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Grievance Tales On the Affective Resonance of “Crazy” Beliefs

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Why do people believe the unbelievable? More precisely, why do some people endorse beliefs that “rational” people see as empirically false, contrary to reason, or—in today’s dismissive jargon—“crazy” or “unhinged”? This question, a perennial fascination for epistemologists, has assumed celebrity recently as conspiracism has morphed from a coterie delusion into an explanation for everything from school shootings to California wildfires. Academics have produced thoughtful studies of this trend, yet in popular usage “conspiracy theorist” remains a kneejerk slur, trotted out by pundits to ridicule any reading of events at variance with their own. The label serves the same function that “Red” and “outside agitator” served in the 1950s: it stigmatizes the labelled person as intellectually beneath contempt.

In this chapter I argue that the easy dismissal of conspiratorial or other unconventional views as bad or mad inhibits the communication on which rationality thrives and ensures that a belief in the unbelievable will remain incomprehensible. This is not to endorse a lazy relativism; I do not suppose that all opinions are equally worthy of respect or that there is such an animal as Kellyanne Conway’s alternative facts. But if we want to understand why “outlandish” ideas have champions, we must consider their emotional logic before condemning them for affronting a putative rationalism. To understand such beliefs, we would do well to remember Blaise Pascal’s humbling observation: *Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connait point*.

The folklorist's perspective

I make this observation not as a philosopher but as a folklorist. The discipline of folklore, defined today as the study of expressive culture, encompasses multiple interests, including folktales and legends (the field's original foci), song, food, family history, material culture, folk belief, and oral traditions such as proverbs, jokes, and stories. But whichever items of lore engage folklorists' attention, we try to approach them with empathy rather than judgment. We are respectful of facts and wary of misinformation, but few of us are intent on debunking "popular delusions" (Mackay 1852); we aim rather to understand why a group's folkways, including "crazy" beliefs, matter to the people in whose lives they function.

The empathic bias can present challenges, if for example you are a Yankee liberal studying Confederate Civil War reenactors or an agnostic studying Pentecostal snake-handlers. But empathy does not require endorsement. Most folklorists are no more discomfited by being at variance with their informants than a liberal historian might be in studying white supremacy or a pacifist in studying military traditions. As analysts of other people's cultures, we try to get at what anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) called the "native's point of view," to understand the cultural principles that enable people unlike ourselves to make sense of their worlds.

In trying to understand the native's point of view, I am drawn to practices that encode intergroup conflict. My doctoral dissertation explored media stereotyping of Mexicans, and I have given American Folklore Society presentations on the origin of *gringo*, yellow ribbons, and rival memory narratives of the Vietnam War (Tuleja 1995, 1997, 2023). In the mid-2000s, a course that I taught on rumor and urban legend drew my attention to the role of grievance and

fear in such oral narratives. I introduced the term *grievance tale* at the 2012 AFS meeting in New Orleans—an appropriate venue since many of the city’s African American residents were then still convinced that the flooding of their neighborhoods during 2005’s Hurricane Katrina had been the work of government saboteurs.

In this chapter I begin by defining the grievance tale and giving four well-known American examples. I then assess the emotional valence of these stories—their affective resonance—and suggest that the dynamics that generate belief in them may also help to explain belief in the more elaborate conflict narratives we call conspiracy theories. The grievance tale may thus serve as a lens through which to reconsider conspiracism. I argue that a purely rationalist approach to grievance-driven narratives misses the “*raisons du coeur*” that explain their popularity and is thus inadequate as cultural analysis.

The grievance tale defined

By grievance tale, I mean a story about an incident of *historical victimization* which, despite being questioned by scholars, remains an article of belief among the victim’s descendants and their sympathizers. The victimization might range from the lethal to the merely insulting; what is important is that it happened in the past (often long ago) and that it illustrates harm done to the victims by the victimizers. In collective memory, it justifies a formerly abused group’s assumption of an aggrieved identity. Central to the tale’s logic is the identification of a historical adversary whose actions legitimize the sense of grievance.

Several European grievance tales identify as the adversary a member of the ruling class and as victim the common people. Examples include the story that Marie Antoinette, when told that her subjects had no bread, responded, “Let them eat cake”; the picture of Roman emperor

Nero fiddling while Rome burned; the idea that medieval nobles had the right to sleep with their serfs' brides on their wedding night; and the image of J. Bruce Ismay, owner of the *Titanic*, saving himself while women and children drowned. These tales fit the common misunderstanding of folklore as “popular misconceptions.” They also fit the folklorist’s understanding of such stories as emotionally significant. And all of them encode popular resentment at the arrogance of the privileged. So too does the idea that in 2005 government operatives deliberately blew up the levees protecting New Orleans’s black neighborhoods to save the homes of wealthy whites. Political scientists Joseph Uscinski and Joseph Parent identify this last idea as a conspiracy theory (2014: 16), but it might just as easily be called a grievance tale. The label is perhaps less important than the potency of the narrative and the zeal with which its believers embrace it.

With this overview in mind, let me discuss four grievance tales that might be dismissed as “mere folklore” but that are deeply meaningful for those who believe and repeat them.

Jeffery Amherst’s smallpox blankets

The first example comes from the colonial period. In 1763, during the French and Indian War, as the British military was struggling to put down the native American resistance known as Pontiac’s Rebellion, the army at Fort Pitt is said to have given smallpox-infected blankets to their adversaries, hoping that disease would succeed where military force was failing. A progressive historian describes the incident as follows:

Under orders from British General Jeffery Amherst, the commander of Fort Pitts [sic] gave the attacking Indian chiefs, with whom he was negotiating, blankets from the smallpox hospital. It was a pioneering effort at what is now called biological warfare. An epidemic soon spread among the Indians (Zinn 1995: 86).

This account is debatable. Amherst did consider winning the war by infecting his enemies. But that this plan saw fruition is at best speculative. The incident did not become public knowledge until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was mentioned in Francis Parkman's history, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* (1851). Parkman's title, anticipating today's casual use of the term conspiracy, referenced the Ottawa leader's success in forging an alliance against the British and his people's success in concealing their war plans "with the dissimulation of their race" (Parkman 2012: 143). Parkman quotes a letter written by British field commander Henry Bouquet to Amherst, citing "the infernal treachery of the vilest of brutes" and anticipating "adequate revenge" for native American brutality against settlers. Amherst responds by ordering a "take no prisoners" policy. Then, in a second letter to Bouquet, he makes what Parkman calls "the following detestable suggestion": "Could it not be contrived to send the *Small Pox* among those disaffected tribes of Indians? We must on this occasion use every stratagem in our power to reduce them." (2012: 304). Bouquet replies:

I will try to inoculate the bastards with some blankets that may fall in their hands, and take care not to get the disease myself. As it is a pity to expose good men against them, I wish we could make use of the Spanish method, to hunt them with English dogs, supported by rangers and some light horse, who would, I think, effectually extirpate or remove that vermin (cited in Nester 2000: 112).

Amherst replies, "You will do well to try to inoculate the Indians by means of blankets, as well as to try every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race." Amherst rejects the Spanish method because of logistics: "England is at too great a distance to think of that at present" (ibid: 113).

Did Jeffery Amherst engage in biological warfare? The record is unclear. Parkman writes that there is “no direct evidence” that Bouquet put his plan into effect (2012: 305). In a comprehensive review of the evidence, historian Elizabeth Fenn concludes that, while Amherst had no scruples about using germ warfare, the documentary case for him actually practicing it is lacking (2000: 1554-1557). The worst charge that you could raise against him is that he considered—indeed *conspired*—to use smallpox as a weapon.

The degree to which this point matters depends on whether you consider contemplation of violence to be equivalent to violence. Some scholars find the distinction trivial. Native American activist Ward Churchill, relying on the same sources as Zinn, states flatly that Amherst perpetrated “history’s first documented case of biological warfare” (1994: 34) and, worse, since he targeted the entire “execrable” race,” that the “Ohio valley incident” was “indisputedly an instance of genocide pursued through microbes” (1997: 154). Amherst’s action, he writes, belies the “myth” that the “attrition of native people” through European disease was “unintentional and unavoidable” (1994: 35).

Intentional or not, the epidemic was real. Smallpox devastated native settlements in this period, as it did white settlements, including Fort Pitt. Moreover, shortly before Amherst’s exchange with Bouquet, trader William Trent wrote in his journal that he had given native people “two Blankets and an Handkerchief out of the Small Pox Hospital. I hope it will have the desired effect” (cited in d’Errico n.p. and Churchill 1994: 35). After quoting this comment, Churchill remarks laconically, “It did.” He then cites a study that, he says, claims 100,000 native people died in the epidemic (*ibid.*). In fact, the study mentions only 100 victims (Stearn and Stearn 1945: 45); whether Churchill’s inflated figure was hyperbole or honest error is not clear.

In any case, germ warfare—especially by the British—was not a bizarre idea in colonial Massachusetts. It was a constant fear of colonial soldiers during the Revolutionary War (Fenn 2000: 1567-1573), and justification for its use against “savages” could be found in “codes of war that legitimated excesses even as they defined constraints” (ibid: 1574-1580). The blanket tale fits a historical moment when native Americans were routinely described as vermin and when Amherst himself, in a letter to another subordinate, advocated the “Total Extermination of those Indian Nations” (ibid). So, while Amherst may not have been as directly *culpable* of microbe warfare as Churchill claims, that he was *capable* of it—and endorsed it—is beyond question. This grievance tale thus carries a symbolic truth that may speak more eloquently about racism than the historical details.

The death of Bessie Smith

In a second tale, blues singer Bessie Smith dies outside the door of a white hospital because the staff refuses to treat her injuries from an automobile accident. Smith’s biographer notes that rumors to this effect arose shortly after her death on September 26, 1937, but that the story took hold two months later when John Hammond claimed in *Down Beat* magazine that at a white Memphis hospital Smith “was refused treatment because of her color and bled to death while waiting for attention” (cited in Albertson 2000 [1972]: 256). This charge, seized upon by the black press, was retracted when the magazine’s editors learned that Smith had been taken directly to a black hospital in Clarksdale, Mississippi. But this fact “lacked the intrigue of the original rumor, so no one seems to have paid attention” (Albertson 2000: 57).

Subsequent corrections by *Down Beat* also failed to kill the rumor, and it soon became an article of liberal faith. In 1941 W.H. Brandon, the doctor who treated the dying singer at

Clarksdale, told folklorist John Lomax that she had been brought there directly “in a colored ambulance” and that he might “brand the statement that she was refused treatment as an absolute untruth” (cited *ibid.*: 265-267). Brandon’s statement, lacking the motif of victimization, was soon overshadowed by the lurid fiction. A young Edward Albee, in his 1959 play *The Death of Bessie Smith*, had Smith turned away from *two* white hospitals. A decade later *Esquire* magazine debunked the story (Grimes 1969), but it remains a resilient item of “mere folklore.”

One wrinkle reveals how a grievance tale can carry symbolic if not factual veracity. Hugh Smith (no relation) was a physician who happened upon the accident scene and gave the singer first aid before the ambulance arrived. He told Albertson,

Down in the Deep South cotton country, no colored ambulance driver, or white driver, would even have thought of putting a colored person off in a hospital for white folks. In Clarksdale . . . there were two hospitals—one white and one colored—and they weren’t half a mile apart. I suspect the driver drove just as straight as he could to the colored hospital (cited in Albertson 2000: 262-263).

The salient point is that the true story, even as it exonerates a fictitious hospital, indicts the separate and unequal medical system of which all American hospitals—not just southern ones—were a part. Given that context, the truth of Smith’s death was more disturbing than the fiction. If she was not turned away at a white hospital door, it was only because she had already been barred from approaching that door. Like the story of Amherst’s blankets, the fictional account of Smith’s death makes a point about racism that is “truer than the facts.”

“No Irish Need Apply”

The slogan “No Irish Need Apply,” abbreviated as “NINA,” is said to have appeared routinely on nineteenth-century help wanted signs to inhibit Irish competition in the labor market. You can buy facsimiles of these signs on eBay, where one seller offers an alleged 1915 version as a “bar humor” item. Vernacular memories of such signs identify them as anything but humorous. To many Irish Americans, NINA signs prove that their forebears suffered systematic job discrimination well into the twentieth century.

The prevalence of the signs went unquestioned until 2004, when historian Richard Jensen called it a “myth of victimization.” In a search of nineteenth-century newspapers, he found little evidence that Irish workers were excluded from the labor market and few NINA notices in classified ads—“fewer than two per decade” (2004: 405). NINA ads for women’s work were common enough in the 1850s that the New York *Irish-American* mounted a campaign against “the anti-Irish-servant-maid-crusade” (ibid: 422); but there is no evidence that homeowners preferred someone other than Bridget to do their housework. NINA signs were even rarer. Dismissing the eBay examples as fakes, Jensen states, “There are no contemporary or retrospective accounts of a specific sign at a specific location. No particular business enterprise is named as a culprit. No historian, archivist, or museum curator has ever located one; no photograph or drawing exists” (ibid: 405).

But even though NINA ads and signs were rare according to Jensen, the idea that employers were restricting Irish job prospects was a potent one. It gained strength in the 1860s with the appearance of a song, “No Irish Need Apply,” written by John Poole and popularized by vaudevillian Tony Pastor. It made the point that, a few “black sheep” aside, in America “a dacent man will never write: No Irish need apply.” It thus positioned the Irish as good Americans and the anti-Irish bigot as exceptional. At the same time, it validated the belief in anti-Irish prejudice.

Jensen claimed the song was responsible for *creating*, rather than reflecting, a sense of grievance. In his reading, the NINA “myth” resembled urban legends and the resentment vehicles that psychologist Robert Knapp (1944) identified as “wedge rumors.” It may have functioned, beyond the 1860s, as an index of resentment not at job discrimination but at Irish immigrants’ general sense of being disrespected by earlier arrivals who were socially and financially better established.

In 2015, Jensen was challenged by fourteen-year-old Rebecca Fried, whose own research in online databases found fifty businesses running NINA ads in the nineteenth century. Although fewer than one a year, this was enough to make Fried a hero to those who cherished the Irish memory of oppression. *Daily Beast* writer Ben Collins (2017) applauded Fried for debunking the debunker, and the website Irish Central ran a slide show of NINA notices over a soundtrack of singer Tommy Makem performing the Poole/Pastor song.

Comments inspired by the video revealed the hold that NINA signs still have on Irish American consciousness. Many viewers recalled elderly relatives witnessing the signs, and some debated whether anti-Irish discrimination was equivalent to abuse of African- Americans. One poster, reacting to a defense of Jensen, snapped, “Your Irish bashing is getting a bit feeble and uninspired. Are you calling my father a liar? Too bad he’s not still around; he’d wipe the floor with you” (Irish Central 2021).

A milder embrace of the tale may be seen in a YouTube ad for Tullamore Dew blended whisky. Over a soundtrack of “Danny Boy,” an Irish bartender points to a “bar humor” NINA sign, then delivers a sentimental commentary. “We were all Them once. Now we’re just us...just US. We are all blend.” That the ad recalls abuse that has not touched Irish Americans seriously for decades speaks to the durable emotional anchoring grievance can provide.

The spitting image

At the end of *First Blood*—the first film of the Rambo cycle—Sylvester Stallone’s character John Rambo expresses anguish at being mistreated upon returning from Vietnam. “I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport. Protesting me. Spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap. Who are they to protest me? Huh? Who are they?” The question was rhetorical. By 1982, when the film was released, the image of Vietnam veterans being spit upon had been in circulation for a decade, and everyone knew that the soldiers’ victimizers were antiwar liberals, particularly “hippies.”

The story was largely uncontested until 1998, when sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke called it a fabrication encouraged by the Nixon administration to marginalize dissenters and exploited by the first Bush administration to justify the 1991 invasion of Kuwait. The image evoked a narrative in which blame for the loss of Vietnam shifts away from national leaders and onto domestic scapegoats. It pitted warriors against peaceniks, and Lembcke saw this binary as a myth; he claimed the war had fostered an alliance between peaceniks and antiwar veterans, memory of which the myth had suppressed (Lembcke 1998).

The book sparked fierce debate. Liberal reviewers welcomed the idea that none of their party had ever spit on soldiers. Veterans had a different reaction. In the 2000s, I searched conservative websites for threads about “spitting” and “Vietnam” and found virulent rhetoric condemning Lembcke, the mainstream media, and antiwar veteran John Kerry. Followers of the conservative website Free Republic, convinced that spitting was rife in the Vietnam years, cited first-person accounts and condemned Lembcke in language showing that what counted for them

was the validity of veterans' painful view of the past. A pro-Lembke article published on Veterans Day, for example, elicited these responses:

The author of this article needs a good swift kick in the face....Notice this puke publishes this crap on our birthday! Semper Fi.
He's calling me a liar. I wish he would do it to my face.
Hey buffoon go peddle your crap somewhere else, how dare you add salt to the wound.

The pained language shows that what was at stake was not the historical record but the grievance-born narrative of "maggots" abusing the troops. That troops were *symbolically* spat upon seems beyond debate, and in rejecting an iconic image of that abuse, Lembke seemed to be questioning as well the anti-veteran sentiment it reflected.

As I have explained in greater detail elsewhere (Tuleja 2023), the spitting stories perpetuated the idea that an unholy alliance of protestors and antiwar vets had lost Vietnam. This was of course a conventional, perhaps *the* conventional, story of the returning vet, and it remains today, despite the current infatuation with military heroism, a defining memory narrative of the Vietnam period. However common spitting incidents were during that time, this veterans' grievance tale has proved its durability.

Factors of resilience

Why have these particular grievance tales survived? What makes them memorable and resistant to debunking? Four factors seem to me most salient.

The first is what rumor scholars call the "kernel of truth." For a grievance tale to have staying power, the depiction of the victimizer must be consonant with other known facts about that person. So, while Amherst probably did not literally infect native people with smallpox, he

considered it, and the idea that he might have done so is consistent with his known animosity toward the “execrable race.” NINA signs may have been rare in nineteenth-century America, but anti-Irish sentiment was real enough. Bessie Smith did not die outside a white hospital, but given the reality of Jim Crow, that point may be considered moot. Vietnam veterans may not have been as routinely assaulted as the “spitting image” suggests, but as a symbolic index, the image is plausible.

A second factor is visual. Upon hearing the tales, we think not of the abstractions genocide, job discrimination, segregation, and antimilitarism; but of infected blankets, signs in a window, a woman’s severed arm, and spit on a soldier’s uniform. These visuals illustrate how the “sharpening” of significant details can contribute to the effectiveness of rumor transmission (Rosnow 1980: 581).

The third factor concerns the mode of abuse. In three of these stories (the NINA tales are the exception), mistreatment comes as a violation of bodily integrity. Amherst’s blankets subvert the expectation of comfort and attack the physical shield—the very skin—of the victims’ defenses. Bessie Smith’s body is severed, and the system purportedly designed to make her whole abandons her. The returning soldiers, anticipating welcome, are met instead with a discarded bodily fluid. And in New Orleans in 2005, the fetid water that is meant to be kept from the city overwhelms it. Perhaps one secret to these tales’ potency is that they evoke outrage at “matter out of place,” as Mary Douglas (2006) famously defined dirt. Like the urban legends of New York sewer alligators or Kentucky fried rats, they record “dreadful contaminations” (Brunvand 1981: 75-101) which, like foul odors and bodily excreta, trigger feelings of revulsion or disgust. The feelings may endure because they are anchored viscerally (that is, “in the gut”) and are not amenable to correction by the “higher” faculties. (The misuse of fluids, of course,

also figures in two famous antisemitic conspiracy theories, the Blood Libel legend and the belief that Jews caused the Black Death by poisoning wells.)

However salient these three factors may be, the tales survive ultimately because they anchor a sense of grievance. Evidence that the powerful are malevolent, they are metonyms for a *general* condition of injustice; their value as signifiers makes their value as “facts” relatively insignificant. Indeed, the fact that “experts” debunk them adds to their resonance—just as, to the true believer, the denial of a conspiracy proves that it exists.

As a form of folk belief, the grievance tale has powerful psychosocial value. It enables those who feel victimized—or who sympathize with victims—to channel their pain into a relatable picture that justifies their resentment. Even if the exhibit is dismissed as wrong or hyperbolic, the victim, defending its symbolic truth, can condemn the oppressor as someone likely to act as the story claims. As one student said to folklorist Patricia Turner when told that Church’s Fried Chicken was not a Ku Klux Klan front intent on sterilizing black men, “Well, it’s the kind of thing they would do if they could” (Turner 1993: 57).

Where symbolic truth trumps facts, the expression of grievance can empower collective identity. This is why rumors about intentional contaminations of black people may be seen not as “pathological preoccupations” but as “tools of resistance for many of the folks who share them” (ibid: xvi). Carl Lindahl, assessing the “bombed levee” story, calls such disaster legends “an essential vernacular tool for expressing how the tellers feel about the prevailing social order, and for helping their communities seek explanations that square with their convictions” (2012: 143). In short, grievance narratives function as “strategic devices” that help “to ratify group identity and to create personal identity” (Jackson 1990: 400).

While facts nod to the head, narratives of injustice capture the heart. In this they resemble the invented stories of heroism that would-be warriors relate to folklorists—inventions that Carol Burke, who heard such stories in Iraq and Afghanistan, calls “too appealing to be undone by mere facts” (2020: 187). Their fictional elements do not make them dismissible. Like rumors and other dubious complaint narratives, grievance tales serve to shape self-awareness, shore up community identity, and provide emotional armor against the onslaught of “reason.”

From anxiety to “comfortable victimhood”

Since conspiracy theories, like wedge rumors (Knapp 1944) and urban legends (Brunvand 1981), seem to flourish in periods of social stress and uncertainty, it is a scholarly truism that they reflect believers’ anxiety and sense of powerlessness. Richard Hofstadter’s (1965) “paranoid style,” for example, is seen as reflecting conservatives’ “anxieties arising from their perceived sociocultural decline” (Olmsted 2018: 39), while the “agency panic” of the late twentieth century reveals “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control” (Melley 1980:62). Social psychologists have found that individuals “dispositionally low in perceived control” react to threat by blaming the influence of personal enemies or the “conspiratorial power” of political enemies (Sullivan et al. 2010). Political scientists Uscinski and Parent reflect this consensus when they call conspiracy theories “a manifestation of vulnerability” (2014: 17) and note that they “flourish when people feel anxiety, alienation, paranoia, and loss of control” (ibid: 11).

But if the powerless embrace conspiracy theories as a response to stress, that invites the question of *how* these “crazy” scenarios provide relief. One possibility is that by blaming their distress on a powerful hidden actor, believers achieve three psychological benefits. First, by labeling their tormentor, they replace generalized anxiety with classification—the label itself

affording a sense of clarity. Second, they free themselves from responsibility for their anxiety since it is caused by something “out there” that they cannot control. Third, they are able to present themselves as cognoscenti, people with special knowledge who are wiser than the experts. Embracing a conspiracy theory might thus be seen as vanquishing anxiety and providing the believer a persona of self-confidence. One study, positing “dispositional overconfidence” as a driver of conspiratorial thinking, even suggests that, far from feeling anxious or isolated, conspiracy theorists see themselves as thought leaders “largely unaware that most others disagree” with them (Pennycook, Binnendyk, and Rand, n.d.: 27).

There’s observational evidence for this idea, as true believers trumpet their agency, proclaiming “I see through your lies” and “You can’t control me.” Often, they project a pugnacious certainty that they will eventually be proven right. But this public posture may not reflect deep feelings. It’s worthwhile to consider that it may conceal anxieties and to remember philosopher Judith Butler’s searing question: “How often is sorrow effectively shouted down by rage?” (2014).

Indeed, given the intensity with which conspiracy theorists respond to challenges, it is plausible that, far from reducing anxiety, embracing a conspiracy theory may intensify and even *validate* it. Blaming a bad economy on Jewish bankers may be an effective labelling exercise, but it will not pay your water bill. Recognizing that a malevolent actor’s schemes are beyond your control is not necessarily a path to peace of mind. And seeing yourself as one of an enlightened minority is no more likely to generate confidence than resentment and suspicion. In short, all three features of the stress-reduction scenario might just as easily *normalize* anxiety, encouraging an emotional default position of “comfortable victimhood.”

Because grievance tales can provide this type of masochistic satisfaction, they serve as a useful lens through which to view related complaint narratives like conspiracy theories. It is significant that, in both the micro and macro forms, the believer in the tale is not a tormented isolate but a member of a stigmatized *group*. Grievance is “felt and expressed by individuals in response to a perceived threat to a collective to which they belong” (Stockdale 2013: 507).

That collective may be as discrete as an ethnic minority or as amorphous as a social category: the working class, immigrants, or “the people.” Conspiracy theories, like grievance tales, may provide a negative comfort not in spite of but precisely because the tales paint one’s own group as powerless. Reiterating a story driven by grievance allows the teller to own a troubled identity by adopting a “chosen trauma” (Volkan 2001) as a historical right. It may thus justify the shared *ressentiment* that Pankaj Mishra sees as the “defining feature” of a world where “the promise of equality collides with massive disparities” of status and power (2017, 31).

But if owning victimhood provides a paradoxical solution to the problem of grievance, it is a solution with costs. When grievance drives identity, the victim may assume a permanent defensive crouch, caught between the terror of a cornered animal and the dyspeptic rancor of Dostoevsky’s underground man—hardly a stance conducive to emotional well-being. The social costs are more far-reaching. If those claiming victimhood cannot vent their anger against the author of their pain (the long-gone spitting hippie, for example), they may rechannel it and teach their children to hate their “traditional” enemies, including people generations removed from the original injury. In the long shadow of that injunction grow multigenerational enmity, ethnocentric armoring, and cycles of revenge. Feeding on itself, grievance yields a rich and poisonous harvest.

“Truth” vs. lived experience

We often approach conspiracy theories by preemptively questioning their validity. We begin (and sometimes end) by asking: Is the story *true*? (Uscinski and Parent 2014: 23 ff). Some scholars even finesse this question, seeing such narratives as *prima facie* false or at least suspicious (Dentith 2018). This forensic bias is not without problems. Even if we avoid the logical fallacy of assuming the conclusion, using truth value as an entry point still displays a rationalist bias that may stunt our ability to comprehend the lived experience of a belief—that is, how it *feels* to the believers.

Focusing on feeling may seem out of place in an epistemic milieu that—as has been the case for thousands of years—privileges reason over emotion, stigmatizes the passions, and claims that the search for truth requires suppressing them. Opposing this hoary axiom, philosopher Robert Solomon notes that “the wisdom of reason against the treachery and temptations of the passions has been the central theme of Western philosophy” and argues that the passions actually enable us to engage with the world, to make “constitutive judgments,” and to give our lives meaning. They do not require correction by reason; “rather, it is reason that requires the anchorage and earthly wisdom of the passions” (Solomon 1993: 11, xvii). Making a concordant point, Rob Brotherton notes that “conspiratorial thinking,” far from being irrational, displays the same “quirks and biases” that drive “normal” people to search for patterns, “connect the dots between anomalies,” and engage when appropriate in “prudent paranoia.” We all have “innately suspicious minds” (2016: 80, 243, 17).

Drawing on these admittedly unconventional propositions, we might consider feeling not as the enemy of fact but as its interlocutor, complicating our perspective and pointing us to reasons of the heart that typically elude the disciples of “loveless rationality” (Solomon 1993:

xix). This is to refine rather than reject the search for truth. “Is it true?” remains a valid question. But a more fruitful question is “Why does anyone believe, even *want* to believe, this?” How does it help the believer make sense of the world? That is a humanizing question that may provide more interesting data than the forensic demand “Show me the evidence.”

Earlier I invoked Bronislaw Malinowski as an exemplar of empathic analysis. In attempting to grasp the native’s point of view, he sought to define what concerns a people “most intimately, that is, the hold which life has” on them (Malinowski 1922: 18-25). To my mind this small term, “the hold,” speaks more eloquently than volumes of theory about what counts—what should count, anyway—in assessing attitudes different from our own.

The project is bedeviled by two difficulties. The first is a sense of superiority that can short-circuit an attempt to “feel with” another if what has a hold on that other offends our values. This bias had been complicating colonialism’s “civilizing” project long before Malinowski went to Melanesia, and he was not free of it himself. A diary published after his death showed him to have shared the typical ethnocentricity of his class and generation—something that shocked but should not have surprised his detractors. The ethnocentric bias has lost little ground in this allegedly postcolonial era, and I suppose one might be forgiven for finding empathy challenging when faced with a mindset that advocates, for example, torturing or murdering one’s opponents.

Empathy may also be impeded by cognitive rigidity. This occupational hazard of the chattering classes explains the alacrity with which they deploy “conspiracy theorist” as an all-purpose slur, often prefixing it with faux medical tags like “wacky” or “delusional.” Richard Hofstadter tried to avoid using “paranoid” in this way, but part of his legacy has been to empower lazy pundits to characterize as “unhinged” any reading of reality different from their own. This diagnosis would be problematic even if it were confined to individuals; when such

medicalization of difference is applied to collectivities (Stockdale 2018)—those “nutty Elvis freaks”—the poverty of such labeling becomes all too apparent.

But even scholars committed to engaging with the native’s point of view can be stymied in encounters with “other” cognitive models. When anthropologist Laura Bohannan (1966), studying the Tiv people of Nigeria, related the plot of *Hamlet* to her hosts, elders pointed out that the play violated known truths about omens, witches, and genealogy. Communication broke down not because Tiv thinking was irrational but because it drew on different cultural axioms than Bohannan’s own. A similar impasse might be encountered by a “rational” person questioning flying saucers or the Great Replacement. And for the same reason. Empathy is aspirational; it does not erase difference.

Attempting to grasp the logic of grievance-fueled narratives remains a worthy enterprise, however, not only because it encourages empathy but also because engaging with “otherness” may fruitfully temper the positivist outlook which, even in these allegedly postmodern times, remains the academy’s dominant episteme. If we were alert to the emotionality of belief, we would recognize with Pascal that there are epistemes that the head knows little about. Such a move might, to be sure, open a gate into an affect-roiling sewer, where imaginary alligators bare their teeth and “crazy” ideas must be taken seriously because stories are “a way of containing a desperate need” (Jackson 1990: 402). Attempting to understand that need is essential to grasping the “why” of grievance—and thus to seeing how the worlds of other “natives” work.

In a nuanced study of “entangled” memories, Marita Sturken advises us to ask, “not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present” (1997: 2). That’s good advice about belief as well as memory. Despite the threat that affective resonance may pose to an epistemological comfort zone, in investigating beliefs

informed by grievance we should remember that even imaginary alligators can make a mess out of you. One sure way to cut the lines of communication before we begin is to tell the true believer “Those teeth aren’t real.”

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