evidence: one of studying the actual findings the conspiracy theory provided, but another, “register” was about the producer of the evidence herself. Bluntly, Rice says the theory itself “is evidence of our ongoing human attempts to figure out what the fuck is happening around us” (11). By reading the archives of evidence for the hollow earth, Rice quite literally embodies the act of the other. Doing this work allows her to

come to profound conclusions not only about the conspiracy theories and theorists—which she ultimately does not find convincing—but also something about herself as a person who experiences evidence:

While reading these archive materials, I felt both registers of evidence emerge with equal palpability, though they were not equally persuasive by any means. Of course, I am a rhetorical scholar who makes a living by finding the polysemic and the multiple in any given text. Still, while any scholar worth her weight can read beyond what the contents contain, it is worth acknowledging that *this same interpretive process* can also guide how hollow earth believers read this material. *Just as I had the sense* that something more is being transmitted by these documents, *the same might be the case* for those who are persuaded by these claims. Something more, something palpable, emerges beyond the geological and historical factoids; evidence of government secrecy, occult, wisdom, eternal life, a sense of purpose. (11; emphasis added)

Rice's willingness to explicitly identify with conspiracy theorists sets a precedent for how scholars of rhetorical studies ought to meaningfully engage with these claims.

Importantly, Rice goes on to argue that evidence-as-a-thing limits our understanding of how evidence functions as an experience *between individuals*: explicitly, she says, "Even when I am faced with an outlandish claim steeped in bullshit—a shadowy elite group of Jews secretly controls the world, or liberal feminists want to make euthanasia mandatory—that bullshit evidence emerges an encounter between me and my bullshit prone interlocutor" (9). To explain what she means when using the term "bullshit," Rice quotes James Fredal, who says bullshit is an experience that happens between "two bodies:" "bullshit is what results when the arrogance of one party leads the other to feel unacknowledged, taken for granted, disregarded, or unheard."

Rice clarifies Fredal's point by saying, "Bullshit is not so much a thing, therefore, as it is a happening. It is a conjuring" (10). As evident through the tension that exists between the academic community and conspiracy theorists—who often target institutions of education as sources of power, "bullshit," or arrogance, can happen from both sides of this conflict.

Rice's book provides critical insights to our field and how we understand "good" and "bad" evidence, especially in her empathetic view of the methodological processes that take place when finding evidence for a conspiracy theory. While Rice looks explicitly at the rhetoric of evidence, my argument dovetails from her position to take on an argument she hints at when discussing the interplay between individuals in disagreement: Conspiracy theories do tell us much about their believers, but they may also call on us to recognize to what extent we are willing to engage with rhetoric—and rhetors—with whom we would prefer to keep our distance. The struggle with the academic view of conspiracy theorists is that it is impossible to view the phenomenon and not see obvious parallels to our own work, especially as scholars of rhetoric who are concerned with the meaning-making capabilities of language and in articulating, through writing and speaking, ideas that promote a common good. A conspiracy theory frustrates the academic process—it apes our methods and even steals our rhetoric to produce troubling, but no-less rigorously determined, worldviews. This intimate frustration inspires distance, but requires the uncomfortable work of making ourselves and our study vulnerable by testing our methods against those we seek to criticize.

## **1.2 Conspiracy Theory as an Imaginative, Socially Constructed Reality**

This project considers conspiracy theories to be a rhetorical act that narrates a socially constructed reality in opposition to an imagined or real "other;" this definition understands that a conspiracy theory is the articulation of an inquisitive and collective positionality. While Q is a

storyteller, he is not a traditional narrator; instead, it may be more appropriate to suggest that Q *creates storytellers* out of his followers. Q capitalizes on the power of dialogue by asking questions in a way that invites readers to create a persuasive, public mythos that purposefully designs a sense of imagined order amidst legitimate social unrest.

Because of their complexity, conspiracy theories depend on invented logic, as they are constructed by a collective act of skepticism, making them immune to debunking with traditional, rule-bound revelations of logical fallacies. For example, the methods by which Q makes appeals—with calls to use logic and through posing questions, not answers—suggest that when engaging with cryptic Q drops, Anons experience a collective meaning-making process that parallels traditional forms of research and requires a particular process of what feels like critical thinking. When considering the proliferation and popularization of conspiracy theories in modern culture, one might be tempted to call for public education in logical reasoning. Stephen Pinker in his recent publication, *Rationality* goes as far as to suggest that “[r]ationality should be the fourth R, together with reading, writing, and arithmetic” (314). He makes the broad claim that statistical and critical thinking skills need be a greater part of curricula, from K-12 to the university level. The idea is that an education in logic would help students to identify “wrong” arguments themselves, but strict adherence to logic as a solution to this problem invites argumentation—an act of “proving wrong” rather than seeking common ground.

While learning traditional rules of logic, of probability and statistics, too, can be helpful when pointing out the irrationality of an argument, there does not seem to be much evidence that asserts that the act of unveiling, the “proving wrong” of an argument will change adherents' minds; learning the rules of logic does not guarantee that those tools will be utilized when constructing beliefs. George Pullman's *Persuasion: History, Theory, Practice* touches on the

limits of logic when confronting harmful ideas from a rhetorical perspective; Pullman says, “The point of persuasion is to improve the thinking of a group or community, not to seize an advantage by triumphantly pointing out an error” (13). Even more pointedly, Pullman goes on to say, “Rarely will logic alone talk anybody into or out of anything” (13). Pullman’s assertion here is in keeping with what studies in neuroscience tell us about the nature of belief. In Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, he provides critical insights to the fact that much of our judgements and beliefs hinge on mental processes that are automatic and often subconscious—not at all driven by traditional notions of “logic.” This powerful thinking mechanism—the “fast” thinking—often rejects the “effort” required by more deliberate or “slow” thinking, leading to biases in judgment and belief, as an example (36).

Still, calls for logic and perspicuity as an effort to determine truths are part of the rhetorical tradition. From Plato to Locke, philosophers have been wary of rhetoric, in part because of their recognition that language affects the interpretation of calculable truths, but also because the nature of belief can be hard to predict. Infamously, in the Gorgias tale, Plato says that “rhetoric” is a way to make a speaker appear as if he knows things he does not know, to “appear good when he is not” (112). What Plato fears is that with the right kind of language, a general populace could be convinced by an orator of untruths. Polus, a young scholar in the Gorgias, commits plenty of what we would now call logical fallacies in his defense of rhetoric; at one point, he “laughs instead of disproving” Socrates’ claims with evidence, another time, he “tries to make [Socrates’s] flesh creep” in order to make a point (122). To a large extent, Plato is concerned with the sensations that he sees associated with rhetoric, or the possibility of perverting truth in an effort to “produce a kind of gratification and pleasure” (114).



To some degree, Plato correctly fears the winning power of “gratification and pleasure” against a soundly articulated argument. Scholars of rhetoric during the Enlightenment felt the same sense of fear; Descartes, a proponent of rationalism, sought to define a method through which he could “come to know with certainty what is true” (Bizzell 832). At the same time, Empiricism replaced Rationalism’s sequential reasoning with empirical observation and experiment (Bizzell 832). Francis Bacon and John Locke advocated for scientific induction, and obviously, many advances in science and technology have been made because of these foundations. These same scholars, though, much like Stephen Pinker, made efforts to apply scientific reasoning to language; broadly, rhetoricians during the Enlightenment recognized the power of language to alter a human’s perception of reality and truth, therefore distrusting rhetoric, which Locke believed increased obscurity. While Locke condemned rhetors and was critical of the practice, much of why he feared rhetoric is exactly why it should be studied.

Locke said language is “abused” if it does not quickly convey one person’s thoughts to another, and one should just say things as they are (898). In direct contrast, Giambattista Vico, a contemporary of Locke, argued that “there are more things in this world than there are words...Our experience is infinitely richer than our language” (Bizzell 833). Vico understood that it was the power of imagination and abstraction that led to productive philosophical inquiry, and that reality cannot be limited by facts. Thus, though outward appeals to logic and truth are common strategies for conspiracy theorists, and even though contemporary scientists like Pinker are tempted to call on education in logic to combat conspiratorial thinking, it is not logic or facts that persuade us or design philosophical truths; as Rice indicates in her rhetorical analysis of conspiracy theories, the process by which conspiracy theorists accumulate evidence follows its own kind of imaginative logical pattern, not based in scientific methods of logic. Indeed, people

choose to hold “illogical” beliefs—or, beliefs that cannot be proven with facts—all the time.

Michael Shermer, a contemporary scientist, discusses the cultivation of belief, and shows that Americans dearly hold beliefs that cannot be proven by logic as fact, and often can actually be disproven. Shermer, in a section *Believing Brain* titled, “I Want to Believe,” points out that many people hold beliefs that “scientists would consider to be unbelievable” because of the lack of evidence (2). He cites a 2009 Harris Poll of 2,303 adults in America, discovering 82% believe in God, 76% in miracles, 75% in heaven. Strikingly, Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, which can be empirically, or factually, proven was only believable to 45% of participants, barely winning out against the belief in ghosts at 40%.

Despite the fact that some beliefs seem “irrational,” modern society is contingent upon the ability to abstract; myths form the building blocks of culture, and human knowledge is limited, meaning that some “illogical” beliefs could actually have merit. Depending too much on logic can actually limit our ability to understand reality in truth, because we cannot, and do not, only depend on tangible facts when we construct our beliefs. Steven Mackey considers Vico’s representation of truth and reality in light of the election of Donald Trump, and makes the case that to combat rhetors like Trump, we need a new kind of ideology that seeks to understand truth beyond the “logical.” Mackey explains that according to Vico, in the past there were three ages of thought: first, superstition—characterized by the way pre-humans “crafted ways of co-operating with each other through superstitions that mysterious gods and spirits manipulated the world,” to a second level of “super hero myths,” which was more humanistic but still relied on god, much like Gilgamesh—where the protagonist is 1/3 god and 2/3 man. Finally, the Human Age relies on the reason of man, as evidenced by the Enlightenment Era. These three mechanisms of philosophical thought overlap, but are distinct in their purviews and these “flips”

between ages were developed as “survival mechanisms,” or new knowledge that required new ways of thinking (6). Importantly, these “mutual mental images” provide a context for human progress (1). In explaining the evolution of human reasoning, Mackey makes the case that a new kind of understanding of reality—one that considers imagination—must occur.

Mackey makes the case that ancient civilizations, which relied on mythos, were, perhaps, “just as vivid, tangible, and intellectually sound” as “scientific and technological cognitions” (2). Mackey points out that for Vico, reality could “only ever be expressed indirectly in terms of the thinking tools which existed in the *sensus communis*” (2). Mackey says that it was when society became “enamored with mathematical and technical ways of reasoning” that rhetorical education lost its mainstream appeal (5). Mackey argues that rhetoric, then fell by the way of being usurped by corporate interests, which he cites books such as *The Unseen Power: Public Relations, as history*, as being evidence. Trump’s election then, calls for a revision of public perception where “scholarly appreciation of rhetorical theory and practice is at last taken seriously” (6).

While imagination offers one view of combatting illogical rhetoric, the social function of shaping reality helps to explain impulses toward conspiracy theories. In *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation: A Social Perspective on the Function of Writing*, Gregory Clark leans on the understanding that people invent, not dictate, realities through the inherently collaborative process of reading and writing (iv). Clark points out that all language is inherently answer-seeking. With Bakhtin as a lens, and his two central ideas, one that language creates rather than conveys reality, and two that the process is collective rather than individual, Clark argues that written language will always be “read in the answering words of a reader” (14). In this sense, all language, even when not apparently so, is questioning—positively, an environment full of questions inspires new ideas and growth. Our greatest “danger” is forgetting the “essential

answerability of the versions of the world that we or others have constructed, and in doing so, stop the dialogue” (17).

In his foundational study of the social function of reading and writing, Clark makes distinctions between the three terms: dialogue, dialectic, and conversation. Dialogue, for Clark, is driven by a conscious effort to interact cooperatively, but dialectic diverges in its effort to enable people to “construct together assumptions and agreements they can share” (xvi). Clark draws the largest distinctions between rhetoric and dialectic by saying that dialectic exchange emphasizes the process of knowledge-making as ongoing. Clark warns that without this sense of knowledge as ongoing, all socially constructed learning environments are at risk; communication for the purpose of cooperation can lead to a “collective reality” (7). Dangerously, socially constructed reality can take on the status of absolute truth, making “fundamental disagreement inconceivable” (8). This situation Clark describes has obvious parallels to discourse communities like QAnon, but even institutions of religion or academia are not immune to this phenomenon of irrefutable, shared realities. To prevent siloed versions of truth, Clark argues that the exchange must remain “incomplete” in order to “keep every version of reality open” (9). The purpose of exchange must not be to come to agreement, but to maintain the process of exchange (9). The tension between being an individual and part of a community is inherent to writing: Clark suggests that we must “learn for ourselves and teach others how writing enables individuals to define and sustain their connections with community” (xvi).

Kenneth Burke captures the essence of conversation as a meaning-making process; famously, Burke’s invitation to “imagine that you enter a parlor” best illustrates what happens when we read, write, or converse—our efforts at sharing ideas are contingent on a conversation already occurring before our voices enter the discourse, and that discourse can only occur

through a process of exchange. Clark mentions that the Burkean parlor highlights social function of language and the ongoing, lived-nature of discourse (after all, Burke says, “The hour grows late and you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still in progress”). A farce mirroring the process of exchange, Q offers predictions and truths, not legitimate inquiry. Many of Q’s predictions do not come to fruition—yet his supporters remain, in part because the questions Q poses establish a collective, imaginative reality. Q provides an experience for readers that transcends the literal arguments he makes. Though Q calls on his readers to “use logic,” he depends on their impulse to imagine attempting to answer his questions.

### **1.3 Introduction to QAnon**

In 2017, a person calling himself “Q” and claiming to be an official government insider with “Q-level” security clearance began anonymously posting to the messaging board, 4chan. From the start, Q maintained that he was delivering classified information regarding a Satan-worshipping group of celebrities and democrats who sexually abuse and literally consume children. According to Q’s predictions, Donald Trump’s re-election in 2020 was supposed to result in a defeat of this cabal, and Anons suspected that Donald Trump communicated with Q himself (Smith and Wong). Donald Trump’s re-tweeting of Q’s memes, along with his refusal to denounce the movement, reinforced these suspicions (Gregorian et al).

Q gained his initial popularity by picking up and propagating the “Pizzagate” narrative, which suggested that a D.C. pizza restaurant was a front for human trafficking utilized by prominent Democrats, a narrative that went viral in 2016. Commenting on Pizzagate propelled Q into the spotlight, and since 2017, YouTube channels and fan pages proliferate, with “Anons” becoming internet-famous for decoding Q’s drops. Q actively posted to messaging boards from 2017 until President Biden’s election in 2020, after which he abruptly stopped leaving drops. Q

re-emerged in June of 2022 and has since posted sporadically, commenting on the war in Ukraine, inflation, and in another case, suggesting that there is “a war for your DNA.”

The popularity and reach of Q’s drop transcended their origin points on 4chan and later 8chan messaging boards; researchers suggest that the year 2020 in particular brought Q to a new level of cultural attention. Four years after “Pizzagate,” with a presidential election looming and a global pandemic emerging, QAnon grew. Ben Collins of NBC News claims that “QAnon rode the pandemic to new heights,” saying that while “QAnon bubbled on the fringes of the internet for years, researchers and experts say it has emerged in recent months as a sort of centralized hub for conspiracy and alternative health communities.” By 2021, *The New York Times* reported that Public Religion Research Institute and the Interfaith Youth Core survey determined that 15% of Americans expressly believed some QAnon narratives, specifically that “patriots may have to resort to violence to restore the country’s rightful order,” and also that “the levers of power are controlled by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles” (Russonello). Even more, the very same research study identified that 55% percent of Republicans polled could be identified as “QAnon doubters” who only “mostly disagreed” with QAnon narratives, but would not reject them entirely.

Q has a purposefully cryptic writing style that leaves room for interpretation, offering absolution for the “agency panic” that inspires conspiracy theories in the first place. Q’s rhetorical strategy postures as interactive, requiring Anons to formulate answers to his consistent, repetitive questions and, quite literally, read between the lines of his purposely elusive writing style. While Q’s original drops appeared on 4chan and 8chan, followers have accumulated the drops on other websites that are more accessible. Particularly, QAlerts.app, a website I used to view Q drops for my study, accumulates and organizes Q drops, even providing “research tools”

in the form of a codebook for Q's acronyms, a meme generator, and a search feature. The facilitators provide defensive guidance for how to approach the drops, outright arguing that Q purposefully withholds information: "Due to the classified nature of much of the information/evidence Q team holds, they can not just come right out with it, however, they can drop breadcrumbs that the people, often the 8chan "Anons," can dig into and help us all discover the truth." The facilitators even question the veracity of Q's claims, saying:

It must be understood that the enemies in this war are monitoring Q as well. *Therefore, some of the information Q drops is strategically misinformation/disinformation.* Think Military game theory and "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu. Sure, none of us want to filter through and try to discern truth from falsehood, however these warfare tactics really cause "We The People" no harm when they must be used, however they are devastating to the enemy and a necessary part of warfare. Military planning at its finest! (emphasis added)

In large part, this note suggests that readers need to parse through actual lies to solve the arguments Q makes, further empowering the reader by suggesting that they, but not "the enemy," can distinguish "misinformation" from truth.

The administrators of QAlerts dedicate their efforts not just to making Q's lies seem intentional, but also to building a community of adherents. Along with Q, they dupe readers, giving them a sense that they have the capability to determine truth, when really, Q's narratives strictly propagate a one-sided view. As another example, QAlerts provides a list of channels and websites wherein Anons comment on Q drops. The writers mention that "rather than gate-keep," they "believe that users can discern and choose what channels align with their viewpoints." Apparently, there are limits to this discernment: "Of course, if any channel suggests anything

illegal or is causing massive division within the movement, please contact us and let us know.”

In disseminating multiple sources of information regarding QAnon, the administrators suggest they trust their readers to “discern” true from false, but with limitations. On one hand, these instructions absolve the administrators from blame if any of the websites they link propagate harmful, or as they have said, illegal, ideas. More importantly, though, that Anons should report anything causing “massive division” within the movement contradicts the previous assertion, that Anons can use their own “discernment” when choosing what to read and follow.

These few sentences from QAlerts are emblematic of the QAnon movement, which generates a rhetoric of both openness to autonomously discovered perspectives and allegiance to Q’s predictions simultaneously. While rhetoricians have been wary of “rhetoric” since its origin, my study suggests that even dialectic—acts of questioning and answering—can be abused for nefarious intentions if the discourse it inspires is not open-ended. The “dangers” of dialectic—or what looks and feels like dialectic for a participant—is a yet unexplored position in our field. QAnon contributes to our larger understanding of how questions have the ability to persuade.

As of 2023, Q himself seems to have lost some of his momentum, and the movement itself has potential to dissolve or revive, likely depending on attitudes and circumstance surrounding the 2024 election season, considering presidential elections have been a topic on which Q has historically been vocal. Regardless, QAnon has made a large cultural impact, and the narratives espoused within it have a kind of staying power. There remains much to learn and uncover, too, with regards to Q’s argumentation and writing style. To date, both academic researchers, along with journalist, express concerns regarding the power of QAnon, but few have taken on the task of analyzing Q’s rhetoric directly. The following literature review suggests that



the absence of studies on Q leaves us hamstrung in our attempts to not only define the movement, but to also consider to what extent a threat QAnon poses to democracy.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic conversation surrounding QAnon is interdisciplinary and growing, with nearly 2,000 peer-reviewed articles in publication since 2017. Despite the amount of interest in the phenomenon, the bulk of my findings reveal that hardly any of the existing scholarship on QAnon engages with Q drops, a surprising discovery considering these anonymous posts are the source text for the abounding conspiracy theories that emerge within the community of followers. This lack of engagement with Q drops implies the presence of a general sense within the academy that Q's rhetoric does not deserve serious analysis; indeed, while much is being said about QAnon, hardly anything materializes concerning language, argumentation style, or general appeal of the voice of Q. Put another way, no one has yet performed a rhetorical analysis of Q as "author." Scholars seem to outright avoid reading Q.<sup>2</sup>

Grasping the full corpus of Q drops poses an inherently unruly task for scholars seeking to gain a larger understanding of Q's rhetoric. Though there are multiple disciplinary views represented in the analysis of QAnon, most of them resist citing or directly referencing Q drops. Indeed, a majority of the studies discussed in this section only offer a kind of adjacent discussion to the drops, referring to them indirectly. Scholars persistently discuss the content of Q drops indirectly—a method that would likely not be acceptable were the authors to be dealing with a less controversial primary text. With this realization, the following questions guided the analysis of the following studies: 1) How intimately and with what methods do the researchers engage with Q's drops? 2) And, in what way does the researcher's resistance, or willingness, to identify with Q drops affect the discourse that follows? In other words, this literature review considers how

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<sup>2</sup> As a brief aside, when I reached out to an academic librarian at an R1 university for advice on culminating Q drops for research, she wrote to me that she was too "reluctant" to view Qalerts.com because she "didn't like the idea of a digital record of [herself] being on the site, frankly."

viewing Q drops through Burke's understanding of "terministic screens" reveals the limits of being able to understand QAnon more broadly, which can result from a resistance to identify with the text.

Distinct trends emerged in the analysis of these articles, especially ones that omitted actual Q drops from the scope of the study: 1) There are often broad generalizations of what the Q drops entail, leading to narrowed representations of the kinds of topics Q discusses; 2) Many scholars rely on non-academic studies of Q drops to illustrate larger theoretical points, rather than citing actual Q drops, overly depending on less-reliable source materials; 3) Absent in nearly every case is a pragmatic response; without intimate knowledge of the source text, these scholars have little with which to confront the argumentative style and content within the QAnon community; 4) Finally, in only haphazardly guessing at the content of Q drops, researchers signal that the content—and the people consuming the content—are not worthy of engaging; in other words, looking over the drops means refusing to identify with readers. Overall, when scholars make general statements regarding the content of Q drops, they pigeonhole the appeal and effect of the rhetoric. Most obviously, attempts to "other" the QAnon movement, with little or no effort to identify, lead to a weaker understanding of the complexity of the movement, along with a lack of empathy for its adherents.

A few articles discussed in this literature review do not shy away from analyzing Q drops directly, and thus provide more nuanced, supported readings that consider the appeal of QAnon which, to some degree, is a question that nearly every scholar who discusses QAnon finds themselves attempting to address. These articles pave the way for my own scholarly advances as they show a willingness to take the risk of identifying with the controversial text. In many cases, these scholars are emblematic of the fact that reading fosters empathy. The scholars engage with

Q drops—and Q believers –and often risk identification for the purpose of better representing and understanding what drives the QAnon movement. Trends in these findings include studies that point to impulses to interpret, and frequent suggestions that Q drops offer a story, or even a poetic text from which the readers attempt to gain meaning.

## **2.1 The Risks of Generalizing**

In some cases, considerations of Q drops exist only as far as they support the thesis of the author’s study—even if the topic of that study focuses on something other than QAnon. In some cases, QAnon becomes the “supporting character,” only briefly referenced—and often misrepresented—in its presentation. As an example, in “Surplus Data: An Introduction,” published in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, a journal of culture and politics, Orit Halpern and his coauthors offer an introduction to a larger collection of articles on data, with this piece focusing on how to intellectually navigate toward “truth” amidst not just swaths of information, but also with its declining reliability. In connection to Q drops Halpern makes a good point that Q creates a “game” of the surplus, sending adherents on online “scavenger” hunts in an effort to unpack his cryptic arguments, but the authors only very briefly describe the drops. The researchers claim that “Q has created a semiotic world of clues that severs itself and its followers from the fabric of social reality altogether, gamifying it” (206). Halpern and his team go on to say that Q’s “game” has “rules,” a sense of “fun,” and “easter eggs” for investigation. Though coupling the term “gamification” with Q provides some amount of insight, because this article does not claim to make a study of Q itself, and instead uses the concept of the drops to make a larger claim for its own means, it presents an unconvincing argument with respect to the idea that readers are “severed from the fabric of social reality.”

For the researchers to imply that “social reality” means one agreed-upon thing, discounts and silences the discourse, ostracizing believers. It might be better to describe the realm of Q drops as an “alternate reality” of sorts; the drops reveal a kind of uncanny, intimate interaction with real and relevant current events, though the perspective of the events is generally skewed. For example, Q’s topics closely follow current events, namely those around the presidential election, COVID-19, and George Floyd’s murder and the social response to it. In each of these scenarios, Q’s motive in discussing these societal issues is to cause unrest, skepticism, and rebellion, and Q has been known to outright lie, especially in making predictions, but Q does not deal in the realm of fantasy: he makes pointed arguments about current events and in some ways, might engage followers with local and national politics at a level beyond that of the average citizen, which in turn makes them feel like more informed “patriots” than the average American (indeed, as I admitted in the preface, I was unaware of who the current CIA director is; Q propagating a theory that she had been kidnapped depends on his followers to, at the very least, know who larger political players are).

In terms of what the actual drops say, though, the researchers dismiss Q drops as “racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic propaganda” (206). There are certainly Q drops that fit this description. Yet this generalized view of the drops as a whole reveals the authors’ motivation to point to the harms of the “surplus data,” not to understand anything unique about QAnon. Too, describing the text as propaganda makes an effort to consider it “other.” Further, by terming Q drops as “propaganda” that there is a deep motivation to present QAnon as “other.” While it feels unnatural to call out this reduction of Q drops—because they *are* racist and, overall, harmful to society because of the clear deceit Q truly does propagate through spreading lies—we must still be more specific in our critiques, because without grasping *what else* Q drops are really about—such

as religion, anti-intellectualism, patriotism, critical thinking, political scandals—we risk missing out on what motivated Anons, and more alarmingly, we are less prepared to fully predict the far reaches of Q’s effect. In other words, Halpern helpfully offers gamification as a way of thinking about the appeal of QAnon, but they miss legitimate engagement with the rhetoric itself that could lead to a more informed understanding of Q’s power.

Additional scholars miss opportunities to find connections between their own research and Q as a phenomenon. Sylvia and Moody in “BreadTube Rising: How Modern Creators Use Cultural Formats to Spread Countercultural Ideology” talk “around” Q drops rather than engaging them directly. Yet their work departs from Halpern to more deliberately discuss what to do with these online conspiracy theories, suggesting that the problematic rhetorics should be engaged with rather than canceled. Published in *Comparative Literature and Culture*, Sylvia and Moody discuss the emergence of “BreadTube,” known also as “LeftTube,” wherein content creators use the style and rhetoric of alt-right videos to create Marxist and leftist “counternarratives” that infiltrate the algorithms of alt-right adherents. This clever—and controversial—digital warfare technique causes concern for these researchers, who pose a “critique of leftist culture,” suggesting that this retaliation is “not only disengaging from difficult conversations but actively working to shut them down by banning right-wing speakers and compelling web hosts and credit-card processors to shut down websites deemed problematic” (3). Indeed, Sylvia and Moody go on to further condemn “cancel culture” by saying:

For those who are trying to understand a complex topic, such practices can come across as not only anti-free speech but anti-critical thinking. Boyd notes that RT, the Russian state television network, has leveraged this exact critique, creating a series of ads with provocative questions, which end with the statement: “Because we believe that the more

you question, the more you know” (“You Think You Want Media Literacy”). These ads were themselves eventually banned. Speaking very broadly with full acknowledgment that there have always been exceptions, the political left tended to avoid these tough discussions, often accusing or ostracizing those who disagreed. This meant that it was primarily rightwing fora such as 4Chan that were available to answer questions and have discussions with those seeking information about controversial topics. Left-leaning ideologies were largely not present as a counter-narrative (3).

Several points are worth considering; the notion that not-identifying with QAnon, or those who might be drawn to the movement, is “anti-critical thinking” predicts why the movement will become so successful; with this argument, these authors provide a perfect segue to my research, but they do not close the loop on QAnon—instead, redirecting their focus back to BreadTube.

Even though Sylvia and Moody foreground my research with a call to engage harmful rhetorics, their study does not fully yet realize the potential for representing Q boards as a space where quasi-critical thinking—or, at least, intense questioning—occurs. Instead, the researchers miss the opportunity to make this explicit connection and instead, only briefly call attention to the gamification of reality that Q drops allow, saying the drops “are vague enough that they allow for significant interpretation by followers.” The authors go on to say, this act “is extremely engaging for those participating in the process of interpretation (12)” Yet, the authors cannot fully speak to the production of this “interpretation” without devoting study to the rhetoric itself. Thus, while making a call to engage with the rhetoric, this is somewhat irresponsible, since the researchers provide no indication that they understand exactly what QAnon says—perhaps some of it should be scrubbed from online forums; it is difficult to make a case either way without citing and studying the rhetoric first hand. Rather than doing this work, Sylvia and Moody

provide important points for how BreadTube does not work as a response: namely, the creators are mostly white academics, and the videos are monetized. Though the authors provide a compelling critique of BreadTube, the article closes with little to no suggestions for engaging the rhetoric, missing out on a clear thread of their own argument: if Anons are drawn to QAnon because it feels like critical thinking, how does that affect how scholars and teachers of rhetoric might respond?

As previously mentioned, Q is perhaps most famous for Pizzagate, wherein he accused high-profile politicians, mostly democrats, of operating a child sex-trafficking ring. In focusing attention on a singular story, we misunderstand how many topics Q speaks to and thereby influences. As an example, Georgia State University's Mia Bloom and Rachel Rollings, in an introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence*, spend the bulk of their time discussing Q's allegations of pedophilia, though still without citing any drops that make these allegations. Bloom and Rollings say, "For Evangelicals, QAnon blended beliefs with religious dogma, cherry-picking verses from religious texts to substantiate its outlandish claims about child trafficking, pedophilia, and cannibalism" (2). Researchers and media outlets are bent on these sensational narratives of Q's conspiracies, but of the 1,175 drops made in 2020, only thirteen of the drops had anything to do with suggesting sexual assault of minors. There are many more threads of narrative that Anons are holding on to, making it irresponsible for us to continue to believe QAnon only distributes an unbelievable story about a cabal; Q has many more interests than this. This particular article was published in 2022, but focuses mostly on Q's earlier content, not referring to any of the topics Q discussed by the year 2020.

Bloom and Rollings provide a definition of QAnon, calling it "the world's fastest spreading conspiracy theory." They suggest the movement is "larger than many religions in the



US,” that it “infiltrated” major religions, and that it is “baseless” (1). Words like “baseless” and “infiltrate” set the tone for Bloom and Rollings’ view of QAnon. Too, the authors neglect to provide a definition for “conspiracy theory,” a word they use twice, effectively ignoring the vast scholarly advances that draw attention to the complexity of this term. The authors conclude that those who follow Q “deny reality and reason” (12). This assumption goes against many scholarly advances in studies of conspiracy theory research that point to the complexity of conspiratorial thinking. Even beyond religion, scientist Michael Shermer reveals that many of us maintain “superstitious thinking,” and the process of determining the impetus for belief and reason are complex.

Despite labeling QAnon as “baseless,” Bloom and Rollings go on to point out the connections between evangelical Christianity and QAnon affiliation: “For Evangelicals, QAnon resonated because of its portrayal of good and evil, and a coming day of judgment, for QAnon, called the storm. Evangelicals also could appreciate the predictive nature of QAnon, commensurate with biblical revelations (4). This connection to apocalyptic rhetoric and QAnon merits exploration, though this article does not include drops that reveal the parallels. Instead, they go on to theorize why evangelicals are drawn to Q—arguing that the pandemic led to a greater sense of loneliness that drove evangelicals to online communities, without acknowledging that the sense of loneliness was likely a universal feeling throughout periods of quarantine (3). From there, though, Bloom and Rollings suggest that there exists a parallel between belief in religion and belief in conspiracy theories: they say, “The degree to which faith plays a role in Christianity and conspiracy theories is unmistakably related. The denial of reality, reason, and science are no strangers to those who based their ‘truths’ on biblical scriptures through unwavering blind faith as their fundamental argument for defending these beliefs” (4). In

this statement, Bloom and Rollings—though not necessarily incorrect in their thesis—risk ostracizing both evangelicals and Q’s followers; there is little to no empathetic gesture that considers why humans are drawn to evangelical Christianity or QAnon.

Still, Bloom and Rollings point to the religiosity of Q’s rhetoric, and they confidently assert that religious rhetoric exists, saying, “What made them [evangelicals] especially vulnerable to QAnon was that the language and terminology that QAnon used that sounded explicitly Christian, including debates about the existence of good and evil” (3). The researchers make this claim without showing how this rhetoric occurs—instead citing another study which mentions that Q suggests “putting on the full armor of God” (4). Q does repeat this particular phrase repeated in many of his drops—in at least fourteen cases—but because Bloom and Rollings do not entertain the rhetoric with any depth, they cannot concretely speak to how Q sets up the dynamic of “good and evil,” or what those words mean in the context of the QAnon community. In short, Bloom and Rollings fail to contribute to a tangible discussion that deliberately considers how, why, and to what effect Q deploys religious rhetoric, and thus do risk identification with Q or his followers.

Rather than engaging with Q drops directly, researchers often rely on non-academic sources to describe Q’s rhetoric; with few substantial, peer-reviewed articles in place, and because of an unwillingness to read Q as primary research, scholars depend on less-reliable sources to represent QAnon. As an example, in “How Human Trafficking Fuels Erosion of Liberal Democracies—In Fiction and Fact, and from within and without,” Jill Coster van Voorhout devotes one paragraph to describing QAnon, but never engages directly with the text; instead, relying on non-academic studies about QAnon to describe the content of the drops. It is

worth looking at a portion of this paragraph at length, to see the way Coster van Voorhout speaks around Q:

The QAnon conspiracy was borne out of Pizzagate (e.g., Simon Wiesenthal Center 2020; Kang and Frenkel 2020). Pizzagate resurged in 2020, mainly due to QAnon. While initially it was spread by only the far-right, it has since been widely circulated on TikTok by teens who do not appear to hold that belief (Sommer 2020). More recently, the conspiracy has developed and become less political and partisan in nature, with less emphasis on Ms. Hillary Clinton and more on the alleged worldwide elite of child sex-traffickers (Simon Wiesenthal Center 2020; Kang and Frenkel 2020; Tian 2021). QAnon seemingly evolved on 4chan, and later 8chan (also known as 8 kun), building on some of the themes developed by Pizzagate and the discussions online that followed. 4chan and 8chan are anonymous online forums (imageboards) where users can post messages and images without having to register for an account. A person or group posted messages as ‘Q’ on all these mostly unregulated fora.

Coster van Voorhout cites four studies in this paragraph: “Simon Wiesenthal Center” is a Jewish human rights organization that conducted what looks to be a thorough, though not academic, study on this historicity of Q; “Kang and Frenkel” is a *New York Times* article, “Tian” is from an online source [bellingcat.com](http://bellingcat.com), which British journalist and former blogger Eliot Higgins founded as a fact-checking, open-source journalist group; “Sommer” is an article from the news site, *The Daily Beast*, which has been called a “high-end tabloid” by Noah Shachtman, the site's editor-in-chief. In citing only these studies, Coster van Voorhout entirely misrepresents elements of Q drops, particularly with the claim that the conspiracy theory became “less political and less partisan.” Coster van Voorhout does not provide a certain timeline for when Q apparently

became more neutral, but nothing about the last year of Q's online presence was non-partisan; with the Presidential election looming, Q became more overtly antagonistic to the Democratic party. This misrepresentation of QAnon underscores the need to view Q drops as a primary source, rather than relying on the summaries dictated by online sources, which undoubtedly are not held to as rigorous standards as an academic study. This study, and others like it, point to the need for more accurate representations of QAnon.

In "The Who and Why of QAnon's Rapid Rise," published in the journal *New Labor Forum*, Matthew W. Hughey opens his article with a short paragraph under the subheading, "What is QAnon?" In a footnote, Hughey cites one Q drop, but the other sources in his description of QAnon include *Yahoo*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New York Times*. As promised, though Hughey's study does provide critical insight regarding the "who" of QAnon, compiling studies that paint a picture of the demographic of believers, which may be somewhat surprising to some: Hughey shows that "QAnons are far from an ignorant 'white working class.' Those with college degrees are slightly more likely than those without college degrees to have heard of QAnon and there is slightly more support for QAnon among college graduates than among non-graduates. Also, a full 40 percent of the 193 people charged in the Capitol insurrection (many of whom were QAnons) were white-collar workers" (78). Hughey provides invaluable insights regarding the large-scale attraction of QAnon, but he makes some unsupported assumptions; Hughey claims that the "save the children" movement inspired by Pizzagate led to a sense of moral superiority for its adherents; he says that celebrity affiliation with QAnon makes it more compelling; and, he says that "QAnons also actively con themselves through self-deception." These points reveal only a surface-level understanding of QAnon's appeal because they do not consider deliberately the power and complexities of the arguments themselves. In other words,

Hughey's generalizations do not address the ideological-making rhetoric that Q espouses because they refuse to refer to the rhetoric as a legitimate source of knowledge for its believers.

Natalie Castro Picón makes the case in *humanities* that “[t]he narrative of [QAnon’s] conspiracies converges in many ways with the discursive structure of storytelling and fiction.” In a few sentences, Picón mentions that QAnon exemplifies this theory, but her research does not represent any specific examples, and rather than citing Q drops directly, she also cites a *New York Times* article about QAnon—and the particular article only tangentially covers one Q story about Donald Trump (8). In yet another case, “Truth and Truths-to-Come: Investigating Viral Rumors in ‘Q: Into the Storm,’” Pastel and Dalebout discuss the HBO Documentary on QAnon, *Into the Storm*, and they only discuss one Q drop, in reference to its appearance in the documentary. Still, they make a fairly reasonable assertion made about the drops: “Q-drops typically consist of leading questions that reinforce the conspiracy about a global cabal of pedophile politicians, and serve as calls to action to Q’s followers – especially the Anons on 8chan – to investigate and put the pieces together.” These researchers in Media Studies are more interested in the QAnon documentary’s representation of QAnon than the movement itself, only directly engaging with a drop because it first appeared in the documentary.

The view of these academic researchers discussed so far aligns with many mainstream media outlets that tend to focus on the more sensational aspects of the QAnon movement. These headlines often point to absurdity, ridiculing believers and thereby further emboldening them. When actually looking at the content Q delivers, we must consider that for Q believers, the potential for political-demonic interplay, for elite pedophilia, is only part of the narrative, or perhaps only one of them. Broadly, Q’s drops from 2020 focused on other topics including: Hunter Biden’s laptop, the 2020 presidential election, discussed in tandem with the COVID-19

pandemic, along with George Floyd's murder, and the social justice movements that accompanied the tragedy. For reference, the studies discussed in this literature review thus far were published in 2022, with Hughey, as the exception, his article being published in 2021. Likely, Q had moved on to these other queries and topics by the time of these publications, but it is not clear, from reading these academic studies, that the authors realized this shift.

## 2.2 Efforts to Read Closely

Some scholars more deliberately read Q drops, and inevitably come to more precise conclusions. In response to scholars who dismiss Q drops, Jane McIntosh's 2022 article discusses the absence of analysis of Q's rhetoric in *Anthropology Today*, saying "almost no serious analysis" exists regarding Q's "cryptic language" (8). Her reading of QAnon, which deliberately analyzes and cites drops, poses a suspicion that Q's "poetic forms" contribute to his popularity, and that the "interpretation of signs" required to understand Q's arguments performs a kind of semiotic analysis. In short, McIntosh argues that "QAnon gave the layperson a sense that through their own agency, they could have privileged access to Truth" (8). Because McIntosh does not ignore the source text, she offers a nuanced understanding of Q's appeal; indeed, for every claim McIntosh makes, she cites a drop to support her view. In one instance, McIntosh actually walks through the experience of encountering a Q drop. She makes the case that the line breaks Q utilizes between sentences "encourage a pause, a moment to let the compressed weight of the words sink in" (9). She then comments on the "barrage" of questions Q poses, making notes that Q purposefully answers some questions, while leaving others unanswered, the effect of which is to cause suspicion, while also providing "clues." She even says the "cumulative effect of so many suggest that many things are (everything is?) subject to suspicion, further destabilizing the relationship between the apparent and the real" (10).

McIntosh goes on to explain that the “poetic forms” of Q drops contribute to their popularity, and argues further that readers feel “anointed with power and expertise” because of Q’s writing style. McIntosh points out that Q encourages “apophenia,” also sometimes called “illusory pattern perception” (10). This phenomenon occurs when an individual identifies patterns or signs between unconnected events. McIntosh cites several Q drops to illustrate this point, one that she claims is most evident through a tendency for Anons to track timestamps between Q’s drops and Trump’s Twitter account, looking for “clues or correspondences” between the platforms. Importantly, McIntosh touches briefly on the community Q creates in dialogue with his readers. She explains that “Q and Anons jointly constructed one another’s power. Anons looked to Q for omniscient clues, while Q handed Anons...their research activity” (12). McIntosh concludes her article with this statement, leaving room for further exploration for how Q and his Anons interact. McIntosh does not offer any antidote for Q as a phenomenon, though she does say that the “alt-right political fantasies... threaten the terms of liberal democracy itself” (12). McIntosh takes concerted risks in her thorough analysis of Q drops, allowing them a large spotlight in her research, but she stops short at allowing any analysis, or at drawing any parallels, that might take an empathetic view of the movement. Still, her willingness to read, cite, and analyze the Q drops provides original and unique insight, making her work a clear departure from the previous articles discussed in this study.

Other scholars who seriously consider Q drops find parallels within Q’s rhetoric and the humanities; Helen Young and Geoff M. Boucher suggest broadly that Q drops provide a “conspiracy story” more than a “conspiracy theory.” Their article takes into account the full corpus of Q drops, with the researchers using The Q Origin Project’s assimilation of the drops as a source. They define QAnon as “as a conspiracy story that emerged within a genre reading

community that already employed reading practices which encouraged the acceptance of its truthfulness because of pre-existing (conventional) beliefs about the nature of the world and specific actors within it” (10). Young and Boucher interpret that story as being “structured like a fantasy, giving imaginative expression to a set of social feelings and normative grievances that would otherwise not dare speak their own names” (8). In short, the researchers read the drops like one might read a novel, they make a compelling case to understand the drops as formulating a kind of plot. Still, McIntosh focuses on the poetic form, Young and Boucher contribute further to the notion, through studying the readers’ responses to Q, that reading Q drops can feel like reading for the humanities, in part by descriptive the effect of feeling the sense of something being not true, but “truthful” in fiction. They argue that this “imaginative” quality of conspiracy theories makes them more difficult to debunk: “considering conspiracy beliefs as originating in speculative narratives makes sense, and it helps explain why QAnon beliefs are notoriously resistant to de-bunking and de-radicalization strategies that treat them as false cognition, rather than a compelling story.” The authors are careful— even though QAnon has plot-like structures, they insist that believers are not playing “make-believe.” Rather, they highlight the fact that the “truth” of the rhetoric seems to matter much less than the “truthfulness”: “predictions can be falsified, and the identity of Q can be revealed, yet it makes not one iota of difference to the fate of the movement.”

Young and Boucher admit that their work does not necessarily provide “practical methods for countering” the power of rhetoric like Q’s, but they do offer an astute observation: they call QAnon a “feeling machine” and argue that pointing out the untruths within the story likely will not compel believers. Rather, they call for “alternative or counter-narratives” that inspire “affective and symbolic resonances for people who are outraged about what they see as



loss of social place and power” (16). In other words, unveiling “the facts” offers little in the face of a narrative that depends so heavily on pathos for its believers.

Like Young and Boucher, other researchers who participate in a close study of Q drops find similarities between the drops and narrative structures. Peter L. Forberg, in *American Behavioral Scientist*, discusses the plot-like elements of Q drops, concluding that “the narrative structures...guide belief...QAnon followers develop a general political plot, set the parameters for conflict, embrace their role in the story” (1). In making this claim—especially supporting it through interacting with Q believers—Forberg determines that Anons do follow a kind of logic or rationale when constructing their beliefs regarding Q narratives, suggesting that Anons are active participants in politically-driven ideological construction. Forberg says,

Sociologists and anthropologists of conspiracy theory tend to suggest that conspiratorial logic is in some way absolute and all-consuming: flowing from their political oppression, mental instability, media brainwashing, or lack of education, conspiracy theorists subscribe to simplistic, irrational narratives...However, this pathologizing neglects conspiracy theorists’ capacity for paradox, contradiction, and disavowal, a capacity shared by non-conspiracy theorists (14).

Forberg goes on to say that QAnon shows the “contextuality” of rationality, recognizing some level of order in the process by which Anons come to believe Q. While Forberg does cite a few Q drops in his analysis, his method of choosing which drops to discuss is left unexplained.

Indeed, while not a scholar in English studies or the humanities writ large, Forberg picks up on the patterns articulated by scholars discussed earlier in this chapter, particularly, Young and Boucher and McIntosh, to indicate that an understanding of Q-as-narrator might begin to speak to his persuasiveness.

In a further conversation that articulates the allure of interpretation when viewing Q drops, Joseph Packer and Ethan Stoneman's piece on QAnon from *Cultural Politics* argues that "QAnon performs distinctly, even if accidentally, Straussian readings of public texts, identifying a variety of esoteric messages in the public pronouncements of President Trump but with the rhetorical intent of publicizing rather than concealing their true, hidden messages" (257). In using the word "QAnon," these authors do not necessarily separate Q from his readers. Packer and Stoneman argue that this "Straussian reading," offers a kind of "reading between the lines" method of analysis. This kind of "literary analysis," for Packer and Stoneman, reveals the methods of interpretation Anons participate in when analyzing Q drops. Though Packer and Stoneman do analyze a few of the drops, they do not provide a comprehensive overview of the text, nor do they provide methods for selecting which drops to analyze. Still, one important case, and perhaps the only mention of Q's use of questions published to date, occurs when these scholars view a particular Q drop that posts a series of 21 questions (drop 70). The authors make a keen observation of QAnon supporters' response: "Anonymous Q supporters Pamphlet and Radix liken Q's posts to the Socratic method, to 'letting the person think for themselves and answer the questions on their own, rather than providing the answers for them in the beginning'" (262). This observation is at least the second time Q's questions have been called "Socratic," yet the presence of questions does not guarantee the presence of the Socratic method. While skeptical of Pamphlet and Radix, Packer and Stoneman do not offer more discussion regarding Q's questions, focusing more on the "reading between the lines" experience Q drops offers, pointing out that there is an "evangelical form of truth-seeking" inherent to the interpretation efforts (263). Too, Packer and Stoneman do not necessarily seek to solve this equation, but they do indicate that the "interactive...esoteric produsage" that QAnon provides would be attractive

to those “whose anti-elitism entails—for better or worse, accurately or inaccurately—fear of persecution” (274). To acknowledge the possibility of truth behind impulses to anti-elitism, and also to discuss QAnon as a response to fear of persecution, provides an empathetic gesture towards Q supporters.

The act of viewing Q drops does not automatically lend itself to feelings of empathy—some scholars are more mechanical in their observations, but still provide useful assessments of the movement as a whole. In the article “Mapping the Messenger: Exploring the Disinformation of QAnon,” a group of researchers take up the task of thematizing Q drops. Darren Linvill, Matthew Chambers, Jennifer Duck, and Steven Sheffield are an interdisciplinary team with skills in researching social media analytics. Like myself, these researchers used the database, QAlerts.app to gather the Q drops, but rather than manually pulling the drops from the website, the researchers did a JSON extract to collate the drops, which is a coding process that allows them to extract the raw language. The team selected a random sample of the Q drops to design their codes, peer-reviewing their codebook multiple times before applying the codes to the full sample of drops. Through this method, the researchers categorized the Q drops within five codes. Almost half of the drops are “allusions to hidden knowledge,” and nearly a quarter of each of the drops are either 1) inspirational or 2) undermining authority. Smaller categories include references to administration or security, and the smallest category, just over 1%, is coded as “calls to action.” There are obvious strengths in this methodological approach, especially considering the technical skills used to harness the drops, and the employment of multiple researchers to provide a kind of checks and balances of the codebook. Pioneers of a sort, these researchers provide a footing for further conversation, namely, research that defines not just the

topical concerns of the drops, as these themes indicate, but also alludes to a more direct, comprehensive understanding of why Q's methods are persuasive.

In *Social Media and Society*, Matthew Hannah authors "A Conspiracy of Data: QAnon, Social Media, and Information Visualization," and takes up the visual elements of Q drops—focusing on "information visualization." Hannah describes the efforts of Anons to visualize conspiracy, describing the process Anons participate in when "mapping out" the arguments made in drops, citing an actual map made by QAnon believer, Dylan Monroe, to show how Anons make efforts to visualize meaning and coherency. Hannah says, "Just like big data, QAnon is organized according to the principle that enough information will reveal the patterns, the connections between everything," and though Hannah reveals that these efforts towards mapping and pattern recognition exist, he focuses only on the maps made by Anons, not the information within the drops themselves. Matthew Hannah's additional work on Q, "QAnon and the Information Dark Age," published by *First Monday*, deliberately studies Q's "war room," saying that doing so "reveals an organized and calculated set of resources waiting to be deployed. Shutting down such sites only reinforces the persecution complex of those with beliefs outside the mainstream." Hannah argues, alarmingly, that the "rise of QAnon is a structural aspect of our contemporary media ecosystem." He claims that the "information dark age" is a product of "a synthesis of distrust in news media and mainstream politics, the ubiquity of information access, and public inability to parse online truth from fiction." For Hannah, this dilemma is a new standard, and he carefully analyzes Q drops to support his assertion.

Perhaps the most thorough analysis of Q drops to date, published by *First Monday*, was written by Dr. James Fitzgerald, professor of terrorism studies. In "Conspiracy, Anxiety, and Ontology," Fitzgerald makes the following astute claim:

Taken individually, the Q drops are mostly rhetorical and often nonsensical. Early musings such as “Why did Soros donate all his money recently?” (28 October 2017) and “Why is POTUS surrounded by generals?” (29 October 2017) may mean little in isolation, but these drops coalesce around specific themes, tend to leverage major occurrences in U.S. politics and are umbilically tied to the promotion of U.S. President Donald Trump as a modern-day saviour (1).

Notably, from the onset, the claims Fitzgerald makes are supported by actual references to the Q drops. Fitzgerald argues the following: that “conspiracy theories are presented as dynamic simplifying devices that help individuals and communities to address...ontological anxiety.” From here, Fitzgerald does not provide a methods section to his study; he aptly foregrounds his study with a discussion of conspiracy theory scholarship, and he frames the discussion further by pointing to legitimate, ontological anxieties, anxieties that are exacerbated by the idea that antagonistic forces prevent the true development of one’s identity. He claims that the simplified “moral dilemma,” created by Q’s narrative of pedophilia helps the readers to develop a morally superior identification with themselves, for example.

Though Fitzgerald and I disagree on the “simplifying nature” of conspiracy theories—I tend to argue towards their ideological complexities—we do agree that “empathy” can be a driving force to deter adherents from engaging with conspiracy theories. He says,

We will not be able to explain [QAnon] away by pointing at ‘the algorithm,’ nor will we erase its presence by obliterating online footprints as they take shape. Ultimately, acceptance of this precept might constitute a new form of resilience to (online) polarization — one which recognizes the inevitability of antagonism and the need for a

more empathetic, agonistic politics; that is to say, *a resilient commitment to dull the sharpest edges of antagonism without erasing them altogether* (emphasis added).

It is important to collate these perspectives on confronting Q, because I, like Fitzgerald, do not see QAnon as a pure censorship problem; instead, QAnon opens the door for empathetic conversations about conspiracy theories; QAnon is neither the first nor the last conspiracy theory to threaten our social order, and to simply silence its adherents likely will only push them further down the “rabbit hole.” With this understanding in mind, each of the chapters that follow this one will deliberately confront conspiratorial discourse with an empathetic framework.

An alarming methodological question emerges from the study of many of the aforementioned articles: how much engagement with the text is necessary to be able to speak on the rhetoric with authority? As these examples seem to imply, in many cases, the answer so far has been, not very much.

### **2.3 Choosing to Identify: Rhetorical Empathy**

Contemporary scholars of rhetorical theory continue to issue a call to “become” the other amidst social and cultural conflicts. In *Changing the Subject*, Lisa Blankenship outlines the process of “Rhetorical empathy,” which she defines as “a conscious choice to connect with an Other” (6). Blankenship’s understanding of what it means to connect requires vulnerability, and a willingness to actually be changed by an opponent. Blankenship says that Rhetorical empathy goes beyond “audience analysis,” though making us “vulnerable enough to consider our motives” (11). Blankenship goes on to cite Burke directly to emphasize this point, arguing that “[o]ur lack of understanding the motives of the Other often fuels our decision not to identify” (93).

Blankenship argues that a rhetor ought to take a closer look at their own motivations for entering discourse, and she says that a rhetor must both change and be willing to be changed by rhetorical dialogue. There are risks associated with this work. For example, in order to truly practice rhetorical empathy, Blankenship makes the case that a rhetor practices “deep acting,” a method antithetical to “surface acting,” whereby a person maintains control of their emotion while performing another; instead, deep acting requires the person to be open to the possibility of allowing real emotions to surface in performance; Blankenship explains that this level of vulnerability can be troubling because “You risk *becoming* the thing you are performing” (8). To rhetorically empathize with Q—or his believers—one must take the risk that to truthfully understand the motivations that drive QAnon, one must be willing to embody the perspective of those with whom we deeply fear.

Blankenship’s scholarship depends on Krista Ratcliffe’s efforts to define rhetorical listening. In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness*, Ratcliffe explains that identification precedes persuasion. The act of identifying requires hearing—genuinely listening to—opposing views. For Ratcliffe, she suggests that rhetorical listening “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (17). She speaks to the little research on listening in the field at the time of her writing in 2005, arguing that there is an “assumption” that everyone is listening (19). And, Ratcliffe already anticipates criticism of her work, making sure to suggest that “rhetorical listening will not result in an ideal world in which rhetorical negotiation is no longer necessary. Such hopes are not only naive but dangerous” (34). Rather, rhetorical listening is a way of “negotiate our always evolving standpoints, our identities, with the always evolving standpoints of others” (34).

Blankenship, along with Ratcliffe, prepare scholars for the difficult work of confronting opposing views, and particularly, Blankenship's pedagogical tools inform the concluding chapter for this project. The spirit of both rhetorical empathy and its counterpart, rhetorical listening, motivate the larger project. These tools, which were built to confront difference in race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender, seek common ground between some of the most profound cultural differences; if conspiracy theories are contingent on acts of "othering," these rhetorical efforts towards understanding one another can support efforts to minimize distances that inspire conspiratorial rhetoric in the first place.



### 3 METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study analyzes Q drops from the year 2020, considering to what extent Q's persuasive power depends on the act of questioning. A literature review of the current scholarship on Q drops previews the study itself, highlighting the gaps in current scholarly advances to draw attention to the need for this work. Rhetorically analyzing the questions Q posed in the year 2020 reveals how deterministic questions can make statements, creating a false dialectical exchange that lends itself to dangerous, socially constructed "realities."

This project exemplifies what researchers Creswell and Creswell define as "convergent mixed methods," in which the study "converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem" (15). Using methods of distant reading and grounded theory, I first quantified the frequency with which Q poses various kinds of questions. With rhetorical theory as a backdrop, specifically, Adina Moshavi's work with rhetorical questions, and Kenneth Burke's theory of dialectic, I then conducted a rhetorical analysis of the questions Q poses in his drops from the year 2020. To prepare for this study, I conducted a literature review of the existing scholarship on Q drops, using Burke's theories in identification and terministic screens to rhetorically view the methods and attitudes scholars take when discussing Q drops.

This research takes a Transformative Worldview, which Creswell and Creswell define as containing an "action agenda for reform that may change lives" (9). Suggesting the need for lives to be "changed," arguing that Anons are victims of rhetoric propagated with nefarious intent, could be perceived as ambitious. While Q's rhetoric appeals to a desire for independent thinking and a skillset to conduct reliable research, unfortunately, much of these appeals are ruses—Q constantly misinforms his readership, propagating a worldview that hinges on fear of the other

and encouraging violence. My study suggests that Q's rhetoric capitalizes on a human urge; Q's questions allow readers to feel as if they are being treated as intellectuals, that they are being given space to research, interpret, and think "critically." This project makes a concerted effort to understand the appeal of conspiracy theories not only for our disciplines' sake but also so that we can begin to build better tools against the rhetoric for both the individuals affected and democracy at large.

### **3.1 Research Questions**

In the initial stages of this project, I was motivated by three larger questions:

1. What can a reading of Q drops reveal about the persuasive appeal of conspiracy theories?
2. What intersections exist between "conspiratorial" thinking and "critical" thinking? In other words, can we articulate the limits of skepticism?
3. What practices can we define—or redefine—in First-Year Writing to support students who will be confronted with conspiratorial rhetoric in their daily lives?

As this project became more defined, and once I became more closely acquainted with Q's rhetoric, I realized my research would depend more deliberately on acts of questioning. Finding very few studies that undertake Q's drops, I began to understand that my project would need to do something scholars had resisted: to discover the role of questions in Q's drops, I would need purposefully to identify with Q and his followers through analyzing the drops as a primary source.

More focused research questions follow:

1. How do we, as academics, contribute to the discourse surrounding QAnon by our willingness—or unwillingness—to engage with the rhetoric directly?

2. What are the qualities of the questions Q poses to his readers through Q drops?
  1. What does research on the impact of “rhetorical questions” offer in the way of contributing to Q’s persuasiveness through question-asking?
3. How does rhetorical theory, focusing on dialectic and Burke’s theory of identification, help our field approach the current discourse surrounding conspiracy theories generally and QAnon specifically?
4. In what ways can we employ theories of rhetorical listening and rhetorical empathy to cultivate honest, dialectical inquiry in composition studies?

### **3.2 Methodological View and Method**

Determining how to best mine the drops from QAlerts.app presented many challenges. I used the qualitative research software, Nvivo, to isolate the questions Q asked into categories. To be able to analyze the language in Nvivo, it was necessary for me to gather “raw” versions of the drops, meaning I was not able to screen capture drops from QAlerts.app because Nvivo cannot process PDFs. Thus, to use this software, I manually copied and pasted 1,175 Q drops into an Excel spreadsheet. From there, I uploaded the spreadsheet into Nvivo and began the coding process. While other methods may exist to more quickly gain access to the raw data within the drop—by scraping the website, for example—this was beyond my skill set. Within the 1,175 drops, more than 1,300 questions were posed. Not every Q drop contains a question. In fact, only 363 out of the 1,175 drops include a question. This means that drops containing questions average four questions within a single drop; bearing in mind that Q’s drops are relatively short, this means that the questions often provoke a rapid-fire sensation.

After collating the drops for analysis, I performed two distinct surveys of the data. In the first viewing, I was inspired by Franco Moretti’s book, *Distant Reading*, which addresses

quantitative methods of approaching large datasets of books. Distant reading, the antithesis to close reading, offers an analytical approach to literary studies in which the researchers broadly view a corpus of texts to gain a “big picture” sense of relevant underpinnings, themes, and contexts. The utility of this theory becomes evident when accounting for the large amount of text provided by QAnon. Moretti explains that close reading requires a small dataset and can cause a researcher to neglect observations of larger phenomena (48). He argues that looking with a distant view of multiple texts actually allows for “focus on units that are much smaller” units like devices, themes, tropes, genres, and systems (48-49).

Moretti admits that “we must accept losing something” when taking the distant view. Nuances and idiosyncrasies can be overlooked in the effort to determine a bigger picture. Yet in the case of this study, understanding the frequency with which questions were posed provided key insights for determining what kinds of strategies Q most overtly employed. Approaching the dataset with no set codes or themes, but with a distinct focus on mining the drops for questions, offered the chance to organically organize the questions by unanticipated types. This effort required a kind of abstraction associated with grounded theory. Creswell and Creswell define grounded theory as “a qualitative strategy in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction.” Through first viewing the questions from a distant perspective, it was possible to notice distinct patterns in the quality of the questions, namely that Q depends mostly on the use of questions that begin with the word “why,” and that he often makes statements that end with a question mark, that could otherwise be declarative sentences if they were to conclude with a period. Additionally, Q posed questions that were often hypothetical, beginning with phrases like “What if?” or “Can you imagine?” Other kinds of

questions posed were traditional reporter questions, beginning with “Who, What, When, Where.”

Realizing the distinctions between answerable, reporter questions versus abstract, theoretical questions helps when attempting to tease out the various kinds of mental dexterity and “investigation” tactics required on the part of the readers to respond. A second viewing of the drops allowed me to group the categories into four larger themes: Statements-as-Questions, Predictive and Imaginative, Reporter and Answerable, Playful and Incredulous. As will be detailed in the findings of the study, a rhetorical view of the act of questioning led me to make arguments regarding how these distinct forms of questions cause important effects on the readers when they pose as a dialectical exchange. The most frequently occurring question type, the “predictive and imaginative” most obviously attempted to provoke complex acts of thinking and answering.

In one of the few studies on Q drops, Janet McIntosh remarks on Q’s many questions and reminds readers of an alarming statement made by Jo Rae Perkins, a Republican nominee for the 2020 Senate election in Oregon: “That’s what I really like about Q... there are questions in the Socratic method...Go do your own research, figure it out for yourself.” McIntosh correctly recognizes that Q’s questions are not shaped by the Socratic method. Q asks many questions that are obviously rhetorical, based on a traditional understanding of the rhetorical question as that which does not seek to be answered. Yet, Q also asks questions that demand legitimate answers, but only a specific variety of responses are acceptable, in short, propagating a narrative detailing levels of government corruption due to Democratic leaders and “the media.” Understanding these qualities regarding QAnon helps when attempting to realize the larger worldview contingent on questioning and “logical thinking” that inspires the discourse. All conspiracy

theories depend on their believers to ask questions consistently, and this reality challenges us to consider the limits of question-asking as a meaning-making exercise.

### 3.2.1 *Terministic Screens and Identification*

Because of Burke's willingness to identify, he confronts perhaps the most harmful "rhetor" in history, and he is critical of those who neglect to take a similar approach. He chides previous scholars who do not fully take the time to read and understand Hitler's rhetoric, calling it

vandalistic for the reviewer to content himself with mere inflicting of a few symbolic wounds upon this book and its author.... If the reviewer but knocks off a few adverse attitudinizing and calls it a day, with a guarantee in advance that his article will have a favorable reception among the decent members of our population, *he is contributing more to our gratification than to our enlightenment*" (164 emphasis added).

Most academics in our field and outside of it would likely agree that Q's rhetoric is manipulative and harmful; we could stop our conversations there, and prove the thesis with a couple, carefully chosen Q drops to serve as evidence for this assertion—many scholars, even ones cited in this study, have chosen to do this to some extent. This is a *gratifying* view of QAnon. Layering our knowledge on top of Q's arguments makes for simple debunking in many cases; yet I am afraid that when we do not actually read the drops themselves, we miss out on capturing the nuance, and, to use Burke's image, the "crude magic" that makes these stories compelling and intriguing.

In "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," Burke willingly thematizes rhetorical strategies Hitler used to make his claims: the creation of a "common enemy" in the Jewish people, for example, but also in the articulation of a worldview that synthesizes legitimate chaos; in an

almost empathetic view of Hitler's adherents, Burke points out that much of what makes Hitler's rhetoric appealing is not just its cohesiveness, but that it, to some degree, responds to legitimate economic crises; Hitler capitalizes on social unrest to create a narrative that serves his own cruel ends. Burke says, "Did not much of his lure derive, once more, from a *bad* filling of a *good* need?...[Hitler] was offering a world view to people who had no other to pit against it" (187). Many of these claims about Hitler parallel my own findings about Q. Though Burke does not use the words "conspiracy theory" to describe Hitler's rhetoric, but his notation of "world view" mirrors my claims that Q provides an ideological framework to readers—Burke says Hitler provides a "world view" to problems German citizens had only observed as "piecemeal" before. Hitler's "world view" is like a conspiracy theory in its most basic sense.

We have to consider that scholars are looking at Q through lenses that shape QAnon. In rhetorical studies, we have the tools to view how terministic screens occur and we recognize that they are not neutral; they either identify or disidentify, add or subtract. Finally, the things we are writing are not being read by the public— if this work reaches the "public," it is by way of our teaching, which may or may not engage with this particular—and imperative--conversation. Currently, we are, for ourselves, defining Q, and this is important work, but without a purposefully outward focus, these terministic screens not only run the risk of being more carefully defined and limiting over time, but also run the risk of becoming echo chambers of intellectual discourse. Our motives inform our research, which has the potential to either limit or expand our view and approach to confronting complex social phenomena like QAnon.

In his analysis of *Mein Kampf* in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," Burke makes the case that careful study ought to be devoted to Hitler's text; he points out that the text, though "nauseating," reveals an affective "crude magic" (164-165). To defend his analysis, Burke

argues that a “people trained in pragmatism,” or, rhetoricians, should want to discover exactly what kind of “medicine” Hitler has rhetorically concocted for Germans so that “we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of a similar medicine in America” (164). Burke’s theoretical framing here inspires and predicts the need for my work in analyzing Q drops. Burke sets the precedent to closely analyze nefarious rhetoric and to prepare to safeguard the public against its aims. Burke’s willingness to identify with nefarious rhetoric separates him from other scholars and illustrates the vulnerability and risks required behind genuine efforts to understand another. Thus far in studies of QAnon, it appears that many scholars are unwilling to risk identifying with Q, or thinking in terms that would bring the disparate discourses together. While there may be good reason to fear elevating QAnon to the point of identification, Burke argues that in order to truly engage with the other, we run the risk of becoming “one” with them, which for scholars would mean fostering a deep, empathetic connection to either Q or at the very least, his adherents.

My rhetorical analysis of the scholarship on QAnon, a precursor to my study of Q drops, depends on Burke’s differentiation between the “symbolic” and “rhetoric.” In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke described the difference between these viewpoints by saying, “We are in pure Symbolic when we concentrate upon one particular integrated structure of motives. But we are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class” (1291). For Burke, the Symbolic—which exists within a kind of self-fulfilling, or self-confirming, dialogue—labels something, and the motivation for creating this label supports efforts towards singular categorization. This is a useful tactic, especially when a disciplinary view can provide a construct through which to see a conflict in a previously unidentifiable way; indeed, when a phenomenon



is unique to a discipline, a symbolic view of an issue can bring a new awareness to another facet of the issue.

This “Rhetorical” awareness, though, requires recognizing the multiple identifications present, and the way those identifications are determined by one’s “participation” or belonging within a sect of some kind—social or economic. For Burke, to realize that these terms exist, and that there are multiple, and even valid, viewpoints, prepares rhetoricians to take larger, more complex perspectives. Put simply, Burke’s dramatistic view of language in “Language as Symbolic Action” describes the process of defining terms as not only a “reflection,” but also a “selection” of reality (1293). Burke’s theory of “terministic screens” provides a framework for considering how our own disciplinary expertise—and even bias—can affect readings of Q and conspiracy theories more broadly. Burke argues that “naming” or “terming” manifests as a nearly inexplicable quality of language. Burke claims there are one of two kinds of motives behind efforts to create terms: he says there are “[t]erms that put things together, and terms that take things apart” (1294). When we “put things together,” we are revealing how things or people “identify” with one another; when we take things apart, our efforts are towards creating distance. In either of these efforts, we end up “directing the attention” towards a specific view of a situation. The rhetorical point of view expands positionality, considering the multiplicity of motivations present during the act of contributing to discourse. Burke establishes that motive drives all discourse, and he later posits that no motive can be neutral; he puts this plainly by saying: “A rhetorical motive is often present where it is not usually recognized, or thought to belong” and “whenever you find a doctrine of ‘nonpolitical’ esthetics affirmed with fervor, look for its politics (1286, 1292).

Burke's work rejects the notion that any language, including art and literature, escapes motivation. In many cases, identification motivates the rhetor, which Burke describes as an effort of making peace in a conflict; the motivation can be to come to a kind of stasis. In "A Rhetoric of Motives," Burke says that "[i]dentification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division," and division occurs because "men" are not "wholly and truly of one substance" (1288). To identify, to perform rhetoric, means to make an effort to overcome the fact that we are inherently "at odds" with one another (1288). But, while identification can operate as a peacemaking mechanism between dissenters, identification can be an effort to maintain opposition to the opponent; in other words, a rhetor can choose to make an argument not for the purpose of making peace with the opposition, but to solidify the way they identify with those in their sociocultural class, with those of who likely are already on "their side." Yet, the complexity of this tendency to design an "other," for Burke, appears when he discusses war as a metaphor for identification. War exemplifies an ultimate form of identification even though it is a conflict because war requires intimate cooperation and knowledge of the other in order to retaliate.

In his discussion of identification and rhetoric, Burke says that "[i]n being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (1288). Illustrating Q's appeal as a quasi-dialectical exchange remains one of the intentions of this project, but another component considers the need for rhetoricians to begin considering discourse surrounding conspiracy theories by a method of speaking "with" not "to."

### 3.2.2 *Traditions of Dialectic*

Scholars define dialectic as an effort towards defining opposing terms through a process of questioning/answering. Despite differences, collectively discovering a conspiracy theory can mirror the process of legitimate dialectical inquiry. Defining dialectic becomes imperative in our efforts to tease out what makes the construction of a conspiracy theory less legitimate—ultimately, QAnon reveals that the quality of the questions posed determines the kinds of responses readers imagine.

Scholars of rhetoric find dialectic reasoning most useful when discussing philosophical concepts, not tangible reality. James Murphy, a scholar of classical rhetoric, makes it clear that dialectic helps when “absolute certainty” may be unattainable, where “truth is pursued to a high degree of probability” (32-33). Whereas dialectic works to come to “general conclusions about human affairs,” rhetoric deals with specific instances of human action (66). Indeed, when parsing through the differences between rhetoric and dialectic, James Herrick supports Murphy’s assertions by saying that rhetoric would be used to resolve specific issues such as, did Jack steal from Jill? Whereas dialectic might address the question, is it morally wrong for Jack to steal from Jill? (75).

Marta Spranzi, calls rhetoric and dialectic “sister disciplines,” defining dialectic as “the art of debate and/or reasoning with a view to advance knowledge” (3). From a Philosophical, Aristotelian tradition, Spranzi discusses two branches of dialectic. One version, disputational, includes a rule-bound debate between a questioner and an answerer; another version, aporetic, is open-ended, and can occur alone (1). Sparzi suggests there may be only “subtle difference” between the two, rhetoric being thought of as producing legitimate persuasion, and dialectic as “obtaining assent” or, put simply, coming to an agreement (3). Indeed, Spranzi explains that

dialectic should not be thought of as an act towards persuasion, but instead should be thought of as “testing...opinions which are good candidates for knowledge” (173). From her view, dialectic functions as a way to produce kinds of truths through discourse which can be held to standards of debate and logic, while rhetoric is a process of suggesting the presence of truth and supporting that truth with evidence.

Nicholas Rescher similarly describes dialectic as a process of discovery, but more strongly emphasizes that there can be “no exit” or “no end” in a pure dialectical exchange. Indeed, while the intention behind dialectic is “consistency” despite contradictions, Rescher emphasizes that these consistencies are still up for revision (6). Rescher carefully outlines the process of a dialectical exchange, which begins with initiation, response, and, importantly, revision and readjustment (3). Put more practically, a dialectical exchange generally discusses the contradictions between opposing terms, such as peace and violence, or law and freedom, for the purpose of coming to greater truths about the qualities and characteristics of these ideas. The “initiation” that Rescher describes alludes to the role of asking questions when defining concepts; responses are answers to these questions; and revision occurs as the definitions become more apparent. This process—or methodology, as Rescher calls it—is rule-bound to some extent, and depends on exchange.

Gregory Clark also suggests that the differences between rhetoric and dialectic are “less significant than the similarities” (19). In essence, rhetoric and dialectic—acts related to reading and writing and speaking, generally—because they have the potential to offer spaces for sustained exchange. Contracting, these same acts also have the potential of “stopping the dialogue.” Clark explains that for Aristotle, rhetoric and dialectic have similar aims; dialectic is the “disciplined and deliberate dialogue of specialists” who use the process to create knowledge; rhetoric is a

more “popular” or “public dialogue” Clark points out that “eristic” rhetoric imposes concepts of truth rather than inviting discovery of it. If we believe in the power and inevitability of socially constructed reality Clark establishes in his work, we must be cautious of eristic rhetoric, a training in the “art of an authoritative statement” (21).

Timothy Crusius, in “A Case for Kenneth Burke’s Dialectic and Rhetoric,” aims to differentiate Burke from Aristotle. Aristotle posited that rhetoric is a method of “popular persuasion,” while dialectic is a process of “inquiring into truth by dialogue” (30). Burke views the two methods of inquiry as much more interrelated; for Burke, dialectic is not the process of debate towards single truth, or an effort to scientifically deduce language to be exact or with ambiguity; rather, Crusius indicates that dialectic “reflects the real paradoxes of the actual world itself” (25). Dialectic uncovers tensions in language, which reflects the tensions in reality; in short, dialectic “reminds us that language has us drawing sharp lines where there really are not any, that it brings something into focus by putting something else out of focus” (26).

In some ways, we can think of the dialectical process as uncovering the substance of the self and the other. Crusius suggests that dialectic might be “logically prior” to rhetoric, as a method of defining the “Act,” a component of Burke's Dramatistic Pentad. Crusius argues that the pentad helps to “systemically contemplate any act from a multitude of hermeneutical perspectives, ‘terministic screens’” (27). Dialectic “chases down” these terms, which are defined by their substance. Substance, another Burkean term, can be thought of to some degree as “essence,” but Crusius points out, there are tensions even in thinking about what constitutes the “essence” of a thing, and our understanding of what constitutes substance contributes to the way we understand the five components of the pentad: the act, the agent, the scene, the purpose, and

the agency. Burkean dialectic reminds us that our efforts to explain the “drama” will always be reductive, since we cannot talk about everything that exists all at once (27).

Rhetoric, for Burke, is identification through sharing one’s “essence” with another, rather than pure persuasion through logic. Once terms have been defined—or at least, once the awareness of the paradox and complexities inherent within terms have been realized—rhetoric is the process of building a community (28). Burke goes as far as to suggest that we share symbolic substance with those that entertain “similar vocabularies,” and we “attribute motives” based on those shared vocabularies (29). Crusius describes this pointedly, saying identification rests on substance, and because of this, rhetoric rests on dialectic; he says the dialectical substance is a condition for rhetoric (30). Identification, for Burke, moves even beyond how we might traditionally define the word “empathy.” Rather than simply attempting to “put yourself in the shoes” of another individual, Burke takes identification further, elevating the experience of identification to something more like transubstantiation: “In being identified with *B*, *A* is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself” (1287). Becoming “substantially one” or, “consubstantiality,” for Burke, is the result of rhetoric happening.

While it is not as simple as mapping out processes of thinking, writing, reading, speaking, and listening on Burke’s philosophically sound terminology, Burke’s work invites distinctions between *defining the substance of terms* and *sharing the substance of terms* in relation to the acts of vocabulary I have listed above. Because this project is more focused on the dialectical process of inquiry, I will propose that reading and listening are critical to dialectic inquiry, unique from the rhetorical goals of sharing and community building. While dialectic inherently builds community through the dialogical process of defining the substance of terms—and establishing a baseline of reality—the efforts to do this work are distinct from rhetorical methods of inventing

arguments. Coming to agree remains far less important, and more dangerous, than sustaining dialogue and recognizing the capability to discover new versions of reality. Though we know this to be true about the power of rhetoric, and the danger of too perfectly “agreeing,” we still maintain traditional perspectives and instruction in argumentative writing. Q’s process looks dialectical, but it cannot be; a true dialectical exchange requires a distinct effort to create definitions of terms—of socially constructing realities—through an open-ended, vulnerable exchange. Dialectic is appealing, in some sense, because it is more equal than learning via lecture, for example. But it also is risky, because it requires intimacy.

The interactive rhetoric of QAnon reveals the ways conspiracy theories uniquely blur the lines between rhetorician and audience. Neither rhetorical scholars nor scholars of conspiracy theories have directly considered rhetorical situations as motivation for conspiracy-making, or have reconsidered the relationship between rhetor, audience, and situation in conspiracy theory studies; this work is necessary if we want to gain a foothold in understanding conspiracy theories as more than confirmation bias, but as an interactive, interpretative response that requires a measure of critical thinking to decode. What seems to appeal to Anons is their active participation in the creative process, in their roles as arbiters of meaning. We might, alarmingly, consider it this way: much in the same way that a scholar is drawn to become an expert in a subject, so too does an amount of curiosity and intrigue inspire Q’s readership. Q’s rhetoric offers the experience of being a kind of intellectual, of imagining a unique capacity to think for oneself, and then validation of one’s ability through the confirmation of narratives within the discourse community itself.

### 3.2.3 *Challenges*

Reading Burke's theories—and reading Burke—are two vastly different experiences.

Though his philosophy relies on identification, in his own style of arguments, Craig Rood points out that in correspondence with fellow rhetorician, Wayne Booth, Burke was “a row interlocutor, uninterested in listening-rhetoric, and prone to accuse and ridicule rather than to defer judgment, ask questions, or search for common ground (452). Rood essentially argues that, upon feeling “attacked” or “misunderstood” in Booth's assessment of his work, Burke was not immune to personal attack as a rhetorical strategy. Consider this section he wrote in a letter to Booth preserved in Rood's article:

(Can one possibly be as conscientious as Dan [a nickname for Booth] without being at least remotely ingenious as he is in telling you that he loves you when kicking you in the pants? And when only the guys on both sides are allowed to have pictures of their own, a system such that, our conscientious pal couldn't be a Pluralist if he either told it in its terms generatively or became “monistic” by subscribing to some of his own?) It's brutal. There's so much of my middle that doesn't count because we both say it. The other two are “normal.” I exist only when I'm “flamboyant.” Go f\*\*q yourself. (461)

This anecdote underscores the reality of discourse, especially when the discourse threatens the “substance” of our realities. Indeed, while I approach this project regarding QAnon within a framework of listening and dialectical exchange, through processes of intentionally hearing and being the other, I began this project with a sense of anger and incredulity, not at all unlike Burke. Burke's theories of transcendence can verge on utopic considering that the force of human emotion, especially anger, should not be underestimated, and cheap attempts to grasp for power amidst these difficult circumstances can be tempting.



Though it may seem more passive, dialectic is a powerful method of meaning-making and discovery when we consider that conversation, or the act of being heard, is persuasive. Dialectic changes the power dynamic, to some degree, between rhetor and audience, focusing more deliberately on the power of shared exchange and conversation, not lecture. While dialectic or conversation is not necessarily an antidote to power dynamics in argumentation, it provides the opportunity to more deliberately discuss the social nature of knowledge-making, and thus understand how conspiracy theories are formed and reinforced through communal sharing of realities and truths. Careful attention to dialectic—paired with focused applications of rhetorical listening—can create teaching environments not unlike the discourse communities QAnon seems to initiate, but wholly different in their efforts to leave open the conversations rather than close them down.


#### 4 FINDINGS IN ANALYSIS OF Q DROPS

*“The situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution.”*

-Lloyd Bitzer

*“Simple logic answers the question.”*

- Q

Perhaps the most common usage of the word “rhetoric” within the popular lexicon describes the “rhetorical question,” which is generally understood to be a question that does not seek an answer, but rather, causes an effect. In the 1580s, an English printer named Henry Denham attempted to make these types of questions more distinct through the use of what he called a “percontation point.” An inverted question mark () this symbol was also called a “rhetorical question mark” and was meant to indicate when a rhetorical question was being employed (Specktor). To some extent, a rhetorical question functions like an enthymeme, wherein it makes an argument on already established—but often unsaid—premises that exist between two or more people. Indeed, though posing as an effort to inquire, a rhetorical question more often re-establishes already determined truths and is implicit if suggestive of new ideas. Rhetorical questions depend on the presence of community to a large extent, because they require previously established discourse to extend new arguments. In thinking about how QAnon functions as a discourse community, attention to the act of questioning is imperative, as it draws attention to the relationship between rhetor and reader and emphasizes the communally shaped reality. In short, Q does not ask questions to spark inquiry: he poses questions for the purpose of having his readers participate in a dialogue meant to create a collective sense of reality.

QAnon models dialectic discourse gone wrong; whereas there has always existed fear of rhetoric being misused, QAnon demonstrates the possibility of experiencing a duplicitous dialectical exchange, using rhetorical questions to inspire a false sense of autonomy and interpretation for readers. Q's excessive use of questions performs an act that mirrors initiating dialogue to challenge the status quo; at the very least, a call-and-response relationship exists between Q and his readers. Yet, Q's questions actually resist inviting readers to participate in any kind of ongoing discourse. Rather, Q spawns a conversation guided by the intention of unmooring his followers from legitimate inquiry, using communication tactics bent on perpetuating an already-determined, unfolding plot.

Scholars have made efforts to determine the rhetorical quality of questions. In particular, Adina Moshavi, a linguistics scholar, aptly defines the rhetorical question as "a sentence whose meaning is that of a question, but which is used to indirectly express an assertion" (94). Particularly, Moshavi, suggests the presence of "implications" within rhetorical questions, noting that there are "multi-level communicative goals" (94). A rhetorical question functions as a persuasive rhetorical strategy because it motivates a listener to acquiesce, inspiring the listener to largely agree or disagree in order to show their conformity—it shows the "obviousness" of the proposed statement; Moshavi says "the question exerts psychological pressure on the addressee by implying that any reasonable person would agree to the implied assertion" (Moshavi 97). Through studying the value of rhetorical questions within biblical contexts, Moshavi provides important insight into these multi-layer communicative goals and intentions—especially through "reporter questions," which Moshavi calls "WH" questions.

Besides the work completed by Moshavi, the rhetorical value of questions by linguists within biblical texts is a common method of study—Paul Ozerov offers an analysis of "wh"

questions in Hebrew contexts, Deborah Prince studies rhetorical questions within the resurrection narrative, and recently, Hadeel Al-Smadi offers a view on the difficulty of translating rhetorical questions in the Qur'an—these, among others. Despite these important contributions, and Moshavi's influence on this project, there does not yet exist a taxonomy of rhetorical questions in the same way that one might imagine a taxonomy of logical fallacies, for example. Within current studies, the effect of rhetorical questions is largely drawn from the source text at hand, and the effect of those questions discussed within specific contexts. The fullest analysis of rhetorical questions broadly is Irene Koshik's *Beyond Rhetorical Questions: Assertive Questions in Everyday Interactions*, provides a comprehensive overview of how questions function within daily, conversational interactions. Koshik's focus is less on the persuasive quality of these questions.

In contrast, scholars of law are interested in the persuasive appeal of questions—particularly the persuasiveness “leading questions” in cross-examination. For example, Sydney Beckman writes an article on questions, the title of which alone is telling: “Witness Response Manipulation through Strategic ‘Non-Leading’ Questions (or The Art of Getting the Desired Answer by Asking the Right Question).” Outright, this author discusses one's ability to “manipulate” responses based constructed value of the questions, in short, arguing that “the wording of questions can impact the witness in such a way can impact his or her answer” (5). Lawyers work this reality to their advantage whenever possible; there is room for further study of the intersections between the role of questions within court settings and the effect of rhetorical questions more broadly. Still, though these areas of research have some intersections with the role of questions in the QAnon movement, largely, the nomenclature that describes the effect of Q's rhetorical questions must be gleaned from their individual contexts.

Q's method of questioning has eerily similar parallels to the biblical structures Moshavi studies, but there are a few important differences. On one hand, the Bible is thought to be a textual authority for truth, not necessarily encouraging "research" or autonomous thought. Q claims the opposite, that readers should look outside his drops in order to determine truths; because of this structure, the drops themselves do not seem rhetorical in nature to readers; they seem investigative. When Moshavi discusses the use of rhetorical questions in biblical cases, she indicates that it is possible to identify the presence of a rhetorical question because "the speaker already knows the answer to the question, the goal is not to gain information but to induce the addressee to mentally agree that the implied assertion is true" (97). Q's audience, unlike original readers of the Bible, has the capability to use the internet to discover "truths." Q capitalizes on an urge to know and discover by asking questions that purposefully lead to scavenger hunts. To some extent, this particular strategy has been noted by scholars who study Q.<sup>3</sup>

While rhetorical questions suggest a sense of something being obvious, a question in a more traditional sense invites the act of answering, inherently lending itself to dialogue. With Q's questions, he sets up an opportunity for his readers to "do their own research." Anons are instructed to "research for yourself" (drop 4734) and that they have a mission to "dispute **[reject]** propaganda push through posting of RESEARCH and facts" (drop 4509). Q offers lots of "research questions" for his followers to investigate, but rather than inviting readers to participate in efforts of inquiry, the questions offer a chance to accumulate evidence for an already pre-determined myth. Q references his use of questions to offset the power and effect of his rhetoric, arguing that he innocently poses questions that allow the reader to use "logic" to "think for themselves." In drop 3893, Q responds to a news article criticizing his discourse,

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<sup>3</sup> More specifically, see Halpern, who calls this strategy "gamification."

describing himself as someone who “simply” asks questions: “Per MSM [**Fake News**]: (person in the basement - LARP) who simply asks(ed) questions on a forum [**imageboard**] that generates(ed) continued [**massive (thousands)**] MSM attacks & WW movement [**Great Awakening**]? Logical thinking.”<sup>4</sup> Before this comment, Q links a tweet that is no longer available as the account has been suspended, but evidently, Q's frustration here derives from being called a “person in a basement” by the “MSM,” or mainstream media. In contrast, Q positions himself as someone who “simply asks questions” and “generates [a] Great Awakening.” Q downplays the fact that his questions are rhetorical: they make arguments rather than produce conversations, and in the cases where Q does ask more neutral questions, he has still primed his readership to only be able to answer those questions with the backdrop of his worldview.

Closer attention to the actual questions Q poses reinforces the sense of autonomy and prowess Q provides, but additional patterns of persuasion exist beyond the use of questions that establish a backdrop for the dialogue they initiate. Before getting into a more thorough discussion of my findings regarding Q's use of rhetorical questions, it is useful to consider more about the quality and topical concerns of the drops, namely those dealing with the relationship between thinking, logic, and Truth.

#### 4.1 Q's Philosophy

“Thinking freely” is a persistent theme within the Q drops. Recognizing that Q conspiracies depend on “logical” knowledge-making is key to understanding his appeal for Anons. Q directly appeals to thinking, logic, truth and knowledge. In 2020 alone, the word

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<sup>4</sup> Of note, Q frequently uses bolding and brackets to draw emphasis and a kind of double-talk honesty to his commentary—I imagine that Q might say the material in his brackets give the not-politically-correct version of what he “really thinks.”

“think” appears 114 times, and the word “truth” appears in 73 instances. Similar notions regarding processes of thinking or discovering Truth, such as those having to do with “knowledge,” “research” or “reading” are also prevalent. In drop 4814, Q asks a series of questions, three of which include: “What happens when people are no longer allowed to think freely?/What happens when people are no longer allowed to challenge their authority?/What happens when people no longer fight back?” Q never defines what he means when he discusses “thinking freely,” but with his hostility towards the “mainstream media,” it follows that “thinking freely” for Q means thinking in opposition to official channels of knowledge.

In a later drop, 4875, Q actually suggests that any effort to discuss or dispel the QAnon movement is a “conspiracy” against him and his followers. One drop reads:

Do you get it yet?/ They are afraid of you **[reach][uncontrolled][anti-narrative][free-thought]**/ Don't forget about the House Intel Committee meeting re: 'Qanon' today./ More 'conspiracy' **[fact-less base-less claims]** pushed re: violent, extremist, racist, dangerous, anti-gov, nazism, white supremacy, anti-religion, anti-American, ...../#2 attacked topic **\_[POTUS #1]**./ INFORMATION WARFARE.

Here, Q refers to a House resolution that passed detailing the kind of harm the QAnon movement initiated.<sup>5</sup> Q calls this “information warfare,” suggesting that to call Q a “conspiracy theory” reveals an effort to eliminate “free thinking.” There are twenty times when Q begrudges the use of the term “conspiracy theory” in reference to him. Once, he simply asks “You didn’t think it was just a conspiracy did you?” (drop 4873). In another case, he shares an article from NBC news that uses the term, and makes this comment: “Coordinated media roll-out designed to silence ‘a conspiracy’ they deem to have significant potential [anti-[D]] ramifications re: 2020

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/1154/text>

P\_election?” (drop 4333). The use of the term “conspiracy” in relation to QAnon inspires retaliation.

Indeed, Q attempts to separate his discourse from stereotypes about conspiracy theories; he tries to solidify his ethos in many ways, one of which includes relying on citations and intertextuality to bolster his arguments. In addition to constantly sharing tweets and news sources, Q quotes the Constitution and Ronald Reagan on several occasions. Quotes from the novel 1984, comparisons to Hitler, and even citations from the dictionary are some of the more frequent citations. These references provide a sense of credibility to Q as he performs as an expert historian or literary scholar. Q claims that “knowledge is power” like a mantra, with the phrase appearing nineteen times in Q drops since 2017. One piece of intertextuality Q refers to is the Enlightenment, making an effort to situate his discourse in historical contexts having to do with logic. In one reference from 2020 Q provides a quote and link from stanford.edu that simply details a definition of the period,

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/>

The Enlightenment is often associated with its political revolutions and ideals, especially the French Revolution of 1789. The energy created and expressed by the intellectual foment of Enlightenment thinkers contributes to the growing wave of social unrest in France in the eighteenth century. The social unrest comes to a head in the violent political upheaval which sweeps away the traditionally and hierarchically structured ancient régime (the monarchy, the privileges of the nobility, the political power of the Catholic Church). The French revolutionaries meant to establish in place of the ancient régime a new reason-based order instituting the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality.



...enlightenment with the process of undertaking to think for oneself, to employ and rely on one's own intellectual capacities in determining what to believe and how to act.

Q (drop 4408).

After the ellipses, Q moves to quote a later part of the definition that cites Kant—Q curiously begins his abridged version of the quote immediately after Kant's name, choosing to not attribute the idea. Still, Q invokes the Enlightenment with some measure of calculation, especially considering that this brief overview thematically supports the way he presents his own arguments. Additionally, the intertextuality offered by including the official definition helps Q establish historical precedent for this kind of thought—Q does not use his own voice to define the Enlightenment, but rather allows a “credible” source to provide to the definition, implicitly confirming what he has already been saying about the concept of “thinking for yourself.” Indeed, this reference to the Enlightenment out of context may not seem so troublesome, but when coupled with the near 150 additional posts that suggest connections between the power of logic and truth, this conceptual framework inspires pause.

Indeed, Q's reference to the Enlightenment offers more than a citation; Q is rigid in his representation of Truth, suggesting that his methods of thinking are philosophically sound. Q's narrow definition of the Enlightenment tries to establish a philosophical point of view, but it fails to consider that the human ability to determine Truth was contentious even during the Enlightenment period. Enlightenment rhetoric emerged concurrently with anxiety regarding perspicuity and exactness of language, or language as a kind of science. Prior to the Enlightenment, there was a focus on knowledge as divined, as known through an external reality, rather than as made possible through the mind. While many Enlightenment philosophers—like Q—

were mindful of the human ability to reason, they were also aware, unlike Q, that logical reasoning-towards-Truth is not perfectly reliable.

Q's rhetoric sympathizes with the potential religious belief of his readers and their sense of a divine plan that will fall into place, a plan that, while divine, is also contingent on their patriotic sensibilities and actions. Thus, while Q frequently suggests that only "logic" is required to determine the Truths his drops unveil, he simultaneously relies heavily on appeals to pathos and ethos to persuade his readers. Simply put, Aristotle suggests that an appeal to pathos is an appeal to feeling, and the feelings Q most often seems to inspire are ones of anger and also spiritual calling—often, Q inspires these feelings to occur concurrently. Q frequently instructs his readers to "put on the full armor of God" in preparation to battle corruption (a Bible verse referenced in at least 17 Q drops since 2017). Q, more peacefully, also tells his readers to "Keep faith in Humanity. Keep faith in Yourself. LIGHT OF THE WORLD" (4636). He encourages them in another case to "have faith" in their research (4760). There is, in fact, a pastoral tone taken by Q in many instances that contrasts other militant, violent instructions in other cases, but they work in tandem to stir up religious fervor often by criticizing "non-religious" democratic politicians or by calling on a sense moral duty required of Anons or "patriots." In drop 4550, Q inspires this aggressive yet religious rhetoric when he says, "Do you think it's a coincidence they banned and prevent you attending Church \_house of worship?/ Anti-American./Anti-God." These pathetic appeals to faith provide a sense of communion with readers, but also suggest the presence of significant threats against religious freedom. In other words, the religious appeals Q makes either lead to feelings of violence or fear, both in effort to create a sense of community amongst readers against any organization that might call for limited interaction in the midst of a global pandemic.

Q's authoritative tone becomes even more evident when considering its poetic qualities. Not only do many of Q's drops take the actual form of a poem, with a line break after each "sentence," but they very often also evoke repetition, allusions, or metaphors. A selection of drop 3929 illustrates a strategy of using parallelism:

Think CEO departures.

Think FBI departures.

Think DOJ departures.

Think State departures.

Think WH departures.

Think DIA departures.

Think Pentagon departures.

Think Senate departures.

Think House departures.

Think Amb departures.

Think IG departures.

Think Judge install.

Think SC install.

Think WH install.

Think FBI install.

Think C\_A install.

Think DOJ install.

Think US ATT install.

Q takes on the voice of a teacher, a bard, and a pastor, all at the same time. Recognizing these strategies offers room for further research regarding a variety of rhetorical appeals; importantly, many of the scholars who have studied Q drops directly have already recognized Q's appeal in terms of how he tells plot-driven stories, and how he depends on acts of interpretation to understand his message, but there is more yet to consider. Unique to Q's poetic tone is that this poem is actually directed towards a specific reader, not a general audience. There is a sense of something both personal and sacred communicated through this rhetorical structure; Q's writing style is tailored to the audience he attracts.

Most importantly for this project, Q uses terms like "open-mind," "critical thinking," and "logic" to capitalize on the human impulse to make meaning. Q's strategy creates a paradox: though he urges "thinking," Q disseminates one-sided views on complex subjects. Q's definitions of logic, Truth, and critical thinking intersect and depart from a rhetorical understanding of the very same terms. Ironically, QAnon reveals a willingness, on the part of Q's followers, to engage in puzzle-solving riddles that do, actually, require thought and research and mirror the act of a dialectic exchange through the effort to answer questions. In addition to these acts of thinking and discovery, Q also facilitates and attracts a specific discourse community—he takes a religious and poetic tone that provides a space for communion.

#### **4.2 Findings: The Interpretive Façade of Q's Questions**

*"Question what you read [from every source].*

*Use discernment."*

-Q (drop 4101)

*Ask yourself a very simple question - Why is everything re: 'Q' being censored, banned, and attacked? When do you expend ammunition [resources]?"*

-Q (drop 4622)

Frequently, Q bombards his readers with questions in series. A common logical fallacy is the tendency to gish-gallop, or to overwhelm an opponent with a number of arguments so dense that it becomes nearly impossible to respond to any one of them directly. Professor Eugenie Scott, former, executive director of the National Center for Science Education coined this term to criticize debates with Duane Gish, a Young-Earth creationist. She said, “The creationist is allowed to run on for 45 minutes or an hour, spewing forth torrents of error that the evolutionist hasn’t a prayer of refuting in the format of a debate” (“Gish-Galloping”). Q “gish-gallops” with an incalculable, overwhelming frequency. This study extrapolates the questions and considers them individually, but it is worth recognizing that many of these individual questions were posed as part of a series. The following table represents the codes that emerged in the first analysis of the drops using Grounded Theory:

*Table 1: Types of Questions*

Type of Question	Frequency
Absent To Be Verb/Interrogative Word	286
Can...?	6
Did...?	10
Do People/Do...?	51
Does...?	4
Have You Ever...?	2
How Many...?	17
How...?	108
If/Then...?	22
Is/Are/Was/Were...?	40
Playful Question	32

What Happens...?	66
What...?	71
When...?	32
Where...?	7
Who...?	75
Why...?	160
Will/Would...?	10

This table includes eighteen codes that first organize the data by the similar types of questions posed. Organizing in this way helped to isolate different strategies for individual study, which, after a second view, 1) revealed emerging patterns within a singular type of questions asked, and 2) allowed me to group the multiple, frequently identified codes by overarching themes.

Despite the sheer number of questions present within Q drops, and the large number of codes to start, using Grounded Theory a second time inspired my determination of four overarching categories of questions that appeared most frequently in the dataset. More precisely, these categories were named through my efforts of personally attempting to answer some of the questions and then terming the effect that process inspired:

1. **Statements-as-Questions:** Q makes statements that do not begin with an interrogative word or omit a “to be” verb, creating a kind of passive voice construction. I called these “absent to be/interrogative word” questions. A couple of examples of these kinds of questions follow: “Same [D] govs who pushed C19 infected patients into nursing homes attempting to keep State(s) closed?” and “US taxpayers funding the destruction of America?” (drop 4842). Another damning question: “The same people who control the media are the same people who are

part of the evil and corrupt system?” (drop 4748). Q’s questions that actually do use a “to be” or “does” cause a similar effect.

2. **Predictive and Imaginative:** Most often, Q asks questions that begin with “why.” These questions pose most apparently as evidence of attempted philosophical inquiry but are always “loaded” with Q’s worldview. For Q, “why” questions tend to inspire the highest level of imaginative response and prophetic predictions, and they function similarly to his “how,” “will/would,” “what happens,” and “if/then” questions.
3. **Reporter and Answerable:** Q asks additional “reporter questions,” who, what, when, where, and how many; these are “answerable” questions, but when contextualized, make larger assumptions beyond the literal questions. “did” questions also ask whether or not something happened, which, theoretically, can be answered.
4. **Playful and Incredulous:** The smallest category are “playful” questions, and most obviously suggest incredulity. “Shall we play a game?” is an example of this kind of question, and it has been posed twenty-three times since the beginning of Q’s drops, but similar kinds of questions that begin with “do people,” “do you,” “can,” “did” or “have you ever” cause a similar effect.

The table below reflects how I have grouped this larger amount of codes into the four categories described above.

*Table 2: Coded Questions*

Statements-as-Questions	Absent To Be Verb Question	307
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	Does Question	4
	Is Question	40
Predictive and Imaginative	How Question	108
	If/Then Question	22
	What Happens/What if Question	72
	Why Question	160
	Will/Would Question	10
Reporter and Answerable	Did Question	10
	How Many	17
	What Question	65
	When Question	32
	Where question	7
	Who Question	54
Playful and Incredulous	Can Question	6
	Do People/Do You Question	51
	Have You Ever Question	2
	Playful Question	32

Each of these categories vary in form, yet they hinge on the same intent, building on one another to create an environment that looks critical and interrogative.

#### ***4.2.1 Statements as Questions***

Some of Q's questions can be discovered through a simple search of the interrogative word—which can be accomplished using either the search function on QAlerts.app or through running a query on Nvivo; yet, this strategy cannot account for the fact that Q does not rely on typical sentence structures when asking a question—over 300 questions posed in the year 2020 are



actual sentences that end with a question mark instead of a period, making this the most unruly category in the dataset. Often, these questions fit under the absent “to be” category because they omit the verb form that would, in most cases, initiate the beginning of the question, and they are obviously rhetorical; they make full statements, and only end with a question mark to seem suggestive. Some of these questions are long, making a full sentence, such as: “Sex trafficking [safeguarding women & children] topic(s) that unite all political factions against a common enemy [faith in Humanity]?” (drop 4742) In many other cases, though, Q offers short phrases as a question: “Time for a change?” “Rigged system?” “Normal?” and “Email?” all appear as their own individual “questions,” among many others.

The questions in this category that actually do include a “to be” verb cause a similar effect; in the forty times Q begins a sentence with a “to be” verb, he asks a variation of the same question nearly half the time: “Is this about the virus OR THE ELECTION?” Further, the four times Q asks questions that begin with “does” also pose statements, an example of which occurred during the height of the pandemic: “Does a combination of prisoner release + ‘mask’ mandate(s) provide for a more dangerous environment to citizens?” (drop 4548). Though “Statements as Questions” make up a large majority of this dataset, they are the most obviously rhetorical questions—inspiring very little sense of imagination on the part of his readers. To some degree, the questions in this section seem purposed to set the tone of inquiry within the discourse, and they offer a kind of security for Q as a writer, letting him imply rather than argue certain positions. Questions from the other categories evoke more concrete acts of critical or, at the very least, imaginative thinking, but Q’s statements as questions most obviously reveal his intent to pose a narrow world view, shying away from questions that might actually facilitate an open-ended dialogue.

#### 4.2.2 *Predictive and Imaginative*

When thinking about how Q sets up a sense of a false dialectic, it is “how” and “why” questions that most apparently initiate the most complex, imaginative response. The largest category of Q’s questions requires readers to essentially answer “how” or “why” something happened. They can be predictive, too; when Q creates “if/then” scenarios or asks “what happens when” or “will” something happen, he primes the reader to imagine possible futures. These questions are grouped together for this study because they prime readers to imagine the intent behind actions along with possible consequences; they also rely deeply on the reader to develop plot-like sensibilities. Scholars have already touched on the interpretation Q invites through his rhetorical strategies, and additional scholars recognize the plot-driven structure of Q’s ideas. Unique to this analysis is the study of questions to elicit these responses; focusing on the presence of questions in Q drops underscores the environment of critical inquiry Q attempts to cultivate.

The answers to “why” questions are often intangible and can be subjective, especially since Q very often suggests the presence of meaning where there may in fact be none. In two specific cases, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest that followed George Floyd’s murder, Q used “why” questions to suggest that these events had larger meanings. In the case of COVID-19, Q suggests that there is a motivation on the part of the media/Democrats to use the pandemic to affect the upcoming presidential election. In each of the cases below, the symbol [D] is meant to refer to “Democrats,” and the questions are in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why wouldn’t the media [D]s want to work [on all fronts] to find a possible solution [immediate dismissal]?

Why doesn't the media [D]s want the pandemic [rearrange: dem panic] to slow-stop?

Why doesn't the media [D]s want society to heal [recover]?

WHY DOESN'T THE MEDIA [D]s want people to no longer fear going outside?

Why doesn't the media [D]s want people to point the finger at China as the source?

Why doesn't the media [D]s want people to return to work [normal daily lives]?

Who benefits the most?

Why does corp media [D] attempt to control us?

Why does corp media [D] challenge [attack] anyone who defies pushed\_coordinated narrative?

Why does corp media [D] attempt to prevent [individual] critical thinking [public]?

Is this about the virus or something else?

Everything is at stake this election.

This collection of why questions, much like the ones regarding media-caused division, makes arguments—the questions are rhetorical: for example “Why does corp media [D] attempt to control us” could easily be made into an argumentative sentence: The corp media [D] attempts to control us. Yet since the question of *why* this occurs is on the table, there comes an opportunity to fill in narrative gaps that explain the motivations behind why someone would want to control someone else.

Q's questions regarding the response to George Floyd's murder further confirm the division his “why” questions amplify. Consider the following series of questions Q poses from varying Q drops:

Ask yourself, why are [D] party leaders refusing to condemn the violence?

Ask yourself, why are [D] party leaders refusing to seek a unified republic? (drop 4635).

Why are [D]s providing safe harbor [safe zones] for ANTIFA to operate? (drop 4656 and 4655)

Why are riots conducted in specific [D] controlled locations? (drop 4699)

These questions, published in September 2020, after the previously mentioned series on COVID-19 further push the sense that “Democrats” are up to something with regard to the ways they commented on the social unrest that resulted after George Floyd’s murder.

Q drop 4748 provides a good example of a series of “why” questions posed by Q, and walking through the possible answers that could be associated with these questions helps to illustrate the kind of imaginative ideas they provoke:

WHY DOES THE MEDIA push division?

WHY DOES THE MEDIA incite violence?

WHY DOES THE MEDIA pit race v race?

WHY DOES THE MEDIA pit religion v religion?

WHY DOES THE MEDIA pit sex v sex?

WHY DOES THE MEDIA pit class v class?

While these questions may look like open-ended questions, they push the narratives articulated elsewhere within Q’s rhetoric; though these questions are loaded, they simultaneously require a reader to synthesize previously made arguments and suggestions to come to conclusions, and they inspire imagination and abstraction to “make sense” of legitimate complexities.

It is helpful to walk through the process of answering the first of these questions to see how the imaginative process is provoked. First, Q asks, “Why does the media push division?” Though this question begins with an interrogative word, the question itself is a statement: that the “media” pushes “division.” To better understand who is being divided, according to Q, you only

simply have to read the following questions: race against race, religion against religion, and so on. To ask these loaded questions, Q makes assumptions about what his readers will already believe to be true about “the media,” but in posing these implications as questions, he provides a playground for the imagination to run wild. Indeed, while the inherent assertions being made within the question itself will automatically push the reader to imagine nefarious intentions on the part of “the media,” the interpretation of the motivations themselves can vary from person to person, allowing readers to walk through a process that, to them, feels like synthesis and critical thinking.

To consider this further, the possible answers that exist in response to this question of “why create division” could include something simple: “Division can cause intrigue and make viewers spend more time on media websites, which can produce a larger income for stakeholders.” Or, imagine this answer: “The media is causing division because they want to incite a civil war, which would lead to chaos and people becoming dependent on the media for information. They could trust the media so much that the media gains the status of ‘God.’” Even more, and in keeping with Q’s larger narrative, someone could answer this question by saying “Because “the media” is run by demonic forces who are trying to eradicate Christianity from American culture.” Again, the possible answers to this question are only acceptable as far as the media is a villain, but to what degree the media is villainous—whether it could be a matter of corporate greed or total warfare—is up for interpretation. Q only asks one “why” question in reference to President Trump. Q posts a picture of the former president surrounded by guns to his head. The guns are labeled “Boston Globe,” “CNN,” “Clinton Machines,” and so on. Underneath the picture, Q says, “He gave up everything./He knew his life, and the lives of his family, would forever change./He knew **[knows]** the consequences./A man who had everything. Why DO IT?”

(drop 4812). Asking “why do it,” as if President Trump is a sacrificial lamb of sorts, shows the contrast between how Democratic politicians are called into question as opposed to Republicans.

To be sure, while the motivations of Republican leaders are never called into question, “the media” and Democratic leaders are conflated and villainized through Q’s why questions.

Questions that begin with “how” another large portion of the questions in this category are, and while they are not as obviously attuned to motive, they focus instead on the process by which motives are enacted. Q’s questions that begin with “how” are effective first in that they establish the method—to go back to Burke, they inspire the reader to determine the qualities of the “Act” initiated by the other.

Q frequently poses ominous “how” questions like “How do you control your own destiny?” and “How do you effectively control the population.” The following, longer set of questions that appear in a portion of drop 4245 that appeared on May 15 of 2020 gives an example of how Q’s “why” questions imagine motive, while the “how” questions imagine method:

Why are possible **[treatments][cures]** being banned?

Why are possible **[treatments][cures]** being attacked?

Why are possible **[treatments][cures]** being targeted?

Evidence overwhelming?

HOW DO YOU KEEP PEOPLE LIVING IN FEAR?

HOW DO YOU KEEP PEOPLE DIVIDED?

HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY VOTE-BY-MAIL?

HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY STATE BAILOUT(S)?

HOW DO YOU MAKE PEOPLE STARVE **[DEPENDENT ON GOV]**?

HOW DO YOU JUSTIFY ANYTHING NON\_COVID RELATED TO BE A  
POLITICAL ATTACK [**FISA\_UNMASK**]?

HOW DO YOU CREATE A DIVERSION?

HOW DO YOU SHIFT THE NARRATIVE?

HOW DO YOU KILL POTUS ECONOMIC GAINS?

HOW DO YOU KILL POTUS UNEMPLOYMENT RECORD(S)?

HOW DO YOU PREVENT POTUS RALLY[**IES**]?

HOW DO YOU DELAY USA\_CHINA TRADE NEGOTIATION [**PREVENT**  
**[FIXED]** BILLION(S) CLAWBACK]?

HOW DO YOU SHELTER [**BIDEN**] FROM DEBATES?

HOW DO YOU SHELTER & PROTECT [**BIDEN**]?

Q answers these “how” questions with more “how” questions; the larger implications behind the why questions, suggest that there are treatments for COVID-19 that were purposefully withheld from the American public. COVID-19 is supposed to be seen as a distraction from the election (recall that Q asked “is this about the virus or the election” nearly 20 times in 2020), and apparently, withholding treatment causes more chaos, which former President Trump could be blamed for. This narrative becomes apparent specifically when considering the questions about mail-in ballots, which Q and others argued could jeopardize the integrity of the election, and more particularly, the questions regarding “kill potus economy gains” and “kill potus unemployment records.” Here, through the act of questioning, Q offers clear strategies—methods—that his enemies are utilizing to materialize their nefarious motives. For example, the question: “HOW DO YOU MAKE PEOPLE STARVE [**DEPENDENT ON GOV**]?” is not unheard of on networks like Fox News, which make arguments that social programs create dependency. Thus,

Q's question establishes that the "Government" seeks to make people "dependent," but the methods of how this dependence is initiated can vary—from mask mandates to affordable healthcare.

Q himself seems to want to distract readers from the "how." In drop 4464, Q outright says: "The 'how' will be hard to understand for most. Focus on the 'why'. The 'when' is now." In appealing to why and how questions specifically, Q generates a presence of meaning and motive behind the mundane. Rather than exposing philosophical or subjective Truths through intense questioning, Q proposes a very distinct narrative through his use of questions. Q even goes as far as to tell his followers that of all the questions being posed, they ought to focus on the "why." Q's rhetorical methods shape reality for readers, yet the process of uncovering this predetermined reality allows Anons to feel empowered and active in the meaning-making process. Though "why questions" are often employed in dialectical reasoning, Q uses the why questions rhetorically, essentially asking readers to fill in plot points that have to do with the motivations of the players. In doing this work, Q suggests to his readers that they will be able to glean Truth.

When Q asks questions like "Will we be a free nation under God? Or will we cede our freedom, rights and liberty to the enemy?" he creates a situation in which one can only imagine a dangerous future. Questions of "would," "will" or "if" imagine a future that undoubtedly contributes to a sense of fear for readers. Consider this question, for example: "Would control over[of] these institutions/organizations allow for the mass control of a population's viewpoint re: a desired topic" In this drop, Q refers to intuitions of information or the media—a villain established elsewhere in his commentary. In asking these "would" or "will" questions, though, Q has readers draw conclusions wherein their autonomy is at stake. Alarmingly, Q pairs ominous



predictions of the future with the recurring phrase “When do you expend ammunition?” Q creates fear about the future—specifically regarding individual autonomy and primes his readers to respond with violence. These imaginative and predictive questions persuade readers to design and believe in the presence of an enemy, along with imagining unhappy endings. While Q pushes for violence as a response to these “realities,” he also encourages readers to employ logic and thinking to combat this sort of mental war he describes, but it is not hard to imagine the kind of fear Q’s rhetoric provokes. Imagining scenarios where one might lose their individual rights or religious liberties causes stress. Q not only creates the imagined, distressing realities, but he acts as if the total absolution of these scenarios lies not only in the election of Trump, but also in violent, active retaliation from Anons.

#### ***4.2.3 Reporter and Answerable***

The questions in this category can be answered in different ways, depending on the positionality of the reader; the mental work necessary to perform the act of answering these questions can feel akin to legitimate acts of research and critical thinking. It may be slightly misleading to label the questions in this category “answerable;” while many of these questions produce a scenario where a legitimate, tangible answer can be attained, they also are loaded with implications beyond the exact answer to be provided. In other words, “who, what, when, and where” questions push readers to accumulate kinds of evidence, often inspiring Google searches to solve the clues; at the same time, these questions require abstraction to grasp: in short, they pose as the kind of question for which there is an actual answer, but the implications behind that answer are vast and limitless.

Q’s questions that begin with “who” allow readers to imagine a variety of motives—all of which consistently villainize democratic leaders, but still, the room for interpreting those motives

inspires creativity. This is the crux of Kenneth Burke's view of rhetoric—that our efforts towards identification involve the act of determining the motive behind another's action. While this work, in reality, can be difficult because of our separation from one another as individuals, Q absolves this conflict by asking “Why” questions for the sole purpose of amplifying the distance against those he and his followers have deemed “other.” As an example, Q's most frequently asked “who” question is “Who benefits most?” which he asked nineteen times in 2020, in every case referring to the relationships between the pandemic and Trump's chances of winning the upcoming election. In this case, Q does not seek to identify a specific individual, but rather, implicates the larger Democratic party as a whole; depending on which leader or set of leaders the readers least trusts, the answers to “Who benefits most” could slightly vary, meaning there might be “room for interpretation” even within this obviously loaded question. Other “who” questions appear that require actual research answers—which can be seen in a series of several questions that seek to compromise former President Barack Obama's ethos. Calling the former president by his middle name, Hussein, Q asks: “Who controls [wields significant influence] re: the 'Hussein' [D] party?” and “Who paid \_Hussein's Harvard Law Degree?” along with “Who financed \_Hussein's political life?” (drop 4750). The first “who” question in this series is more abstract, and could refer to many people, but Barack Obama's law degree was funded—by himself, scholarship, or sponsor—and there were undoubtedly donations made throughout his political tenure. These questions can be solved, but even after finding the “correct” answer in these cases, the reader is still left to determine the motives behind contributions made to the former president's career.

Sometimes the “who” questions Q poses lead to efforts of uncovering specific persons—persons whose motives can be imagined in a variety of directions. Q asks “who” a total of five

different people are—and while searching online can provide biographies of these individuals, these kinds of answers do not suffice; instead, by asking these questions, Q suggests that these individuals have ulterior motives, that they are players in a larger plot.<sup>6</sup> Other “who” questions do not name-drop: for example. Q asks, “Who was the 17th Director of the NSA?” and “Who [former WH staff][one or more] insisted he could be trusted?” These questions are also possible to solve; but, even though the solutions, the provision of a name, can be attained, the implications behind that individual’s role lead the reader to imagine and deduce intentions that may or may not exist.

Like “who” questions, questions that begin with “what” cause the effect of being simultaneously “answerable” and “theoretical.” Only one “what” question in Q’s repertoire could be considered exclusively philosophical, but only when out of context: the question, “What does the word ‘patriot’ mean to you?” could offer various answers in an open-ended exchange, and while there may be multiple options available for this question in Q’s world, such as “someone who votes for Trump” or “someone who is a Christian,” the possibilities are not, in fact, truly limitless—the response “someone who supports Hillary Clinton,” for example, would not be welcomed in the dialogue. Another case, drop 4699, provides another example of a similar kind of question; during Black Lives Matter protests, Q asked “What are safe zones?” He follows this question with two more: “Why are riots conducted in specific **[D]** controlled locations?” and also “Sacrificing the lives and well-being of the community for a calculated political gain **[or other]**?” In asking for a sort of definition of the term “safe zone,” Q pointedly critiques major cities in their responses to civil unrest, the implication being that the leaders use the social

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<sup>6</sup> These people include Dan Abrams, the brother of judge Ronnie Abrams, Alexandra Chalupa, Greg Andres, and Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal.

division for their own gains. To some extent, “What are safe zones?” is a question that Q himself immediately answered—in other cases, Q does this in other cases as well. In drop 4553, Q says “What is a common theme/tactic of the LEFT?” and he follows this question with definitions of the words fascism, narcissism, censorship, narrative, dogma, suppression, aggression, projection, and psychological projection.”

Again, like with who questions, there is tension even within the singular category of “what” questions. Some questions posed are literal, answerable questions, some are actually answered by Q immediately, but others legitimately require piecing ideas together to build a picture behind what the questions imply. “What happens/What if” questions comprise a different category in this study, namely because they tend to attempt to make predictions, but this following set of questions from drop 4645—that begin first with a “What if” model the work that “what” questions inspire. Q asks, “What happens if 44 is actively running a shadow command and control [**shadow presidency**] operation against the current duly elected POTUS?/What former mid-senior admin officials would need to be involved?/What current mid-senior admin officials would need to be involved? What key positions of power would be critical to the operation?” (drop 4645). This set of questions introduces the much longer drop that includes a link to three news articles that discuss President Obama visiting Europe, India, and China.

The drop goes on to pose a series of questions about government officials who have been “terminated,” along with other government officials who, assumingly, align with the Democratic party but were still active during President Trump’s presidency, including the “CDC;” Q asks about twenty different people and agencies in this drop. The first “what if” question, though, poses a hypothetical, and the overarching thesis within this drop: Barack Obama is still “pulling the strings” politically, and Trump is unable to retaliate because of the overarching, Democratic

infiltration. Though there can be no other thesis than this, there is enough variability in the questions asked that the reader can feel as if they are doing “research” and thinking critically to solve the puzzle. The three “what” questions that follow the drop leave space for genuine inquiry—but the articles and names that follow the questions limit the possibilities for open-ended conversation. Still, looking up and understanding who the players are in all the positions Q names, like “The US Attorney D of Columbia” and “Dept of Treasury” would take a significant amount of effort to piece together. Thus, Q both answers and does not answer his own questions, making the process of inquiry legitimate and a farce at the same time.

In a sort of departure from “who” and “what” questions, “when” questions almost exclusively contribute to the sensation of building a plot, refusing to acknowledge that coincidences occur. Surprisingly, rarely does Q ask for a legitimate time or date in questions that begin with “when” but in one case, in April 2020, amidst a drop that included questions about the early stages of the pandemic, like “Why does FAKE NEWS push anti-hydroxychloroquine **[fear tactics re: use]**?” Q also asks, “When did [BIDEN] become the front runner?” Here, Q sets up a dynamic wherein he makes the argument, time and again, that the pandemic was utilized to place Trump at a disadvantage in the upcoming election.

Other “when” questions do not seek specific times, but rather, scenarios. For example, Q asks “When do you expend ammunition” four times throughout 2020; he asks “When you are blind, what do you see?” and “When does news become propaganda?” Many of Q’s “when” questions are not asking for a specific date—they are asking for the presence of a feeling or a sensation to inspire action. For example, a series of questions about churches illustrates this thinking pattern: in response to a situation wherein the Pope refused a meeting with the US Secretary of State because of a conflict of opinions regarding the Catholic church’s operations in

China—Q first linked screenshots and quotes from a *New York Times* article detailing this conflict—he asks: “When does a Church become a playground?/When does a Church become a business?/When does a Church become political?/When does a Church become corrupt?/When does a Church become willfully blind?/When does a Church become controlled?” (drop 4799). The only “tangible,” timely response to this series of questions could be “now;” these when questions inspire readers to track down supposed issues of misconduct within the Catholic church, building a narrative rather than a timeline.

Some “when” questions, though, do ask readers to think along a sense of time, always for the purpose of causing the reader to assume patterns or coincidences that can be proven through evidence of timeliness, rather than simple coincidence. This can be seen in thinking about how one might answer a series of questions Q poses in drop 4592 regarding Democratic leaders:

When was the last time you witnessed a **[D]** party leader 'speak out against' the riots **[violence in the streets]?/[MSDNC projecting 'peaceful' protests?]** /When was the last time you witnessed a **[D]** party leader support those who took at oath to protect and defend? /When was the last time you witnessed a **[D]** party leader support and call for UNITY across our Nation?

Clearly, a specific date and time cannot answer these questions—but one could imagine a reader thinking back to various times in American history where they possibly aligned with a Democratic leader; asking these questions does allow a reader to genuinely think back and attempt to track changes to the Democratic party based on their own perception; or, an acceptable response could be “never, they have always been corrupt.” All possible answers, even though variances are present, lead the readers to believe that at this point in time, the Democratic party would not call for unity.

“Did,” “how many,” and “where” questions were also included in this category, causing a similar effect of simultaneously being “answerable” but also abstract. The community around Q drops makes the act of coming to these solutions more possible. As a reader of these questions, there are generally multiple ways to respond—you could use your own prowess to search the internet to solve the answers in isolation, or, you could look to your fellow Anons who are also taking part in providing their own responses. Likely, this second method is more attractive because of the sense of community and identification such an act offers. Thus, the effect of dialogue within Q’s drops is twofold—between Q and his readers there is an inherent sense of dialogue at play because of the question/answer format of the exchange, but answering the questions also inspires a communal act, of checking one’s own suspicions against other readers, building a multi-faceted narrative.

#### ***4.2.4 Playful and Incredulous***

Part of the community Q builds within his messaging boards stems from the candid tone he takes with his readers, and his “playful” questions contribute to this sense, along with facilitating an environment of inquiry. The “playful” tag, assigned to the smallest collection of drops, marks questions that were stage-setting to a large extent, and could even be considered “taunting.” Q poses questions like, “Do Anons understand what is about to be unleashed?” (drop 4450) and he asks “Do you see what is happening” ten times. “Do you think it’s a coincidence they banned and prevented you from attending Church\_house of worship?” (drop 4550). Q asks “Do you see a pattern” five times, and “Do you see what is happening/happened” a total of eight times.

In addition to asking Anons if they “understand what is about to be unleashed,” Q asks “do” questions about other people. On one hand, he says things like “Do these people care about

your well-being?” (drop 4294) in order to offset politicians as apart from Anons, but he also asks questions about people who are not politicians, but who are also not a part of QAnon; in one telling case, he asks: “Do people [human psyche] tend to follow the ‘majority/mainstream viewpoint’ in fear of being isolated and/or shunned?” (drop 3858). Another time, Q asks, “Do people actually believe those responsible for the attempted coup [coup attempt] of a duly elected sitting US President will go unpunished?” (drop 3651). These questions initiate a clear “us versus them” dynamic. In these assertions posing as questions, Q suggests that his “enemies” are not able to think clearly, or to see the patterns that are, apparently, so obvious to him and his followers. In doing this, he positions his readers as critical thinkers, suggesting that those who do not see supposed intentions behind closing public gathering places during a global pandemic are the ones who are not actually thinking through the implications of the pandemic. Other “playful questions” in the same vein read “Have you not been following?” or “Memes ready?” and “Awake yet?” The words “teasing” or “provocative” could also be used to describe the quality of these questions, but overall, there is little opportunity for acts of answering when considering these questions—they are meant to inspire ridicule.

### 4.3 Who is Q?

*Sometimes you can't TELL the public the truth. YOU MUST SHOW THEM.*”

-Q

While most agree “Q” is one singular author, his rhetoric embodies a mythic tint that allows him to transcend the need to identify himself; his ethos is bolstered by his anonymity.

<sup>7</sup>More than likely, Q is an ordinary American citizen, not a special government agent, but

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<sup>7</sup> Likely, the “Q’s” voice was started by one person but eventually switched to someone else. Detailed reports of this authorial shift appear in this article.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/technology/qanon-messages-authors.html>



regardless, Q has gained notoriety—both in the form of a cult-like following and also as a source of derision and fear. If the author of these drops truly had access to “Q-level clearance” government secrets, one would expect that more of Q’s predictions would have been fulfilled. Thus, it is unlikely that Anons now, especially in 2023, believe that Q is anyone more than a person with an account on a messaging board.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that Q followers still believe that Q works as a top-secret government agent, not just because his predictions fail to come to fruition, but also because Ron Watkins has almost admitted that he is Q. Ron Watkins’s father is Jim Watkins, a shady individual who owns 8chan and 4chan; in the documentary *Into the Storm*, Ron toggles between claiming to know nothing about Q, to admitting to knowledge of very specific pieces of information regarding Q’s narratives. Most damning, at the end of the documentary, Ron nervously laughs while explaining to the director that he is “Not Q!” It is almost a “wink and nod” gesture, though; Ron seems emboldened by Q’s popularity, suggesting a hint of regret at not being able to take credit for how widely influential Q’s writing has become. Q’s reemergence further suggests that Ron Watkins is behind Q, and technical scholars suggest that it would be impossible to return to the messaging board after years of absence if Watkins was not the owner of the board (Thompson). It is also worth noting that Q’s re-emergence in 2021 occurred as Ron Watkins ran for public office in Arizona. Yet, like Homer—or even Shakespeare—Q’s canon, his corpus, has been determined by readers who are unflinching in their devotion; Q followers are more interested in interrogating the false flags, and unmasking Q has become a burden for unbelievers.

Oddly enough, Q eerily predicted an accurate narrative of demise, though his prediction suggested that Trump would win the election and Democrats would protest, not the opposite, which is what actually occurred. In September 2020, Q made drop 4722:

Add it all up.

1. Virus
2. Riots [organized \_ANTIFA]
3. Fires

The 'Why':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUxIJznKyY>

Make no mistake, they will not concede on Election Night.

Make no mistake, they will contest this legally in battleground states.

Make no mistake, they will project doubt in the election results

Make no mistake, they will organize massive riots and attempt Anarchy-99 design

Playbook known.

Q

The YouTube link leads to a clip from the Tucker Carlson show, wherein Carlson suggests that Democrats are working on a “Plot to Oust Trump.” The “they” in question in the Q drop refers to Democratic politicians. In fact, the opposite occurred; as is well known, after President Biden's election, Trump refused to concede, contested the election in multiple states, and continues as of 2023 to project doubt in the election results. The January 6th attack on the capital undoubtedly constituted a “massive riot.” After this embarrassing set of failed predictions, it is no wonder that Q decided to recuse himself from internet sleuthing for a period of time. It does seem, too, that Q’s return in 2022 and 2023 comes without much momentum. Occasional news stories still

appear with Q followers involved, and there may be cause for concern if some of these believers continue to run for public office (Reilly et al).

Scholars disagree when it comes to the impact Q has on American lives and thinking patterns. For example, in June of 2022, I attended a virtual lecture by the ISPCR Summer Program that featured conspiracy theory scholar, Joseph Uscinski, who went as far as to suggest that neither conspiratorial thinking nor QAnon narratives are on the rise.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Uscinski's survey data indicates that QAnon has as many followers on the "right" as "the left" sides of the political spectrum (Enders).

Though Uscinski continues to provide important insight on the role of conspiracy theories in culture, and though he rightly points out that personality traits might be more indicative of conspiratorial thinking than party affiliations, what Uscinski misses in his survey data is that a believer in QAnon myths may not identify with the phrase "QAnon" itself—indeed, 76% of his respondents indicated that "heard nothing at all about QAnon" in 2020. It is perhaps also worth noting that the insurrection at the capitol had not yet occurred when this survey took place. Additionally, 3% of Uscinski's respondents indicated that they "heard or read a lot" about QAnon. Uscinski provides this data with a qualifier—that "only" 3% of respondents read a lot about QAnon—which adds up to 10 million people. A further 20% of his respondents indicated that they have heard or read "a little" about QAnon, which is not a small percentage. In the same lecturer, Uscinski indicated, with data he considered alarming—that 25% of people surveyed believe Disney "grooms children into sexual lifestyles," and that 25% of surveyed participants believe "preschools and public schools secretly engage in Satanic practices." In 2019, Q shared an article that has since been taken down. The headline indicated that Disney Vice President

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<sup>8</sup> Uscinski discusses this theory more here.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/18/qanon-america-conspiracy-theory>

Michael Laney was in prison for sex abuse. Q leaves one comment– “nothing!” in response to this headline (drop 3499). He posts another cryptic drop about Michael Iger stepping down as CEO–Q says, “The Silent War Continues’ (drop 3883). Though Disney–or even public schools–are not a major tenet of Q’s narratives these stories exist here as well, and cannot be perfectly untangled from the movement.

What Uscinski’s data might actually tell us is that even if readers are not coming across Q drops themselves, the community and narrative that these drops initiate has spread beyond the “literature” within 4chan and 8chan. The mythos Q perpetuated is catching on. It has proven difficult to discuss the role of QAnon as an influencer of American politics because it is difficult to track down the origin beliefs; put another way, one might become an “Anon” of sorts without ever having directly encountered a Q drop. For example, while some of the January 6th insurrectionists quickly aligned themselves with Q, others may be ignorant as to the origins of the narratives they were willing to, quite literally, fight for. Social media shares can dilute the origin of arguments as there are often meme-generating software built into the platforms Q posts to, making it nearly impossible to trace how many memes are generated and shared. A “chicken or the egg” type of dilemma emerges in terms of determining just how influential these drops are, but, regardless of whether QAnon designs narratives from scratch, or whether he capitalizes on ideas already part of the cultural zeitgeist, it remains without question that his influence as an anonymous, internet cult leader without a face is unprecedented.

Regardless of whether one believes conspiracy theories are a menace or a tool for democracy, conspiracy theories are powerful and, as made evident in the 21st century, can spread wildly on the internet and influence public perception and action. They also show us what people want: the ability to socially construct a worldview that “logically” makes sense, the

chance to interpret, the invitation to conduct research to find answers, and narratives that point directly to villains. Determining exactly who “Q” is, and who is reading Q, is important work, but we can also consider how Q and his readers are emblematic of certain kinds of discourse communities more broadly. To be more specific, Q takes on the persona of a “teacher,” as one who leads his “students” to collectively determined “truths,” and who motivates them towards actions against perceived injustices. Answering the question “Who is Q?” from an abstract point of view can lead us to determine that anyone in a position to effect someone’s understanding of reality has the potential to become a Q-like figure. Without a doubt, the motivations behind the real “Q” and those like him who are in similar positions of authority are wildly dissimilar—yet, we might consider how our own pedagogical tools, especially ones that ask questions of students, have the potential to limit authentic dialectical inquiry much in the way that Q drops do. The following chapter of this study concludes by thinking of these parallels in Q’s “pedagogy” and our own, making specific suggestions for how educators might avoid “sounding like Q” when working with students.

## 5 CONCLUSION: RE-THINKING ACTS OF QUESTIONING IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

*“Expand your thinking” -Q*

*“Keeping an open mind is an essential requirement of critical thinking.” -bell hooks*

Q purposefully hides his arguments behind rhetorical questions, but the act of questioning has a legitimate role in knowledge creation. This study, which provides a context for how “loaded questions” are provocative in that they create a sensation of discovery, informs scholars of rhetorical studies of new ways to consider how collective acts of imaginative answering create shared realities—for good or for bad. This understanding informs not only the way we choose to discuss these shared realities, calling into question how willing we are to acknowledge the complexity and effort required to build a conspiracy theory, but can inspire us to interrogate the way questions function as a pedagogical tool to support students’ inquiry.

Student-generated research questions can actually lead to conspiratorial conversations. As an example, at the end of the Spring 2022 semester, I assigned my composition students a traditional research project consisting of writing a proposal and research questions, along with gathering academic sources for consideration. Students were allowed to choose any topic for research, and as we were work-shopping their topic proposals in class, I ran across a curious pattern. In one instance, a student asked to investigate the death of Princess Diana. Their research questions follow: “1) Who was Princess Diana truly? 2) What was the initial report of the Princess’ death? 3) Who were some of her enemies? 4) Why are there speculations about her death? 5) What happened if her death was not an accident and who is at fault?” In a second proposal, a student wanted to prove, or disprove, the existence of extraterrestrial life. Their

questions follow: “1. How can we tell if the people telling these stories [about UFOs] are telling the truth? 2. Is it possible that UFOs are just naturally blurry? 3. Have aliens ever visited earth? 4. When and where will we find extraterrestrial life? 5. Are aliens believed to be dangerous?”

Another proposal sought to determine if the Megalodon is real. As a class, we discussed strategies for narrowing the focus and reshaping these research proposals, but another student interrupted the conversation to announce: “I don’t know if some of these topics are going to work; they’re just conspiracy theories.”

Indeed, when I asked my students to research a topic of their choosing, a number of them gravitated towards the conspiratorial: they looked to reveal cover-ups of the existence of mythical creatures or to solve a decades-long and complex “murder mystery.” Students may not always realize the implications of the questions they ask. In other words, there may be a fine line between a “conspiratorial” thinker and “critical” thinker—there are limits to skepticism. Malcolm Gladwell addresses the characteristic of “questioning everything” in *Talking to Strangers*, claiming that most of us do not question everything: we “default to truth” in daily life to quickly get through day-to-day encounters. Yet “Holy Fools,” to Gladwell, are so paranoid in their questioning that they can no longer trust any person’s actions. Gladwell says that “Holy Fools perform a valuable role...[but] we can’t all be Holy Fools. That would be a disaster” (100).

In the same way that this study makes an effort to identify with believers of conspiracy theories, so too do I as an instructor seek to identify with students of composition—the questions they pose, while far-reaching, still represent genuine inquiry. As one further example, in April of 2021, made an announcement in class that I would need to move our next meeting online since I would be travelling to Alabama to get my first dosage of the Covid-19 vaccine. The politicization of vaccines was at an all-time high, but I saw my classroom as a safe space to

model my choice to take part in what has been collectively agreed upon by experts as good behavior. A well-meaning student spoke up: “I don’t know if you should do it, Professor Harte!” I was nervous to engage in a conversation that was sure to become politically charged—particularly as a non-tenured faculty member—I was also eager to see how my student would support his claim. When I asked him why I should avoid the vaccine, he said: “I saw that you will become paralyzed on whichever side of your body you get the vaccine.”

With the benefit of hindsight, I can imagine this scenario playing out in my student’s mind—I can imagine the courage it took for him to say these words to his professor in front of his peers; I can imagine, too, that this student really believed what he said, that he would not risk speaking up if there was not legitimate concern for the health and safety of his professor. Further, this student was asking this question in a class where, to some extent, I had been encouraging them all semester to question established truths and ideas. It is not surprising at all, then, that this student felt he was doing good work, to question the efficacy of a vaccine which, to him, was new and frightening. In real time, I am not sure that I responded perfectly in this situation—I remember making a quick joke about “researching” on “YouTube;” I did not sit with this student’s question, because I was not sure how to. Looking back, I realize that this moment was an opportunity for dialogue—that this student trusted me and his classmates to address something he legitimately feared.

To some extent, we walk a fine line between teaching dialectic—open-end discourse—versus deliberately pointing students away from narratives that are not only untrue, but are dangerous. We face a “wicked problem,” a term scholars use to define social issues that cannot be quickly solved, that conventional methods, such as “legislation, regulation, money, power, and technology,” cannot immediately reduce (Yankelovich 9). Despite the significant challenges



to be faced, both within and outside the classroom, solutions can be developed for “wicked problems.” For example, *In Creating Wicked Students: Designing Courses for a Complex World*, Paul Hanstedt argues that instructors should ask students to confront wicked problems, not shy away from them. He says students need “wicked competencies” to address these issues, focusing less on “content and skills” and more on authentic consideration of how to make the world a “better place” through problem solving. Inspired by Hanstedt’s optimistic view on confronting wicked problems in the classroom, this chapter makes suggestions regarding how we might more authentically discuss acts of questioning and listening with students, acknowledging the power and influence behind these processes.

## 5.1 Questions in Composition Studies

Not only do students design questions for themselves to pursue, and thereby direct or even limit their own efforts at inquiry, the questions we provide for students to consider can also be deterministic. In the context of First-Year Writing, a course sequence which scholars of Rhetoric deeply influence, we ask students to design research questions, we ask questions on prompts, and class discussions are built around questions—either ones instructors pose or ones that students generate about course materials. It is useful to think about how a pedagogy in writing and thinking that is focused on dialectic can become a sort of training ground or preventative measure for students likely to confront conspiracy theories in real time—especially since no one is immune to conspiracy-theorizing. This chapter asks scholars of composition studies to reconsider how we teach and model acts of questioning, recognizing that if we, instructors, are the ones asking the questions, we are determining the conversations. It is important to consider how the ways we question students, specifically when we prompt them to write, can determine the scope of their ability to think critically and authentically. Furthermore,

facilitating acts of questions and listening inspires dialectical inquiry and moves students away from conspiracy theories and into understanding one another's stories.

Q prefers the term “logical” thinking to “critical” thinking; but his discourse proves effective in part because he claims to inspire the same kinds of tools offered in composition studies—namely those dealing with thinking, research, and the power of individual interpretation. Without question, First-Year Writing courses are often thought to bolster critical thinking along with writing skills. At Georgia State University, for example, the composition sequence is described as follows: “We seek to develop students’ critical thinking, reading and writing skills through engaging them in meaningful analysis of literary, cultural and other readings, understanding the social and discourse communities that shape writing, and writing as responsible, purposeful social action.” Similarly, in a renowned text for first-year writing, *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* edited by Gregory Tate et al, the term “critical thinking” is mentioned in half of the chapters in the anthology, despite the fact that each chapter poses a different theoretical approach to the discipline. In the introduction to the collection, the editors define critical thinking in composition as follows:

While many fields convey their subject matter first before asking students to generate new knowledge, composition classes typically aim for young scholars to create new understandings for themselves by practicing writing and critical thinking...as complex modes of making sense of the world and communicating that sense to others (17).

This “sense-making” mechanism of critical thinking, then is intimately connected to the field of First-Year Writing. While the approaches to composition studies are multi-faceted, with seventeen options for building a composition class--ranging from Research Writing to Genre

writing—represented in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies* alone, what becomes an overarching element in nearly any composition course is its focus on “critical thinking.” What careful study of QAnon reveals is that Q capitalizes on the human urge to complete the tasks outlined by GSU—and countless other—First-Year Writing departments and programs—to think in a way that produces a sense of meaning about the world. Q also depends on his arguments taking off because of the belief in nefarious intentions of the “other.” Scholars of rhetoric—especially those who are teaching first-year college students—might consider how we can more intentionally foster open-ended, dialectical inquiry and exchange through our teaching, to directly oppose narratives that create villains. Current articulations of “critical thinking” and “research questions” in our field will help to ground this work.

Furthermore, even within contexts of discussing critical thinking, scholars before me have made efforts to move students away from argumentative, one-sided writing, suggesting that approaches to rhetorical listening, rhetorical empathy, and reading are strategies that better equip students to identify with others. This work of truly identifying requires a more nuanced definition of critical thinking. More precisely: teaching students to ask the right kinds of questions is useless if we do not also teach listening to others as a response; I invite scholars to consider how listening is a critical component of a legitimate dialectical exchange. In other words, what is missing from current definitions of critical thinking in composition studies is attention to acts of listening as a response to the cultivation of new and communally constructed ideas. If we teach students to ask open-ended questions, and also how to listen as a response, we begin to move our instruction towards a dialectic-inspired pedagogy that provides a kind of safety net for students who will come up against harmful ideas outside of our classrooms.

I am not the first to call for renewed attention to dialectic in composition studies. In a contribution to *First-Year Composition: From Theory to Practice*, Victor Villanueva proposes a curriculum for first-year composition based on “the love of language” (259). One of the tenants of this pedagogical approach is the idea that “the dialectical process is basic to academic discourse and thereby basic to a first-year writing course” (268). Villanueva discusses the challenges he has faced in his 30-year career in teaching writing, especially when it comes to his “intrinsic need to have students discuss racism in the classroom” (258). Yet what Villanueva discovered, his “themes” in first-year writing, those specifically related to issues of race, “didn’t work” (263). Rather, when shifting the theme of his courses to “language,” Villanueva found that it “provided a way into those themes for which we have real expertise” (265). To do this work, though, Villanueva presses teachers of composition to reject Aristotelian dialectic, wherein the “aim is to win;” instead, Villanueva encourages a dialogue that “question[s] the familiar” (261). For the purposes of this project, though, Villanueva’s insight ought to affect the spirit behind the discussions we choose to hold in composition—and even more, in our efforts to inspire dialogue about difference, or racism, as Villanueva says, we must press students towards questions and discussion about the larger role of language and how the way that we describe others shapes our reality and our understandings of both them and ourselves.

As Villanueva suggests, a course themed on “race” did not prepare his students to discuss the multi-layered issues surrounding the topic. Something similar could occur in composition classes based on “QAnon” or “Conspiracy Theories.” Theming the class on “Language” though, did not prevent the students from discussing race, but rather, gave them a new framework from which to participate in the discussion. While Villanueva suggests “Language” themed classes helped propel his students to this important work, so too could acts of “Questions” help to

motivate students to realize how the kinds of questions they encounter matter best be addressed through acts of listening to what others have to say. The kinds of questions we ask students, and the kinds of questions we teach students to ask themselves, can cultivate more genuine inquiry.

Though she does not expressly offer a curriculum based in dialectic, Lisa Blankenship calls more specifically for rhetorical empathy in *Changing the Subject*; I extend Blankenship's argument that rhetorical empathy might be a product of close listening that occurs through dialectical exchange. Blankenship recommends employing rhetorical empathy with composition students by having them value their own stories and the stories of others—the antithesis of conspiracy-theorizing, and she describes specific strategies for listening and empathy in the context of conversations regarding LGBTQ+ communities and religion, and issues of labor and race. Blankenship defines rhetorical empathy as “a conscious choice to connect with the other” (4). This act is one wholly distinct from conspiracy theorizing; if rhetorical empathy is an effort to “diminish the self,” to listen to and even embody (through what Blankenship calls “deep acting”) the opinions of the “other,” to create a conspiracy theory is to create a narrative of the other through one's own individualized sense of reality. While I have criticized scholars like Uscinski for being uncritical of conspiracy theorists, Blankenship challenges us to do this exact same work, but with a difference.

Blankenship says that her approach to rhetoric is “different from one that listens to others in order to make a point and to change them. It goes beyond audience analysis and considering our audience and instead as that we become vulnerable enough to consider our own motives, our blind spots, and our prejudice” (10-11). Rhetorical empathy, then, teaches the listener something about themselves and the “Other;” Blankenship refers to Burke explicitly when discussing this experience, suggesting that “[o]ur lack of understanding the motives of the Other often fuels our

decision not to identify, let alone empathize” (93). This description of identifying for the purpose of grasping motive is quite distinct from a notion that “all ideas” deserve attention. Blankenship's efforts at giving a voice to others is not for the purpose, necessarily, of determining whether or not they may be “onto something” with their ideological stance; rhetorical listening is a way not of validating harmful ideas, but instead, the person and their stories, wherein those ideas originated.

## **5.2 Considering Prompts: Against Argumentative Writing**

When discussing composition theory, Blankenship provides a tangible example for encouraging rhetorical empathy in composition classrooms. She suggests “bringing the self” to the front of the course, going on to say, “one of the most important contributions rhetorical empathy adds to composition theory is an emphasis on students as real people with stories and motivations behind their responses in class” (115). She recommends designing “narrative argument” essays, which purposefully combine the “personal and political,” rejecting traditional argumentative essay assignments, and she is not alone in the call for revising the traditional argumentative essay. In *A New Writing Classroom: Listening, Motivation, and Habits of Mind*, Patrick Sullivan delivers a pedagogical approach centered on the “reflective essay.” Published in 2014, this book largely disparages traditional approaches to writing assignments that privilege structure and argumentation. Sullivan goes as far as to say that argumentative writing “traps” students into focusing on the “closure” and “certainty” of an argument.

Rather than crafting writing assignments that point towards closed, firmly articulated argumentative positions, Sullivan calls for teachers to expressly expose students to “complex kinds of questions that cannot be comfortably encountered or easily resolved” (3). In other words, and though not explicitly stated here, Sullivan is attempting to move conversations in

composition studies away from argument, and toward dialectic. Sullivan points out the research that suggests argumentative writing takes up a large portion of instruction in both K-12 and first-year writing settings, despite the many calls from scholars of rhetoric and composition to reconsider its place within the curriculum. Sullivan points out that the essay questions on both the SAT and ACT “require students to stake out ‘positions’ or a ‘point of view’ and then develop an argument without recourse to any kind of reading, data, or listening” (18). Sullivan later positions his argument even more firmly:

This kind of simple argument-driven assignment (which is often very different from the kind of argument that develops in classes where the focus is on rhetorical strategies or classical argumentation) requires students to cultivate an artificial sense of authority and “mastery” concerning subjects they typically know very little about. For example, how can a student who has been assigned to read two short essays about economic inequality, gender roles, or popular culture write with any kind of authority about any of these subjects? (57).

While Sullivan goes on to call for more attention to writing that occurs as a product of reading, he first articulates the kinds of questions he poses for students of composition in his efforts to encourage reflective writing and reading practices, questions like: What does it mean to “know” a subject? What can I say that I know for sure about the subject I am writing about now? What are the limits of my knowledge and understanding of this subject?” I find this modeling of open-ended questions to be imperative in discussions of writing with students.

Though Blankenship and Sullivan offer alternatives to Argumentative writing, Sullivan’s sample essay prompt asks many leading questions; the presence of questions does not inherently

guarantee the presence of dialectical inquiry. In a sample essay prompt, Sullivan provides the following list of questions for students to consider:

Do some popular television shows present a “simple view of the world,” as Hoffman suggests? If so, in what ways are they “simple”? What would be a more accurate view of the world? Who are the “good citizens” that Hoffman talks about “who were only too ready to set their standards for women and children, factoring out poverty or exhaustion or simply a different set of beliefs”? Why should we care if they set the standards or “factor out poverty or exhaustion or simply a different set of beliefs”? What would a “different set of beliefs” look like? Hoffman says at one point, “This may be the only thing we need to know about love.” What is this thing we need to know about love? Is she right? Why is the young boy in “Us and Them” so fascinated by the Tomkey family? What causes conflict in this story? What do Hetherington and Kelly have to tell us about marriage, divorce, and family? Is there anything that you found personally meaningful in this group of readings?

There are ten questions “to consider” in this 1250-word essay prompt; while the prompt also encourages students to “generate their own questions” for these readings, there is no built-in support for the act of questioning, and the overwhelming number of questions that already exist in this prompt do not suggest, to the student, that there are more questions even possible to consider. Further, the questions, perhaps innocently, are leading. Only two questions, “What causes conflict in this story” and “is there anything you found personally meaningful” are truly open-ended. Eerily, this “gish-galloping” essay prompt parallels acts of questioning initiated by Q. These heavily-loaded question prompts create a narrative for which students might be tempted to simply “fill in the gaps” with evidence, much like the false dialectic between Q and Anons.



The risks behind these kinds of questions in writing prompts are apparent when considering that often, the topics within a composition course can very often point to “wicked problems.” We chance a simplification of complex societal issues if students feel as if simple “answers” can be readily supplied. Recent developments in studies of writing prompts for First-Year Writing show that the act of questioning is perhaps the most common strategy in prompt-writing. Dawn Formo and Kimberly Robinson Neary, in a study of seventy-five writing prompts, found that 93% of the prompts used a series of questions to direct writing, whereas, by contrast, only 57% listed a series of tasks to complete, and even fewer, only 55%, mentioned the audience for the task. These scholars make suggestions to move towards more transparent assignment prompts that address threshold concepts in writing studies, indicating specific concerns about the quantity of questions they found in their study, saying: “We wondered how the assignment sheet had been contextualized in class, given the sheer number and scope of questions it asked.”

We ought to consider what would happen if we allow students to design questions for inquiry—questions of the texts they read, and questions for one another. When we ask students to write their own questions, we allow them to “prompt themselves,” bringing awareness to how questions are formed, and being careful that we, as instructors of writing, do not ask leading questions in our efforts to prompt writing. These types of prompts which are heavily loaded with questions are not uncommon. As instructors, we recognize that writing prompts directly bridge a teacher’s instruction and student’s product. I question the effectiveness of writing prompts which already pose questions, explicitly pointing students towards possible interpretations.

For all writing tasks, it is my hope that students will investigate their own intellectual interests, not mine. Thus, though analytical questions promote direction, they can also read like a checklist for students—I am sure many instructors of writing can recall receiving essay from

students in response to the kind of essay prompt Sullivan presents; very often, students are tempted to “answer” all the questions we ask of them in these situations, and are unable to see the difference between open-ended, generative questions and exam (or, SAT/ACT) questions. Thus, while the spirit of Sullivan’s pedagogy very closely aligns with my own intentions in teaching composition, question-driven prompting in writing instruction can limit a student’s potential to discover how to invent methods of inquiry for themselves.

Students need guidance when reading and writing, though, and Sullivan’s intention, like mine, is to ensure that students recognize that reading is more than “data mining.” We must simultaneously have students look to texts for “answers,” while also guiding them to listen to the stories—not just the ones assigned in our classes, but those that exist outside of themselves. Rather than prompting students with questions that may end up being “loaded” despite our even our very best efforts, I suggest we guide students to inquiry. To prepare students to “prompt themselves,” I now facilitate an assignment that provokes a traditional dialectical exchange between students, one which I employ in my courses on composition and literature at regular intervals throughout the semester. I have titled this worksheet “Answer Swap.”<sup>9</sup> After students have completed a shared, assigned reading, I ask everyone in class to locate a passage in the reading, and design an “analytical question” about it.

First, the act of close reading and questioning allows a student to closely “listen” to the text at hand. From there, I ask them to “swap” their worksheet with someone else in the class, and to answer a question written by someone else. After creating both questions and answers, students get together to discuss their ideas with the classmate they were paired with. This kind of activity drives attention towards a kind of dialectical exchange, asking students to think about

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix A.

how to ask good questions on one hand, but also encouraging acts of listening to responses. This assignment can be replicated in online discussion boards as well, and is a simple way to encourage legitimate participation and dialogue in classes of all sizes. Much like Peter Elbow's "Believing Game," a task where students attempt to embody the belief of an opinion different from their own to see the "other side," my "Answer Swap" activity is one that can be applied to any text, controversy, or conversation that occurs in a course. It functions as all-around good pedagogy, too, to support learners of all varieties—asking students to respond to one another in writing, first, before discussing, prepares even the quietest of students to gather their thoughts before sharing.

These kinds of assignments, where students design questions, prepares them to see the value—and challenges—of inquiry. Too, this work empowers students to authentically explore a variety of topics available within any kind of text. These processes are not easy—students will write "bad" questions, or "leading" questions, and they will learn how those questions can often box-in their writing, proving "points" rather than illuminating tensions. The move away from argumentative rhetoric of certainty, of defending a single idea, purposefully looks more like the "Burkean Parlor," and requires students to realize the complexity of themselves and those around them.

### **5.3 Challenges in Higher Education**

One might think that my study's most obvious recommendation to composition studies would be a discussion of how to confront QAnon or conspiracy theories in First-Year Writing; instead, I have chosen to explicitly depart from this strategy, and to, less directly, talk about cultivating dialectical inquiry as a training ground for challenging harmful ideas for a few important reasons: 1) We need more studies in our field regarding the role of conspiracy theories

in culture before we are prepared to take this to the classroom. We have an alarming gap in our scholarship regarding this subject; taking a rhetorical view, that more deliberately identifies with this phenomenon, could help the field prepare to think about approaching these topics with young students; 2) What we do know, from Blankenship is that rhetorical empathy helps to build bridges across distance—distances of all kinds. What we also know about conspiracy theories is they are an effort to participate in a discourse community while simultaneously distancing the self from “villains.” I seek to initiate the conversation regarding how we might use these tools already in place in our field to address conspiracy theories more directly; 3) Talking about QAnon in a composition classroom can put the instructor at risk. There exist many “culture wars” regarding topics Q discusses—deliberately bringing these realities to first-year students not only puts the instructor at risk of retaliation, but it also positions them to be accused of acts of “liberal brain-washing.”

Rather than end this study with a call to discuss QAnon in First-Year Writing, I extend an even larger call to articulate how our discipline in particular is prepared to handle these very crises of conflict. Higher Education, the Humanities, and First-Year Writing programs are at risk due to state-wide budget cuts and lack of enrollment. Students are choosing to forgo college for various reasons, one of which has to do with the sense that colleges inflate “liberal” ideologies—the image of the ivory tower will forever dampen the important work being accomplished in our discipline and others. The stigma is bolstered by traditions of obfuscating our work with academic jargon, or even worse, hiding it behind paywalls, creating tangible distance between “us” and “them.” We might consider being more strategic in our efforts to make college education accessible and meaningful. What is at stake in maintaining distance from conspiracy theories and their believers is the certain fact that without re-shaping and making accessible our

very purpose in Higher Education, we risk becoming the “villains” on which these narratives depend.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix A: Swap for Answers Worksheet

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Purpose: For this assignment, you will get to 1) work with a partner in dialogue, 2) practice choosing good details from a text and asking questions about them, and 3) get to practice answering theoretical questions and, therefore, making analytical points.

Task: Choose a passage from the reading this week. Ask an open-ended, analytical question about the detail you noticed. Swap pages with a classmate and provide a response to their question, not your own.

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**Student 1:**

Passage:

Question:

**Student 2:**

Answers:

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