Conspiracy Theorist's World and Genealogy

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories pose a serious threat to our society these days. People often dismiss conspiracy theory believers as at best gullible, or more often unintelligent. However, there are cases in which individuals end up believing conspiracy theories out of no epistemic fault of their own. In this paper, I want to offer a diagnosis of the problem by focusing on the *genealogy* of the conspiracy theory beliefs. Drawing on a novel interpretation of Nietzsche's use of genealogies, I argue that the problem of belief in conspiracy theories is best understood as a broadly political one regarding the oppressive, dominating, and exploitative world in which conspiracy theory believers find themselves in. I, then, draw on the work of the feminist philosopher, María Lugones, to offer an approach to addressing the problem of belief in conspiracy theories which recommends radical humility and playfulness.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, echo chambers, genealogy, feminist philosophy

1 Introduction[1]

One of the most popular Iranian television series of all time is called, My Uncle Napoleon. It is based on a novel of the same name. The story is a multi-faceted masterpiece set in the 1940s Iran at the time of the occupation of the country by the Allied forces. It depicts the most intimate aspects of the city life in Tehran: the theme of inequality figures heavily in the series, and it is a commentary on the contradiction that defined the years leading up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution: e.g., the crisis of identity for a deeply religious society overwhelmed by an in-pouring of "Western" values and lifestyle. One of the main

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characters of the story, the namesake of the series, is a retired low-level army officer who believes he fought against the British in the Persian Constitutional Revolution in the 1900s. He also believes that now with the occupation of Iran by the Allied Forces, the British have finally found a way to take their revenge on him. So, even the smallest irregularity in the turn of events is a plot by the British to eliminate him, which of course calls for extreme measures. As you might imagine, hilarity ensues.

The character of the Uncle resonates with the Iranian people, not simply because of the comedy; it is a depiction of an all-too-familiar way of thinking in the uncertain and utterly unjust world of Iranian politics and culture of the early 20th century so much so that nowadays one way of marking something as a Conspiracy Theory is simply to use the Uncle's phrase "it must be the British".

Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. But with the age of the internet and social media, we now face the problem at a level never seen before.[2] In the United States, the last two election cycles have shown us that conspiracy theories are a social problem that needs our attention. Consider the now-infamous events of Jan 6th which led to the death of 5 people on the same day and more in the following days.[3] When it comes to some conspiracy theories, the stakes could not be higher. What is more, studies have shown that the best predictor of who believes in a conspiracy theory is belief in other conspiracy theories.[4] It seems like believing any conspiracy theory – deadly or not – is a risk factor in believing other conspiracy theories. The spread of conspiracy theories, then, is a problem we simply cannot ignore.

The present paper is an attempt at addressing the problem of belief in conspiracy theories. It takes as its starting point the idea that we should pay close attention to the *genealogy* of belief in conspiracy theories, that is, the causal origins, the social and historical context of how people come to believe them.[5] Paying attention to the history of conspiracy theories, I argue, reveals two things: one negative, the other positive. The negative point is that belief in conspiracy theories is not necessarily the result of an epistemic failing. The positive point, in turn, is that constructing new political power structures is where we should put our efforts in if we want to address the problem.

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[2]See, for instance, (McBrayer 2020).

[3]See (Clary, Allman, and Bohn 2016).

[4]See (Swami et al. 2011), cited in (Cassam 2019). Although, also see (Enders et al. 2021).

[5](Stamatiadis-Bréhier 2023) has recently advocated for a similar approach, arguing that genealogical consideration can have an undermining effect on a special class of conspiracy theories, namely, conspiracies that aim to create conspiracy theories. As we shall see, my approach is different in that it examines the significance of genealogies for conspiracy theories in general. My argument in Section 3, in particular, shows that a universal genealogical argument against the spread of conspiracy theories does not hold much sway. (Koper 2024) is another noteworthy example of a sympathetic view, which I discuss further in fn. 19. Finally, (Butter and Knight 2020), includes a collection of papers in Section 4, with a focus on the history of conspiracy theories in different regions of the world. These works, and in particular that of Mathew Gary, which focuses on the Middle East, constitute an invaluable part of the genealogical approach I'm advocating. However, my interest here is in the philosophical underpinnings of such an approach, which, as far as I know, remains largely unaddressed.

The plan is as follows: In the next section (2), I offer a general and to my knowledge novel account of conspiracy theories that seems specifically well-positioned to offer a diagnosis of the problem based on the causal origins of conspiracy theories. I also situate my view in the larger debate over the definition of conspiracy theories. In Section 3, I argue that despite appearances the genealogy that is revealed by my definition fails to offer a fully general account of why it is irrational to believe in conspiracy theories. Then, in Section 4, drawing on an interpretation of Nietzsches genealogical methodology, I argue that rather than a narrowly epistemological role, genealogies play a political role in revealing the particular features and functions that the target notion plays. Applying this general lesson to conspiracy theories in Section 5, I show that the problem with the belief in conspiracy theories is often a broadly political one, namely, that the believers are victims of the oppressive, dominating, or otherwise exploitative world that they inhabit. Having offered this diagnosis, I utilize the work of the feminist philosopher, María Lugones, in Section 6, to offer an approach to addressing the problem of belief in conspiracy theories which recommends radical humility and playfulness.

2 What are Conspiracy Theories?

Before getting into the genealogy of conspiracy theories, let us first get some clarity on what conspiracy theories are. As a methodological starting point, I am skeptical of any attempt to give necessary and sufficient conditions for when something counts as a conspiracy theory. Instead, I propose to think of the concept as a family resemblance without necessarily clear and codifiable boundaries. This leaves open the possibility of demarcating subcategories that may be of interest for specific purposes. This is how I propose to focus the discussion in what follows.

To bring the specific kind of conspiracy theory that I have in mind into view, consider the particular conspiracy theory that the Sandy Hook shooting was a false flag operation. The original creator of this conspiracy theory, Alex Jones, has been a regular actor in the conspiracy theory scene in the US for many years now. Arguably, the Sandy Hook CT, however, was at the heart of what catapulted him into the American consciousness.[6] On December 14, 2012, when the country was shocked with the images coming from Newtown, Connecticut, Alex Jones wasted no time claiming that the incident was a false flag operation, and that the shooter was in a CIA mind-control program. As he later testified in a defamation case brought to court by the families of the victims, his accusations were a clear case of conspiracy mongering that blatantly dispensed with evidence or argument.[7]

What I take examples like this to show is that an important phenomenon in our current

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[6]See (Kirk et al. 2020).

[7]In his 2019 deposition, Jones claimed: "And I, myself, have almost had like a form of psychosis back in the past where I basically thought everything was staged, even though Ive now learned a lot of times things arent staged" (Joseph 2019).

political climate is the prevalence of those conspiracy theories that are believed by many *consumers*, while the original *creators* themselves do not believe them.[8] One way this could be the case, of course, is when the creators believe their theories to be false. However, I'm deliberately formulating this proposal to be consistent with cases in which the theory is an instance of Frankfurtian "bullshit" in that it is characterized by an indifference to the truth.[9] We can, thus, provide the following working definition of conspiracy theories:

> **Conspiracy Theories (CT)** are those theories about a conspiracy whose creators do not believe them to be true.

One might take issue with this definition by pointing to those conspiracy theories that start innocently, in the sense that their creators do believe them. The immediate point, of course, is one that I've already made: namely, that I am not attempting to give a necessary condition for what counts as a conspiracy theory. For all I have said, I admit that there may very well be conspiracy theories whose creators do in fact believe them to be true. However, given the obvious importance of the kind of conspiracy theory that I'm demarcating here, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus my attention on this kind. From here on out, I will use the capital letter 'C' and 'T' (CT) to refer to this kind of conspiracy theory.[10]

That said, there is also an important qualification that is worth emphasizing in connection to this objection, namely, that I am assuming that believing is partly constituted by taking into account the relevant evidence and caring about the truth. This has two important implications: first, how adamant someone is that they *believe* some claim doesn't matter if they are not taking into account the relevant evidence. Second, and more importantly, it is possible for someone to end up, at a later time, believing their own bullshit, when their epistemic environment transforms in such a way that it not only provides confirming evidence for the bullshit, but also insulates the individual from contrary evidence (in other words, the individual's epistemic environment constitutes an *echo chamber* in the sense I'll introduce in Section 5). So, in more cases than it might appear at first, we have reason to reject the idea that the creators do in fact believe their CTs.

With this account of CTs in hand, we are ready to turn in the next section to the question of the epistemic role of genealogies for CT believers. However, before we do, allow me to make a few methodological comments which should help to situate this discussion in the larger debate over specifically the definition of conspiracy theories.

The account I have provided might seem to fall under what is sometimes referred to as the 'generalist camp' in the debate over the definition of conspiracy theories.[11] According to the generalists, there are broad generalizations about conspiracy theories that settle

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[8](Harambam 2020) make a similar distinction between creators and consumers of conspiracy theories.

[9]See (Frankfurt 2005).

[10]I borrow this notation from (Cassam 2019), though my usage is different from his.

[11]For an overview of the definitional debate, including the distinction between generalism and particularism, see (M R. X. Dentith 2023a).

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once-and-for-all, as it were, whether belief in a conspiracy theory is epistemically warranted. For example, (Napolitano 2021) has recently argued that conspiracy theories are distinctive because they are "self-sealing" in the sense that they are immune to contrary evidence. She then goes on to claim that belief in conspiracy theories can therefore never be justified.[12] However, as we shall see in the next section, I argue that not every instance of believing a CT involves a failure of epistemic rationality. In other words, despite the appearance that I'm identifying some epistemic failing by basing the definition on the possibility of bullshit conspiracies, this is decidedly not the view I am endorsing. On the contrary, the point is ultimately that even when the creators bullshit their way to conspiracy theories, that is still not grounds for dismissing the consumers' belief as thereby irrational. What's more, I deny generalism to the extent that I limit my discussion to one kind among potentially many conspiracy theory kinds. If generalism is the view that there is a common core to all and only conspiracy theories, which can be formulated in terms of a definition, then that is inconsistent with the family resemblance view from which I am starting with here.

This might then seem to put my view squarely within the so-called 'particularist camp'.[13] According to the particularists, whether one is or is not epistemically warranted in believing a conspiracy theory is a question to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Particularists are often keen on rejecting the idea that there is a worthwhile distinction between conspiracy theories and any theory that involves a conspiracy. So, for instance, comparing the official story of 9/11 with the conspiracy theory that it was an inside job, the particularists argue in the following way: since whether it is or is not justifiable to believe either theory is a question to be settled on a case-by-case basis by considering the available evidence, we do well to avoid confusion by not labeling one or the other "conspiracy theory" in any distinctive sense.

It should be clear from the foregoing that I disagree with a strong form of particularism. I do think that we can fruitfully give more-or-less unifying definitions that help illuminate aspects of conspiracy theories that might otherwise remain hidden. That is precisely what I hope to show in the remainder of the paper regarding CTs. Thus, if particularism is the idea that any attempt to formulate broad generalizations about conspiracy theories is doomed to failure, then I am committed to rejecting that. However, it is important to emphasize once again that, as it will become obvious shortly, I do agree that such generalization do not always settle whether it is or is not epistemically justifiable to believe a conspiracy theory.

What is more important for my purposes, however, is a certain shift in focus away from the narrowly *epistemological* considerations regarding the epistemic justifiability of belief in CTs. While the above working definition does not settle whether it is or is

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[12]For other examples of the generalist camp, see, among others, (Cassam 2016) and (Harris 2023).

[13](M R. X. Dentith 2023a) presents particularism as the consensus view. See (M R. X. Dentith 2023b) for a brief history of this consensus. Some notable particularists are (Coady 2003), (Matthew R. X. Dentith 2016), (Keeley 1999a), and (Pigden 1995a).

not justifiable to believe in CTs, it does – or so I shall argue – help attune us to the fact that CTs do not arise in a vacuum, that, as (Stokes 2018a) puts it, "conspiracy theorizing is not merely a formal category of explanation but also a concrete, historically and socially conditioned practice (and as such open to ethical evaluation)" (28). Stokes convincingly uses this important observation to argue for a hybrid view he calls 'reluctant particularism', which is the idea that there are broadly moral reasons why one should not even entertain some conspiracy theories. My approach in this paper departs even further from the dichotomy between generalism and particularism in that the point becomes less about whether individuals should or should not believe or entertain a CT, than diagnosing the social conditions that give rise to CTs. As opposed to a problem about rationality of the individual believers, the shift I'm invoking here invites seeing the problem of the spread of CTs as one about the oppressive and dominating social conditions that gives rise to them, and points the way to a unique way of engaging with them, accordingly.

3   The Epistemic Function of Genealogy for CTs

The definition I offered in the previous section gives us a purchase on what CTs are, based on the attitudes of their *creators*:

> **Conspiracy Theories (CT)** are those theories about a conspiracy whose creators don't believe them to be true.

More importantly for our purposes, however, this definition also gives us a straightforward story about the *consumers* and where their beliefs[14] come from: The consumers are the victims of deceptive plots of a few manipulative individuals who are indifferent to the truth. So, going back to Alex Jones, the idea would be that those who believe him when he says that Sandy Hook was a false flag operation are gullible victims who fail to see his intentions for what they are: a plot to get them to distrust the government and view the gun culture in the country as a victim of an all out attack by the left.

And, this kind of genealogy in turn seems to suggest an account of the problem with the spread of CTs: the consumers of CTs, like their creators, believe things without proper justification.[15] The idea is that the genealogy of these beliefs somehow shows that these beliefs are not in good standing. And, initially, that sounds reasonable. For, suppose you

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[14](Ichino and Räikkä 2020) have recently argued that some consumers hold their CTs non-doxastically. In this paper, my focus will specifically be on *beliefs* of the CT-consumers, and the function of genealogies for such cognitive attitudes. However, it seems to me that many of the positive claims about the political function of genealogies may apply *mutatis mutandis* to other (non-doxastic) attitudes. I won't argue for this point here.

[15](Pigden 1995b) and (Keeley 1999b), among others, have disputed this claim. As we shall see, I ultimately agree with this result. However, it is important to note that my focus here is specifically on whether there is an argument from *genealogical* considerations for this claim. That's why I only engage with the safety considerations below and not other broadly epistemological considerations.

find out that your belief that, say, today is Wednesday is the result of falling victim to a manipulative plot, then even if that is far from a guarantee that your belief is false, it should significantly lower your confidence that today is indeed Wednesday.[16]

Following (Srinivasan 2015), I take it that the best analysis of what's going on in these cases is that the belief-forming process that is used to come to the belief is unreliable, where that is cashed out in terms of:

> **Safety**: S's belief that P is safe iff S could not have easily believed not-P using a sufficiently similar method she used to believe P (Sosa 1999)

Your belief that today is Wednesday is not safe because, using a sufficiently similar method, you could have easily come to believe that today is not Wednesday. Similarly, the victims of Alex Jones don't hold safe beliefs because using a sufficiently similar method they could have easily come to believe that Sandy Hook was not a false flag operation.

If this diagnosis is indeed correct, the solution to the problem of the spread of CTs is, at least theoretically, easy: Make sure that people don't use such methods to form their beliefs. And there seems to be two levels to do this: institutional and individual. So, on the institutional level, we might try to deplatform or regulate people like Jones who do not believe the claims that they make, or design programs of 'cognitive infiltration' with covert operatives rebutting various CTs (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). On the individual level, we might educate and encourage people to be better critical thinkers and look more widely when they are examining the evidence for themselves.

As important and convincing as this diagnosis and solution may seem, however, unfortunately, I do not believe that they get at the core of the problem with CTs. To be clear, I do not want to deny that some ways of coming to have CT-beliefs are unreliable and therefore lead to unsafe (and unjustified) beliefs;[17] my claim, rather, is merely that there are other entirely reliable methods of coming to have beliefs which escape this analysis altogether, and as such the kinds of solutions on the offer are incapable of addressing them. Allow me to elaborate.

To see the problem with this diagnosis, let's ask what is the method that CT believer uses to arrive at their belief. The problem emerges if we choose a sufficiently general description of the method, for instance, adopting one's belief from a trusted source. If this is the method that the CT believer uses, then the diagnosis seems to fail because if forming one's beliefs based on the testimony of trusted sources is unreliable, then given

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[16]There is a growing literature on the 'undermining' effect of genealogies in epistemology. (Street 2011), for instance, argues that, in light of the evolutionary development of our moral concepts, we should reject a mind-independent understanding of morality. Similar arguments have been made about religion. For a list of references, see (Srinivasan 2019) and (Vavova 2018). In this paper, I am only concerned with the specific genealogies that apply to CTs, that, for instance, they are the result of a manipulative plot. Thus, I sidestep the issue at the heart of that literature, namely, the danger of a global skeptical argument.

[17]An example of which would be what (ibid.) calls "irrelevant influences".

how widely we rely on this process to form our beliefs, we seem committed to a global skeptical conclusion.[18]

Can we respond by indexing the method to those sources that one has a justification to believe are trustworthy? As a general account, this proposal fails. For one thing, demanding that one must have a justification to trust an individual for their testimony to be justified commits us to a controversial view about testimony, namely, *reductionism* about testimony. In the present context, accepting this view would be entirely ad hoc and therefore unattractive. More pressing still, the idea that one must have a justification to believe a source trustworthy will presumably have to be itself cashed out in terms of safety. But clearly there are entirely reliable processes that one can come to trust a creator of CT. Think, for example, of someone who is born into a social and cultural context in which a CT creator, say, a neo-Nazi leader is celebrated as trustworthy. If situations like these are possible, then the above diagnosis of the problem of CTs in terms of lack of epistemic justification (by failing the safety condition) fails. That is because trusting those in one's immediate social and cultural context is, in general, a reliable way of forming beliefs, making such beliefs safe and therefore justified.[19]

None of this is to deny that there are unreliable ways of coming to trust an individual. For instance, arguably, given the scale of the evidence against him, most of those who still in 2023 trust Alex Jones are very likely using methods that are unsafe. My point is that neither possibility should be overlooked: While many can end up believing a CT unsafely because they use unreliable methods, it is also possible for one to end up with CT beliefs through entirely reliable methods. Since the distinction between these two possibilities is helpful later on, let us label them "Unsafe CTs" and "Safe CTs", respectively. The immediate point here is that Safe CTs entirely escape the above diagnosis that CT consumers believe without justification. If they have beliefs about whom to trust that are formed safely, then it seems that they are within their epistemic rights to believe the testimony of those trusted sources.

4   The Political Function of Genealogies

It might appear that we have come to a dead-end; that in so far as at least some CT-believers utilize reliable methods of coming to form their beliefs, genealogies have not

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[18]I borrow this point from (Srinivasan 2015), which notes the so-called 'generality problem' for reliabilism regarding the formulation of the processes involved in belief formation. See (Conee and Feldman 1998).

[19]It is worth mentioning that this line of thought is in broad agreement with (Levy 2007), who argues that because of the radically social nature of knowledge, we cannot but put our trust in appropriately constituted experts in our epistemic environment. Levy uses this thought to criticize the CT-believer for "cutting herself off from this environment". However, it remains open for CTs to create more local information networks in which the CT-believer is fully embedded despite being isolated from the larger environment. In other words, Levy's point about the radical sociality of knowledge is consistent with CT-believers being victims of what (Nguyen 2020) has labeled "echo chambers". I will return to this thought in Section 5.

much to offer us by way of elaborating the problem of CTs. But this, I believe, is a mistake. As (Srinivasan 2019) has recently argued, the theoretical function of genealogies isn't some technical epistemological point about the justification that we may or may not have for our judgements; rather, the true function of genealogies is to reveal something deep about the politics of power, and to engage our creative capacity to construct the world anew (140). My goal in the remainder of the paper is to lay out this interpretation in some detail and apply it to the case of CTs. My hope is to expand on this interpretation by offering some novel ways in which taking genealogies seriously can help us in dealing with CTs.

Let us begin by considering one of the most influential genealogical arguments, i.e., Friedrich Nietzsche's criticism of herd morality. In rough outline, in *Genealogy*, Nietzsche contends that his rational reconstruction of the history of moral concepts has an undermining effect in that it would force us to reevaluate our values (Nietzsche 2007). For, according to him, our moral concepts have their root not in moral intuition or the human good will, but rather in the exploitative intentions of the Christian priestly caste. While most commentators have interpreted Nietzsche's argument in epistemic terms, i.e., that our belief in morality is somehow unreliable, Srinivasan offers a different interpretation:

> I want to offer a different way of reading Nietzsche's genealogy, according to which Nietzsche is primarily interested, not in whether our representations are in good epistemic standing, but, like Foucault, in what our representations do – and in what we might do with them (141)

According to this interpretation, Nietzsche aims specifically to reveal the exploitative nature of herd morality, that "that modern morality has the effect of controlling and neutering the instincts of "higher men", those individuals capable of the grandest reaches of human genius" (*ibid.*). This, of course, can easily seem to suggest a radical moralistic program that seeks to dictate and eliminate any outlook that itself doesn't approve of. However, it is important to realize that, for Nietzsche, there is nothing more "modern" than that kind of moralistic outlook is: "all modern judgments about men and things' are smeared with an over-moralistic language; the characteristic feature of modern souls and modern books is to be found in their "moralistic mendaciousness"" (ibid., III, 19).

So, it is an advantage of the present interpretation that it does not construe Nietzsche as rejecting the herd morality because it is somehow false or unjustified (because unsafe). To say that would commit Nietzsche to a firm ground from which he can criticize Christian morality, but one that he would have no right to claim by his own lights. The present interpretation, instead, fully embraces a random or lucky aspect to genealogical work to the extent that the success or failure of the genealogical argument is partly a matter of luck (Srinivasan 2019, p. 146). Whether Nietzsche's profit, Zarathustra, is met with open arms by the "herd" is partly a matter of luck, a fact that Zarathustra quickly realizes upon his descent: "There they stand," said he to his heart; "there they laugh: they understand

me not; I am not the mouth for these ears" (Nietzsche 1961, Prologue, 5). Thus, the function of genealogy isn't to reveal some eternal truth about morality, but to invite those who are ready to appreciate the exploitative, and dominating, and life-denying aspects of the herd morality.

Here's another, perhaps more important, advantage of the present interpretation: while a purely epistemic interpretation would construe the function of genealogies exclusively negatively by rejecting our current moral beliefs, the political interpretation has a clear message for how to move forward. For genealogies have the potential to show us that the world we live in, specifically, our social world, is shaped by the concepts that *we* introduce and use. Srinivasan calls this our "worldmaking" power:

> The purpose of Nietzsche's genealogy is not the revelation of sheer contingency or absolute randomness'. Its purpose is to show us the dependency of the world on how we represent it, and that how we represent it is a matter of which of the various interpretations and adaptations' successfully vied for domination. In revealing this, Nietzsche's genealogy is a reminderat least for those of us who are sufficiently strongof our worldmaking power (146)

On this interpretation, then, Nietzsche's genealogies have an empowering effect because they help us appreciate that our moral concepts are our own doing. They are the representations that are introduced and used by us to shape and regulate our world and interactions in it. And this suggests that we have the power to change the status quo. When, for instance, we learn about Marx's Mr. Moneybags who turned labor, i.e., that magic commodity whose consumption creates value, into something to be bought and sold in the marketplace, if we are ready, we come to despise his plot (Marx 2011); but more importantly, we are impressed by his creativity and resourcefulness, and, again, with some luck, we can hope to exercise the same qualities in reshaping and restructuring our world.

This is a lesson that recent developments in the ethics of race and gender have taken to heart. Consider Audre Lorde's (1934-92) famous remark that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 2007, p. 110). As I understand it, Lorde here sides with Nietzsche in going beyond simply dismissing the old concepts that generate and perpetuate oppression by calling for a new set of concepts that help us to identify and describe the many forms that oppression takes, in ways that in turn help us restructure our society. For example, as Alison Jaggar reminds us, we can now articulate and discuss otherwise vague, uneasy experiences thanks to new concepts such as "sex roles", "sexism", "sexual harassment", "the double day", "sexual objectification", etc (Jaggar 2000, p. 238).

Similarly, in reaction to those for whom "the discovery that race is "constructed" should provide a justification for its abandonment", Charles Mills argues that we need a "cautious and appropriate glossed employment of 'race'" (Mills 1998, p. 14). That is because, for Mills, we need this concept and other new ones to capture the moral realities of the Black lives now and throughout history. In a Nietzschean spirit, Mills sees something positive

in the revelations of genealogical work on race through history and fiction: "They provide the raw material from which philosophers can extract the conceptual web of an alternative order" (16).

To sum up, then, according to what I am labeling the political interpretation of the function of genealogies, genealogies have a double function: they put us in a position (if we are lucky) to appreciate the potential life-denying aspects of our moral concepts, but they also have a *constructive* function in that they reveal a special power that we possess, namely, that of transforming the world around us through forging new representational practices. I think that taking this double function seriously can help us in identifying the problem of CTs and devising a response strategy.

5   The Political Function of Genealogies for CTs

In section 3, we saw that the problem with the diagnosis of the problem of CTs that identifies an epistemic defect in their genealogies is that there are many situations in which people end up believing a CT by using entirely reliable methods. For example, someone who has been born and raised in a situation in which their trusted circle instills in them CT-beliefs, uses methods that are, in general, reliable and therefore lead to justified beliefs. I argued that this is a limitation of the view that genealogies can only have an epistemic effect in revealing the justificatory standing of CT-beliefs. In this section, I aim to show that the political function of genealogies is precisely what's missing in providing a full diagnosis of the problem of CTs.[20] In the next section, I take up the question of the implications of this diagnosis for a response strategy against CTs.

Let's begin our discussion with a brief taxonomy of CTs. Recently, (Nguyen 2020) has argued that it is important to distinguish between *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers*. According to Nguyen, while "An epistemic bubble is a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been left out, an echo chamber[, by contrast] is a social epistemic structure from which other relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited" (141). Nguyen's idea is that it is crucial to distinguish between these two phenomena because they have entirely different implications about how we should respond to them. Since an epistemic bubble simply lacks information, the response strategy is at least theoretically simple: ensure that the relevant information makes its way to people inside a

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[20]In fn. 4 I mentioned a number of sympathetic sources. (Koper 2024) is another that has similarly drawn attention to the social and political aspects of conspiracy theories. Koper argues that "rather than just taking the term as referring to a particular type of truth claimone that posits the existence of a conspiracywe should also see politics and rhetoric as necessary parts of the concept of conspiracy theory" (2). While Koper takes inspiration from the tradition of critical theory going back to Adorno and others, my focus here is different in that I am specifically interested in the genealogy of conspiracy theories, the social and political context in which they are generated and spread. In addition, my hope is to say something positive about the fruits of sustained attention to the genealogy of CTs in the next section, which goes beyond Koper's more modest ambitions.

bubble. As such, epistemic bubbles are, as the name suggests, fragile. Things, however, are different when it comes to echo chambers. Here, because of the active exclusion of voices through distrust, simply providing further evidence cannot help to mitigate them. Instead, Nguyen recommends what he calls a "social epistemic reboot" during which the agent temporarily suspends their belief about whom to trust, but then when they start over they proceed in an ordinary way, forging new trust relations, which allow them to become a full social epistemic agent (157).

Now, I believe that CTs are best understood as a kind of echo chamber because they usually enjoy a robust trust structure that makes them immune to contrary evidence.[21] As I mentioned in Section 3, I believe we do well to make a further distinction between those CTs that acquire their trust structures reliably, that is, Safe CTs, and those that do not, Unsafe CTs. For, as we saw then, we do seem to have a clear diagnosis of the problem for Unsafe CTs – think, those who trust Alex Jones because of his extrovert mannerism, say: we can simply say that they believe things for which they lack justification, so they suffer from an epistemic failing. What's more, we seem to have a clear suggestion about how to address that problem: make sure people don't use those methods to form their beliefs. However, again, as we saw back in Section 3, this only goes so far because people can and do come to have beliefs about whom to trust using entirely safe methods. And, thus, Safe CTs remain a puzzle because so far, our discussion of genealogies doesn't seem to provide us with a diagnosis of why people believe them.

To see the interest in Safe CTs better, it is helpful to look at some concrete examples. I have already mentioned the possibility of someone ending up with CT beliefs because they are born and raised in a community that trusts other CT believers and creators. Real life examples of this kind, of course, abound. But we are likely to know of those cases in which the CT believer has managed to escape their echo chambered existence. Consider, for instance, Derek Black, the former white supremacist and the son of a grand wizard, who was groomed to be a neo-Nazi leader.[22] Similarly, Tara Westover has documented her experience growing up in a Mormon survivalist family, which strongly distrusted the medical establishment and refused treatment for any of the members.[23]

Other examples include those in situations of oppression and marginalization. Consider, for instance, the Uncle in the Iranian TV series I mentioned at the beginning of the paper. If it is not clear from my description already, the Uncle represents the deep distrust of the Iranian people toward foreign powers like the British, who consistently sabotaged the country's fight for a constitution through conspiracies and secret dealings. The Un-

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[21]See (Napolitano 2021), who, drawing on an early suggestion by (Keeley 1999a), argues that for this reason, believing CTs is irrational. It should be obvious by now that I disagree with the latter claim. However, I will not have the space to argue for that claim here. See my (Shoaibi 2022) for further discussion on this issue.

[22]See (Tippett 2023). (Nguyen 2018) offers an accessible version of (Nguyen 2020), which also discusses the example in some detail.

[23]See (MacGillis 2018).

cle's beliefs about whom to trust and distrust are, I claim, entirely safe in the sense that the processes he uses to come to have those trust beliefs are reliable: if someone in the position of power has a track record of exploitation, then coming to distrust them as a result of your marginalized situation is an entirely reliable way of coming to form beliefs about whom to trust. What's more, once such a network of trust structures are in place, the Uncle can safely end with specific CT beliefs such as: "the British are out to get him" because, firstly, his trust circle help to provide confirmation and much of the context for his beliefs, and, secondly, his distrust in outside voices makes him and his circle insulated from contrary evidence.[24]

Similar examples from other situations of marginalization are not hard to come by. Take, for instance, the COVID vaccine hesitancy in the Black and brown communities during the first months after the vaccine was available. In light of the exploitative track record of the medical establishment in the US in the form of events such as the Tuskegee experiment, it is no surprise that the Black and brown communities distrust the US government when it comes to medical treatment. That's no surprise because the process by which they come to have that belief is reliable.[25]

How does the political function of genealogies help us diagnose the problem with Safe CTs? My answer, I hope, in light of discussion of the political function of genealogies, is beginning to come into focus. Genealogies help to uncover the exploitative, oppressive, and dominating nature of the world that gives rise to Safe CTs. And they do so in at least three distinct ways: first, they show that the CT beliefs arise out of a context in which their believers are likely to be oppressed. This is true in the latter two examples, where the CTs have a sort of defensive or survival function in the sense that the belief in CTs, given the unfortunate situation that the beliefs find themselves in, helps the victims make sense or even more basically survive.[26] Second, the genealogies can reveal the manipulative nature of the CT beliefs, as in the case of Derek Black and Tara Westover. And, finally, they can

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[24]One might worry that since examples of this kind involve the creation of novel CTs by individuals that end up *believing* them, they pose a problem for my working definition of CTs provided in Section 3. For, recall that according to my working definition, CTs are theories about a conspiracy whose creators do not believe them. However, as I suggested in Section 2, while it's true that the Uncle ends up believing his CT about a British plot to eliminate him, we are not forced to admit that the idea starts life as a belief. It seems most plausible to me to say that the original idea is a mere musing with a certain indifference to the truth, *à la* Frankfurt. However, the Uncle and his circle end up *believing* it through their echo chambered dynamic, which provides a robust justification for it.

[25]See (Burch and Walker 2021).

[26](Harris 2023) has recently argued that a primary attraction of CTs is due to their ability to give the CT-believers a sense of *epistemic autonomy*. Harris' idea is that many CT believers find themselves in situations in which they are alienated from different forms of knowledge production, and thus find a recourse in trusting CT generators and their own experience and intuition. As I go on to explain, I do not deny that this kind of dynamic is often caused by certain epistemic shortcomings. However, the driving idea behind my discussion here is that this need not be so – that, in the case of Safe CTs, one may seek one's epistemic autonomy exactly because one is, in fact, alienated from the sources of knowledge through mechanisms such as racism, colonialism, etc.

reveal that the CT beliefs perpetuate and bolster a systematic oppressive environment.[27] We can see this most explicitly in CTs such as Pizzagate where there is a clear anti-Semitic element.[28]

The political function of genealogies, then, gives us a novel diagnosis of the problem of CTs. Instead of focusing myopically on the rational standing of an individual's beliefs, i.e., whether it is rational or not, the genealogical approach helps to illuminate the social and political conditions that give rise to and spread CTs. This allows us to see the problem even in cases in which one's beliefs do not exhibit any kind of rational failing. To be perfectly clear, I do not deny that many people end up with CT beliefs due to some more-or-less serious epistemic failing. However, I do think that focusing on these cases conceals a much more important phenomenon, namely, echo chambered CTs. And even there, I think, it is important to resist focusing on cases in which people end up with their trust beliefs due to some epistemic failing. Instead, I believe, we do well to carefully examine the cases in which people end up with CT beliefs out of no fault of their own, that is, Safe CTs. For, as I've tried to make clear in this section, doing so not only allows us to understand and engage with CT believers better, but also helps us learn something deep and important about *ourselves* and the world we live in, namely, that the social and political conditions that we inhabit are a crucial element in what shapes our epistemic world.

6   CTs and World-Traveling

Recall from section 4 that political genealogies have a double function: not only do they reveal something about the political structures we inhabit, they also point the way forward by empowering us to recreate the world by forging new representational practices. In this final section, I hope to make a convincing case for one such constructive strategy for responding to the problem of CTs. Given the diagnosis from the last section that locates the problem with the oppressive environment of the CT believers, the obvious place to look for inspiration is the literature on other forms of oppression.

The feminist philosopher, María Lugones, has offered a striking anatomy of oppression by focusing on her past oppressive behavior toward her own mother (Lugones 1987). She notices that her understanding of "love" was consistent with viewing her mother as "a different sort of being" whose primary function was to be "grafted": "to love her was supposed to be of a piece with my abusing her" (5). And she observes that what she

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[27]The idea that the epistemic *environment* of CT believers is of importance is emphasized by (Levy 2007), who holds that knowledge is *radically* social in the sense that it is partly constituted by an agent's social interactions with other in their environment. While Levy argues that the radical sociality of knowledge is a reason to defer to experts (in our largely healthy environment), (Blake-Turner 2020) is an example of someone for whom the sociality of knowledge implies an increasing difficulty in acquiring knowledge and other epistemic goods, given our degraded epistemic environment due to the spread of fake news (and conspiracy theories).

[28]On the morally unacceptable implications of CTs, see (Cassam 2019, ch.4). See also (Stokes 2018b).

needed to overcome her previous abusive behavior is a renewed understanding of what "love" means:

> I was disturbed by my not wanting to be what she was. I had a sense of not being quite integrated, my self was missing because I could not identify with her, I could not see myself in her, I could not welcome her world. I saw myself as separate from her, a different sort of being, not quite of the same species. This separation, this lack of love, I saw, and I think that I saw correctly as a lack in myself (not a fault, but a lack). I also see that if this was a lack of love, love cannot be what I was taught. Love has to be rethought, made anew (6-7)

Lugones sees a parallel between her abusive relationship to her mother and the relationship between the White/Anglo women and the women of color in the US. As in the former case, the White/Anglo women fail to truly love the women of color. They see the women of color as essentially different and separate, and while in their interactions they may superficially treat them with respect, as soon as they have no use for their services they become totally excluded and separate from them:

> Their lack of concern is a harmful failure of love that leaves me independent from them in a way similar to the way in which, once I ceased to be my mother's parasite, she became, though not independent from all others, certainly independent from me (8)

Lugones's strategy here is Nietzschean in more than one way. First, and most obviously, she recommends a constructive redefinition of the concept of "love". Her insight is that a distorted notion of love that is consistent and actually helps to maintain separation and independence is at the heart of oppressive relations. So, her solution is one of overcoming these boundaries and identifying with each other's experiences. She assimilates this activity and the attitude that makes it possible, "world-traveling".

> Loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother's world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world. Only through this travelling to her "world" could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separate from her (8)

The second way in which Lugones' strategy is Nietzschean helps us get clear on what she means by another's "world". For the significance of traveling to others' worlds for Lugones is that it is an attempt to understand and identify with their lived experience. A sense of "world" that is not true to people's real experience (by being, for instance, overly abstract), "would constrain, erase, or deem aberrant experience that has within it significant insights into non-imperialistic understanding between people" (11). To put it

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in the language that is now familiar from our interpretation of Nietzsche, Lugones wants us to pay close attention to the genealogy of our representational concepts so that we can describe and identify those that are life-denying and exploitative.

What does it take to "travel" to another world? As I read her, Lugones' answer is radical humility and playfulness. Lugones thinks that to be able to understand another's experience, we must suspend our assumptions about how the world works and be ready to experience things anew. One can find an example of this kind of attitude in children who are imaginatively creating a new game. One child puts the slab on the floor and shouts "lava!" and everyone else jumps on as if there is lava on the ground and the only way to avoid it is to stay balanced on the slab. Another makes the jump onto the carpet and happily declares, "Phew! I'm in the ocean". What's distinctive about this kind of play is that there are no pre-established rules about how the game goes. The rules are created as am imaginative exercise that brings in a new game into the world. Commenting on a similar example, Lugones makes the following observation about the attitude of playfulness:

> This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction. We may not have rules, and when we do have rules, there are no rules that are to us sacred. We are not worried about competence. We are not wedded to a particular way of doing things. While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular "world." We are there creatively. We are not passive. (16)

Now, I want to suggest that this kind of radical humility about our perspective on the world and playfulness is precisely what we need to deal with echo chambered CTs. Given our diagnosis regarding the conditions that give rise to specifically Safe CTs, we need to engage with CT believers in the same way that we do others caught in an oppressive environment. And that means, if we adopt Lugones' strategy, that we radically adjust our attitudes toward CT believers. We must suspend our assumptions about CT believers and their worldviews. We must be open to traveling to their world to see and identify how their experiences are structured, and invite them to do the same for us. We must then engage in a kind of imaginative free play in which we construct the world we mutually occupy anew using concepts and representational practices that overcome the boundaries that separate us and construe as entirely isolated from each other.

This suggestion might seem farfetched and fantastical. However, I believe that if we look at specific examples of people escaping their echo-chambered existence, we can see that we have, in fact, a practical strategy in dealing with CTs. Consider, for instance, Derek Black's case. According to his own telling of his transition, a decisive moment was when a Jewish fellow student invited Black to his Shabbat dinner without any paternal-istic intention to convert Black, but to simply support him with a community and show

him what his family's life looked like from the inside. The remarkable point about this encounter according to Black is that he didn't receive any information that he was unaware of before, but that it provided him with an environment to listen: "And it wasn't the first time I had heard that; it wasn't the first time that somebody had told me that racism is bad. It was just the first time that I'd been willing to listen to it." (Tippett 2023) What this example shows, I believe, is that Lugones' strategy is one that can be effective in overcoming the boundaries that keep people isolated and almost impossible to understand, a problem that, according to Lugones, is at the heart of oppressive circumstances such as those which give rise to echo chambered CTs.

To take another example, consider the problem of Black hesitancy against the COVID vaccine. As a recent NY Times article makes clear, what helped to mitigate the problem was not simply more information or data about the efficacy of the vaccine or some sort of government program to fight misinformation (Burch and Walker 2021). Rather, it was a community-based effort in the shape of door-to-door canvasing, grounded in the idea that "The questions being asked about the vaccine should be understood in the larger context of historic inequities in health care" (ibid.). In other words, there was a distinct attention to the genealogy and a loving attitude that created community support, and activism at the grassroots level.

An immediate question one might raise about this suggestion is "who exactly is the "we"?" This is an intriguing question to which I cannot pretend to have a full answer. On the one hand, it seems that the social movement of the kind I am advocating are often galvanized by lone actors who through their heroic actions bring about a radical shift in the public perception of an issue. Here, I'm thinking, for example, of the many instances of public resistance in the Civil Rights movement. Arguably, Nietzsche would agree that without such epoch-making figures such as Napoleon or Zarathustra, radical conceptual shifts would not be possible. On the other hand, as I emphasized earlier when I was discussing Nietzsche's views on genealogy, these shifts do not come about purely through the genius of such figures; it rather relies partly on an element of luck. And, here, I think we can see a way in which the collective sensibilities of the society can be instrumental in making the conceptual shifts of the kind the world-traveling view advocates possible. We can, in other words, see that the actions and attitudes of an individual toward (someone they believe to be) a CT-believer do not take place in a vacuum; rather, their significance depends on the larger social environment in which the interaction is taking place. At least, to this extent, then, all of us play a role in making a playful and constructive attitude toward the CT-believers possible, and are thereby the proper target of the "we".

Some might object, "Are you suggesting that I suspend my beliefs about, say, how wide-spread election fraud was in the 2020 election cycle, and approach the election denier prepared to be convinced otherwise?" It is important to realize that this is decidedly not the suggestion I am advocating. No doubt, many of the particular CT beliefs of a CT believer are false, and for many of us, given our epistemic environment, they constitute

blatant fabrications, which we *know* to be false. The claim about radical humility and playfulness rather regards our attitudes about the structural features of the world the CT believer occupies. In other words, what we need to suspend judgment on and take a playful attitude toward are beliefs regrading those things that a careful attention to genealogy would reveal, namely, the social and political structure that give rise to CTs. When it comes, for instance, to the 2020 US election denier, I am urging, we should stop ridiculing and otherwise isolating the CT believer and instead approach them with an openness to learn about the circumstances that have led to their current situation, which can with some luck in turn lead to an imaginative, playful reconstruction of the world we occupy together.

I will end with a brief note about emotional reactions to CTs and CT-believers. My claim that we should stop isolating CT believers is not meant to imply that being outraged and angry with CT believers is somehow mistaken. Such emotional responses can be entirely fitting given the right circumstances. For example, if a wrong has been done, depending on the nature of the wrong, being angry might be precisely how one should react.[29] That is entirely consistent with my claim that the way to address the problem of belief in CTs at its core, we must "travel" to the world of the CT believer. The latter idea is not supposed to undermine or otherwise override the appropriateness of the emotional response by showing that, for instance, the emotional response is counterproductive. However, I believe that in the spirit of writers such as (hooks 1995), the emotional response will ideally take a *constructive* form. Some have, for instance, argued that anger can play a communicative role in relaying deep dissatisfaction and demanding change (Srinivasan 2018). More radically, to the extent that anger registers a fundamental disconnect between the worlds that we inhabit by being unintelligible to others,[30] it can indicate exactly the kind of radical humility and playfulness that Lugones characterizes the idea of world-traveling with. For, if Lugones is right, then overcoming the gaps that make us unintelligible to each other is only possible by suspending our assumptions about how our social world is supposed to be structured and being prepared to recreate it anew together.

7   Conclusion

Conspiracy Theories pose a serious challenge in our world. And it is hard in our polarized political climate to see any sense in them. However, as I hope to have shown, a shift in which kind of Conspiracy Theory beliefs we focus on can help us see that they often arise in unfortunate social and political contexts. The critical tradition stretching back to Nietzsche and beyond encourages us to utilize the genealogical approach to uncover such, often hard to explicate, contexts. In this paper, my aim has been to explore exactly this approach to Conspiracy Theories. Using specific, concrete examples, I attempted to

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[29]This kind of claim has been defended by, among others, (Callard 2019).

[30](Hirji 2022) labels this kind of anger "outrage anger".

humanize the Conspiracy Theory believer and to suggest that to address the problem of the spread of Conspiracy Theories, we must work to overcome the representational barriers that keep the believers isolated. We must, to put it in a language that María Lugones has made available to us, travel to their world with an attitude of radical humility and playfulness because that's how we can be sure to treat each other as fully human, deserving of love, integration, and respect. This does not imply that many Conspiracy Theory believers don't deserve to be labeled as irrational for failing to look at the widely available evidence. However, to treat all believers in that way is to be blind sighted by one form of this phenomenon. To engage the problem of the spread of Conspiracy Theories at its core, we must adopt a genealogical approach and take seriously the idea that Conspiracy Theories arise in concrete historical contexts where the problem is less about the (ir)rationality of individuals, than it is about the contexts in which the individuals find themselves in. If we view the problem more wholistically in this way, then we will see that a humanistic approach such as the one we find in Lugones is a more promising approach than engaging Conspiracy Theory believers on the epistemic merits of the content of what they believe.

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