9

Anxieties of Influence: Conspiracy Theory and Therapeutic Culture in Millennial America

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By the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, neurasthenia, or "nerve weakness," had become a highly fashionable symptomology of characteristically modern anxieties. Its various symptoms—insomnia, lethargy, depression, hypochondria, hysteria, hot and cold flashes, asthma, hay fever, "sick-headache," and "brain-collapse"—graphically marked the effects of urbanization, industrialization, and the rationalization of everyday life. Its fretful preoccupation with bodily vigor and decay articulated the conflicts, contradictions, and haunted sensibilities of pervasive social changes (Lutz 1991: 4–5). As a disorder, neurasthenia embodied a new anxious sensibility of the excitable subject as symptom, mirror, and source of worldly forces; suddenly, both the self and the surrounding world seemed at once diffuse, weightless, floating, and unreal, weighted down with symptoms, haunted, immobilized, and excessively sensory and concrete (Lutz 1991: 15–16). As a discourse, neurasthenia articulated both the mysterious malaise of a subject affected by broad and dimly perceived social processes and the emerging therapeutic dream of revitalization through medicine, self-help, talking cures, and eclectic spiritual cures.

Neurasthenia was an unsteady, fraught structure of feeling, mixing a gothic imaginary of hidden threats and unseen forces and the optimism of a new consumerist-therapeutic ethos of self-realization, personal magnetism, and corporate charisma (Fox and Lears 1983). It became a true cultural lin-

gua franca, not because it provided a unified master narrative for anxious times, but because, on the contrary, it was a site of conjuncture for competing and conflicting discourses, ranging from evolution, civilization, science, technology and medicine, religion and ethics, gender and sexuality, health and disease, class and race, to art and politics (Lutz 1991: 20). It was "a multiaccented story" that allowed many different readings, and, at the same time, as a discourse, it was both heteroglossic and "nervous," articulating diacritical or oppositional forces and sensibilities (Lutz 1991: 15). As the symptomatic space of conjuncture where entrepreneurialism met family-based sentimentality, cultural rationalization met reenchantment, and consumerism, class conflict, feminism, and a newly professionalized therapeutic culture eyed each other with a wary gaze, it was at one moment progressive and at the next apocalyptic, at once optimistic and pessimistic, both productive of new social forms and aggressively conservative.

In its social production, neurasthenia first became a cultural lingua franca among turn-of-the-century cultural producers—artists, writers, and other "brain workers"—men and women with "the most refined sensitivities," and then spread to other classes and sectors through reactions and particular social uses that variously embraced, rejected, subverted, or appropriated it (Lutz 1991: 6, 15). In other words, as a "nervous system," neurasthenia not only expressed or reflected modern anxieties but also participated in their particular and actual production as a set of discursive practices in social and political use (Taussig 1992; Lutz 1991: 20). In practice, neurasthenia both proliferated and contested modernity's angst and its rationalization of the link between the subject and a world of forces and effects.

Now, at the end of a long century's efflorescence of anxious symptomologies within an ongoing nervous system, conspiracy theory has become a new lingua franca to track the tensions and symptoms of the "New World Order." Its idiom is not the body but the body politic; its controlling preoccupation is not with bodily vigor but with human agency and political knowledge in a world of social influences (Melley 2000). Like neurasthenia, conspiracy theory articulates both symptoms and cures in an anxious link between mysterious hidden forces and the redemptive healing force of agency. Unlike neurasthenia, which presumed that its symptoms were the accidental outcome of civilizational progress, conspiracy thinking focuses on the revelation of "the shocking truth": it assumes that our anxieties are *designed*. We are the victims of the hidden persuaders of consumerist culture, a far-reaching technogovernmental complex, a network of demonic forces, an endless swarm of sophisticated social controls and invasive influences. The

sensibility of conspiracy, or "fusion paranoia" (Kelly 1995), tracks signs and surges of power, surveils banal surfaces to discover hidden threats and promises, pieces together obscure, disparate details in search of the key to an ultimate puzzle and the moment when the imaginary finally matches the real. It dreams up eccentric paths of return to a pristine past, a redemptive human agency, and a world ordered from on high as if a blueprint of a law, a code, or an urtext could be directly, magically imprinted on matter and society, claiming to heal the wound imprinted by the long-standing sense of disjuncture between the American dream and an always already degraded reality. It is, like neurasthenia, a discourse animated at once by fear and desire.

Postwar conspiracy theory differs from earlier "paranoid styles" of American politics in its tendency toward broad social and cultural criticism rather than disclosing secret cabals and in its nearly unanimous judgment that government power is party to, rather than the innocent object of, conspiracy. Nor is it any longer an episodic or eccentric mode of political attention and articulation. Like turn-of-the-century neurasthenia, turn-of-the-millennium conspiracy theory is an overarching structure of feeling that articulates conflicting political efforts and disparate publics in a multivocalic national space of conjuncture.

Conspiracy theory has become so deeply ingrained in the national political imaginary that it encompasses every point on the political spectrum and is as characteristic of the center as it is of marginal groups and occult knowledges (Dean 1998; Marcus 1999). Conspiracies, secret collusions, clandestine activities, and all manner of treachery are charged and frequently proved or confessed. The federal government builds up elaborate defense systems to protect the nation from free-floating specters of catastrophic terrorisms and weapons of mass destruction (Lewis 1999). We are told of grotesque secret government-run experiments on unwitting citizens such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiments on African American men (Wilson and Mill 1998). Leading figures in government, industry, science, medicine, and the military are directly implicated in cases of social and political corruption, environmental degradation, and consumer fraud and deceit (Schoepflin 1998).

Investigative reports, talk shows, television series, movies, novels, and textbooks present a diffuse, sometimes panicked sense of struggle against unknown forces—a deep worry that normality is not normal any more, that "somebody" has done something to the way things used to be, that we have lost something, that we have—that we have been—changed. We are being influenced, manipulated, regulated, experimented on, watched (Graham 1996). Then, in spite of our suspicions about the police, we be-

come their agents in response to Community Watch programs that solicit us to scan bodies out of place in the neighborhood and television shows like *America's Most Wanted* that ask us to scrutinize the faces in 7–11 for a match. The ubiquitous home video camera is poised to capture moments of conspiratorial forces in motion, such as police brutality, enacting an omnipresent panopticon that mimics the logic of "the system" itself. The dual slogans of *The X-Files*—"Trust no one" and "The truth is out there"—express a heady yet unsettling wedding of a deep skepticism of officially sanctioned truths and the seductions of the sensualization of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980: 44).

Conspiracy theory has spread through so many divergent and conflicting routes that it now articulates a widely shared sensibility of being controlled by an all-pervasive, networked system that is itself out of control. Like neurasthenia, conspiracy thinking is a multiaccented story, an overlapping set of heteroglossic discourses that conjoins contradictory and competing reactions and outcomes in a fraught and fretful structure of feeling that yearns for and despairs of ultimate solutions. It fashions right-wing and left-wing visions with equal vigor. The religious Right mobilized a new "politics of ultimacy" that read politics through a millennialist lens of fateful issues at stake in a once-and-for-all confrontation (Barkun 1998: 459). Pat Robertson joined disparate strands of right-wing conspiracy theories under the rubric of the *New World Order* popularized in his 1991 book of that title. The white male "new war" culture reacted to a feminized New World Order with a paramilitary cultural movement centered on Rambo films, paint-ball games, *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, shooting ranges, militias, and survivalist groups (Gibson 1994). The New World Order quickly accumulated a script of threats including new law enforcement formations directed against gun owners, surveillance through black helicopters and implanted microchips, concentration camps for dissenters run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and hundreds of thousands of UN-affiliated foreign troops on U.S. soil to stifle armed resistance (Barkun 1998: 455).

On the Left, political movements fighting the inequalities of race, sex, and class have taken up the practices of conspiracy theory to track the violent effects of unjust subjugation on identities, bodies, and the body politic. In the 1980s, the Cristic Institute brought a lawsuit against a large collection of former U.S. intelligence and military officers who constituted a "Secret Team" operating a vast drug-smuggling and arms-running enterprise that had been directly involved in many of the unhappy events in American history since the 1950s (Kelly 1995: 69). More recently, a broad coalition of en-

vironmentalist groups, liberal churches, labor, and social movement activists has launched an international campaign against the World Trade Organization as a secret, conspiratorial world power. Conspiracy theories circulating in the black public sphere posited that HIV was disseminated through black neighborhoods for the purpose of genocide, that the government intentionally spread narcotics into black communities, that food additives in Kentucky Fried Chicken systematically sterilized black men but not white men (Fenster 1999: 72; Kelly 1995: 64). Some feminist discourses tracked a conspiracy of male dominance through institutions, ideologies, and private life (Kelly 1995: 64), while the men's movement embraced men as wounded by the same patriarchal regime and sought therapeutic solutions (Pfeil 1995).

All the voices theorizing conspiracy, Right, Left, and "hard to label," take for granted that the powers-that-be are functionaries of the opposing camp, and none suppose that routine politics ("throw the bastards out") offers much, if any, remedy. For postwar conspiracy has diagnosed structural, not personnel, problems. It is the nervous expression of the idea that social systems affect human action, that large organizations, bureaucracies, social institutions, information networks, ideologies, and discourses shape individuals, and that we therefore are not entirely free, autonomous, self-controlling individuals (Melley 2000: 5). In conspiracy theory, social regulation comes as a terrible revelation, a scandal, because of the challenge that it presents, the threat that it represents, to long-standing notions of the individual as a coherent, rational, autonomous agent. Not only are things not the way they used to be, but "people are no longer what they used to be" (Melley 2000: 42). Postwar paranoid interpretations are, thus, rooted in and articulate "agency panic" (Melley 2000: 12). At the same time, they effect a "postmodern transference" in which the agency depleted from the individual is attributed to the social. Social structures do not simply affect human action; they are mysterious, motivated, intentional, and often malevolent (Melley 2000: 13).

Individuals, groups, and organizations from time to time get so enmeshed in their conspiratorial visions that they act them out, sometimes violently. Charlie Manson, Timothy McVeigh, Theodore Kaczynski, white supremacist militias, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, and the Branch Davidians and the ATF at Waco are sensational examples, but we have all glimpsed somewhere—in our families, schools, workplaces, and communities—that hypervigilant over-the-edge look in the paranoid eye, that bottomless rage against the system, that obsessive compilation of signs that "they" are up to no good. It may seem that these more and less sensational moments are the only times

that anyone seems to do something about conspiracies, that otherwise it's just talk, a lot of wild talk, that never comes of anything, sort of like valves blowing off steam, the effluvia of postmodern life. But postwar conspiracy talk is never idle. It is always also some sort of therapy that has themes of ultimacy and redemption built into it—as dreams, abysmal realities, or intensely polarized unconscious structures. The practices of conspiracy theory form a tensely articulated pact with therapeutic culture through the logics of stress, trauma, injustice, self-made agency, and redemption. Taken separately and together, conspiracy theory and therapeutic culture constitute fields of feeling that channel the contradictions of contemporary social transformations and their effects. They knot together desire and despair, progress and collapse, enchantment and disenchantment, nostalgic and futurist yearnings, and the search for everything from purity to community. This is the nature of a modern nervous system. It is also the nature of metadiscourses of modernity.

Therapeutic culture arose with the shift to consumer capitalism at the turn of the century. It replaced the producer ethic of work, sacrifice, and saving with a yearning for self-realization rooted in the generalized neurasthenic sense that selfhood had become fragmented, diffuse, and somehow "weightless" or "unreal." Advertising, thrill-seeking mass-marketed amusements, and an ethic of immediate gratification helped create a new symbolic universe where the yearning to experience "real life" in all its intensity was both projected as an ideal and frustrated by the contradictions of a deliberate, mass-mediated, market-driven cultivation of spontaneity (Fox and Lears 1983). Therapeutic reactions against the modernist rationalization of culture were themselves symptoms of the rationalization of the helping profession, the talking cure, and an autonomous "self" whose immanent indwelling spirit sought expression and release.

Therapeutic culture and conspiracy theory entwine through their separate and sometimes conflicting or competing uses of a shared set of modernist interpretive practices that oppose the forces of the rational to the irrational, the transparent and true to the arcane and hidden. With a passion bordering on epistemophilia, both claim a sublime pleasure in revealed knowledge and hermeneutic mastery, in the effort to uncover and recover lost or secreted knowledge, cracking codes, sifting through signs, symptoms, and overdetermined webs of feeling in search of the telling detail. Both rationalize the link between the subject and the world by scanning for signs of agency, dysfunction, and fit and by gathering disparate signs into a narrative drama of transformation, encounter, risk, and conversion. Both uncover an underlying plot

that combines radical doubt with the sense that the truth is out there. Born of the restlessness and obsessions of modernity's simultaneous overstimulation and numbness, alarm and anesthesia, sapping and celebration of self-control, both breed disciplines and compulsions and take on a life of their own (Berlant 1996; Buck-Morss 1993, 1995; Feldman 1994; Ivy 1993, 1995; Terkel 1988).

Conspiracy theory as a therapeutic practice addresses specifically late-modern anxieties about the perfidies of power/knowledge: uncertainties about the causes of and links between human action and complex social events; about "expertise" and "experts"; about "truth" and "meaning" and "reality"; about the grand metanarratives that gave direction and purpose to history; about how to live as a liberal subject (man) caught in the body of a sociological subject (woman/cockroach). In the same instance that conspiracy thinking addresses these anxieties, it produces them, for every paranoid cure is also a symptom. Whenever conspiracy thinking asserts "the truth" and apprehends "reality," it simultaneously acknowledges their instability and partiality, their social construction and regulation. The postwar culture of paranoia articulates a crisis of agency, of the liberal subject in peril, but every effort to restore it, to disavow subjection, is haunted by traces of influence (Butler 1997). Knowledge of social influence is always built into the postparanoid subject. The ceaseless sign scanning, code cracking, and mastering of logics are a balm, rationalizing, making sense, revealing the meaning of things, and at the same time they agitate, destabilize, and demonstrate empires of conspiracy. The plethora of conspiratorial anti–master narratives that have rushed to fill the vacuum created by postmodern incredulity toward grand narratives also underscores and intensifies a sense of historical fragmentation and disorientation. Paranoid culture, is, thus a therapy of compulsions. Nothing is ever finished. Everything is always starting over, caught in a cycle of endless repetition because each recantation incants the recanted, each autonomous act is the effect of subordination, each step outside is also always a step inside.

We have described contemporary conspiracy theory in the United States, like the neurasthenia at the turn of the century, as an embodied anxiety that articulates the stresses, contradictions, and dreams of redemption of a subject under the influence of diffuse and haunting social, political, and discursive force fields. We also take postwar paranoid culture to be a nervous system or structure of feeling. Internally riven between nightmare and dream, symptom and cure, it becomes a liminal space of conjuncture of myriad discourses, positionings, and reactions. Finally, we note that, like neurasthe-

nia, conspiracy thinking is a metacultural discourse that engages fundamental questions of fear and desire, subjectivity and agency, ideal and reality, through practices of anxious rumination: scanning for signs, symptoms, and sources of dysfunction; fetishizing knowledge; rooting experiences of the uncanny and the unknown in hidden and diffuse structures of power; slouching toward redemption. In other words, we take the culture of paranoia to be a metacultural articulation of the anxiety of influence itself.

Particular cultures, groups, and publics articulate the anxiety of influence in different ways and to varying degrees. They invariably recycle and revise preexisting story lines and tropes, often contribute minor innovations to the larger field of conspiratorial thinking, and sometimes realize stunning breakthroughs, boldly going forth to make connections that no one has made before. Here, we take up two case studies in which a postwar paranoid structure of feeling is embedded in a wider array of practices that fashion "remnant" communities. Both nervous systems are strikingly inventive and generative, metacultural and metaphysical, haunted and dreamy; both sift through signs and influences in complex, critical, uncanny, wondrous ways; and both are especially preoccupied by modern mediated knowledge and "information." They register effects, decipher meanings, predict futures, and fashion stories—small, mid-sized, grand, and cosmic. In the Calvary Chapel case, a nineteenth-century conspiracy theory is given new life in a therapeutic form that meticulously juggles light and dark, fear and desire, indignation and assurance, and that delivers a vision of agency—earthly redemption—through political knowledge. In Heaven's Gate, we have a case of therapy in motion in which agency/earthly redemption is achieved through the miraculous channeling and juxtaposing of assorted metaphysical knowledges, both secular and religious, into charismatic authority and a compelling and really real life-and-death drama.

Calvary Chapel

In 1997, we did fieldwork at the Calvary Chapel church in Orange County, California. Started by Pastor Chuck Smith in 1965, Calvary Chapel grew rapidly as part of the Jesus movement of the 1970s and the growth of suburban evangelical churches in the last two decades (Balmer 1993; Balmer and Todd 1994: 664). It combines conservative fundamentalism, including strict interpretation of the Bible as the word of God and an apocalyptic vision of the End Times, with a soft, or light, pentecostalism and a markedly hip and youthful style. In the early 1970s, Calvary Chapel drew converts from

youths and disaffected hippies through Christian rock festivals, go-go clubs, and love-ins, Christian coffeehouses and surfer clubs, baptisms in the ocean, and hotlines for kids on bad trips including a thirty-second cure for heroine addiction. Today, the Costa Mesa campus boasts a congregation of twenty-five thousand members and has spawned a loose federation of four hundred churches, many of which have congregations of over ten thousand people (Balmer and Todd 1994: 693).

Like many of the new evangelical megachurches that rose to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s, the services, style of preaching, and structure of the church have adapted secular therapeutic culture to Christian ends (Miller 1997: 21; Harding 2000) by providing marriage counseling and a wide array of weekly support groups and lifestyle groups, including the Working Women's Joyful Life Bible Study, Proverbs Class for Men, High School Mothers' Prayer Meeting, Korean Fellowship, Becoming Disciples (for new believers), New Spirit/Alcohol and Drug Recovery, Singles' Group, Prison Fellowship, Physically Disabled Fellowship, Elders Pray for the Sick and Other Needs, High School Girls' Bible Study, and the Christian Prophecy Update Meeting. Bookstores on church grounds are filled with a combination of apocalyptic titles warning of the dangers of utilitarian individualism and the decay of moral standards under the regime of liberal humanism, consumerism, and bureaucratization and Christian self-help books with titles such as *Daily Devotions, Everyday with Christ, Self-Confrontation, The Fast-Track: A Manual for In-Depth Discipleship, Marriage the Way It's Made to Be,* and *Men Whom Women Love to Love* (a play on the best-selling secular self-help book *Women Who Love Too Much*).

Services begin with concerts of inspirational Christian pop music complete with electric guitars, drums, and large screens that project the lyrics so that the congregation can sing along. The sermon that follows is given in an informal, vernacular style; the rhetoric moves facilely back and forth between the grand scheme of biblical prophecy and world events and the intimate present day of private life, lifestyle choices, faith, and dreams. A good-news bulletin of mass conversions and fun family events moves into a soft-spoken critique of consumerist values and laissez-faire situational ethics in which "there are absolutely no absolutes"; the world is in a steady moral decline, and the church is becoming more worldly, so Christians have to change the world. Congregants dressed in jeans and T-shirts read along in the vernacular New King James version, marketed as the "Slim Line Version," while the pastor cites Scripture, peppering his comments with hip jokes, friendly

smiles, and translations of the signs of the End Times in terms of suburban everyday life.

The pastor encourages people to take notes as he gives them tips on how to be Christians in a world drawing close to the apocalypse. For instance, he might offer a basic three-step plan of Christian action: (1) be Christian, and act as a model for others; (2) get close to non-Christians; and (3) speak out. He gives concrete tips that blend self-help aids with intentional, conspiratorial planning: "It's easier to start a fire with people who are already thirsting," so try talking to non-Christians at holiday parties when the spirit is in the air. We all need to come out of our sequestered suburban and Christian-only lifestyles, so do lunch with a coworker or invite neighbors for dinner, invite non-Christian men to watch the game with you, make contacts when you're working out or at kids' events, contact people you used to know—"though some say it's better not to look 'em up, you know what I'm sayin'?"—and practice "strategic consumerism like going to the same dry cleaner's every day so you learn that person's name." The pastor might also suggest that people write down the titles of Christian self-help books "that will enable you to do these things," such as Paul Little's trio of books *Know What You Believe, Know Why You Believe,* and *How to Give Away Your Faith*. Every Christian should be able to relay the Gospel in a thirty-second to one-minute sound bite.

Calvary Chapel's optimistic apocalypticism—optimistic because it signals the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, the rapture, and the Second Coming of Christ—reads signs of impending doom in a variety of seemingly "good" and "bad" signs, including the growth or development of world population, education, technology, communications, transportation, secularization and ecumenicism, the rise of satanic cults and false prophets, the AIDS crisis, the New Age movement, abortion, pornography, homosexuality, divorce, crime, drugs, UFOs, and alien abductions (Harding 2000: 241). Apocalypticism for Christians such as these is not just a set of beliefs but a specific narrative mode of reading history backward. Future events, which are fixed and known, determine the shape, the content, and the significance of present events and actions (Harding 2000: 230). Economic and political events are read as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy that narrates the return of the Jews to Palestine, the rise of the New Roman Empire, the great tribulation during which the Anti-Christ, or the Beast of Revelation, will rise to worldwide dominance, the rapture of the church in which the saved will be saved from the imminent horrific days, the triumphant return of Christ in the battle

of Armageddon, and the final, glorious, millennial reign of Christ from Jerusalem (Fenster 1999: 155; Marsden 1980). Recent world events of specific interest to the church's prophecy updates include, for instance, the Persian Gulf War, anything concerning the fate of Israel and the Jews such as the Mideast Peace Treaty, the election and reelection of Bill Clinton, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the creation of the European Economic Community (the New Roman Empire), and signs of a New World Order in news of the Internet, transnational business and finance, the demise of America as an economic and political power, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (Harding 2000: 233). According to the church's reading of the Bible, we are currently in the Church Age—a suspended time of waiting and watching—and Christians are enjoined to enact their role in God's plan by praying, living right, and saving souls.

Like both therapeutic culture and conspiracy theory, Calvary Chapel's practices of reading back and forth between biblical prophecy and signs in the present find the future in the present, the invisible in the visible, and redemption in a dramatic transformation. In its eschatology, the End is not merely imminent; it is immanent—present in the whole of history—and the individual life holds the promise of the End (Fenster 1999: 177). In the words of Pastor Chuck Smith, "Time is short. I believe God has intended and deliberately designed that every generation should believe that Jesus is coming in their generation. That each generation had that awareness of the immediacy of the return of Jesus Christ. I think God designed it that way" (Smith 1997). The ecstatic promise of predestined events casts concrete Christian interpretive practices as a transcendent experience of the sublime; practicing faith, adhering to moral principles, evangelizing, consuming prophetic interpretations, scanning for signs in current events, and learning to sense the coming of the End Times all bear the mark of a higher order realized in the everyday. Like Weber's Calvinists, Calvary Chapel followers are directed both to hold fast to their faith in salvation, demonstrating it in prayer and otherworldly piety, and to build, prove, and justify their state of grace through action in the world. The belief in predestined biblical prophecy and the premillennial rapture of the saved reproduces the paradox of the Calvinist predestination of the elect; rather than rob Christians of their agency, it infuses them with divinely inspired agency (Weber 1958: 111–14).

Like therapeutic culture and conspiracy theory, then, Calvary Chapel's premillennialism rationalizes the link between the subject and the world by sanctifying the practice of scanning for signs of the End Times and inventing forms of appropriate action. When it connects the banal details of everyday

life to an invisible order, it gives voice and reason to a haunting density of floating effects, channeling uncanny resonances and latent forces into routes of engagement and salvation. Fueled by an unstable dialectic of disillusionment and reenchantment, it constitutes a space of conjuncture in which theories of a world order torn between the forces of good and evil and proper agency and passivity or dysfunction meets ecstatic dreams of a peaceful, unhaunted fit between self, society, and spirit. Its very madness from a modern, secular humanist point of view makes it compelling from a Bible-believing point of view; speaking it becomes a political act of dissent, disruption, and critique of dominant theories of history (Harding 2000: 238) at the same time that it lays claim to a new society of Christians.

The nervous link between the practices of conspiracy theory and therapeutic culture was most dramatically demonstrated in Calvary Chapel's weekly Bible Prophecy Update meetings. The study group was attended by a hard core of right-wing conspiracy theorists who gave voice to extremist views that were not otherwise elaborated in the soft, suburban poetics of official church discourse. The study group followed a standard, ritual format that moved from an opening prayer through alarming, vitriolic accounts of secular humanist conspiracies and back to the good-news Gospel of the coming rapture and injunctions for Christians to live calm, holy lives of prayer, soulful preparation, and evangelizing. The leader of the group would open the conspiratorial expressions with a monologue on the evil forces evident in federal gun control, unisex Bibles, environmentalism, sex education in the schools, and the spread of homosexuality through the media. Then the group would watch a video of a professional, official-looking, Christian news broadcast such as *Jack Van Impe Presents* (with Jack and his wife, Rexella, positioned at a "news desk" as anchors) or *This Week in Bible Prophecy* (starring Peter and Paul LaLonde). This was followed by listening to a tape of a prophetic Christian radio broadcast, such as Charles Taylor's *Today in Bible Prophecy*.

The tension in the room would grow thick with the righteous outrage of watching shocking, evil revelations unfold. Then the group leader would invite participants to testify to updates in their own lives. People told violent stories of dark forces at work in their own lives and theorized about conspiratorial cultural, political, and economic trends. They often expressed doubts of their own intelligence and of the little man's ability to track the mysterious moves of the powers that be. But they were sure of one thing: that there were irrational, conspiratorial forces at work in the world and that God had a plan that would turn it all around in the end. When the bitter-

ness of conspiracy theory had reached an unbearable peak, the leader would draw the group away from nascent calls to violent action and back into the fold of the therapeutic Christian community by reminding them that all this bad news was actually blissfully good news because it meant that the Lord was coming soon. Their role as evangelical Christians was simply to go home and pray. Soon they would be released from the torturous knowledge of evil, injustice, and social dysfunction. With this, the tension in the room would visibly deflate, and the feeling of relief, pleasure, and purpose would grow palpable. In the end, the dialectic enacted throughout the session between indulgence in rage and snide comments about the "idiots" in power and an attitude of transcendent Christian self-control would come to a resting point of satisfaction.

Throughout the sessions, both the conspiratorial and the therapeutic sensibilities were fueled by dreams of a triumphant individual agency rising to combat the hegemony of the knowledge industries. Increased knowledge in the world is, in itself, evidence of the imminence of the End Times; time is in fast forward, and this generation is completely different from all others. Knowledge has doubled in each of a string of ever-shortening periods (the years 1–1750; 1750–1900; 1900–50; 1950–60); in the present times, knowledge is doubling every two years. But, in the new secular, consumerist order of things, entertainment, speed, and convenience are the sole values cherished, and change is taken to be a good in itself. Traditional roles and ways of life are materially eroded by dependence on the knowledge industries as a worldly God. Kids who spend all their time on computer games no longer play kick the can and hide and seek. Parents and teachers are no longer the storytellers; huge media conglomerates are. Christians are warned to resist the seductions and distractions of a media-saturated world. On movie night, the church plays Christian horror videos that portray scenarios in which teenagers miss the flight to the rapture because they are distracted by a Walkman and do not hear the final boarding call; businessmen miss the plane because they are on their cell phones and portable computers doing business or playing video games.

Christians have to learn to read between the lines in order to resist the brainwashing of false prophets. Nazis founded the science of semantics; today, they would be able to use Madison Avenue advertising and Hollywood magic. The fact that crime is down but crime reporting is way up is all too convenient for the antigun lobby.

Authorities knew all about the bombs at the World Trade Center and in Atlanta. There were calls to the FBI hotline in Atlanta and photographs of a

man rummaging through the duffel bag that held the bomb—was he resetting it? Why haven't they found this guy? Why did they ruin the reputation of the security guard instead—the weak one? They're like the Nazis who burned the Reichstag and blamed it on the Jews. A New Age "expert" on television happily pronounces that we're jumping a stage in evolution, getting rid of millions of weak people; she implies that only the "fit" will survive. Some computers were stolen from U.S. security and offered to Hussein; luckily, a hacker saved the day at the last minute, but there are bad hackers out there too and alarming data leaks every day. The same guy is still running things—the guy in the little red suit.

False knowledge systems, adrift in a world without tradition and Christian values, have produced ludicrous, irrational claims posing as hegemonic values and common sense. Under the new regime of political correctness in the schools, for instance, kids are told that acid rain and global warming are their parents' fault. Kids can be sent home from school for handing out birthday invitations only to boys. There is mandatory teaching of homosexuality as a normal and healthy "alternative lifestyle." (Someone calls out "Why can't the militia be an alternative lifestyle?" and everyone laughs.) These days, a man's computer might actually suggest that he call his wife his "spouse," and the story of Peter and the Wolf is suddenly about an endangered species. Euthanasia is presented in the mainstream media as a *Picket Fences* story about an old man who wanted to be killed to give his son his heart. A person with measles can be quarantined, while a person with AIDS cannot even be legally identified. Gun control nuts want to ban toys that even resemble guns or to ban people from owning a gun if they have ever committed a crime, even if that "crime" is nothing more than a "shouting match with your wife" or a fight at school. Regimes of worldly knowledge come and go, and the old ways of thinking are always delegitimated in the end. In the 1950s, people used X-ray machines as a sales gimmick to see if their shoes fit, and no one had a clue that they were being exposed to harmful radiation. Now, every time scientists find a little bug on Mars, people believe that there is intelligent life in the universe. There are still things that we know nothing about, but biblical prophecy is a constant.

Christian news broadcasts catch critical world events that the mainstream media either miss because they're distracted by soap-opera scandals or actively cover up. There are laws being enacted that will one day overrule national sovereignty. Deadly diseases that are now resistant to antibiotics are spreading unchecked. Police now confiscate all of a person's property if they find a marijuana plant anywhere near their house (and, of course, the police

get a cut). They could win the drug war easily, but they don't want to because it's just an excuse to control us. You can be arrested for leaving the country with $1 more than $10,000 if you don't report it. Everyone has to carry identification cards at all times, and they don't want us to use cash because they won't be able to control us and track our every move. The IRS suddenly has the right to access our bank accounts. The Constitution is gradually being eroded to clear the way for a world government. Arabs are attacking the Jews in Israel. They're building up the backbone of the Internet with new fiber, and the government is unable to control its rapid growth and sieve-like structure. A recent study shows that 25 percent of all these women talking about sexual abuse have been implanted with chips that give them vivid false memories of precise events.

Yet, while the media and the powers that be are dangerous forces that spread false consciousness and suppress true knowledge, this is itself part of God's plan. Even the knowledge brokers in the news media, government, high-tech, the United Nations, and big science unwittingly channeled truths. Despite Hollywood's ignorance of God's plan, its apocalyptic blockbusters of disasters are creating images of things to come and preparing non-Christians for the tribulation. New technology might be used in uncovering the secret truths of the Bible. Some say, for instance, that the code of the Word might be decoded by reading every twentieth word of the Bible with the help of computers. Others say that somewhere in the Bible there may be clues to the precise date of the rapture. But, in the end, all the knowledge gathering and righteous interpretations of events will give way to the certainty of the rapture itself as God's force inscribes itself on the world and frees Christians from their vigilant watch. Technologies might begin to track the "earthquake magnitude" of the event with the needles on their instruments going crazy, but, as the world collapses around people, it will be futile to take readings. People can take note of the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, and epidemics of skin cancer, but, in the end, men's hearts will fail them at the roaring of the rivers and the seas. The rapture will be soon.

The prophecy update sessions end with prayer and light parting comments: "Well, don't bother to pay your taxes because he's coming soon, hopefully it'll be this Pentecost, you never know." Prepare yourself. Make yourself available for whatever the Lord wants you to do. Ask him what he has for you every day when you get up.

Heaven's Gate

In the spring of 1997, as we listened to the people at Calvary Chapel vacillate between righteous outrage at the signs of evil escalating around them and blissful patience in the light of Christ's soon coming, the people of Heaven's Gate acted out another end times scenario, one that fused conspiracy theory and therapy culture in much more demanding terms. While Heaven's Gate drew on a dramatic revision of the premillennialist scenario of churches like Calvary Chapel, its intellectual roots were equally in the UFO/alien discourses that proliferated in the United States after World War II.

Stories of UFO sightings and alien contact were always tinged with suspicions of government cover-up, but charges of conspiracy, cover-up, and repression—social, physical, psychological—became central preoccupations during the 1980s. At the same time, UFO/alien discourses greatly elaborated their therapeutic practices, and they moved from the margins to the mainstream of American popular culture. Among the thousands of stories of UFO sightings, Roswell was the most renowned site of these shifts. Thanks to a series of sensational publications by UFO investigators (Berlitz and Moore 1980; Randle and Schmidt 1991; and see Eberart 1991), the tiny New Mexico town of Roswell emerged from the obscurity of a one-day "flying disc wreckage" story in 1947 to become the centerpiece of an epic/epoch of extensive government cover-up of extraterrestrial contact (Saler, Ziegler, and Moore 1997: 2–29). The process culminated in "UFO Encounter '97" on the fiftieth anniversary of the crash, which, more than anything, was "a celebration of conspiracy thinking" (Dean 1998: 191). In the alien contact lineage of stories, alien abductions were the principle point of entry into more mainstream paranoid and therapeutic culture. In particular, Budd Hopkins and Whitely Streiber published a series of best-selling books in the 1980s that revealed in vivid, visceral detail a terrible history of alien-human contacts that had been doubly repressed—as memory by the aliens and as truth by the powers that be (Hopkins 1981, 1987; Streiber 1987, 1989). The process culminated in 1994 when the Harvard psychologist and therapist John Mack pronounced stories of alien abduction literally true, thereby ending elite academe's regime of stonewalling evidence of alien encounters (Mack 1994).

As if obeying Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis, the more it was said that UFO sightings and alien encounters were repressed, the more they proliferated (Foucault 1980). By the turn of the millennium, UFO/alien

discourses had become a major clearinghouse for late-modern anxieties regarding threats to human agency, "the fugitivity of truth," the balkanization of "consensus reality," the collapse of grand metanarratives, cultural difference, the origin of meaning, and the all-around dispersion of cultural and political authority (Dean 1998; Dery 1999; Melley 2000; Saler, Ziegler, and Moore 1997: 140–41). They also presented a copious site of conjuncture for all sorts of idioms, enabling connections across a vast field of discourses: space travel; high technology; information; cyborgs; surveillance; mind control; death and life; body and spirit; science; government; reproduction; sexuality; race; immigration; the environment; colonizing and being colonized; fear and desire; trauma and hope; catastrophe and salvation; revealed truth; persecution; and, of course, cover-up (Dean 1998; Bryan 1995; Curran 1985; Darlington 1997; Heseman and Mantle 1997; Lewis 1995; Lieb 1998; Pritchard et al. 1994). And they incorporated a full range of therapies: hypnosis; channeling; meditation; self-help and support groups; psychotherapy; irony; humor; hoax; consumer kitsch; Hollywood films; television series; and investigative reports.

Like Calvary Chapel, Heaven's Gate got its start in the 1970s. Its founders, Bonnie Lu Nettles (also known as Peep, the Admiral, Guinea, Her, and Ti) and Marshall Applewhite (also known as Bo, the Captain, Pig, Him, and Do), were raised in Southern Baptist and Presbyterian churches, respectively, but as adults became adepts in various metaphysical arts—meditation, channeling discarnate spirits, astrology, mysticism, Theosophy, and paranormal contacts with space beings (Balch 1995: 141–42). Sometime in 1974, their peculiar mix of Bible prophecy, metaphysics, contactee/flying saucer culture, TV sci-fi, and high school biology became an unfolding social drama in which they figured, not as mere spectators awaiting the Blesséd Hope, but as major actors. Applewhite had a vision in which he realized that he and Nettles were the two witnesses prophesied in Revelation 11, and they embarked on their mission knowing that they would be assassinated for spreading God's word, that they would rise from the dead after three and a half days, and that they would ascend to heaven in a spacecraft.

The Two, as Bo and Peep also called themselves at the time, began to gather their flock in 1975, invited their followers to "walk out of the door of your life," separate from all human attachments, prepare for the coming "harvest" of souls, and join them in "the Father's kingdom" in spacecraft that would come for them shortly after The Two ascended. For nearly a year, the flock, with and without Bo and Peep, added and subtracted "students," fragmented and reassembled, camped and wandered, waiting for "the Dem-

onstration," the assassination and resurrection, that would prove the truth of The Two's message. Early in 1976, after a particularly bad bout of TV publicity in Las Vegas that made them feel "like they had been shot down by the media and the mission was dead," The Two told their hundred-some students that the Demonstration had in fact occurred already—"at the hands of the media." Not long after that, Peep/Ti announced that "the doors to the Next Level are closed" and the harvest was over. It was time for "students" to enter the "classroom," an indefinite period of growth and preparation for lives of "service" on the Next Level (Balch 1995: 154).

The group disappeared from public view until 1992, when they resurfaced briefly in the form of a website, newspaper ads, television broadcasts, and public meetings in order to make a "final offer" to those who would join them for the "liftoff" that was imminent. Having regathered some "lost sheep," Heaven's Gate, as the group was by now known, disappeared again until the notorious day in late March 1997 when thirty-eight bodies were found rotting in a wealthy San Diego suburban home. From the outside, it was "the largest mass suicide in U.S. history." From the inside, the Captain (Bo, Do, Applewhite) and his crew had left their earthly vehicles behind and joined the Admiral (Peep, Ti, Nettles, who finished her work on the human level and departed in 1985) in a spaceship tucked away in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet for their journey to the Next Level.

The group's suicide combined with other telltale signs that it was a "cult" to guarantee Heaven's Gate's status as an ultrafringe phenomenon. The group and its spectacular finale figured as a major sign of the times in various paranoid scenarios, such as, "The approaching year 2000 is coaxing all the crazies out of the woodwork" (*Time* 1997), or, "This new hybrid cult [emerged] from a mix of human communications techniques and the latest, newest, and most powerful mass communication technology in human history . . . the Web" (Conway and Siegelman 1997). Prominent UFO/alien contact experts denounced Heaven's Gate not only as a suicide cult but also for its reverence for aliens, that is, for Next Level souls who traveled by spacecraft and whose bodies looked like little gray space aliens. Speaking at the 1997 Roswell celebration, Budd Hopkins rejected any claims about "good, benevolent, transformative eco-aliens," lumping those who make such claims with the Heaven's Gate suicides: "For anyone to accept the idea that we must bypass our fellow humans and look to the UFO occupants as the final source of ecological wisdom and spiritual growth, is, unfortunately, to take a step along the same path" (quoted in Dean 1998: 195).

Hopkins chided Heaven's Gate for its "pronoia," its conviction that aliens

were out to help, not hurt, us (Dery 1999: 13), but, as we shall see, its paranoia was equally pronounced. Although itself far from the mainstream, Heaven's Gate fully partook of the mainstreaming of paranoid thinking and therapy culture during the 1980s and presents an exquisite instance of their fusion. Their cosmic metanarrative as it appeared in various webpages during the 1990s (see *Heaven's Gate* entries in reference list) had become much more apocalyptic and conspiratorial than it was in the 1970s as well as much more effectively therapeutic, providing a confident personal voice, a complex historical point of view, and strong plot lines, characters, and motivations.

On the lighter side, Do and his students tell us that "the human kingdom was created as a stepping stone between the animal kingdom and the true Kingdom of God," the Level Above Human, which was a physical place, not a spiritual realm. The human kingdom is made up of "mammalian —seed-bearing—plants or containers," while the Next Level kingdom is made up of "non-mammalian, non-seed-bearing containers for souls." Souls evolve through a series of incarnations in mammalian bodies and progress by shedding human/mammalian characteristics and behavior—sexuality, gender, and all other addictions and ties—through the tutorship of a member, or Representative, of the Kingdom of God who has been through the process. The earth is, thus, a "garden" of plants (containers, vehicles) for souls, which are harvested from time to time by Next Level Representatives. Jesus' body was prepped, or tagged, at birth and incarnated at the time of his baptism by the soul of a Next Level Representative who had come to earth to harvest a few select souls. Do and Ti were, like Jesus, Next Level Representatives, tagged at birth and incarnated by souls in the early 1970s. The bodies of their crew were, like those of Jesus' disciples (his crew), also tagged at birth; in the mid-1970s and early 1990s they were incarnated by Next Level souls who arrived in spacecraft (which humans called UFOs and *flying saucers*). For two decades, the crew used their human bodies as cocoons, undergoing the metamorphosis necessary for their assumption of genderless, asexual, nondesiring, telepathic, eternal bodies bound each and only to an Older Member and living lives of service to the Next Level. In the 1990s, Do began to receive ever-clearer signals that their classroom time was nearly over, although he did not know for some time whether they would ascend bodily into a spacecraft that would land on earth or leave their earthly vehicles, their flesh bodies, behind and ascend as discarnate souls (*Heaven's Gate,* "Planet about to Be Recycled").

On the darker side, Next Level "gardening" on earth had long been challenged and corrupted by "malevolent space alien races" who presented them-

selves to humans as "Gods." They are "Luciferians," descendants of Next Level members who fell away many thousands of years ago, and they are "humans' GREATEST ENEMY. They hold humans in unknown slavery only to fulfill their own needs. They cannot truly create [the Next Level is the only place from which souls, life, and all creating originate], but they develop races and containers through genetic manipulation and hybridization; they make deals with human governments to engage in biological experimentation (through abductions) in exchange for advanced technology." Luciferians keep humans in darkness through their control of religions, above all Christianity, and family, sexuality, and gender. They see to it "through the 'social norm' (the largest Luciferian 'cult' there is) that man continues not to avail himself of the possibility of advancing *beyond* human" (*Heaven's Gate*, "'UFO Cult' Resurfaces"). When members of the Level Above Human are present, anti-Kingdom forces "'turn up the heat' in the area of mammalian behavior," binding "human souls to this world through: a preoccupation with sexuality (indulgence in all pleasures/addictions of the human senses); reproductivity (family); service to the human kingdom (within the structure of indebtedness and credit); and non-disputable, 'moral' responsibility to their family, community, race, nation, and their unknowingly distorted *religious* concepts" (*Heaven's Gate*, "'UFO Cult' Resurfaces," "Organized Religion"). The opposing forces have been so successful that "the weeds have taken over the garden and truly disturbed its usefulness beyond repair—it is time for the civilization to be recycled—'spaded under'" (*Heaven's Gate*, "Overview of Present Mission").

The modal hero in postwar American conspiracy dramas—that is, theories that are fully enacted and inhabited, that become real parallel worlds—is the lone masculine individual who realizes that the system is evil and struggles mightily to get "outside" it, sometimes alone, sometimes with like-minded others. Such figures—Timothy McVeigh, Theodore Kaczynski, the white militiamen—may be seen as vigorously asserting masculinist notions of individual autonomy and self-control against political, social, and technological forces to the contrary. But postwar paranoia accommodated other kinds of responses to the challenge to liberal notions of the individual and human agency, including those like Heaven's Gate that, in effect, actively rejected liberal individualism. Do and his students sympathized with those who publicly scorned "the system" and tried to live "outside" it. They thought that humans such as Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidians at Waco were trying to break away and therefore might not be "spaded under" with the rest of humanity (*Heaven's Gate*, "Last Chance").

But, because they had received no instruction from a Next Level Representative and thus had not shed their mammalian addictions, desires, and ties, such humans were not yet ready to advance to the Kingdom of God and would have to undergo further reincarnations. The quest was not simply to escape "social control"; it was to escape "human" social control and to enter and fully submit to "Next Level" socialization. Heaven's Gate thus doubly reenchanted social control, on the one hand as evil via the Luciferian space alien races and on the other hand as benevolent via the little gray-like souls from the Next Level.

UFO/alien discourses and the postwar culture of paranoia in general are liminal cultural spaces—nervous systems—that accommodate a variety of reactions to the anxieties of the times. Some of them are loose and low cost; others, especially the conspiracy dramas, the inhabitable paranoias, like Heaven's Gate's, are narrow, taxing, intense, and exacting. The entry requirement for Heaven's Gate was total separation from the world—leave behind family, love, sex, work, material possessions, personal names and identities—"everything except enough food and liquids to sustain your vehicle while it is here, and enough rest to give it strength that it needs while it's in a decaying atmosphere such as the Earth's. . . . Anything else, whether it's desire to play the violin or preach a sermon or nurse a child, anything of this world, you must overcome" (Steiger and Hewes 1997: 153–54).

At first, students were, after abandoning all, each expected to figure out on their own via direct contact with the Next Level what else they needed to do to complete the overcoming process. Then, in the summer of 1976, The Two gathered them in a Wyoming campground and launched them on nearly two decades of minutely orchestrated metamorphic therapies, or "disciplines." The disciplines scan as brainwashing techniques, some well-worn, some brand new, but Do presented them as consummate moments of choice in which students decided over and over again to give up their tokens of human agency and autonomy in favor of achieving Next Level consciousness. No one was told to do anything; everyone was free to choose at each moment whether to follow instructions from the Next Level; if they chose to follow them, they would ascend; if not, not.

Students wore hoods "to learn about the 'conning' ways of their visual personalities." Their days were organized into tasks "assigned" every twelve minutes—"each person physically going to a given spot every 12 minutes to concentrate on his or her desire to serve" (*Heaven's Gate*, "'88 Update"). Students were assigned "check partners" with whom they consulted before taking any action. They were given new names. They became meticulous

bookkeepers and filled their feeling diaries every 12 minutes. There were frequent fasts, including a three-month fast with a "master cleanser" composed of lemonade, cayenne pepper, and maple syrup. Students entered prolonged regimes of silence called "tomb time." They were asked to abandon all addictions, not only sex, alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, but likes and dislikes, habits, opinions, judgments, ways of expressing themselves, and personality traits "such as being critical of others or getting down on yourself, having negative responses to situations, needing to talk constantly, having things *your* way or on a particular timetable, or needing human affection or attention" (*Heaven's Gate,* "Total Overcomers"). Finally, detailed "behavioral guidelines" further inscribed a scrupulous regime of self-surveillance. There were "17 steps" for entering the classroom, beginning with "Can you follow instructions without adding your own interpretation" (*Heaven's Gate,* "The 17 Steps"). More advanced "guidelines for learning control and restraint" defined three major offenses (deceit, sensuality, and knowingly breaking an instruction) and over thirty lesser offenses (e.g., "having inappropriate curiosity," "staying in my own head, having private thoughts," and "identifying with influences—using the 'I' or 'me' pronoun in application to an offense instead of recognizing that it was an influence using me") (*Heaven's Gate,* "Major and Lesser Offenses").

At first such therapies were understood as exercises that enabled humans to evolve into members of the next level. Later, Do, or Ti, or The Two, realized that their class members had, as they themselves had, already been incarnated—they "*were not humans* recruited by Ti and Do . . . but *were members of the Next Level before ever meeting them*" (*Heaven's Gate,* "'88 Update"). They were all "walk-ins," all aliens occupying—trapped in—human bodies. If notions of liberal subjectivity cleave to a sense of interiority, self-control, and self-reliance, of a sense that the individual is "a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories" (Melley 2000: 12), the members of Heaven's Gate sought to vacate that subjectivity as much as they sought to evacuate modern society. Or almost as much. For they conserved the essence of liberal individualism, individual intention (Melley 2000: 30), in their paradoxical mandate to choose perpetually to have no choice.

While Heaven's Gate members became, like Calvary Chapel Christians, adepts at reading the world—and the skies—around them for "signs" that their prophecies were coming true, it was not their signature method of making meaning. Their forte, their peculiar genius, was tacking back and forth among a host of vernaculars—Christian, UFO/contactee, New Age,

sci-fi, biology, gardening, teaching—and fashioning a hybrid discourse in which the seams were foregrounded. From the outside, their semiotic moves seemed parodic; from the inside, they seemed like revelation. Their language was overtly double-voiced in a way that highlighted intertextuality and the process of translation in meaning making. With their incessant making explicit of connections and intertwining of terms, Ti and Do taught their students a literary mode of attention. They showed them *how* things were connected, not just that they *were* connected. Indeed, they showed them how to connect things, how to convert similarities across boundaries of difference into similarities always already linked by sameness. They taught them how to convert metaphors into metonymies. How to enchant, or reenchant, the world.

The endless repetition of twinned and twined idioms showed up, not only in the language of Heaven's Gate, but also in their practices and appearances. The group's leaders were of course a pair separated by small differences and were so named, variously, Bo and Peep, Admiral and Captain, Him and Her, Winnie and Pooh, Tiddly and Wink, Nicom and Poop, Chip and Dale, Pig and Sow, Ti and Do, or simply The Two. And the cultural references to the 1970s went way beyond *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* to produce a complex sense of doubling—or cross-referencing, intertextuality, hypertexting—between the then and the now. Heaven's Gate's antifamily, antigender, radical egalitarian celebration of sameness as a form of communion with the other referenced monasticism and mysticism but also the hippie counterculture. Even their radical antisexuality, which seemed if anything a piece of the 1990s, linked to 1970s youth culture in the way that was played out as a quest for a kind of innocent, primordial sexuality and the desire for the intimacy of undifferentiated otherness. "Virginity," Do said, "can be recovered" (*Heaven's Gate,* "'88 Update"). Do himself was a very 1970s father figure, a soft, avuncular father, a Dr. Spock blend of routinization and permission, of Mr. Rogers and Timothy Leary. Do actually looked a little like Mr. Rogers, and he sounded a little like him too. Do also looked a little like Timothy Leary—without hair—a resemblance that was made manifest at the time of the suicide by what we can only hope was a coincidence—namely, the launching of Timothy Leary's ashes, along with the ashes of *Star Trek* inventor Gene Roddenberry, into space the same week that Heaven's Gate ascended to the Next Level.

To this list of allusions to the 1970s—of haunting, channeling, doubling, déjà vus, moments of temporal repetition—we may also add the Grateful Dead. The hippie/drug culture lingo linked Heaven's Gate to the Dead as

well as to Timothy Leary. The thoughts, for example, sent down to students from the Next Level were called *flashes* and *hits,* terms once associated with the quintessential 1970s activities, LSD trips and marijuana smoking. Heaven's Gate's greatest mime of the Grateful Dead was its traveling troupe quality. The meandering around the country, the continual process of breaking up and regrouping, the apparent antiorganizational amorphousness and placelessness, all echo the Dead. Heaven's Gate's movements had an edge of flight that the Dead's did not, an edge that recalled yet one more ghost from the 1970s—the television show *The Fugitive*.

The mass suicide of Heaven's Gate was in fact the last moment in a long succession of sudden disappearances, getaways, seclusions, concealments, and disguises. Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles disappeared, as they became Bo and Peep, from the lives of their already estranged families, friends, and lovers. During 1975, they haphazardly assembled their band of followers as groups of five, ten, and twenty people "suddenly disappeared" from their towns after meeting with Bo and Peep. Some students never contacted their families or friends again; others called them every few years from pay phones or sent them postcards postmarked in cities distant from where they were living. They assumed new names, not one, but two, or three, or more. When they finally materialized in an enduring way for the world to see, it was in cyberspace, the ultimate nonplace, or, rather, the zone of endless virtual places. And, even then, they registered their webpages under false names and addresses.

Fugitives are a kind of outlaw; they occupy spaces outside the law. It is unclear, sometimes more, sometimes less, whether fugitives are in the right or the wrong, and, thus, their flight calls attention to and problematizes the system, whatever system it is, that allots value, meaning, credibility, authority, and rights in such a way that forces flight. Something that is fugitive is also something that is fleeting or that eludes grasp; something evanescent, of short duration, fading, or becoming effaced (*OED*). Perhaps the members of Heaven's Gate would have preferred to leave nothing behind, not even their human bodies, by boarding a Next Level spacecraft on earth, but it did not work out that way. On the other hand, by willing the inevitable—death—perhaps they gained, or recovered, "the suicidal intention depleted from the sociological subject" by Durkheim's "attempt to explain suicide without recourse to individual motive" (Melley 2000: 30, 28). But their "exit statements" do not suggest that individual agency was at stake. Instead, as in the case of their nomadism, the point, aside from getting their souls on board the ship to the Next Level, was to call attention to the meaninglessness of what

they were leaving behind, to demonstrate that "the true meaning of 'suicide' is *to turn againt the Next Level when it is being offered*" ("Exit Statements").

The student Glnody wrote, "Choosing to exit this borrowed human vehicle or body and go home to the Next Level is an opportunity for me to demonstrate my loyalty, commitment, love, trust, and faith in Ti and Do and the Next Level. . . . There is no life here in this human world. This planet has become the planet of the walking dead. The human plants walk, talk, take careers, procreate, and so forth, but there is no life in them. . . . Suicide would be to turn away from this incredible opportunity I've been given, to turn my back on the Next Level and the life they are offering." Srrody wrote, "As the comet Hale-Bopp brings closure to this visitation, perhaps even this civilization, I am so filled with joy—not only for myself and my classmates, but with the pride that only a son can have for His Father [Do], who has pulled off a Next Level miracle that any of us made it out of this world alive" ("Earth Exit Statements").

Postscript

Conspiracy theory is not an open-ended set of "reading practices" but a particular structure of feeling. It is a nervous system, a split sensitivity, an internally divided cultural space that has force, that generates as well as registers the contradictions of contemporary social transformations. Preoccupied with questions of individual agency, and sometimes yearning for escape, it knows deep down that there is no "outside" to the social/evil influences on earth. Although despairing of a political cure, it seeks one nonetheless in the form of a perfect rationalization of the relation between self and world. As a metacultural discourse—dwelling on fundamental, abstract dilemmas of ideal and real, good and evil, creation and destruction, hope and dejection, purity and pollution, mystery and minutiae—conspiracy theory actively works on, works out, the world, if not the cosmos, in search of its cures. Calvary Chapel rationalizes self and world by sifting endlessly through the signs of the times, while Heaven's Gate channeled and dramatized a medley of stories and tropes—both drawing heavily on "the media," on television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, for their raw materials. Their paranoias are/were, not ideologies or beliefs, but practices, remarkably inventive, capacious, and efficacious ones that penetrate deep into the modern subject as modes of agency and float like an ether in a world composed of multiple, contradictory, paradoxical, unstable, but unending influences. This is the Enlightenment with a vengeance. It is also the haunting

trace and reminder of the hidden forces and excluded sensibilities that now permeate the force fields of social and cultural life and saturate the sense of the symptomatic self in the world.

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