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# The Laughter unto Death: Hillary Clinton, Feminine Laughter, and a Cannibal Witch Conspiracy

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**Abstract:** In 2016, a conspiracy theory arose that posited that Hillary Clinton had become afflicted with kuru—a degenerative neurological disease—as a result of engaging in cannibalism. This essay examines the assertions of the conspiracy for evidence of ideological and political claims about Clinton and tracks rhetorical maneuvers made by the conspiracy theorists regarding narratives of biological and spiritual pollution. I argue that this conspiracy’s focus on laughter—of kuru victims, witches, and Clinton—represents an effort at disciplining modes of political participation and bodily habitus. In the process, the conspiracy offers scholars an opportunity to examine a demotic and paranoiac political ideology at work and reveals the political repercussions of conspiracies, hoaxes, and fake news.

**Keywords:** Hillary Clinton, conspiracy, cannibalism, laughter, pizzagate

ON NOVEMBER 23, 2016, THE POLITICALLY right-leaning “internet ministry” Net4TruthUSA published a YouTube exposé about Hillary Clinton with the goal of revealing the truth about the strange behavioral and emotional inconsistencies that had supposedly dogged her 2016 Presidential campaign. “In my perusal of research into this Pizzagate—disgusting Pizzagate thing—I came across a question—that led to further research—and what I came up with is truly amazing,” begins the commentator “David T” (Net4TruthUSA, 2016). The “amazing” conclusion reached by David and a host of other conspiracy figures is this: Clinton has developed a rare brain ailment, a form of transmissible spongiform encephalopathy called kuru. This neurodegenerative disease is transmitted during the consumption of infected human tissues. In plainer language, Hillary Clinton—along with a cabal of “Washington Insiders”—is a cannibal, engaged in a diabolical worship practice overseen by the performance artist Marina Abramović. Clinton’s erratic head movements, instability on her feet, and “crazy” bursts of laughter are taken as proof of the advanced progression of the disease. While a few commenters on the video were concerned that David was missing a more nefarious problem—demonic possession—most of his 1,700 commenters seemed eager to accept this pathologization of Clinton. The video was subsequently viewed over 166,000 times before the “ministry’s” account was terminated for violating YouTube’s

Community Guidelines. It has since resurfaced on other channels and continues to draw views and approving comments.

This cannibal claim, politically inflected and preposterous for reasons both practical and biological, nonetheless gained some traction among fringe elements of right-wing political commentary. While never a nationally prominent theory, the aforementioned video's claims were part of a number of related internet exposés that promulgated the idea that Clinton had developed a disease as a result of cannibalism, videos with titles such as “Hillary Clinton’s Mysterious Malady” (TheShameCampaign, 2016), “Hillary’s Secret Illness? Clinton Falls Twice on Stairs in India” (Simpson, 2018), and the earliest example, “Hillary Clinton Kuru Glitch” (theJonathanKleck, 2016). These videos, in turn, prompted the penning of dozens of fevered “alt-news” articles (Admin, 2017; DeplorableMe, 2018; thelightinthedarkplace, 2017) and social media conspiracy posts (Anonymous, 2016; userdna45, 2016) further perpetuating the theory. But to understand the reach of this conspiracy, we must contextualize it more broadly as an aspect of the now thoroughly debunked Pizzagate scandal. Pizzagate—a conspiracy theory connecting the Democratic Party to an imagined human trafficking and child sex ring that was alleged to center around a Washington D.C. pizzeria—culminated with death threats to the owner and staff of the restaurant and the armed invasion of the restaurant by a North Carolina man who had been duped by the conspiracy. The claim that a pizzeria was a hotbed of Clinton-affiliated pedophilia, Satanism, and cannibalism link the Pizzagate conspiracy to the kuru conspiracy, and due to this association, the reach of the conspiracy's claims escalated dramatically. Accounts of Pizzagate and the cannibal claim appeared in major media outlets and across social media posts, shares, and retweets (Robb, 2017).

In a conspiracy, just as in a hoax, the claims made in service of convincing the public are a variety of popular or demotic cultural commentary, “a story that offers both explicit and implicit narratives about the nature of the world” (Brisini, 2017, p. 4). According to Goodnight and Poulakos (1981), conspiracies—even those erupting from a lunatic fringe—are potential agents in the “restructuring of social consensus” (p. 300), and are, in part, a fantasy that “constitutes a hint of people’s hidden agendas and an expression of their individual psychodynamics” (p. 301). In attempting to reveal a hidden reality about the *world*, the authors of conspiracies inadvertently reveal the hidden realities about *their own* epistemic and heuristic perspectives.

The aforementioned hidden agendas of conspiracy claims may also be understood as coded social critique (Miller, 2002). Conspiracy theories deserve sustained scholarly attention, as do the rhetorical strategies that are used to spread those claims. Mapping this particular conspiracy theory—and taking its claims about Clinton seriously—reveals a number of critiques of Clinton and the threat she was perceived to pose to entrenched patriarchal, fundamentalist, and ethnonationalist factions in contemporary American society. Consequently, the conspiracy also reveals the composition and nature of the governmental and political world as understood by the conspiracy theorists responsible for the assertion. While the claims and multimedia texts produced in support of this conspiracy may have served some minor effort at direct persuasion, they are more productively understood as a kind of metonymic representation of a troubling undercurrent in American political discourse.

This essay's aims are both documentarian and analytical. It recounts one of the most outlandish moments of the 2016 presidential election cycle and maps the breadth of the claim, thereby establishing the constellation of factual information and perceptual half-truths necessary to gain mass appeal. It also analyzes the conspiracy as a rhetorical and persuasive strategy, an argument about Clinton's character and, more broadly, about the precarity of the current American moment. In order to address these topics, the paper proceeds in four major sections. The first offers a brief primer on kuru from both biomedical and spiritual/sorcerous perspectives. The second demonstrates how these sorcerous concerns, which are seemingly downplayed by the pseudo-medical evidence offered in support of the conspiracy, are in reality the primary persuasive appeal and narrative for the hoax. This conspiracy functions by linking the claim that Clinton is involved in practices of witchcraft and cannibalism to a broader theory of social corruption and active efforts at social reordering. The third highlights the importance of laughter—both the uncontrollable laughter of kuru and the cackle of the witch—in critiques of Clinton's persona and explores the liberatory potential of women's laughter as a counterhegemonic force. Finally, the fourth considers the susceptibility of Clinton to these sort of conspiracy claims and reflects more broadly on the use of conspiracy claims to shape political discourse.

### **Kuru: A Brief Primer**

Kuru, from a Western, scientific and medical perspective, is a “relentlessly progressive, incurable, and fatal” prion disease that emerged among the Fore people in the highlands of Papua New Guinea during the early twentieth-century (Carson-DeWitt, 2012, p. 602). It was transmitted by the consumption of infected human remains, particularly tissues associated with the neurological system. The name for the disease derives from the Fore word *kuria/guria*, meaning “to tremble” or “to shake,” and reflects the muscle spasms that typify the disease. The symptomology of the disease progresses in roughly three stages. The first stage manifests as a general unsteadiness of stance and gait, with minor shivering and a progressive deterioration in clarity of speech. The second stage is reached when the affected individual is wracked by spasms and involuntary movements of the limbs. The second stage of the disease is infamous because it is the point at which significant neurological effects join the physical deteriorations, potentially including the hysterical laughter that has given the disease its sensationalized sobriquet, “The Laughing Death” (Brown & Gajdusek, 1991). The final stage of the disease augurs death as major bodily systems begin to fail. Once the symptoms of kuru manifest, death is certain.

This summary of kuru’s etiology is the result of substantial biomedical research and fieldwork in Papua New Guinea (Alpers, 1979; Gajdusek, 1963). The account does not, however, summarize the fullness of kuru as a biological or cultural agent. It is impossible to understand kuru without contextualizing it in the social practices and spiritual beliefs of the Fore. Kuru arose in the Fore because they were practitioners of funerary endocannibalism: they ate their dead, a practice dubbed “transumption” (Alpers 2007). According to Whitfield et al. (2008), transumption was an effort at controlling the spirits of deceased loved ones and hastening their journey to *kvelanandamundi*, the afterlife or place of ancestors. Transumption, as an act of care, was therefore very different from the more familiar exocannibal impulse to consume one’s enemies and thereby acquire their power, instill fear within their community, or diminish their humanity (Lévi-Strauss, 1983; Vilaça, 2000).

The Fore did not link the practice of transumption to the spread of kuru, nor did they conceptualize kuru as a disease in the wholly biological sense. Instead, they believed that an individual who developed kuru was being targeted by an evil sorcerer, a belief that endures among the majority of Fore (Puwa, 2008). Sorcery is understood as a

persistent threat among the Fore. In the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea, sorcery serves an offensive purpose, a variety of personal vendetta satisfaction and warfare that “purports to draw on magical or non-empirical means to achieve its ends,” where in “some cases a further aim is to cause mental or emotional disturbance in the victim; and kuru comes under this heading” (Berndt, 1958, p. 6). Sorcery is understood to be the causative force behind the development of kuru symptoms; as the symptoms cause the body to fail in predictable ways, kuru is understood to be a biological death incited by magical means.

### **An Elaborated Theory of the Kuru Conspiracy**

Establishing the features of kuru, as both a biological and spiritual phenomenon, is integral to understanding the persuasive utility of the disease to this conspiracy theory, especially because the conspiracy surreptitiously reanimates the sorcerous dimension of kuru in a Western context. The conspiracy does so in a roundabout fashion, initially seeming to privilege the biological explanation for the disease. As the YouTube conspiracy theorist David T asserted, “if you’re involved in spirit cooking, and child rape, and child murder, and eating dead bodies,” as Clinton purportedly is, “if you’re eating dead bodies, you’re going to get this disease. It’s called kuru, and causes abnormal folding of prions in the brain that makes you go crazy” (Net4TruthUSA, 2016). This imprecise biological understanding of the disease is deployed to wed the claims of the conspiracy to seemingly rational causal and empirical justifications rooted in epidemiological science. In this way, the conspiracy participates in a long-standing American tradition, wherein popular narratives about the supposed objective or unbiased quality of scientific inquiry are used to prop up specious or distorted claims. As Rosenberg (1997) pointed out, the logic of this operation “is to be found not in [an argument’s] particular scientific content, but in [its] function. We must look not at the internal logic of the scientific ideas appropriated, but at their external logic—their social function” (p.10). In other words, the specific content claims made in a scientifically inflected conspiracy or hoax are less important than the fact that the claims are purported to be scientific in nature and therefore rooted in the widely respected *ethos* of scientific inquiry.

The biological inconsistencies of the claim that Hillary Clinton has developed kuru are patently obvious and wither under the slightest scrutiny. No human transmission of the kuru prion has been documented since 1960, and with the death of the last likely kuru victim in 2008

(Alpers, 2008), the ability of kuru to be transmitted ceased, as the prion requires direct ingestion or inoculation to spread. Even if Clinton *were* a cannibal, she could consume human remains without any fear of contracting the kuru prion, and if she did contract a spontaneously-emergent prion disease, that disease would not be kuru. Indeed, no physical evidence of Clinton's cannibalism is ever presented:

We've all but proven—with their own documents—that Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton, John Podesta, and a whole bunch of these people—including some notable celebrities out in Hollywood—are into this spirit cooking, child molesting, and even child sacrifice. *Now, to my knowledge, no bodies have been recovered, no murder charges have been proffered.* (Net4TruthUSA, 2016, emphasis mine)

Instead, the charge apparently stems from the hacked Wikileaks emails of John Podesta—Clinton's campaign chairperson—wherein it was revealed that performance artist Marina Abramović had invited John and brother Tony Podesta, a noted art collector, to attend a "Spirit Cooking dinner" at her home. Abramović's performance art pieces involved the use of pig's blood to write messages on various surfaces. (Blood and pain are common themes in Abramović's work.) These art events garnered a significant amount of media attention, leading to the characterization of Abramović and her work as "satanic" by conservative media and Christian activists (Introvigne, 2018). The conspiracy theorists suggest that Clinton's affiliation with this artworld figure and her work—work that is erroneously assumed to include human remains—is somehow the context wherein the biological vector of kuru was transmitted.

The conspiracy claims are not fundamentally about biology or pathology, however. Instead, the conspiracy is an effort to use the rational logic of epidemiology and biological contamination to forward a concern about spiritual contamination and about the deleterious effects of Clinton's influence on one version of American society. Positing that Clinton is a cannibal involved in maleficent ritual and occult practice is no accident. It is the activation of a well-established and deeply historical rhetorical trope: the witch. Conceived as a vulgar and carnivorous woman, emboldened by an era of social upheaval, and in-league with forces that would weaken or dismantle established hierarchies, the witch is a figure sought and vilified during the witchcraft manias that swept European and American societies over the course of the last six centuries. While the conspiracy initially seems to focus on the

salacious claim that Clinton is a cannibal, it is the associated gendered claim that Clinton is *literally a witch* that underwrites the conspiracy's broader persuasive appeal.

As feminist historians have pointed out, gender—particularly womanhood—has long been the focal point for terrorization under the charge of witchcraft. In a much cited remark, Larner (1981) noted that “witchcraft was not sex-specific[,] but it was sex-related” (p. 92). There is an astounding quantity of literature that documents the susceptibility of women to charges of witchcraft. Some scholars locate women's vulnerability as primarily rooted in economic pressure (Thomas, 1971) or vocational opportunities afforded to women (Scully, 1995). Others find that the interpersonal dynamics of village life give rise to accusations of witchcraft (Willis, 1995), particularly as historically interwoven with disease (Ross, 1995). While much scholarship tends to focus on American and European witch manias in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, scholars have located the roots of a European belief in women's association with dark magic in earlier eras (Jones & Zell, 2005) as well as examined witchcraft charges in non-European and non-Western contexts (Geschiere, 1997; Mantz, 2007; Skaria, 1997). In any case, there is a significant body of historical and interpretive work that supports the assertion that witch hunting is, in large part, woman hunting (Larner, 1981). A thorough review of this literature far exceeds the scope of this paper. However, to the extent that Clinton is perceived to embody the feminine usurpation of traditionally masculine power, the likelihood of critics' associating her with witchcraft escalates.

It was not simply Clinton's womanhood that associated her with the figure of the witch. It was that she was a woman seeking power at a particular moment of perceived social disruption. An emphasis on moments of social disruption or turmoil has long formed the basis of anthropological and historical accounts of witchcraft as a social phenomenon (Evans-Pritchard, 1963; Malinowski, 1961). As Taussig (1980) famously noted, belief in sorcery and other “devil-beliefs” spikes during eras of radical transformation in economic modes and established social structures (p. 101). Similarly, Hester (1992) asserted that charges of witchcraft multiplied across medieval Europe in an effort to reassert a male-dominated status quo upon an emerging social order of women's social and economic empowerment. Behringer's (1997) work on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century witch manias of Bavaria provides a telling analysis of the impacts of social upheaval on witch fears and the concomitant increase in witch hunting. As the sixteenth century dawned,



so too did the repercussions of a radical reordering of established medieval life through “rapid political, social, and religious change in the fifteenth century” (Russell, 1972, p. 271), to which Behringer adds a variety of economic pressures such as the transition from feudalism to capitalism. The peasantry also faced shifting behavioral demands. The rise of the absolutist state exerted severe pressures for behavioral conformity from above, while changes in family structure—particularly the roles of women—exerted transformative pressures from within homes and communities (Wiesner, 2000). In this social milieu, a belief in witchcraft boomed.

Finding analogues between these changing political, social, and religious features and the features of our own moment is hardly a challenge. According to a variety of Pew Research Center polls, the United States is currently experiencing rapid political change. Fifty percent of Millennial voters identify as political independents, while only 31 percent of Millennials report discerning substantial difference between the established Republican and Democratic parties (Pew Social Trends Center, 2014). Social change manifests as demographics and their associated cultures shift, particularly as the United States continues its transition to a non-White majority nation (a milestone that will be reached sometime in the early 2040s). Other social changes include a groundswell in support for same-sex marriage (74 percent of Millennials vs. 41 percent of the Silent Generation) (Pew Research Center, 2017), a desertion of self-identified patriotism (49 percent Millennial vs. 81 percent Silent Generation) (Pew Social Trends Center, 2014), and a general rejection of the belief in social trust (only 19 percent of Millennials surveyed report believing that “most people can be trusted”) (Pew Social Trends Center, 2014). Community fragmentation seems endemic to the current American moment: 67 percent of polled White, working-class Americans report seldom or never participating in non-religious sports teams, book clubs, or neighborhood associations (Jones, Cox, & Lienesch, 2017). With regard to religious upheaval, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) reports that in at least 20 states, religiously unaffiliated people make up a greater share of the population than any one faith group or denomination (Jones & Cox, 2017). While we might assume that these religiously unaffiliated persons were stereotypically young, urban, educated, and/or affluent, demographic research locates greater incidence of disaffiliation among less-educated, hourly compensated, working-class Americans (Jones et al., 2017). Economic upheavals manifest in shifts away from manufacturing and

resource extraction as drivers of job creation, particularly as pressures related to offshoring and automation escalate. Coupled with rising income inequality, this scenario replicates a condition of widespread economic precarity (Tsui, Enderle, & Jiang, 2018). And we hardly need to question, at this point, whether a kind of despotic demagoguery has arisen as the political response to these shifts in established social orders.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century laypersons could hardly conceive that the extraordinary changes sweeping across all dimensions of their lives could be rooted in mundane, worldly sources (Ben-Yehuda, 1980). Instead, they imagined the existence of an organized, nefarious shadow society dedicated to the undoing of the social and spiritual order through magical means. This theory of an organized, disruptive alter-society is dubbed the “elaborated concept of witchcraft” (Behringer, 1997, p. 13) to distinguish it from the more mundane, isolated, and emergent varieties of witchcraft supposedly practiced by rogue agents across Europe. Belief in the elaborated shadow society foregrounded and consolidated a broad swath of social anxieties, projecting them onto women, children, people with disabilities, and animals, and thereby established a unified theory of social unrest as an active undoing rather than a passive outcome of disparate social shifts. This practice of social and religious sabotage was conceptualized as a kind of uber-treason against the body politic, reminiscent of the foundational Christian story of Lucifer’s rebellion against God. Mackay (2009), in his translator’s introduction to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the 1486 witch hunter’s manual, makes note of one feature common to the elaborated theory of witchcraft that is particularly germane to the topic of this paper: the slaughter—and sometimes consumption—of babies.

To modern ears, the elaborated theory of witchcraft sounds extraordinary and implausible, the fever dream of an overzealous church and undereducated peasantry during a tumultuous era. But as preposterous as it seems, the elaborated theory of witchcraft is precisely the logic of social malevolence applied to Clinton by means of the kuru conspiracy. The notion that Hillary Clinton, John and Tony Podesta, and other political figures are enmeshed in a broad, networked shadow society or diabolical coven of Washington Insiders, all of whom serve some manner of old or false god, is the very heart of this conspiracy. The YouTube video proposing the conspiracy attempts to link Clinton’s supposed cannibal practices to the Old Testament figure of Moloch, an ancient Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice. The sacrifice and ritual consumption of human remains is undertaken, the theory

contends, in league with actively malignant forces and as a sorcerous practice: an elaborated theory of political witchcraft.

This particular conspiracy is not the first time that commentators have associated Hillary Clinton with occult practices. Clinton reportedly organized séances to contact the dead (namely Eleanor Roosevelt) during the era of the Clinton presidency (Woodward, 1996). Larry Nichols—a conspiracy theorist and long-time critic of the Clintons—made claims regarding Clinton’s participation in a literal “witches’ church” or coven. In various interviews with Alex Jones’s *INFOWARS* media platform, Nichols reported that Clinton was a regular participant in occult or pagan rituals and flew to Los Angeles multiple times a year for coven gatherings (Salazar, 2016). In a similar vein, writer and occult theorist Tracy R. Twyman (2016b) put forth the notion that the Clintons are witches, claiming that they have been communicating in color-coded messages with groups of witches, in particular by wearing purple (a color signifying “pagan pride”). Twyman (2016a) also lent her support to the theory that the Clintons are voodoo practitioners, suggesting they were introduced to the practice during their 1975 honeymoon trip to Haiti and have since courted otherworldly aid throughout their political careers. D’Souza (2016) perhaps most succinctly summed up the collective conservative perspective on Clinton when he opined that “she is old, and mean, [and] even her laugh is a witch’s cackle” (p. 23).

While the notion of a “witch hunt” is a trope that has long persisted in American political discourse, we find in the case of the Clinton/kuru conspiracy a literalization of the metaphor, an *actual* witch hunt. Clinton is to be reviled, the conspiracy theorists claim, not only because she has broken the taboo against consuming human flesh, but because she has done so in service of destroying the social order. In this way, the conspiratorial claims about Clinton and her political witchcraft activate the paranoid style of American political discourse (Hofstadter, 2008). In this scenario, an individual—in a paranoid fugue, possessed with a fear of being manipulated and believing themselves capable of perceiving a vast array of (potentially irrational) linkages between individuals, concepts, entities, and occurrences—extrapolates their paranoia at perceived persecution into a broader theory of social unease. Rather than simply targeting the individual in question, the perceived machinations of malicious agents are characterized as “directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others” (Hofstadter, 2008, p. 4).

The Clinton/kuru conspiracy goes a step beyond the established framework of the paranoid style, however, and lends support to recent claims that there is a subtextual form of conspiracy logic at work in contemporary political discourse (Neville-Shepard, 2018). Rather than focusing on the flawed logics of conspiracy claims, this conception centers on the workings of conspiracies as sensible—if untrue—uses of false claims to structure belief and engender community. These viral conspiracy theories are proposed to be expressly anti-establishment (insofar as they are understood to serve as mechanisms of breaking with established fonts of governmental and media power), and are critical of “dominant mythical framework(s)” (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 123). The new social order that is fostered by these conspiracies—a newly-crafted counterpublic—is thereby broadly construed as a viable alternative to mainstream ideologies and roots the specific claims of any given conspiracy in a broader constellation of associated claims that (even tangentially) support the general *ethos* of the conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are full of direct claims (“Clinton has kuru,” “Clinton is part of a group of demonic cannibals,” etc.), but the *subtext* of those conspiracies—“Clinton’s kuru is a symptom of a broader corruption within society”—is perhaps the more pressing and agential form of argument made on behalf of a proposed reordering of the social. It is, after a fashion, an elaborated theory of conspiracy thinking.

Such conspiracy thinking and efforts at imaginative social reordering need not necessarily run counter to long-established trends in society. Rather, they might be constructed counter to more recent *shifts* in society, away from an established set of pseudo-mythical norms or values. As conservative author Wayne Root (2016) spelled out, the deliberate destruction of a narrowly defined, supposedly authentic American culture was perceived by critics to be part of Clinton’s presidential agenda. Her election, Root assured his readers, would mean that “the America we know and love [...] the America created by our Founding Fathers [...] is finished. *Forever*” (2016, emphasis in original). In a PRRI poll (Jones et al., 2017), 68 percent of White, working-class Americans reported that they believed the country to be in danger of losing its specific culture and identity, ostensibly at the hands of immigrants, foreign influence, and socially liberal policy decisions. This vision of an imperiled authentic or traditional American lifestyle prompts the crafting of paranoid narratives and persuasive appeals—particularly insofar as the paranoid style finds purchase via the logic and practices

of scapegoating that seek to ascribe some blame for the looming sense of disorder that troubles many Americans (Howell, 2012).

The kuru conspiracy is not foremost about the biological impacts of eating tainted flesh. Instead, it is a coded assertion that the socially disruptive sorcery that was present in the Fore view of kuru has a real-world analogue in the contemporary American context: the machinations of a corrupt class of elites. The rationality and empiricism of the epidemiological claims about kuru are a kind of Trojan Horse for the true function of the conspiracy: smuggling into broad cultural conversation—and legitimizing—a paranoid worldview that believes in an elaborated concept of social corruption. The kuru conspiracy is clearly not the first time that charges of engagement with the occult have been leveled at Clinton. But the conspiracy does present an updated version of the claim and one that is supposedly grounded in publicly available televisual evidence.

Precisely *how* Clinton's occult efforts will disrupt American society is left unanswered by the conspiracy theorists. But this too is in keeping with the logic of the witch hunt. As Federici (2004) pointed out, "witch hunters were less interested in the punishment of any specific transgressions than in the elimination of generalized forms of female behavior which they no longer tolerated and had to be made abominable in the eyes of the population" (p. 170). It was not necessarily a prefigured set of specific crimes that motivated witch hunting—the "crimes" themselves were loosely defined, largely unprovable, and often so fantastical as to be impossible to commit—but rather the need for a structure that would permit the application of punishment with *ex post facto* justifications and evidence. As Siegel (2006) wrote, "the accident that occurs 'for no reason' and affects my life, comes, like the gift that it is, from nowhere. 'Witch' names the accident and asserts that it has a source" (p. 9). The hearsay, conjecture, back-alley gossip, and petty personal vendettas of village life have been replaced in this conspiracy with the supposedly unassailable mass-media evidence of the 24-hour news cycle. But the impulse to ascribe blame for perceived slights—economic downturns, cultural and demographic shifts, faltering American dominance on the world stage—remains squarely focused on sussing out the root of those perceived declines: the lurking figure of a witch.

### **Transgressive Laughter and Biological "Reality"**

The visual evidence for the claim that Clinton has kuru—endlessly looped videos of her facial expressions, her head movements, her stumbles—

locates in her biological body the supposed residue of a spiritual taint. But it is finally her laughter that is central to the discursive space manipulated by the conspiracy's claims. Clinton's laughter has been a topic of political conversation for over a decade. In a segment on *The Daily Show* from September 25, 2007, host Jon Stewart reviewed a series of five Clinton interviews wherein she laughed in a way that seemed erratic, delayed, unbidden, or contrived (Hillary's Laugh Track, 2007). Earlier that year, former DNC Chairman Terry McAuliffe told columnist Roger Simon that Clinton's "belly laugh" was proof of her likeability, a claim dissected and dismissed by *Slate* columnist John Dickerson (2007). Groch-Begley (2015) summarized the coverage of Clinton's laughter during the 2008 Democratic Primary, as her laughter was disparaged by dozens of major publications and political commentators. In a 2015 email released by Wikileaks, John Podesta (2015) wrote that "laughing too hard is [Clinton's] authentic weirdness," in response to a political strategist's concern about her laughter during the Benghazi hearings. As Gutgold (2017) summarized in her review of the preoccupation with the media-christened "Clinton cackle,"

Laughing, perhaps the most comfortable and confident of all behaviors, was characterized as "out of place" for Clinton, again, underscoring that Hillary Clinton, as a presidential candidate must not look at ease, ergo something must be wrong or contrived. The choice of the word "cackle" suggests a characterization of someone wicked. (p. 129)

Clinton's laughter has long been a liability to her political career and an odd obsession of her critics. But this preoccupation with—and disciplining of—a woman's laughter is not unprecedented. Instead, it is in keeping with feminist theories of laughter—particularly the laughter of women—as a transgressive and threatening force. "Humor," Weisstein (1973) noted, "as a weapon in the social arsenal constructed to maintain caste, class, race, and sexual inequalities[,] is a very common thing. Much of this humor is pure slander" (p. 51). Representatives of dominant patriarchal culture, when confronted with the laughter of women, rather than *at* their expense, react strongly because their experience using the chastening force of laughter prompts them to interpret women's laughter as a doubling back of that slanderous force onto their own (increasingly fragile) subject positions. But there is a less intuitive position to take, as Irigaray (1985) does, by suggesting that the laughter of women is

distinct from the laughter of men, not a recycled “men’s laughter by women,” but rather its own entity: “Women among themselves begin by laughing. To escape from a pure and simple reversal of the masculine position means in any case not to forget to laugh” (p. 163). There is an unruliness to laughter that, when embodied by women, transforms the laugh into a tool of destabilization and questioning, especially useful against patriarchal cultures and institutions (Karlyn, 1995). But it is also the case that women’s laughter unsettles because it is a mark of distinct Otherness(es), not beholden to patriarchal authorization or sanction. When Cixous wrote in *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) that, contrary to the common telling of the myth, the Gorgon Medusa was not terrible but rather that she was beautiful and laughing, Cixous was marking this uproarious distinction. Cixous’s Medusa—rather than a cursed outcast, raped by Poseidon and shamed—was a monstrous alternative, a joyous and laughing woman whose self-possessed power made her threatening to the world of men (as manifest in writing, in speech, in bodily control and pleasure). Medusa’s expressive power made it such that Perseus was forced to slink into her lair and remove her head as she slept because once awakened she would have proven impossible to subdue. This lesson—about the importance of attempting to prevent the awakening of feminine laughter—has not been lost on those who would seek to constrain the (political) power of women.

In overtly political terms, the disruptive force of feminine laughter has also been linked with the political laughter of Rabelais’s carnivalesque, as “laughter in the Middle Ages functioned as the unofficial opposition to medieval ideology—asceticism, sin, atonement, suffering, fear, religious awe, oppression and intimidation” (Isaak, 1996, p. 16). The carnivalesque, representing an embodied and material space of alternatives to dominant narratives, is an arena wherein chaotic social fragmentation can occur, marked and incited through laughter. This chaos is threatening to entrenched positions of authority and power not only because it has the potential to upend tradition and hierarchy, but because the laughter of women “is not a private depoliticized *jouissance* but sensuous solidarity. Laughter is first and foremost a communal response” (Isaak, 1996, p. 5). Laughter springs from an explicitly or implicitly shared experiential perspective and draws the laughers into greater alignment. As Henderson (1999) wrote, “humor both reveals and produces intersubjectivity, a cultural mortar or strain of recognition and alliance among even the most tenuously related persons” (p. 41). Clinton’s laughter is not, perhaps, threatening insofar as it is deployed

as an overt mockery or avenue of commentary against particular claims or stances; it need not be so tightly wedded to its purported referent in order to be perceived as threatening. The threat, instead, is the premise/promise that Clinton's laughter might engender a kind of communal response, a sweeping shift that enables other women to awaken into laughter themselves, to be hailed, in Althusser's (1972) terminology, into a position of unofficial opposition to established social conventions. The feminine laughter of one Gorgon or one witch, that is, might awaken untold numbers of threats to the world of men.

The realization that Clinton's laugh is a potent political instrument is where the most insidious dimension of the Clinton/kuru conspiracy claim becomes apparent. To suggest that Clinton's laughter is a manifestation of an illness, that it is not authentic laughter at all but rather an involuntary, asemiotic outburst, is to strip away the agential, transgressive, and affiliative force of Clinton's feminine laughter. It is no longer laughter in the face of power—a laughter that might serve as a refusal of the twin demands of respect for masculine authority and the adoption of a demure, “ladylike” comportment, as well as a laughter that might bring together disparate individuals. Instead, the laughter of a kuru victim is the admission of powerlessness. It is the unshakeable assertion of the crushing dominance of biological realities over the fragile artifice of autonomous, willful subjecthood. Clinton—an agent of social unrest, a threat to established patterns of patriarchy in governance, a cackling witch—is thereby rebuked and put in her place by the conclusive truth of biological “reality.” Claiming that Clinton's laughter is evidence of kuru transforms her laugh into an empty gesture, each bellow an involuntary and uncontrollable excision of her agency, and a reminder to those who would laugh alongside her that no authentic, transgressive, libidinous, laughter-of-women is available to them. The conspiracy functions to actualize—through its claims and purported biological evidence—precisely the theft of agency that is supposedly performed by the disease.

The laughter of the kuru victim marks not simply a spiritual attack, nor the cessation of life via prion infection. It marks instead a rupture: a fracture of laughter itself, the act of laughing without the content of laughter. The victim laughs during their unraveling, because of their unraveling, laughing at nothing. Perhaps the laughter of a kuru victim is not laughter at all, if laughing is understood as a directed act: we laugh with, we laugh at, we laugh because, and we direct the laugh into a loose signification. This spontaneous performance, a moment of framing and



marking that establishes an indexical and reflexive relationship between laughter and its referent, is a kind of embodied matrix with the laugher at its core (Glenn, 2003). But the kuru-afflicted laugher cannot *not* laugh, laughs at nothing, perhaps laughs at nothingness itself, and in doing so, begins to mark the impending absence of that person. The exhalations, the hoarse braying, the unlaugh of kuru marks the laughter unto death. It is finally this absence—this public and private erasure—that proponents of the conspiracy desperately wish upon Clinton and the world that her ascendance was believed to portend. They wish it so fervently that they have become convinced of the improbable veracity of the kuru claim.

### **Conclusion: Misinformation and the Specter of Conspiracy**

Twenty-five years ago, Steiner and Jowett (1993) wrote that “perhaps we ought to be grateful that the larger, faster, more efficient technologies and techniques for generating and promoting propaganda on a global scale do not ensure success” (p.10), a sentiment that now seems hopelessly quaint. Success in influencing public belief achieved by propagandists, international agents, fake news creators, conspiracy theorists, and hoaxers is now a given. Gunther, Beck, and Nisbet (2018) concluded that fake news likely had a substantial impact on the voting decisions of many Americans in the 2016 presidential election. Their work found that individuals who agreed with one or more items of fake news were 4.5 times more likely to have defected from their previous allegiance to the Democratic party and cast a vote for Donald Trump. Foremost among the widely disseminated false messages tested by the researchers was this claim: “Hillary Clinton is in very poor health due to a serious illness” (Gunther et. al., 2018, p. 2).

Misinformation—in the form of conspiracies, hoaxes, and fake news—poses a grave threat to the rule of law and the legitimacy of democratic processes. Consequently, it cannot be discounted as an object of study simply because it is distasteful, nor will it be wishfully disempowered if researchers ignore it. Instead, we must use it to ask a more pressing question: *why* are certain political figures susceptible to widespread conspiracy thinking, and subsequently, what can be done to combat this variety of political manipulation? In Clinton’s case, it is clearly—but not exclusively—her gender that served as the opening for conspiracy claims (Parry-Giles, 2014). As Anderson (2017) has pointed out, there is a “presidentiality paradox” that constrains women presidential candidates, wherein “to be viewed as ‘presidential,’ female

candidates must compensate for their conspicuous masculinity deficit” by “talking tough” and pushing back against efforts to disenfranchise them, a series of behaviors and postures that “triggers the gendered attacks that have dogged Clinton throughout her presidential career” (p. 133). A conspiracy such as the kuru claim—especially in its witchy form—sticks to Clinton because it is an oblique tool for enacting socially desired checks on female ambition. This is the aforementioned subtextual form of conspiracy logic at work, simultaneously critiquing Clinton for desiring power and establishing a counterpublic whose affiliation with a whole host of loosely defined anti-establishment ideals works to dismiss Clinton as a viable candidate. By this logic, it is precisely *because* Clinton has accrued the necessary endorsements and skills to be a viable candidate (within the establishment) that her viability is thrown into question. And lest someone attempt to disprove the conspiracy by facts—such as those about the epidemiology of kuru—the conspiratorial community may fall back on the broader web of associated conspiracy claims to soften the blow of losing any single disproven theory’s contribution to an ideological construct. As a result, Clinton’s professed unsuitability, malfeasance, or outright wickedness seemingly cannot be disproven, at least from within the conceptual or rhetorical reach of the conspiracy. The claims of conspiracy theorists demand inspection because they produce results, and those results shape policies with decades-long repercussions for social and political institutions.

We are living, as Young (2017) submitted, in “The Age of Euphemism,” no longer thrilling at the revelation of a hoax—Drat, fooled again!—but instead muddling the fantastical and the real to the point where they begin to collapse into an undifferentiated morass. The line between the teller (the self) and the told (the falsehood) grows increasingly unclear as new media forms and technologies expose us to polarizing and tribalizing information bubbles. Young (2017) wrote that

today’s hoaxes rely less on human nature or collective memory than cultural amnesia. We quickly erase hoaxes once exposed, excising the monstrous palimpsest, because as with any witch hunt or obvious fake, afterward we can’t quite explain why we believed the outrageous thing in the first place. (p. 432)

For this reason, there is a temptation to allow the Clinton/kuru hoax to pass wordlessly into memory, the belief in its preposterous claims a

national embarrassment, its association with witch hunting a shameful reminder of our desperation to scapegoat and defer culpability. But to forget the conspiracy is to empower those who conceived of the falsehood and saw to its dissemination, and to ignore it is to miss an opportunity to understand these sort of explicitly gender-motivated criticisms as they subtextually shape and reshape the fields of possibility for American political and civic life.

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