

The Mandela Effect and New Memory

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Abstract

This paper looks at a recent phenomenon on the Internet referred to as the Mandela Effect, which states that small details from the past have been changed, altered, and edited to create a parallel universe. The reasons for the Mandela Effect becoming such a popular conspiracy theory and Internet meme shed light on our contemporary technoscience culture and the influence of advanced information technology on human cognition, memory, and belief. This phenomenon involves aspects familiar to esotericism, since both conspiracy theories and esoteric knowledge cohabit the same marginalized cultural space, sometimes referred to as the “cultic milieu.” In fact, the Mandela Effect signals a possible transformation of this space. The recent ideas from tech author and founding editor of *Wired* magazine, Kevin Kelly, as well as memory research by experimental psychologist Endel Tulving, illustrate potential factors behind conspiratorial creations and the reshaping of underground culture. This article seeks to bring the Mandela Effect to the attention of scholars by highlighting the web of relationships embedded in the phenomenon, as well as the implications for historical consciousness and the construction of conspiratorial worldviews.

Keywords

Esotericism; conspiracism; cultic milieu theory; memory; technoscience; fundamentalism

“We know accurately only when we know little, with knowledge doubt increases.”
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.¹

“Media determine our situation.” —Friedrich Kittler.²

Introduction

The “We are ‘Happy’ at CERN” video directed by CERN technical student Michal Laskowski and released in 2014 shows Jonathan Richard Ellis, a British theoretical physicist who is working with CERN, wearing two cardboard signs around his neck suspended on strings — one of which says “Bond #1,” the other “Mandela” — while holding up a paper sign that reads “We Are Happy @ CERN.”³ The first actor to play the James Bond character was Barry Nelson in *Casino Royale* (1954). Add that to the other cardboard sign that reads “Mandela,” and one can extrapolate “Nelson Mandela.”

Toward the end of the video a silhouetted figure dances before an oversized digital display screen of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). At the bottom corner are the numbers 4664. If one adds another 6 to this number, making it 46664, it becomes the name of a series of AIDS benefit concerts organized in honor of Nelson Mandela between 2003 and 2008. 466 was the prison number assigned to Mandela in 1964, hence 46664. However, if one searches the internet for this number in conjunction with Mandela’s name, one comes across several unusual hints that the number may have been changed from what it was originally, that is 4664 — the same number that shows up in the “We are ‘Happy’ at CERN” video.⁴ The Internet search turns up *both* number sets in relation to International Mandela Day, Mandela’s prison number, and the concert series.

Was the number changed?

If you haven’t guessed it, this paper is about conspiracy and theory. The Mandela Effect (hereafter ME) refers to a new and unusually technophilic conspiracy theory that concerns the collective memory of the populace and the data storage of history. While to the average person memory is a linear progression of sequential events

¹ Johann W. Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, trans. T. B. Saunders (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 97.

² Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxix.

³ US LHC, “We are ‘Happy’ at CERN,” video, 3:34, November 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Lt9yUfVY>.

⁴ See, for example, “Mandela’s prison number seems to have morphed from 4664 to 46664,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://whale.to/b/mandela.html>.

constituting the present reality, modern-day historians as well as psychologists and brain researchers have argued that history and memories about history are constructions shaping collective reality. Memories can be penetrated, invaded, altered, and ordered in such a way as to match prescribed paradigms. Current research reveals that memories and histories – in consequence, belief – are not static, fixed, or linear, but rather processes which are constructive, malleable, and changeable: in a word, *plastic*.⁵ What problems does this pose, not only for how scholars think about the world, but for how people understand their reality? Moreover, what insights does it provide into the persistence of esoteric knowledge in the cultural margins of society?

To analyze these questions, this paper seeks to understand conspiracy theory as a method of knowledge production connected to science, religion, and esotericism, and performed in Colin Campbell’s “cultic milieu” (1972). The narrative elements drawn on in constructing the ME are those Wouter Hanegraaff has tracked in *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012) as relating to the ancient wisdom tradition that were consigned to the dustbin of history.⁶ At the very least, they proliferate in the same cultural space (to be more precise, *technocultural* space). As Hanegraaff has shown, these narrative elements consist of amalgamations of Platonic (and Neo-Platonic), Hermetic, and Gnostic forms of Christianity. Hanegraaff refers to this concept of the ancient wisdom tradition as Platonic Orientalism. Elements of this tradition have been deliberately marginalized over the course of European intellectual history. Early Church Fathers attacked them as heretical and heterodox, while during the Protestant Reformation Luther accused the Church of retaining “pagan” rites and rituals in their dogma. Platonic Orientalism was criticized as superstitious and nonconforming to reason by Protestant Enlightenment scholars such as Jacob Thomasius (1622–1684) and Jacob Brucker (1696–1770), and again by the French *philosophes*. The emergence of modern science in the early modern and modern periods saw the ancient wisdom narrative retreating into occult and esoteric societies and groups, such as the Theosophical Society, and finally coming to rest during the twentieth century in the cultic milieu. Hanegraaff’s historical survey demonstrates that over time esoteric knowledge was repeatedly constructed as the heterodox or deviant “other” opposing the mainstream and normative orthodoxy.

⁵ See, for example, Joseph E. LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002); Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); David William Bates and Nima Bassiri, *Plasticity and Pathology: On the Formation of the Neural Subject* (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, 2016).

⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Like the ancient wisdom tradition of esotericism, knowledge claims associated with conspiracism are performed inside a “deviant” cultural space and involve constructing a counter-world that opposes an official world. Timothy Melley brings into focus the implications of this social process in *The Covert Sphere* (2012), describing the phenomenon as the “simultaneous presence of competing ontologies, a plurality of worlds that makes it difficult to know which ‘reality’ is the *real* reality.”⁷ This suggests a connection between conspiracy theories and esoteric knowledge. While scholars have long recognized that religious beliefs and conspiracism have a connection, only recently have they begun to study the role of esotericism. In 2011 Charlotte Ward and David Voas developed the term “conspirativity” to encapsulate a merger of male-oriented conspiracism and female-oriented alternative spirituality or “New Age” spirituality (itself a gloss for esotericism). Ward and Voas define conspirativity as a “hybrid system of belief” with a political orientation constituting a worldview that is both surprising and recent, utilizing the cultic milieu to account for the cultural space in which such a merger could take place.⁸ However, in “Conspirativity Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?” Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal convincingly argue that alternative spiritualities and conspiracy theories are entwined in the history of esotericism. In fact, they suggest that “conspiracism and esotericism are joined at the hip.”⁹ Asprem and Dyrendal show that by considering the history of European esotericism, such a combination appears both predictable and established. Furthermore, they show that “rejected knowledge” and the cultic milieu have “allowed spokespersons who did *not* self-identify with the world of occult rejected knowledge to take over the inverted wisdom narratives of the Reformation and the Enlightenment and thus ... to view the occultists as internal enemies, working to corrupt the true faith, upset public morals, and spread false knowledge.”¹⁰ They conclude that this dynamic of

⁷ Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 36–7. Here Melley is referring to postmodern society, not early modern Europe, but this astute characterization of simultaneously competing ontologies is applicable in both historical contexts.

⁸ Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirativity,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011): 103–21.

⁹ Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Conspirativity Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30, no. 3 (2015): 373.

¹⁰ Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Conspirativity Reconsidered,” 374.

self-understanding occultists and public stigmatization of occult knowledge have facilitated the production of myriad conspiracy motifs.

This can be explored through a recent conspiracy-flavored meme on the Internet referred to as the Mandela Effect, which states that minute details from the past have been manipulated to create a parallel universe. The ME offers scholars an opportunity for analyzing the persistence of an esoteric, epistemological “Other,” and thus this paper harnesses the ME to display the ways in which esoteric and conspiratorial ontologies are mutually constructed and diffused in opposition to an “official” worldview. Some self-identifying “Mandela Effect researchers” are fundamentalist Christians, rather than New Agers or esotericists, so it may seem erroneous to compare them with historically marginalized esoteric thinkers.¹¹ However, my rationale is that ME “researchers” are unknowingly drawing on the same reservoir of esoteric knowledge within the same historically marginalized cultural space as esoteric thinkers and “New Agers” have done and still do. To support this move, I lean on Asprem and Dyrendal’s theorization of Campbell’s cultic milieu alongside James’s Webb’s “rejected knowledge” as being the cultural space of “all deviant belief systems,” and extending it to Michael Barkun’s notion of “stigmatized knowledge claims.”¹² The assertions of Christian Mandela Effect researchers would not be, and are not, acceptable to mainstream scientific and academic elites, nor to mainline Christians. Such knowledge practices are necessarily relegated to the border regions in society, where we might expect to find knowledge claims of the New Age movement, conspiracy theorists, and esotericists. A cursory excursion into something like YouTube should make this abundantly clear.

Therefore, if we follow Barkun’s suggestion that “the very logic of the cultic milieu suggests that under certain circumstances a person’s religion becomes indistinguishable from political ideology and the occult,”¹³ we shall find that those believing in the Mandela Effect, while sometimes self-identifying as Christians – but often as “red-pilled” Christians, a reference to the

¹¹ “Mandela Effect Researchers” is a self-designation among those who believe in the Mandela Effect. I employ the term as well to adhere more closely to the emic terminology, and also because research (i.e., endlessly looking up things on the Web) is literally the main activity of this group.

¹² James Webb, *The Flight from Reason* (London: Macdonald, 1971); Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹³ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 26.

Matrix films — possess characteristics historically attributed to esotericism by constructing a worldview based on stigmatized knowledge claims oriented in opposition to the “authorized” knowledge claims of the establishment. Barkun has identified two ideal types of occult-conspiracist interactions, with Type I representing non-occult practitioners who seek to expose the evil power of the occult (an example of this type is John Todd), and Type II representing those holding conspiracy theories who themselves have some occult beliefs (here Barkun gives the example of David Icke). Barkun has recently described the “merging of fringe and mainstream” and has argued that “the formerly clear boundary between mainstream and fringe no longer exists.” This change is due to advancements in communications technology, which allows for fringe beliefs to flow into the mainstream through unexpected channels. He concludes that as the occult and conspiracy theories become more mainstream, “the process of fringe-to-mainstream migration may be the catalyst for another process, namely, the creation of new elements of stigmatized knowledge ... in ways that cannot yet be seen, the fringe will eventually both contract and expand as a function of the dynamics of boundary change.”¹⁴

With the emergence of the Internet, websites like Wikipedia, and social media sharing platforms like YouTube, the cultic milieu now encompasses more than Campbell’s “occult” and non-Christian elements (i.e., “occulture”), and appears to be merging, to some degree, with the fundamentalist Christian milieu (for example, Hillary Clinton’s reference to “dark conspiracy theories drawn from ... the far, dark reaches of the internet” in her so-called “alt-right speech”¹⁵) and the underground conspiracy theory community (such as people who self-identify as “red-pilled” Christians). The spread of the Internet and smartphone technology has wrought a transformation in society, including what Campbell has called the “cultural underground of society.” It is important to note that persistent secularization might be relegating aspects of the institutional religions into the cultic milieu, especially when it comes to CERN, the Mandela Effect, and panic over “fake news.” Campbell certainly never would have included elements of fundamentalist Christianity when theorizing his underground milieu, yet this seems to me to be a potential mistake. More extreme forms of Christianity *have* sometimes

¹⁴ Michael Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2016), 701-09.

¹⁵ Team Fix, Abby Ohlheiser and Caitlin Dewey, “Hillary Clinton’s Alt-Right Speech, Annotated,” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/08/25/hillary-clintons-alt-right-speech-annotated/?utm_term=.39f63195c9ef.

existed in tension with mainstream society, beginning at the outset in ancient Rome and later in modern societies that operate (at least organizationally) along rationalist and materialist principles. In the current “hyper-normal” and “post-truth” world in which we find ourselves, heavily mediated by technological information flows, the cultic milieu theory needs reconfiguring. A phenomenon such as the ME illustrates that the institutional “un-fungible” beliefs of Christianity can exist alongside esoteric knowledge and New Age wisdom, oriented around conspiracism and directed at something as highly specialized and scientific as CERN. Campbell anticipates this when he concludes his essay, arguing that “the imputed processes of secularization may be creating circumstances favorable to the growth of the milieu and the further expansion of cultic beliefs” and that “a growth in the prestige of science results in the absence of control of the beliefs of non-scientists and in an increase in quasi-scientific beliefs.”¹⁶

Campbell did not anticipate that fundamentalist Christian elements, riding on the back of conspiracy theories and ongoing secularization, would appear in his cultic milieu and cohabit with esotericism and New Age spirituality. Scholars have begun to note these changes and are working to update and expand cultic milieu theory (e.g., conspirituality). Jeffery Kaplan and Heléne Lööw’s edited volume, *The Cultic Milieu* (2002), seeks to complexify Campbell’s picture in light of the Internet and increased globalization. They note that “with the explosion of Internet communications in the present day, ideas move with unimaginable speed to an ever increasingly audience of consumers ... because the ideas move so easily within the vast cultic milieu, it is not only conceivable, but likely, that vastly incompatible groups, belief systems, and individual adherents could (and do) materialize together, as if from the very ether itself, for events on which interests converge.”¹⁷

For the present paper, this convergent event is a phenomenon called the Mandela Effect, in which red-pilled Christians, occultists, New Agers, and conspiracy theorists alike have a vested interest. ME believers knowingly and unknowingly call upon forgotten or rejected esoteric beliefs in a complex cultural space where the laws of nineteenth-century physics no longer apply, and where a struggle is undertaken to make sense of modern experiments in physics (e.g., CERN).

¹⁶ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972): 119–36. Reprinted in Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw eds., *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 23–24.

¹⁷ Kaplan and Lööw, *The Cultic Milieu*, 6.

The Mandela Effect

The Mandela Effect (ME) started to appear on the Internet in 2012 or 2013. Since then, its popularity has skyrocketed. Internet users have suggested alternative nomenclature for the phenomenon, such as the M Effect, the Quantum Effect, or just the Effect, however the initial appellation persists. The following presents an anecdotal account of my personal encounter with this phenomenon on the Internet.

The ME came to my attention in 2015 when I came across a blog post from 2012 written by “Reece,” who claimed to be a “graduate student of physics.” The blog was called the *Wood between Worlds* and the post was entitled “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe.”¹⁸ It discussed the idea that the spelling of the name of a popular children’s series — a series originating in the 1960s — had been altered from its original spelling of *The Berenstein Bears* (spelled –ein) to an alternate spelling of *The Berenstain Bears* (spelled –ain).¹⁹

“Reece” was certain, as a result of childhood memories and familiarity with the series, that the former spelling was correct, and a number of others commenting on the post agreed with him. The spelling change coincided with the death of the last member of the couple who had created the series, Jan and Stan Berenstain. In fact, it was the “misspelling” on Jan’s obituary in 2012 that drew the blogger’s attention to the name change of Berenstein to Berenstain. When the blogger looked up the name on the Internet, not only was it spelled Berenstain everywhere, but all the old book covers the blogger personally owned revealed the alternate spelling. “Reece” came across more people who remembered the –ein spelling, some of whom ran home to their parents’ houses to dig up old books from the past, only to be shocked by the supposedly “new” spelling.²⁰

¹⁸ Reece, “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe,” *The Wood between Worlds*, August 23, 2012, <http://www.woodbetween.world/2012/08/the-berenstein-bears-we-are-living-in.html>.

¹⁹ According to a 2015 article by Mack Lamoureux for Vice.com, the confusion over the spelling first appeared on the Internet in 2009 on Dreadlock Truth forum and later again on a humorist website called the Communist Dance Party in 2011, which first pairs the misremembered spelling with the Butterfly Effect. From there, the phenomenon leaped into 2012 with the Wood between Worlds blog post by Reece. For the *Vice* article see Mack Lamoureux, “The Berenst(E) ain Bears Conspiracy Theory That Has Convinced the Internet There Are Parallel Universes,” *Vice*, accessed October 14, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mvx7v8/the-berenstein-bears-conspiracy-theory-that-has-convinced-the-internet-there-are-parallel-universes.

²⁰ These accounts are all narrated in the “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe” blog page.

So many recalled the previous spelling, and so emphatically, that the blogger came to the conclusion that somehow our reality had been tampered with, that in the past the name actually *had* been spelled -ein, but that after this reality-tampering it was spelled with an -ain. In *this* reality, it had *always* been spelled that way. In short, the blogger concluded we are living in an alternate reality or “parallel universe,” and for the remainder of the post “Reece” described the mathematical potentiality – through examples like imaginal numbers and quantum theory – for this conclusion to be possible. The blog post further stated that “the stEin and the stAin universes are actually just different hexadectants of the same universe.”²¹ In other words, the proposal was not exactly for a quantum multiverse but a reality slippage from one temporal quadrant of reality into a parallel quadrant within the same reality.

What was this about? I recalled the Berenstein spelling, so the post left me feeling vexed. I wouldn’t have bet my life on the -ein spelling, but it seemed to be the way I remembered it. What was more interesting was the number of other people who remembered it this way. Certainly, there were people who recalled it with -ain, but a larger number believed it had changed, and the majority was more than willing to jump on the parallel reality theory.

Things only got weirder from there. For one, in the comments for the post there was a person claiming to be the actual son of Jan and Stan, one Mike Berenstein, who applauded the creativity of the post but then went on to give a very sober history of how his family had in fact changed the name -ein to -ain after coming to America from the Ukraine for the surname to sound less Jewish when pronounced (there is a long history of this, of course). Apply Occam’s razor, Mike wrote, and you will see that it has always been BerenstAin.²² Below this comment, a dizzying list of other people agreed or disagreed with Mike’s statement, or simply expressed their befuddlement over the whole issue. By the thread’s end, people had resorted to spelling it Berenst*in.

Not long after, I came across several YouTube videos that discussed the same confusing idea, and by this point it was simply being referred to as the “The Berenst(E)ain Bears Conspiracy Theory,” and even the “Glitch in the Matrix.” Since I remembered the spelling as -ein, I delved into some of these videos and blog posts, but there seemed to be no clear answer to the whole thing. I eventually gave up.

²¹ Reece, “The Berenstein Bears.”

²² Anonymous, August 23, 2012 (3:44 p.m.), comment on Reece, “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe,” *The Wood between Worlds*, August 23, 2012, <http://www.woodbetween.world/2012/08/the-berenstein-bears-we-are-living-in.html>.

Later in 2015 I came across something else on YouTube that piqued my interest in this subject, which revealed not only that the The Berenst(E)ain Bears Conspiracy Theory had continued, but also that it had been developing in bizarre and interesting ways. The videos I came across discussed something called the Mandela Effect, referring to Nelson Mandela, and while much of the focus remained on *The Berenstain Bears* spelling mix-up, it was now being referred to as the Mandela Effect.

The concept and name were coined by paranormal blogger and author Fiona Broome, who developed a website of the same name that focused on “Alternate Memories/Alternate Realities.”²³ She explains that she launched her website “to describe an emerging phenomenon,” and she offers the following backstory: “Years ago, I was one of the two people who coined the phrase ‘Mandela Effect’ during a conversation in Dragon Con’s ‘green room’ ... It started when Shadow [a Dragon Con security manager] mentioned that – like me – other people remembered Nelson Mandela’s tragic death in a South African prison. Apparently, others in the green room shared that memory.”²⁴ In the post that launched her website, Broome explained: “I thought Nelson Mandela died in prison. I thought I remembered it clearly, complete with news clips of his funeral, the mourning in South Africa, some rioting in cities, and the heartfelt speech by his widow. Then, I found out he was still alive.”²⁵

As we all know (or perhaps *should* know), Nelson Mandela died in 2013 following a long and prestigious career. But a person suffering from the ME remembers several things one way that are apparently incorrect. The long list of altered examples usually begins, for most people, with the spelling of the name Berenstain of the popular children’s book series. I spent over two years tracking examples of this phenomenon, and I provide a few of these below. In reporting on the ME to both laypersons and academics, I have sometimes noted a strong emotional reaction while listening to examples. There are, incidentally, *hundreds* of examples circulating online.

The movie (and novel) by Anne Rice called *Interview with a Vampire* has been changed to *Interview with **the** Vampire*. The name of the television series *Sex in the City* is now *Sex **and** the City*. The title of the cartoon series *Looney Toons* is now spelled *Looney **Tunes***. The old TV series Johnny Quest is now spelled **Jonny** Quest.

²³ Fiona Broome, “The Mandela Effect,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://mandelaeffect.com>.

²⁴ Broome, “Mandela Effect.”

²⁵ Fiona Broome, “Nelson Mandela Died in Prison?,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://mandelaeffect.com/nelson-mandela-died-in-prison/>.

The famous line from the TV show *I Love Lucy*, “Lucy, you’ve got some ‘splaining to do,” was never said on the show. In *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) the *Star Wars* film, the famous line “Luke, I am your Father” has been changed to “**No**, I am your Father.” The character C-3PO from the *Star Wars* series is now thought to have a silver leg that it never had before. In *Forest Gump* (1994), the line “Life is like a box of chocolates” has been changed to “Life **was** like a box of Chocolates.” In *Field of Dreams* (1989), the line “If you build it, they will come” has changed to “If you build it, **he** will come.” The line “Mirror, Mirror on the wall” from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) is now “**Magic** Mirror on the wall.” In the first *Jaws* movie (1975), the famous line “We’re going to need a bigger boat” has been changed to “**You’re** going to need a bigger boat.” Several things have been altered in the original version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The first is that the line “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore” is now “Toto, **I’ve a feeling** we’re not in Kansas anymore.” The second is that during a scene in the movie in which the main characters are lost in a scary wood, the Scarecrow now wields a pistol that appears entirely out of place. The memorable opening lyrics of the song from *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* (1968–2001), “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood,” has changed to “It’s a beautiful day in **this** neighborhood.” Another song lyric alteration is the final line from the Queen song *We are the Champions* (1977), in which Freddy Mercury sings “... of the world” at the end. Now he doesn’t sing that line; the song just ends.

The monkey from the children’s series *Curious George* (2006–2015) no longer has a tail. Two obscure television shows starring The Brady Bunch from the late ‘70s and early ‘80s called *The Brady Brides* and *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour Show* are thought only to exist in this new parallel universe. In the 1980 film *The Elephant Man*, the ending is no longer sad but uplifting, with a ghost appearing that people seem not to remember. The 1984 Toyota Van, the so-called “terrorist van,” from the first *Back to the Future* (1985) movie has been changed into the iconic VW Bus. The character Dolly, who is Jaws’s girlfriend in the 1979 James Bond movie *Moonraker*, no longer has braces. There have also been many changes to names of various actors and famous persons, such as *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz (remembered as Charles Shultz), stuntman Evel Knievel (remembered as Evil Knievel), country singer Reba McEntire (remembered as Reba McIntyre), and Sally Field (remembered as Sally Fields).

In addition to TV, film, and music changes, a whole host of product logos are thought to have been altered, including Coca-Cola, Yoo-hoo, Cup Noodles, Depend, JCPenney, Oscar Mayer, Totino’s, KitKat, Reddi-wip, Froot Loops, Chick-fil-A, Oxi Clean, Vicks VapoRub, Scott, Skechers, Double

Stuf Oreos, Bragg, Febreze, Curad, Johnnie Walker, Ford, Volvo, Volkswagen, and many others. Curiously, most of the corporations behind these brands claim never to have changed and/or updated their logos.²⁶

Changes cited in the Holy Bible are too numerous to mention, but I will include a few of the most popular. These pertain to the King James Version, and they are found changed in the physical copies of old, owned KJV bibles, as well as in online versions. One is to be found in Isaiah 11:6. This passage used to begin “The lion and the lamb will lay down together” but now it says: “**The wolf will live with the lamb.**” In Matthew 9:17, the word “wineskins” here has been changed to **wine bottles**. Luke 5:24 no longer says bed or mat, but now says: “I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy **couch**, and go into thine house.”

Proponents of the ME also believe that the Earth’s geography has been altered, with South America now being too far east, and Australia being much closer to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. There are many other examples, as well. Human anatomy has also undergone some changes, including the size of various organs such as the liver, as well as the shape, size, and position of floating ribs at the bottom of the ribcage, and the heart is now located in the center of the chest, rather than at the left breast. As with Nelson Mandela’s misremembered death, many changed historical events are frequently cited. Some people believe the “Tank Man” who stood before a column of tanks on June 4, 1989, in Tiananmen Square was killed and run down by the tank, but the man simply halted the line of tanks and was ushered out of harm’s way. Another change is the 1963 Lincoln four-seater that drove John F. Kennedy on the day he was assassinated. Now there are six seats in the Lincoln, and six people too, in the famous video footage and photographs of the assassination. To top things off, Hitler now has blue eyes instead of brown eyes, and one of the spaces you used to be able to buy on a *Monopoly* game board was called Ventura Avenue but now it is called **Ventnor Avenue**. And Rich Uncle Pennybags, the mascot of *Monopoly*, never had a monocle.

And so on, and so on.

Religious Belief and Esotericism

In the ME community, one often hears, “In this reality...” or “In this timeline, timeline B...” when discussing a supposed change. They refer to material

²⁶ The unchanged status of the logos is typically confirmed for Mandela Effect researchers online through the actual corporate websites or frequently through the *Logopedia* website.

evidence that appears to show things as they “remember them” — such as old photos, or old newspaper articles with the correct spelling of Sally Fields, etc. — as “residue.” Although a variety of explanations are exchanged among self-identifying ME researchers, the most prominent theorizing about the source of the parallel reality is divided into two separate but interrelated camps. Both camps overlap in that they believe that the LHC at CERN — which has been openly trying to discover extra dimensions and the particles that make up dark matter — has succeeded in either punching a hole in space-time, contacting an alternate dimension, or altering the timeline through experiments which have resulted in the past becoming switched, changed, or deliberately *edited*. The concept of constructing a people’s history and its direct effect on them is nothing new to historians, but what may be new is the extent to which people in the public sphere are discussing the idea as a real possibility for explaining feelings of global anxiety, confusion, disorder, and postmodernity. In addition to the CERN connection, both camps cite the development of the D-Wave system quantum computers as partly responsible for tampering with the fabric of reality through its complex computational processing operations. According to the D-Wave website:

To speed computation, quantum computers tap directly into an unimaginably vast fabric of reality — the strange and counterintuitive world of quantum mechanics. Rather than store information using bits represented by 0s or 1s as conventional computers do, quantum computers use quantum bits, or *qubits*, to encode information as 0s, 1s, or both simultaneously. This *superposition* of states, along with the quantum effects of *entanglement* and *quantum tunneling*, enable quantum computers to consider and manipulate many combinations of bits simultaneously.²⁷

Both camps of ME researchers believe in a conspiratorial hidden hand of scientists, politicians, corporations, “globalists,” and neoliberal financiers working to create a New World Regime in which billions of unconscious, materially distracted political subjects are manipulated, oppressed, and dominated. Admittedly, the development of advanced technologies are frequently funded by government security agencies and “D-Wave’s first customer was Lockheed Martin, one of the world’s largest aerospace, information systems, and defense contractors.”²⁸ Of

²⁷ “D-Wave 2000Q Tech Collateral,” D-Wave Systems Inc., 3, accessed October 14, 2018, https://www.dwavesys.com/sites/default/files/D-Wave%202000Q%20Tech%20Collateral_0117F_0.pdf.

²⁸ “D-Wave Overview,” D-Wave Systems Inc., 4, accessed October 14, 2018, https://www.dwavesys.com/sites/default/files/D-Wave-Overview-Jan2017F_1.pdf.

course, the assumption made by ME researchers is that people as subjects are not already oppressed and dominated; instead, the projected world-to-come for these two camps of believers is a dystopia of grand proportions, a “Prison Planet” in the words of one popular conspiracy researcher Alex Jones.²⁹

Where the two ME camps differ is on the evangelical front. The first camp subscribes to a mostly secular conspiratorial worldview filled with corrupt businessmen and politicians trying to enslave humanity, with the theories of quantum mechanics and the work carried out at CERN and quantum computers allowing for the possibility of an alternate dimension. However, not all the ME believers in this camp are atheistic, and many subscribe to a type of New Age spirituality with blends of esotericism, quantum mysticism, and Asian religion and philosophy.

The second camp colors their language with biblical references, the dawning apocalypse, Satanic magical rituals, and the rise of the Antichrist, signs for which they locate in all the various aspects of the ME. For this camp, the direction of the world away from God has resulted in these subtle reality alterations, which they interpret as fulfillment of biblical prophecy, citing Daniel 7:25 which states that the Antichrist will “change times/seasons and laws.” George M. Marsden famously argued in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980) that American evangelical Christians have, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, reacted strongly against the influence of Darwinism and modern liberal society, culminating in what is now commonly referred to as “fundamentalism.” Marsden describes how the fundamentalist variant of American Christianity was often characterized as anti-science, anti-intellectual, even as a laughing stock in the early twentieth century, and how this stereotype became a reality as fundamentalists retreated from modern life until the second part of the twentieth century, when they reversed and entered the political sphere. Marsden’s conclusion is that “fundamentalists experienced profound ambivalence toward the surrounding culture,” and this observation is important because the religious camp of the ME displays a similar separatist attitude toward New World Order “globalists,” who they perceive to be at the heart of contemporary societal problems.³⁰ This helps to explain how the Christian elements have come to cohabitate in the cultic milieu with both esotericism and New Age spirituality in our postmodern, technoscience culture.

Furthermore, there is an echo here of those intellectual debates of Enlightenment Europe described by Hanegraaff, in which esotericism was framed as a separate domain in the various processes of boundary work of the

²⁹ Alex Jones, *Prison Planet TV*, accessed December 17, 2018, <http://tv.infowars.com/>.

³⁰ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), x.

Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation (as well as the Catholic Counter-Reformation). This development resulted in undermining the authority of biblical Christianity through a privileged positionality of human reason, a claim picked up by the secularization thesis during the twentieth century. With the so-called “victory of science” and the eventual expulsion of metaphysics and theology from elite academic discourses, which was replaced by a secular scientific discourse, it might be said that metaphysics and theology relocated within the public sphere.³¹ The persistent process of societal secularization may contribute to a scenario in the future in which fundamentalist Christianity finds itself in the cultic milieu, along with esotericism.

Christians enthralled by the ME display the characteristic signs of esotericism as a separate, marginalized knowledge discourse, especially in their reliance on amateur research, supernatural causality, and subjective experience. Yet evangelical ME researchers need not “war with the facts” of science, for in this new reality the facts are simply altered constantly through devious supernatural means. Clinging to the literal truth of the Bible becomes imperative. The evangelical camp is typically right wing in its views, often condemning CERN workers, homosexuals, and leftist politicians in the same breath. When videos started being uploaded to YouTube describing how the Mandela Effect had altered the Bible, this camp often had to reject such assertions, explaining that the Bible is God’s Word and thus unalterable.³² This area continues to divide the two camps, with the secular/occult/New Age one believing the biblical alterations and the evangelical one for the most part arguing that these alterations are delusions effectuated by the Antichrist. Many concepts and practices associated with esotericism and occultism are cited in conjunction with CERN, quantum computing, and corrupt politicians as yet another element of what is taking place, with a particular focus on “Satanic” ritual magic.

The occultist/New Age current of ME contributes to our understanding of esotericism and its relationship to conspiracism by highlighting the close proximity and mutual constitution of these domains of knowledge. Whatever boundary existed between them is increasingly becoming eroded through our modern information technologies. For example, one feature of the New Age movement after 2000 was the lead up to 2012 and the promise of an age of spiritual awakening that would come with the end of the Mesoamerican

³¹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism in the Academy*, 153-56.

³² See, for example, New Covenant Baptist, “The Lion and the Lamb (Mandela Effect Debunked),” video, 7:35, July 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6ku06695qs>.

Long Count calendar.³³ As the prophetic date of December 21 came and went, leaving the world apparently unaltered, it created a hole in the New Age community, which some have rectified using the ME. In the words of one blogger who posted “December 21, 2012” under a Reddit thread devoted to the ME:

I had a thought today about this date. I remember people making a big deal about this for years. When the day came and went and there was no “end of the world” people just went on with their lives. It pretty much has not been talked about since. ... I feel like this date may be a big reason for these noticeable changes that we call the Mandela Effect. I cannot shake that feeling.³⁴

This new interpretation maintains that the ME is proof we shifted timelines in 2012, and since that time an all-out war has erupted between the forces of good and the forces of evil, with the latter often described as globalists, evil wizards, and corporate elites.³⁵ However, this is often interpreted as a positive development in the overall spiritual evolution of humankind, despite the various agents of evil at work. In the words of another blogger:

I have come to see a definite link between the Mandela Effect and the destruction of organized religion; inasmuch as organized religion, including Christianity, **must** be destroyed in order to clear the way for humanity to ascend to a higher existence. This does not mean the Truth that Christianity is centered around must be destroyed; it means that Christianity itself – the religious institution – is what prohibits people from *finding* that Truth.³⁶

Additional examples by New Age authors include *Mandela Effect — CERN Reality Changes, Time Travel, Parallel Worlds & Black Magick* by Edward Alexander, a Norwegian occultist. Cynthia Sue Larson, a spiritual life coach and inspirational, bestselling author, has incorporated the ME into her system but

³³ The purest example of this idea is, perhaps, articulated in Daniel Pinchbeck, *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2006). However, other esoteric groups such as the Anthroposophists took notice, for example Robert Powell and Kevin T. Dann, *Christ and the Maya Calendar: 2012 and the Coming of the Antichrist* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2009). For scholarly analysis of the 2012 phenomenon see Joseph Gelfer, *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

³⁴ TimothyTeboux, “December 21, 2012,” *Reddit* (blog), 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/MandelaEffect/comments/6k5kh3/december_21_2012/.

³⁵ See, for example, Corey Goode, “Ancient Aliens from the Future! Time Travel & the Cosmic Web,” video, 1:41:25, August 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsWjmlvTtM>.

³⁶ TombEscaper, “The Mandela Effect Can No Longer Be Denied: Berenstein Was The Tip of The Iceberg,” *AboveTopSecret* (blog), May 28, 2016, <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread1115051/pg140>.

downplays the conspiratorial elements, writing that “CERN came along after the fact, from the standpoint that first nations peoples have long described oral histories about how these same sorts of things (so-called ‘Mandela Effect’) have been happening since the dawn of time.”³⁷ Spiritual teacher and author Stasha Eriksen self-published a book titled *The Mandela Effect: Everything is Changing*, explaining to her readers on the back cover, “I had the phenomenon presented to me, and I felt called to show it to all of you, for what appears to be a Divine reason.” Several Rastafarians have picked up the topic, notably Ras Ben who presents on the subject, for example at the Canaanland Moors Seventh Annual Noble Drew Ali Day in 2017. The popular hip-hop reggae artist Illuminati Congo also released a song in 2018 titled “Mandela Effect.”

The most extreme interpretation of this “positive” occultist/New Age current of the ME comes from John Lamb Lash, the neo-Gnostic author known for his writings on mythology and ancient Gnosticism.³⁸ In early 2017, Lash created a YouTube account called “Mandela Effect Decoded” and proceeded to release over sixty videos “decoding” the phenomenon from his own “gnostic” perspective. He also released a “tracking page” detailing the developments on his website metahistory.org.³⁹ The series begins with a description of Nelson Mandela as a Marxist, Communist, anti-white murderer responsible for the deaths of white people in South Africa, and whose legacy is responsible for racial tensions in that region today. Other popular Mandela Effects are given a similar interpretation by Lash, drawing on ideas typically associated with the “alt-right” – although Lash himself would resist this identification. The “pings” of the Mandela Effect, as he calls them – meaning instances of misremembrance that grab your attention – are sent by the goddess Sophia – who is Gaia, the earth mother goddess – in an effort to notify her “children” that she has returned to bring about what Lash, in his reading of Nag Hammadi texts, calls “Sophia’s correction.” Sophia’s children are described by Lash as the white race of Europe who have been targeted by Marxists, Jews, leftist intellectuals, and social justice warriors. These groups are either deceived by or are working directly for the “Archons” in an effort to bring about the genocidal eradication

³⁷ Cynthia Sue Larson, “The Mandela Effect has been with us longer than we thought,” *RealityShifters* (blog), July 3, 2016, <https://cynthiasuelarson.wordpress.com/2016/07/03/the-mandela-effect-has-been-with-us-longer-than-we-thought/>.

³⁸ His most well known title is John Lamb Lash, *Not in His Image: Gnostic Vision, Sacred Ecology, and the Future of Belief* (Hartford, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006).

³⁹ Many of the videos and the “tracking page” have since been removed but are preserved on *Internet Archive* at https://archive.org/details/MANDELA_EFFECT_DECODED.

of “white people,” who are often specified as Europeans. This would wipe out the possibility for Gnostic spirituality, as well. Sophia returned to “correct” this situation, and those who recognize the “pings” are the true knowers becoming conscious of the fact that the mother goddess has returned.

Lash saves his most intense vitriol for Christians, whom he derides as being deluded and ensorcelled by Jews, the religion he sees as responsible for Christianity. Lash is thus able to align his anti-Semitic and anti-Christian views through a logic not altogether incongruous with modern reconstructions of Gnosticism. Lash would defend his anti-Semitism as being the culmination of his Gnostic experiences and lifelong study of the Nag Hammadi texts. In his reading, these texts present a religiosity that is diametrically opposed to Judeo-Christian salvation. Mathew J. Dillon, a scholar of Gnosticism and popular culture, has recently noted Lash’s “fall into virulent alt-right anti-Semitism,” writing that:

Lash’s anti-Semitism brings into focus an unsettling but unavoidable aspect of the reception of the Nag Hammadi codices. It is undeniable that presentations of the Hebrew YHVH as Ialdabaoth can be read as anti-Semitic themselves to anti-Semitic interpretations. Lash’s counter-memory of early Christianity, while historically incoherent, amounts to a reading of Judeo-Christian history as the false worship of Ialdabaoth and his rulers. Having written in *Not in his Image* that Judeo-Christianity exterminated the pagans, it is unsurprising that he would find similar archontic dynamics at play in the contemporary world.⁴⁰

Lash’s “fall” into the alt-right began sometime before he started incorporating elements of the ME into his message. However, such ideas found greater support and a new audience once he encountered the ME. Lash’s vision is possibly centered more on anti-Semitism than something like anti-blackness. As Dillon points out, Lash’s study of Gnosticism caused him to reevaluate both the Nazis and Adolf Hitler, and he has since become an outspoken Holocaust denier. While he advocates racial purity, he simultaneously interprets Judaism as a “master race” ideology that is committed to “white genocide” of non-Jews.⁴¹ The case of Lash reveals the crucial need for more research into the racist and racial dimensions of the ME, and how such ideas are recycled and re-transmitted within the cultic milieu of esotericism and conspiracism.

⁴⁰ Mathew J. Dillon, “The Heretical Library: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2017), 144.

⁴¹ Dillon, “The Heretical Library: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture,” 143–45.

Conspiracism

Academic literature on conspiracy theories is limited, but there are enough books on the market to see how scholars have approached the subject — that is, as the “relic of a populist, right wing, political tradition, which refuses to go away.”⁴² The foundation for much of this literature is Richard Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” published in *Harper’s Magazine* in November 1964, which describes the paranoid style of conspiracy theorists as apocalyptic, hinging on all or nothing, making “the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable.”⁴³ This leap is not for want of facts, as conspiracy theorists avidly accumulate “facts” in order to prove their case to nonbelievers, but at some crucial junction they make a leap in the imagination. This style of explanation arouses deep emotions, immediacy, and conviction, and Hofstadter concludes that the paranoid spokesperson is in fact a militant leader: their rhetoric is one of absolutes — absolute good versus absolute evil — and, in short, they are something to be avoided. Many scholars have followed Hofstadter’s line of reasoning, such as Karl Popper, David Brion Davis, Daniel Pipes, Michael Barkun, and others.

However, recently scholars have attempted to recast conspiracy theory style in a positive, playful light. These scholars point to a turning point in 1963 with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, when conspiracy theory extended toward the purview of the Left. This later material, coming out of newer disciplinary fields such as cultural studies and science and technology

⁴² Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19. For an academic overview of conspiracy theories see Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); idem., *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Aaron John Gulyas, *The Paranormal and the Paranoid: Conspiratorial Science Fiction Television* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1964; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000); idem., *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); idem., *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

⁴³ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 37–8.

studies, reframes conspiracy theory as an acceptable response to the postmodern world, the decline of Western society, mass surveillance, late capitalist economy, and neoliberal globalization. Scholars such as Knight, Fenster, Melley, and Gulyas describe how from the 1960s to the 1990s, leftist conspiracy theories became widespread and represented the expression in popular culture of paranormal and science fiction themes, epitomized by the TV show *The X-Files* (1993–2002), with a playful, parodic, self-reflexive critique of power. Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson describes the production of conspiracy theories, albeit critically, as the “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age,” a desperate but necessary attempt to make sense of the globalized, multinational, and highly complex operations of late capitalism.⁴⁴ Timothy Melley builds on this idea, calling conspiratorial explanations “a way of understanding power that appeals both to marginalized groups and the power elite,” no longer referring to some small political plot but to “a large *organization, technology or system*, a powerful and obscure entity.” Melley concludes that conspiracy “has come to signify a broad array of social controls.”⁴⁵

In *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, Jovan Byford criticizes this reversal by affirming that conspiracy theories are harmful to society “because they harbour suspicion about any official source of knowledge [and] stand in opposition to science, medicine, and other forms of academic inquiry.”⁴⁶ The main points of his book, which echo those of Hofstadter as well as Popper, are important and contain much validity.⁴⁷ Yet Byford’s argument is precisely the reason for approaching conspiratorial thinking differently, for to accept his view we must be satisfied with Western academic and scientific forms of knowledge production, their pedigree, and track record.

In some respects, the ME might cautiously be considered as a conspiracy theory through the lens of this latter group – as the continuation of a playful, intuitive, premonitory critique of knowledge production in its Western, capitalistic mode. We could characterize a certain strand of the history of modern esotericism in this way, as well.⁴⁸ This strand is clearly evincible in groups such

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 353.

⁴⁵ Timothy Melley, “Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy,” in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 57–9.

⁴⁶ Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 144.

⁴⁷ For Popper see *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, *Contemporary Esotericism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

as the Discordians in the 1960s, which invented a parody religion in underground magazines like *The East Village Other* (1969) in New York, and in Robert Anton Wilson's *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975).⁴⁹ These artists and writers brought together aspects of occultism, conspiracy, and New Age spirituality from the 1960s countercultural movement and blended them with humor, science fiction, and alternative history. Wilson's contribution is especially important because of his ability to simultaneously resist and acknowledge the validity and absurdity of fringe topics. In his fiction, he established a self-conscious position of ambiguity and offered an almost hacker-mentality approach to life. He was an influence on the California alternative spirituality and anti-establishment scene in and around the Bay Area during the '80s and '90s, and this influence bled into the more mainstream New Age movement that would later explode across the West Coast. As Joseph Dumit has commented, "the crux of New Age, the power of New Age, is generated by the fluidity of the playful attitude on the part of those persons who continuously create phenomena that can be identified with New Age."⁵⁰ This is the Wilson style of conspiracy theory, which culminated in the 1990s with the *X-Files*, a TV show that as recently as 2018 aired an episode titled "The Lost Art of Forehead Sweat" that tackled the Trump administration and fake news through the lens of the ME.

The extent to which New Agers and conspiracy theorists, including ME researchers, are aware of this influence on their beliefs is not altogether certain, but it is an important influence that appears to be more pervasive than is often recognized. The recent "alt-right" obsession with the Pepe the Frog meme, around which was constructed a parody deity called Kek and a parody country called Kekistan, is a clear example that such influences persist.⁵¹ In postmodern times, a serious attack has been leveled against the validity of facts, truth, and knowledge claims of so-called experts. The ME's uncertainty and challenge to recorded history and knowledge functions as a necessary reflection of our postmodern condition, and as a sign indicating the further liquid element of contemporary society, the slippage of our collective memory.

⁴⁹ For a useful overview, see Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), Chapter 9.

⁵⁰ Joseph Dumit, "Playing Truths: Logics of Seeking and the Persistence of the New Age," *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, no. 37 (2001): 69.

⁵¹ See Egil Asprem, "The Magical Theory of Politics: Meme Magic, the Cult of Kek, and How to Topple an Egore," forthcoming in *Nova Religio*; Jason Wilson, "Hiding in Plain Sight: How the 'Alt-Right' Is Weaponizing Irony to Spread Fascism," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2017, www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism.

New Memory, Hive Mind

I will briefly summarize two areas of research that could shed light on conspiratorial creations such as the ME. The aim is not to make a claim, but to suggest two potential entry points for tracking the ME's relation to the cultural imaginary of a secularized, technoscientific society. The examples concern the capacity, ability, and limitations of memory, both human and digital, and reveal that memory is more complex and enigmatic than is supposed.

A paper published in 1985 by Swedish scientist and physician D. H. Ingvar entitled "Memory of the Future: An Essay on the Temporal Organization of Conscious Awareness" introduced the idea that memory could be organized around future behavior and cognition.⁵² Ingvar's research focuses on the temporal organization of conscious awareness at the neurological level. Conscious experience is, according to Ingvar, considered to be based on past memories, the awareness of a now-present, and "concepts of future behavior and cognition, i.e. concepts of events which have not taken place."⁵³ Ingvar explains:

The capacity to retain and be conscious of concepts of future events is here termed "memory of the future". This unconventional and simple term was chosen since concepts about the future, like memories of past events, can be remembered, often in great detail. They can also, like memories of the past, be recalled spontaneously, or at will. ... The important question to be raised here is to what extent do events in the brain, related to the past, the present, and the future take place at a conscious (attentive) level or at a subconscious (pre-subtentive) level, or at both simultaneously.⁵⁴

Ingvar's argument is that human beings have an "inner future," composed of anticipated future plans, events, and goals, which they can recall at will and in painstaking detail. It follows, then, that they can spontaneously change this inner future and remember it differently. Interestingly, Ingvar concludes his paper by stating that "it is only by access to serial plans for future behavior and cognition, i.e. 'memory of the future', that we can select and perceive meaningful messages in the massive sensory barrage to which our brains are constantly exposed."⁵⁵ This relationship between temporality and memory

⁵² D. H. Ingvar, "Memory of the Future: An Essay on the Temporal Organization of Conscious Awareness," *Human Neurobiology* 4, no. 3 (1985): 127-36.

⁵³ Ingvar, "Memory of the Future," 128.

⁵⁴ Ingvar, "Memory of the Future," 128.

⁵⁵ Ingvar, "Memory of the Future," 134.

helps us understand the larger neurological implications of the ME; namely, that altering details of a person's past influences the course of their future — just as, according to Ingvar, the present is influenced by the future.

In the same year, 1985, Estonian-born Canadian experimental psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Endel Tulving developed his idea for the capacity of “autonoetic consciousness.”⁵⁶ According to Tulving, “Autonoetic (self-knowing) consciousness is the name given to the kind of consciousness that mediates an individual's awareness of his or her existence and identity in subjective time extending from the personal past through the present to the personal future. It provides the characteristic phenomenal flavor of the experience of remembering.”⁵⁷ This *flavor* “distinguishes remembering from other kinds of awareness, such as those characterizing perceiving, thinking, imagining, or dreaming.”⁵⁸

Like Ingvar, Tulving's capacity for memory is in integral property of human consciousness and conscious experience. Tulving relies on three types of memory: procedural, semantic, and episodic. For this paper we will consider only episodic memory, or the act of remembering personally experienced events. In most instances, ME researchers describe their experience of the past, having been altered and changed, in terms of strong personal recollections of *remembering* the original corporate logos or historical events from past experienced events or moments in their lives.

In a 2000 paper, “Where in the Brain Is the Awareness of One's Past,” Endel Tulving and Martin Lepage conclude that to recall a past event in one's memory is to consciously revisit the event in the present as a *new experience*.⁵⁹ This is Tulving's “autonoetic awareness,” which constitutes an individual's ability to traverse the personal past and future. Postulations on the formation of a neuropathic self and the plasticity of the brain by Catherine Malabou and others have since contributed to a dialogue about the self-creativity of mental processes.⁶⁰ Considering these developments alongside the ME opens the door to the interesting possibility for a complete autonomous self-regulation of temporality, memory, and the experience of reality.

⁵⁶ Endel Tulving, “Memory and Consciousness,” *Canadian Psychology* 26, no. 1 (1985): 1–12.

⁵⁷ Tulving, “Memory and Consciousness,” 1.

⁵⁸ Tulving, “Memory and Consciousness,” 3.

⁵⁹ Martin Lepage and Endel Tulving, “Where in the Brain Is the Awareness of One's Past?,” in *Memory, Brain, and Belief*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 208–28.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Joseph E. LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002); David William Bates and Nima Bassiri, *Plasticity and Pathology: On the Formation of the Neural Subject* (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, 2016).

Tulving's research and his scientific work is part of a complex, ongoing discussion related to the academic domains of psychology and neurobiology, much too complex to rehearse in a single paper focusing on conspiracy theory, religious belief, and esotericism. What is important to take away from this excerpt of Tulving's work, however, is his idea of auto-noetic consciousness and its relation to episodic memory and the ME, which will hopefully illustrate the function of memory as a dynamic, creative instrument at work within the "inner worlds" of people, playing a crucial role in how they construct not only their past and their present, but also their anticipated futures.

The recent research on future memory is important for thinking about the ME because it reveals the complex and creative elements at work in the memory apparatus. As this type of cognitive and psychological research demonstrates, when a person calls up a memory from the past, it is not as though they are putting on an old VHS tape and pressing play, but rather that the person is literally having a new experience, mentally, physically, affectively, and grounded in the sensorium. This idea can be traced to Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850–1909), a German psychologist who initiated experimental research into memory. Ebbinghaus's theories were developed by Sir Frederic Bartlett who argued in *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932) that "memory appears to me an affair of construction rather than reproduction."⁶¹ In other words, memory is a constructive process, a fitting together of fragments of information from a variety of diverse sources, and not a literal replication of past events or duplication of a tiny picture stored somewhere in the brain.

This interpretation of memory as "constructive" entered public awareness with Daniel L. Schacter's successful *Searching for Memory*, published in 1997.⁶² Schacter was a student of Tulving at the University of Toronto in the late 1970s, and his book discusses the various theories about memory based on scientific advances and research. Using case studies and new technological capabilities, the book presents Schacter's conclusion of "constructive memory."⁶³ In a 2012 interview with the *Harvard Gazette*, he referred to memory as both the "time machine of the brain" and a type of "virtual reality simulator."⁶⁴

⁶¹ F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 205. See also Daniel L. Schacter, "Adaptive Constructive Processes and the Future of Memory," *The American Psychologist* 67, no. 8 (2012): 603–13.

⁶² Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

⁶³ See also Daniel L. Schacter, "The Seven Sins of Memory: Insights from Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 3 (1999): 182–203.

⁶⁴ Taylor Beck, "Making Sense of Memory," *Harvard Gazette*, August 16, 2012, accessed

Memory is therefore more complex and quasi-mysterious than we tend to imagine. As Tulving and others have argued, since this curious reliving in the present of a recalled memory is true for the past, it could also be true of the future. What might this tell us about the ME and the role it plays in shaping the collective consciousness of the cultic milieu? I include this research in my paper on the ME and conspiracy theory to help us think through the deeper implications of this recent phenomenon, and what those implications are signaling us to pay attention to. The research on future memory reveals the blurry boundaries of the tripartite division of temporality – past, present, and future. Ingvar and other researchers base their definition of conscious experience on a linear model of past, present, and future, yet the three temporal concepts are, in fact, entangled within the inner experience of the individual. If we are to believe what Karen Barad has argued about the nature of the universe as a type of quantum “smear,” then the so-called individual is hopelessly entangled with matter, at both the social and ontological level.⁶⁵

Yet memory is fallible. A Google search of the ME brings up the Wikipedia entry for false memories and confabulation.⁶⁶ What is confabulation and why has the ME been hyperlinked to this Wikipedia article? William Hirstein published a monograph on the subject in 2005, entitled *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation*. Hirstein defines this disturbance in terms of “stories produced to cover gaps in memory.”⁶⁷ However, confabulation can define various other features, including denial, split-brain syndrome, and even schizotypy. Hirstein points to fracturing in one’s epistemic system as a possible cause of confabulation. This could account for another feature of confabulation in which people “do not experience doubt about their claims and ideas, whereas a normal person would. The claims are epistemically ill-grounded because they have not passed a review process that can result in doubt about them.”⁶⁸ Hence the resistance and denial which emerges when confabulations are confronted with conflicting data. The important point here is not whether one sequence of events is more “real” than the other, but rather that the resisted data and the clung-to data represent competing forms of knowledge.

October 14, 2018, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/08/making-sense-of-memory/>.

⁶⁵ Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ There has been a “Rational Wiki” page made for the ME. See https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Mandela_effect.

⁶⁷ William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 19.

⁶⁸ Hirstein, *Brain Fiction*, 21.

However, it is therefore important not to write off the ME as “mere” confabulation, but to consider the phenomenon in light of what we have said about the effect of subjective memory on an individual’s cognitive map. This phenomenon is part of a process that has, and will continue to have, profound consequences on the emergent future. The unique relationship shared by memory, temporality, and historical consciousness provides fertile ground for exploring the potential implications of the ME and its collective effect on Campbell’s “social underground.”

A final example to highlight is the role that digital memory, cloud storage, and big data play in the ME. In 2001, tech author and founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine Kevin Kelly gave a talk for the PARC Forum at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center entitled “The Self-Replicating Omega Library.”⁶⁹ In this talk, Kelly presents his idea of a self-replicating universal virtual library, or a “forever library,” which would contain all the books, ideas, and knowledge in the world; everything electronically scanned and uploaded to the cloud and the Internet. Google is in the process of digitizing all the books in the library, he informs us, and eventually they will accomplish this endeavor creating a neo-Library of Alexandria. This forever library would contain within itself the necessary information required to reproduce itself. After all the books in physical libraries have been digitized and hyperlinked together — and after all movies, TV shows, music, images, ideas, even objects, are scanned and hyperlinked — then we arrive at something new, something much like a giant neural apparatus, what Kelly compares to a “hive mind.” Kelly develops this idea more fully in his 1994 book *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World*.⁷⁰

The most useful indications of Kelly’s “Omega Library” talk regarding the ME are about “discovery.” Kelly explains that discovery, in the sense he uses it, is not about uncovering something that has never been perceived before (think of “The New World” and the indigenous peoples already living there). Discovery for Kelly involves the linking of previously unknown things to the wider growing body of structured knowledge being “stored” in people’s brains. “Information” or “facts” are “discovered” when something unknown by the mass collective of knowledge suddenly links to what is already known (or, in case of the ME, thought to be known) and becomes integrated into the whole, *changing it*.

⁶⁹ Kevin Kelly, “The Self-Replicating Omega Library,” video, 43:44, February 14, 2012 (recorded on November 15, 2001), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oQbsYZPTsw>.

⁷⁰ Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Kelly explains that with all the books in the library digitized, along with everything else, much of the information and data being produced will not (and does not) come exclusively from human beings. In addition to human contributions to information, a large amount is generated by the Internet, by machines and algorithms themselves – what we now could refer to as “soft” A.I. Kelly invites his audience in Palo Alto to consider the numerous bureaucratic forms generated each day, some of which people never set eyes on, and self-generating spam-bots and even malware. There is always a low-level textual generation taking place on the Internet controlled by a kind of neural apparatus – or Kelly’s “hive mind.” Expanded exponentially, “discovering” becomes not much different from “creating”: there will be so many unseen, machine-generated, hyperlinked knowledge webpages and files that looking something up, and then finding it, will be akin to creating it. It follows, then, that in a future, highly technologically mediated society, the process will no longer be the same as purely *remembering* something and confirming or learning it for the first time. The separation between discovery and remembrance will close. These newly created items will be linked to the rest of the Omega Library and integrated, reorganizing human epistemology and perception. In short, Kelly argues that finding something on the Internet will, in the future, be akin to bringing that something into existence.

Could the ME be an early symptom of Kelly’s projected techtopia?⁷¹

Conclusion

Outside the CERN facility there is a large statue of the Lord Shiva of the Hindu religion depicted as being engaged in the *Nataraj* dance, a performative myth or ritual which consists of the creative *Lasya* dance and the destructive *Tandava* dance, the latter representing the destruction of outmoded worldviews and ways of life. The common interpretation of this iconic ritual image is necessary destruction in order that new creation can emerge. The statue was a gift from India to commemorate its close association with CERN, beginning in the 1960s and continuing today. In the summer of 2016, the domain of esotericism intruded on the mainstream narrative in the form of an apparently leaked smartphone video showing a CERN worker spying

⁷¹ Kelly has developed his ideas further in recent years, claiming that technology is an evolving ecosystem, a living, intelligent species that is seeking to come into existence to form a seventh kingdom of life. See, for example, Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

on a violent, black magic style ritual being performed before the Shiva statue late at night. The ceremony included the ritual sacrifice of a willing, young, virgin-like girl. The participants of the ritual wore hooded black robes and carried torches, and the hierophant ritually slays the virginal girl in white using a sharp blade. The leaked video circulated on the Internet, functioning as corroborative proof for some that CERN and the “elite” scientists and politicians controlling the world are indeed Satanic ritual occultists. Others reasoned that, even if the video was fake, it was being performed at night on the high-level security grounds of CERN, the implication being that CERN workers, either mockingly or genuinely, were engaged black magic. The video caused such a commotion that CERN issued a public response on their website:

I saw a video of a strange ritual at CERN, is it real?

No, this video from summer 2016 was a work of fiction showing a contrived scene. CERN does not condone this kind of action, which breaches CERN’s professional guidelines. Those involved were identified and appropriate measures taken.⁷²

Whether or not “those involved” were truly identified and reprimanded is beside the point. What is significant is that in this piece of media all the elements that characterize the cultic milieu are present. A scientific institution, carrying out its work by a secular method, is here resituated in a world of supernatural causality, interconnectedness, and web-like correspondences (“as above, so below”), evil machinations of technology and power, dark individuals conspiring to keep people deceived, and of course the hidden hand of magic behind it all. The video exposes the claims of esoteric/religious knowledge production and mainstream secular claims speaking on behalf of “Truth” by reminding us that both interpretations exist as two sides of the same coin, that what is carried out in one sphere necessarily reflects in the other. This should encourage us to seek new ways of categorization outside the old orchestrated binaries of knowledge.⁷³

In this paper I have endeavored to expose the phenomenon of the ME to scholars in the hope of stimulating further research into the subject concerning its implications for a transformation of the cultic milieu within

⁷² “CERN answers queries from social media,” accessed October 14, 2018, <https://home.cern/resources/faqs/cern-answers-queries-social-media>.

⁷³ For the fake human sacrifice filmed at CERN see “Fake human sacrifice filmed at Cern, with pranking scientists suspected,” *The Guardian*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/aug/18/fake-human-sacrifice-filmed-at-cern-with-pranking-scientists-suspected>.

our technoscience culture. As unauthorized ideas and beliefs move closer together through the ease of technological transmission, they will continue to move farther away from authorized knowledge and narratives. They could increasingly find themselves mixing and potentially synchronizing. The convergence of esotericism, fundamentalist Christianity, and conspiracism is encouraged by those in the tech industry itself, as for example when Geordie Rose, founder of D-Wave Quantum Computing, compares his quantum computer to “an altar to an alien god” and later suggests, in response to Christian ME researchers at a June 2017 TechVancouver conference, that artificial intelligence would be “summoning” the “Great Old Ones” of the occult-inspired author H. P. Lovecraft.⁷⁴ The Great Old Ones are fictional galactic demons that feature prominently in Lovecraft’s short stories, and yet they have become the focus of actual magical and occult ritual practices among some fans since the author’s death (e.g. Kenneth Grant). Here, then, we see a spokesperson for the tech industry publicly endorsing occulture themes as being connected to advanced technological development, using analogy and religious language to draw such themes closer together. In Lovecraft’s stories, the Great Old Ones are worshiped on Earth by murderous occultists and they have no regard for humankind whatsoever, seeking to wipe human life out of existence primarily because of how unintelligent and insignificant humans seem in comparison to themselves. Such public proclamations reinforce the belief among New Age/secular and Christian conspiracy researchers that ahistorical supernatural forces are at work in the world, which are endeavoring to alter reality. It therefore seems reasonable that they would continue to find grounds to cooperate and stand together. An example of these converging groups is the “QAnon” conspiracy. QAnon received widespread mass-media coverage across the Web after attendees at a President Trump rally in Florida displayed a Q on shirts and signboards. Justin Caffier writing for *Vice* called QAnon “the greatest crossover event in conspiracy theory history,” for Q overtly uses “references to all the greatest hits like Freemasons, MK Ultra, and the symbology of the Illuminati,” as well as Christian notions of “The Great Awakening” and the Satanic magic of the elites, as well as references to “red-pilling.” In our current situation, we are likely to see more such collaborations.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ TechVancouver.Org, “Geordie Rose of Kindred AI presents Super-intelligent Aliens Are Coming to Earth,” video, 21:28, July 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD8zGnT2n_A.

⁷⁵ Justin Caffier, “A Guide to QAnon, the New King of Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories,” *Vice*, June 12, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ywex8v/what-is-qanon-conspiracy-theory.

The psychological symptoms indicated by the ME could increase as information spreads and technological media complexifies. The relationship between memory, event, and narrative is apparent in the cultic milieu through its reevaluation of ancient history, the re-dating of sites such as the Sphinx in Egypt, and the belief in fabled ancient continents such as Atlantis. Within esotericism there is often already tension between a sacred timeline of past events and the mainstream narrative, similar to fundamentalist Christians who believe in Young Earth creationism. The most immediate example of this situation is “fake news,” where people choose to believe that some accounts are more *truthful* than others — meaning such accounts have been less infiltrated by conspiratorial elements of manipulation. The overload of information, coupled with the breakdown of traditional thought patterns under the influence of “modernity,” has culminated in the idea that we live in a post-truth world, where people are increasingly forced to determine, or perhaps create, their own past, present, and future. Modernity is often seen as synonymous with ambiguity and thus people will continue to struggle as they seek for truth in black and white terms. ME researchers evoke Marsden’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century fundamentalists, scouring the Bible to understand society. The conclusions they arrive at, the sources they draw on, and the space in which they present their claims intersect with rejected discourses of esotericism and conspiracism. Incoherency of data has always been a problem — it is the problem of changing worldviews — but rejected data is organizing itself in news ways with social media. New Agers, conspiracy theorists, fundamentalist Christians, and “everyday folks” are all being confronted with the instability of history and objective knowledge. The Copernican revolution and the existential breakdown of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic worldview caused a similar situation, in which people lamented the loss of the great chain of being that linked everything together in a meaningful harmony — and who, we could say, were at one point certain that their Earth was the center of the universe, before their reality was *altered*.

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