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“BUT YOU HAVE TO HAVE BEEN THERE TO KNOW WHAT WE ARE TALKING
ABOUT”: AN EXAMINATION OF THE RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENTS OF
CULTS AND OTHER EXTREMIST GROUPS AND HOW THEY LEAD
TO VIOLENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture often cites charismatic leaders as the catalysts for violent acts in cults and other extremist groups. This explanation is insufficient and oversimplified, and this thesis challenges the idea that a single speech or person can move a large group to act violently and without their own best interests in mind. This thesis examines two well-known cults: The Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate, to determine what compelled their followers to commit violent acts — particularly mass suicide. I then take this analysis and look at QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory group, whose participation in the January 6th, 2021 insurrection is explained by my analysis of the cause of cult violence. This thesis explains how Kenneth Burke's theory of the psychology of form and Jenny Rice's theory of rhetorical ecologies interact to create a rhetorical environment in which it is almost impossible for members to do anything but act violently—toward themselves or others.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Introduction	1
Thesis Question	2
Methodology	2
Defining a Cult	4
Cult Violence	4
What I am Choosing to Leave Out and Why	6
Moving Forward	7
Chapter I: Case Study 1: The Peoples Temple	11
Introduction	11
A Brief History of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple	12
Analysis	14
Conclusion	23
Chapter II: Case Study 2: Heaven's Gate	26
Introduction	26
A Brief History of Heaven's Gate	27
Analysis	32
Conclusion	46
Comparing the Suicides	47
Chapter III: Case Study 3: QAnon	49
Introduction	49
A Brief History of QAnon	50

Analysis	53
Conclusion	64
Chapter IV: Conclusion	65
Works Cited	70
Author's Biography	74

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Family members of people involved in cults are often quoted saying things like, “I never thought he would do something like that”, “she was a normal, bright kid” or “he was never a violent person.” If these parents, siblings, and spouses are right, then what is going on in cults that causes members to commit disturbing acts such as violence or mass suicide?

People cite “charismatic leaders” as the root cause of violent acts within cults. They try to make sense of “strange” behaviors and relying on the idea of a charismatic leader who gives strong speeches is an easy way to do so, but it is inadequate. It is tempting to have a simple default answer to acts such as mass suicide because they are so unsettling and seem impossible but acknowledging the complexity of the situations that the victims lived in honors them more than assuming that one person singlehandedly convinced them to lay down their lives with a good speech. The standard explanations for cult behavior tend to fall short when one looks more deeply at the rhetorical context in which the members of a group live, whether physically, emotionally, virtually, or otherwise.

Because I find default explanations of violent acts such as mass cult suicide are unconvincing, I have explored a more situational understanding. I believe there are, in fact, more complicated, nuanced explanations for this behavior, and it would be beneficial to be able to recognize when the context that we are living in is becoming dangerous. I have selected two of the most infamous cults, Heaven’s Gate and

Jonestown, to investigate the rhetoric of cults from a more environmental point of view. I then consider QAnon in relation to Heaven's Gate and Jonestown because it seems cult-like to many but is significantly different in its organization than these iconic cults. Ultimately, I argue that the environment of what are called cults rhetorically induces people to commit violence.

Thesis Question

Originally, I wanted to know how cult leaders convince their followers to kill themselves. This interest later broadened to include not just suicide, but violence in general. Through my research, I discovered that some cult leaders are not actually charismatic at all, and that some speeches are not very strong, but that they are still effective. This led me to change my research question to something more along the lines of *What is happening in cults that makes members do violent things?* This question seemed to bring me closer to the truth.

Methodology

I chose two of the most famous cults — the People's Temple and Heaven's Gate -- because both are known for ending in mass suicide, which I deemed to be one of the most extreme acts of violence. I analyzed the rhetoric of their leaders, which I found to be relatively underwhelming, despite the fact that Jim Jones is well known as a “charismatic leader.” I then looked for alternative explanations as to how both groups both reached such tragic endings and concluded that rather than simply focusing on the charismatic leader and what they are saying, it is important to look at the overall rhetorical

environment that is created and how it supports violent acts such as murder and suicide. Oftentimes, via conditioning and other contextual elements, acts that were once unthinkable begin to open up as options. Not only do acts such as murder and suicide become options, but some rhetorical ecologies reach a point at which anything less than violence seems like a non-option.

This analysis led me to look at QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory group. My initial intent was to use what I had learned from Jonestown and Heaven's Gate to decide if I would classify QAnon as a cult. Interestingly, over the course of my examination, I determined not only that QAnon did have the markers of a cult, but they also had the signs of a cult that was moving toward a large-scale act of violence.

Part-way through writing my thesis, on January 6th, 2021, members of QAnon and other Trump supporters broke into the U.S. Capitol building in a violent attempt to start a coup. It went on for hours and the police ended up shooting a QAnon member in the neck and killing her, as well as forcing the intruders out using flash-bangs and teargas (Tan). While this event was incredible, I could not help but think, *Yes, this makes a lot of sense. This is the violent act they were leading up to.* Based on my research, groups that exhibit certain distinct behaviors will likely lead to violence, following along a behavioral arc, as I will explain. This paper looks at how groups like cults get to the end of the arc — how they move toward violence.

Defining a Cult

In this thesis, I look at groups — some of which are commonly referred to as cults. It is important to recognize that the term “cult” does not have a clear and agreed upon definition. There are no set criteria for a cult, and it could be argued that most religions are cults. Filing a group under the term “cult” tends to be problematic, as the rhetoric around cults can be distracting, and calling something a cult does not help you understand it because cults do not have much in common with each other. For example, what we traditionally call “cults” can include a variety of different traits, such as living in a commune, forced sexual acts, changing your name, or dressing in uniforms. However, neither of the two classic “cults” that I will present exhibit all of these traits. Therefore, it is important to note that the word “cult” is another tool we use to simplify an incredibly complex concept. The only thing that I would say differentiates a cult from other groups is its tendency toward violence, and even there, the line is blurred. Heaven’s Gate, as I will explain, was not inherently violent. Members only participated in physically harmful activities by choice, such as castration and suicide. However, these are not activities that most “groups”, such as a church group or a book club would engage in. Hence, the differentiation between group and cult.

Cult Violence

Not only do people stereotype cults as groups with charismatic leaders, but they often also see mass suicide as the kind of violence that sets cults apart from other groups. I argue that this is not the only type of violence that makes a cult.

It is difficult to define violence. People have vague and ambiguous definitions, and there are multiple ways to interpret it. Vittorio Bufacchi, a philosopher, states that “We may learn a great deal about specific acts of . . . violence occurring within certain cultures in different parts of the world, without necessarily having a better understanding of the meaning of violence as a universal concept. At best these volumes remind us of the complexity of violence, they don’t help us to understand it” (Bufacchi 194). The closer one looks, the more robust the definition of violence becomes, whether physical, emotional, psychological, or other. Violence can present itself in many ways, and because “. . . the concept of violence remains elusive and often misunderstood,” I want to clarify exactly what I mean by violence in the context of my thesis (Bufacchi 199).

I will be understanding violence to include mass suicide, insurrection, (which led to injury and death) and other practices such as self-castration, which many would consider violent, particularly for adults. For the sake of my thesis, I will classify all physically harmful acts as violence.

For fear of grouping two very different events under the same name, I would like to differentiate between the suicides in Heaven’s Gate and Jonestown. In Jonestown, the members drank or were injected against their will with cyanide, which, as I will later detail, is a horrible, prolonged death. The bodies then lay strewn all over the ground outside until later found.

This was a much more “violent” death than Heaven’s Gate, which was peaceful and dignified. The members consumed vodka and a mix of chocolate pudding or applesauce and phenobarbital, a drug which brings on what feels like sleep without convulsions or pain (Press). Phenobarbital is the drug used to put down animals and is

regarded as a humane way to do so (The Humane Society). The group took turns dying, tending to those who had passed away before them. The difference in manner in these suicides does not make the end result different, but it does make one wonder if Jonestown could be called “more violent.”

QAnon has not, at this time, led to mass suicide. However, that does not mean it is not a violent group. The Capitol siege led to multiple deaths and many injuries, as well as the need for physical force to stop it. There is not one specific action, such as mass suicide, that we should use to classify cult violence, as doing so just further narrows our understanding. Instead, seeing violence as actions that are harmful — in this context, mostly physically — is most appropriate.

What I am Choosing to Leave Out and Why

When discussing cult behavior, most people think about the psychological aspects of the members or the leaders. As a communication and economics major who has never taken a psychology class before, I have no basis on which to discuss cult psychology. Instead, I will be examining the rhetorical aspects, which I have much more knowledge of and experience with based on my communication background. Though one of the main theories I will rely on is called “psychology of form,” the theory itself actually comes from the communication field. Psychology of form is a theory from Kenneth Burke which states that once an expectation is created in a narrative, it should be satisfied (Burke Counter-Statement 31). Burke discusses this theory as it pertains to literature, explaining that the arc of a story is best left concluded, but I will be using it in the context

of a rhetorical environment. Psychology of form will be one of the major theories that guides my analysis of Jonestown, Heaven's Gate and QAnon as I move forward.

If you came here hoping to learn more about the psychology of cults, I suggest the following sources: *Legitimizing New Religions* by James R. Lewis, *Bounded Choice: True Believers And Charismatic Cult* by Janja Lalich, *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*, "Charismatic groups and cults: A psychological and social analysis" by Marc Galanter, and "The cult and its causes" by James Bissett Pratt.

While there is a plethora of existing research on cult psychology, there is much less on cult rhetoric, making it more challenging but more important, in my opinion, to look into it and add to the literature that does exist. I will be pairing my use of Burke's psychology of form with Jenny Rice's concept of rhetorical ecologies, which she defines as places in which we exist that are shaped by rhetoric, experiences, and feelings which, in turn, shape us (Edbauer 9).

By linking Burke and Rice's two concepts, I will explain how cults move toward violence without reliance on the classic but inadequate explanations of charismatic leaders or incredibly persuasive speeches.

Moving Forward

In what follows, I will be discussing Jonestown and Heaven's Gate as case studies through which to learn about the rhetorical ecologies of cults. I will then synthesize this information through an examination of QAnon, whose behaviors led me to expect a violent act, which, as I will explain, came to fruition. Throughout my thesis, I will rely most heavily on the work of Burke and Rice, whose ideas of psychology of form and

rhetorical ecologies, combine to form an explanation for cult violence: the creation of an environment in which a behavior is so expected that it cannot be left undone. In the cases of Jonestown, Heaven's Gate and QAnon, that behavior was violence.

I argue that Jim Jones's final speech to the Peoples Temple, known as the "Death Tape" was not rhetorically or linguistically persuasive. What was effective was the use of his voice. Jones had spent months conditioning, abusing, drugging, and sleep depriving his followers, getting them comfortable not only with the constant sound of his voice, but also with the idea of drinking poison. These behaviors became such norms within his compound that by the end, when the members heard his voice telling them to commit suicide, most were not just ready to do so, but they were incapable of doing anything else.

Heaven's Gate had a very different path toward suicide, but with the same result. The leaders, Ti and Do were not malicious like Jim Jones. Instead, they preached about bringing their followers with them to Heaven in space. In order to achieve this ascension, the members would have to renounce their humanness and die. After 20 years of preparing for death via drastic behavior, language and belief modification, 39 people committed suicide, as requested by their leader at the time, Do. This, like at Jonestown, was possible as a result of the expectation that had been created: an expectation of ending the group with death.

QAnon is a unique element of my thesis that went from being a way to synthesize my analyses of Jonestown and Heaven's Gate to further proof of the ecology/arc framework that I will be discussing. After identifying commonalities between the environments of Jonestown, Heaven's Gate and QAnon, I anticipated that QAnon would

commit a large-scale act of violence. On January 6th, 2021, they did exactly that. Members of the group joined in as Americans broke into the U.S. Capitol building with intentions of insurrection, where some died, and many others were injured. Participation in this siege helped QAnon members to conclude the arc, which it did not seem would be concluded otherwise, as the end of the Trump administration meant there would be no Martial Law under President Trump, and no ending of the democratic cabal they believe exists. Though not the ending members were necessarily hoping for, this event “satisfied the appetite” for violence that had been created over time in chat rooms and in online groups, rather than in person, as in Heaven’s Gate and Jonestown.

The anticipation of something makes the satisfaction almost necessary. If you are told there will be a delicious dessert after dinner, you plan for it; you eat a smaller portion, you prepare your palate for something sweet, and once this expectation has been built, you need to satisfy it. When dessert comes, it will be very hard not to eat it. This was the case at Heaven’s Gate and Jonestown. If dessert does not come, you will likely take yourself for ice cream or something else sweet to satisfy the craving. This was the case for QAnon.

As the quote in the title of this thesis — a quote from Do, a leader of Heaven’s Gate — states, “you have to have been there to know what we are talking about.” I take this to mean that we must look deeper into the environments of the cults — get as close as we can to “being there” — in order to know why they did what they did. The explanation that I have reached is that cults reach violence by following along a behavioral arc within their rhetorical environments, which are comprised of a number of behaviors, as we are about to see, which create an anticipation of violence that must be satisfied.

CHAPTER I

CASE STUDY 1: THE PEOPLES TEMPLE

Introduction

When thinking of a cult driven to violence by an unstable, persuasive leader, the Peoples Temple and the Jonestown massacre come to mind. The phrase “drinking the Kool Aid” comes from Jonestown, after all, and is slang for having one’s mind taken over. Jim Jones, founder and leader of the Peoples Temple, is who people traditionally think of as the kind of charismatic leader able to convince people to commit atrocities. However, this impression is wrong; he in fact was not particularly rhetorically persuasive. His rhetorical strength came instead from creating an isolated environment which primed his followers for suicide. Jones led his cult of over 900 members to South America in 1977 where they lived in a disorienting and oppressive space; at the end of 1978 the group committed mass suicide.

I argue that Jones’s final speech to the Peoples Temple, given right before the members committed suicide, and often credited with causing the suicide, did not need to be persuasive or effective. He could have said something very simple, and his followers would have killed themselves. After months of living in an environment created by conditioning, abuse, drugging, and sleep deprivation, Jones’s followers were just waiting for the word to drink the poison. As I will explain, Kenneth Burke’s psychology of form and Jenny Rice’s concept of rhetorical ecology help explain this. Going through with the act was even more thrilling after the anticipation that Jones had created. The only thing Jones could *not* have said is that they should not kill themselves, as it would contradict

the conditioning that his followers had taken part in (Gritz). Though the deaths of the members of the Peoples Temple were horribly tragic, the rhetorical ecology that Jones had designed would have failed if they had not drunk the poison.

A Brief History of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple

Jim Jones was a complex character, described as a “charismatic, politically savvy, visionary, persuasive, persecuted, manipulative, abusive of women, abusive of drugs, and, finally, murderous man who almost always wore dark sunglasses” (Who Was). Jones started as a self-ordained Christian minister, but later moved to San Francisco and grew to be a powerful figure, donating to many charities and rallying to get votes for political candidates. His church, which he called the Peoples Temple, ran programs such as a free dining hall for the hungry, a drug rehabilitation facility, and a legal aid service provider. Jones focused on promoting justice and equality, especially on the basis of race, and his ideologies attracted a large group of followers from all backgrounds (L. Kennedy).

By the 1970s, members of the Peoples Temple started to report that Jones was forcing people to give up their belongings, homes, and child custody (History.com). He was accused of abuse and sexual assault and staged fake cancer healings. When this news began surfacing in 1977, Jones made the decision to move to a compound in Guyana, a country in South America, with his people to create a “utopia” based on socialist principles (History.com).

Over the course of the year that the members spent in Jonestown, Jones conditioned them into submission using linguistic and psychological tactics as well as abuse, drugging, and sleep deprivation. Jones also took advantage of the lack of communication with the outside world that came from living in an isolated South American settlement. Those who wanted to leave Jonestown had no way of contacting anyone, so Jones was in full control.

On November 18, 1978, 918 members of the Peoples Temple committed suicide or were murdered after a visit from California Congressman, Leo Ryan, who went to Jonestown to ensure that nobody was being held against their will. He brought members of the media and discovered that people did, in fact, want to leave, but did not feel that they were able to. Congressman Ryan was shot and killed on his way back to the United States by a member of Jim Jones's community. Jones feared that the government of Guyana or the United States would come after him and the other members of his Peoples Temple, so he convinced most of them—he had to forcefully inject some people—to drink a mix of Flavor Aid and cyanide, telling them that they were participating in an act of freedom that would inspire others (History).

Despite the fact that some defectors were injected with cyanide or shot and some escaped, the group still committed what is known as the largest mass suicide in modern times (Highest Death).

Analysis

The Death Tape

Jones's final speech — which was recorded and is now called the “Death Tape” — was given and recorded by the late cult leader himself, and later transcribed by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. As far as his speeches go, I will be examining Jones's final speech only, as I find it most important, considering the implications, and because he spoke almost all day every day on the loudspeakers of his compound, so analyzing all of his speeches would be an insurmountable task. In fact, the incessant sound of Jones's voice is better understood as a sonic environment, as I will explain. Also, most importantly, since this speech is often credited with causing the suicide, it requires consideration.

The most striking thing about Jones's speech — at least for the purpose of my work — is that it is hard to describe as particularly persuasive. Jones tends to ramble and make incorrect cultural references. He screams, swears, mutters repetitively, and seems on the verge of a mental breakdown. At one point in the tape, Jones is recorded saying, “Peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, peace,” which is quite eerie and indicative of a complete lack of peace (Q042).

Jones makes one major argument in this speech: if we do not kill ourselves, we will be killed, so we must do it first, as a revolutionary act. He says, “This is revolutionary suicide” (Q042). There is no truth behind this claim, of course. The people of Jonestown were never threatened with murder or violence. In fact, the U.S. government wanted to release them from their commune, if they desired. However, Jones pays no mind to this fact, stating that they will be killed if they do not commit suicide.

Later, when convincing his followers to drink the poison, Jones says, “My opinion is that we be kind to children and be kind to seniors and take the potion like they used to take in Ancient Greece” (Q042). Because Jones gave his followers cyanide, it is likely that he actually meant to reference the Ancient Romans, as the Roman emperor Nero is famous for using cyanide to poison his relatives (Cyanide). Ancient Greeks did not use cyanide; they used poison hemlock and mandragora (Laios). Additionally, it is interesting that Jones mentions being kind to the children during the suicide, as the children were the first to be killed by their own parents, and the fact that cyanide causes the body to “. . . convulse. Then your mouth fills with a mixture of saliva, blood and vomit. Then you pass out, and then you die. Your body is deprived of oxygen completely. It’s a horrific death” that lasts from 5-20 minutes (Janos). Those who were listening to his speech knew this firsthand, as they were watching the children die, which you can hear in the background of the recording.

These are only a few examples of the multiple confused, incoherent, or mistaken statements Jones makes in his speech, which, on its own, is wholly unconvincing. For such a speech to move people from being opposed or resistant to gruesome, slow suicide to actively wanting it and willing to follow through, the audience would need to find nearly manic babble and demonstrably false claims (children clearly suffered before their eyes) convincing. If Jones’s speech was so underwhelming, why did it work? The answer, according to my findings, is explained through a combination of Kenneth’s Burke’s “psychology of form” and Jenny Rice’s “rhetorical ecology.” Jim Jones created a closed environment in which the expectation all along was that the group would commit suicide, and he satisfied that expectation on November 18th, 1978.

An Alternate Explanation

Psychology of Form

Kenneth Burke wrote about the relationship between psychology and form in a way that helps make sense of the deaths at Jonestown. He says that “Form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (Burke Counter-Statement 31). By this, Burke means that in writing, speaking or acting, you build an expectancy in your audience, so that when they receive what they have been waiting for, they will be thrilled (Deepak). Another way to think about this is with the metaphor of an arc. Behavior creates an arc, and the arc leads to a certain destination. For example, when reading a murder mystery, one would expect to learn who the killer is at the end. The expectation is built, so when the reader finally reaches the conclusion, they are satisfied. The arc can be built in a variety of ways — through an infinite number of storylines — however, the destination of the arc will be the same. In the case of Jonestown, the actions of Jim Jones and the community itself created an arc leading to mass suicide.

Rhetorical Ecology

Professor Jenny Rice (formerly Edbauer) wrote about what she calls “rhetorical ecologies,” describing them as “a circulating ecology of effects, enactments and events” (Edbauer 9). By this, she means that a rhetorical ecology is an environment created by rhetoric, experiences, and feelings in which we exist that shapes the way we act. For example, in “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” Rice references Craig Smith and Scott Lybarger, who argued that

President Bush's speeches on the war on drugs were not only informed and inspired by public concern about the issue, but also reinforced these concerns (Edbauer 6). In this case, it is clear that both parties — the president and the public — fed off of each other, shaping the rhetorical ecology. With Jonestown, the rhetorical ecology was created by Jim Jones, then strengthened by his followers, who were living together in a closed system, which amplified the effect, as I will explain. The conditioning created the ecology.

Creation of the Environment

Jim Jones had been conditioning his people for over a year before asking them to lay down their lives. He built up social norms within the commune and created an expectation for his people that their lives would end in suicide. In any other society, it would be unheard of to regularly rehearse the act of drinking poison, but Jim Jones created a closed society in which doing so became routine, which transformed the taboo into the norm. Via practice suicides, loudspeakers, abuse, and disconnection from the outside world, Jones created an ecology with an arc that could only end in mass suicide. The fact that this was the result of the conditioning and not Jones's final speech is evidenced by the fact that some members were not conditioned, and therefore did not want to kill themselves in response to his call to do so.

Practice Suicides

Jones regularly had his people go through what were called "white nights," in which they were all handed a cup of red liquid. Jones would say, "In forty minutes, you

will all be dead. Now empty your glasses” and then watch to see who followed his instructions (Wunrow). The liquids were never actually poisonous until November 18, 1978, when they finally committed mass suicide. After running this drill multiple times, the idea of drinking poison together became more ordinary.

Burke talks about a concept which philosopher and psychologist, John Dewey, called “occupational psychosis,” and which economist and sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, called “trained incapacity” (Merton 562). The idea behind the concept is that your abilities in one area function as inadequacies or blind spots in another, and that what you once learned to do may be inappropriate under changed conditions (Merton 562). This means that once one has been conditioned to act a certain way, it becomes almost impossible to do otherwise. In the case of Jonestown, the people were trained to carry out the order to drink the poison and therefore were incapable of not going through with the eventual suicides that they had been trained for and anticipating.

Creating a society of people who were not afraid of death by suicide and who even trained for it not only made it easier to ask this of them when the time came, but it also created the expectation that the time would come. Why practice so much for something that would never happen? Like a fire drill, where you often do not know if there is a true fire, the members never knew if the liquid was truly poisonous. They knew that one day, the contents of their cups would probably kill them, and they were prepared for it.

Ambient Voice

All day, every day, Jim Jones blasted his voice on loudspeakers throughout the compound. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke states, “. . . Rhetoric as the speaker's attempt to identify himself favorably with his audience then becomes so transformed that the work may seem to have been written under an esthetic [sic] of pure ‘expression,’ without regard for communicative appeal” (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 37). After a year of acclimating his members to his voice, Jones had built up a familiarity with them, deeply connecting his voice with their day to day lives. His words became a constant, a sonic environment, almost like a second subconscious for them. Burke states, “Hence, having woven a rhetorical motive so integrally into the very essence of his conception, the writer can seem to have ignored rhetorical considerations” (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 37). Jones did not have to focus on being persuasive so much as oratorically familiar with his people, in order for his speech to be effective.

Hearing the voice that has become like a second brain, a God, or a parental figure tell you to do something is much more compelling than the voice of a stranger. Jones played his voice constantly, getting his people so used to listening to him that, according to trained incapacity as discussed before, they were unable not to behave as expected when the time came. As Burke notes, “often we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address, but as a general *body of identifications* that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reënforcement [sic] than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 26). Daily repetition by an orator is more powerful than the carefully crafted word, even if what that orator says has little meaning. As explained, Jones’s speech was underwhelming, yet effective, and this

is due, in large part, to the repetition of his voice that had preceded the speech every day for a year.

Isolation

Jonestown was built by Jim Jones himself in a swampy area that is now an overgrown jungle in Guyana (Schild). Members of the Peoples Temple were not able to contact anyone from the US and could not easily escape to neighboring towns. This created an almost completely closed system in which Jim Jones was the ultimate ruler and his words were the law of the land. It also meant that all ideas, behaviors, and social norms were solidified from within. Had the members been able to have guests, go on trips, and call their families, they would have been reminded that regularly drinking what could be poison and warming up to the idea of suicide were not normal behaviors. However, living with 900 other people who were doing the same thing, mirroring each other's behaviors and strengthening these norms made it all the more difficult to act differently, and all the easier for Jones to have his ideas echoed in a closed chamber: his compound. In other words, all sound and action that would conflict with the arc of expectation was excluded.

Physical Abuse

Jones used other techniques as well to make his followers more compliant to his conditioning such as beatings, electric shock, drugging, and sleep deprivation (Wunrow). Jones said to one of his members, "Let's keep them poor and tired, because if they're poor they can't escape and if they're tired they can't make plans," and that is exactly what he did (Wunrow). If they slept more than a few hours each night, members were made to feel guilty, and they were forced to work six days per week, leaving them sleep

deprived and psychologically overwrought as a result of being worked hard, beaten, shocked, and forced to not sleep enough.

Additionally, in the months before the suicides, Jones began drugging his members as a form of mind control. When Jonestown was inspected after the suicides, enough antidepressants, downers, and pharmaceuticals were found to treat all 918 members hundreds of times over (Wunrow). Potential defectors were confined to their own units and given sedatives like Thorazine until they lost their will to fight (Wunrow). The drugs that Jones was administering in the grilled cheese sandwiches that he fed to some of his members had “suicidal tendencies” as a side effect, according to medical officials (Wunrow). Jim Jones used pharmaceuticals to make his followers more amenable to his conditioning tactics.

It is interesting to note that, as mentioned earlier, Jim Jones had previously run a drug rehabilitation facility. Jones understood the dangers of drugs and proceeded to use them against his people, creating a town of psychologically fragile, exhausted, and malleable people. Under such conditions, normal ideas about persuasion — the power of language choices, the skillful use of reason and evidence, careful appeals to values — become irrelevant. It is the habituation of the place, the physical conditions of daily life, and the forming of expectation that matter.

The Exception Makes the Rule

The fact that Jones’s followers were conditioned by their environment was also evident in that some were *not* conditioned. For example, when you listen to the Death Tape, you can hear some people saying that they do not want to drink the mixture or that

they have alternative ideas. These defectors make it clear that Jones's speech was not persuasive enough in itself to make them commit suicide. The real factor in the suicide was whether the members had succumbed to the months-long, ambient rhetoric of suicide rituals, isolation, Jones's voice as collective subconscious, drugging, and abuse. If so, then suicide seemed inevitable. If not, another speech from Jones, whether it was especially overwrought or not, clearly did not make a difference. Therefore, we can conclude that the most powerful force at play here was the conditioning, not the language or performance of his final speech.

Thomas Rickert helps us understand this as ambient rhetoric. He claims, "that rhetoric is ambient. . . rhetoricity is the always ongoing disclosure of the world shifting our manner of being in that world so as to call for some response or action" (Rickert xii). By this, Rickert means that the space you dwell in shapes you and aligns you with your rhetorical ecology. He says, "Transformations go hand in hand with difference in habitation, in how we dwell" (Rickert xiv).

The resisters in Jonestown could see where the psychology of the Peoples Temple form was going and not everyone wanted to satisfy it or be a part of it. Those who had tried to leave with Congressman Ryan felt the shape of the arc and did not want to be there when the group reached the end.

Conclusion

If Jones's words themselves were not what led to the suicides of 918 people, then the most important aspects of Jones's final speech are not the words he is saying, but the fact that it is his voice and the action that it signals. It is hard to even imagine what kind

of traditional rhetorical tactics might have worked for the holdouts, making the specific nature of the Death Tape less important. He had created, as explained by Kenneth Burke and Jenny Rice, a rhetorical ecology with the expectation of an arc that had to be concluded. What is important is not the psychology of the speaker, but the psychology of the audience. This is one part of the “charismatic leader” explanations for cult violence that is questionable, then. Such explanations emphasize the psychology of the leader, turned into speech, as the source of the cult’s rhetorical power. Jones did not need to say anything magnificent or incredibly convincing in this speech; he just had to signal that it was finally time to “satisfy the appetite” and finish what they started. He had talked about, practiced, and normalized suicide with his people. *Jonestown* as a place had conditioned them into submission, not Jones as the town’s orator, and they were just waiting for him to say the word that completed the story of *Jonestown*. Notably, the word had to come from him, the voice that they were so accustomed to hearing. So, Jones is critical to the rhetoric, but not in the way that is often assumed. It did not matter what that voice said, as long as it matched the end of the arc that *Jonestown* as a place had created — the arc of suicide. Doing anything besides calling for his people’s death would, in terms of rhetoric, have been a failure on Jones’s part.

The power of the environment is even more apparent if you consider the litany of terrible acts that Jim Jones committed that did not disrupt the suicidal arc. He was accused of abuse and sexual assault, he staged fake cancer healings, he forced people to give up custody of their children, and yet, it did not matter. What mattered was the context that his followers were living in: a place where they were sleep deprived, abused,

drugged, exposed over time to increasingly alarming “norms”, and awaiting a day when they would be asked to lay down their lives.

Jonestown was a place where death was expected and had built up to a mass suicide for so long, that, when came time, the group was ready and some were even overwhelmed with excitement, as evidenced by some of the voices that can be overheard on the tape.

Another simple indication of the importance of Jonestown as a rhetorical ecology, rather than as a horrible event drive by overwhelming oratory, is that outside of Jonestown it would be nearly impossible to convince almost 1,000 people to commit suicide, no matter how well one speaks. However, the brainwashing, isolation, and practice runs lead them to make the ultimate sacrifice and they were less hesitant than one would be without such conditioning.

No speech, no matter how great, can convince parents to inject their children with a poison that will lead to a miserable and slow death when there is no true threat. Only a rhetorical ecology with a carefully crafted behavioral arc can do that.

CHAPTER II

CASE STUDY 2: HEAVEN'S GATE

Introduction

The Heaven's Gate cult spanned the course of two decades, from the 1970s to the 1990s. Like Jonestown, the group ended in mass suicide. However, as explained in the previous chapter, an arc can follow a number of different paths and still arrive in the same place. Heaven's Gate and Jonestown were two completely different groups, despite the fact that many people now lump them together under the umbrella of "suicide cults." It is important to keep in mind that the way something ends should not single-handedly define it. It is appropriate, in this case, to call Heaven's Gate a cult as even one of its leaders, Marshall Herff Applewhite, said in a homemade recording: "Is it a cult if I ever heard one? Yes, it is. It's a cult. I mean, it's the cult of cults, it's the cult of truth" (Tweel). Like Jonestown, Heaven's Gate had been heading to its demise for years, and the behavior, language and beliefs of the members under their leaders lead directly and unsurprisingly to suicide. Burke's psychology of form once again explains that after 20 years of conditioning, going through with the act was even more thrilling and "necessary" due to the anticipation that Heaven's Gate's practices had created. Heaven's Gate was a closed, disciplined atmosphere organized around a suicidal purpose that was understood as departure. The group spent their time looking forward to and organizing their lives around their deaths, so it was the only natural ending.

A Brief History of Heaven's Gate

The information that follows in this chapter section is all from one source, an HBO documentary entitled *Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults*, unless specifically cited otherwise (Tweel). I have chosen to rely so heavily on this source, the facts of which I have cross-checked, as it is an authoritative account that features interviews with former Heaven's Gate members and relevant scholars and experts, as well as recordings from the group itself. The documentary is a video anthology of sources and speakers, whom I will mention by name, rather than citing, as they are collected within the series.

Heaven's Gate was a Christian offshoot cult in the 1970s when popular culture took a serious interest in space and spiritual belonging outside of established religion. Heaven's Gate was, as religious scholar Reza Aslan explains, a millenarian group, meaning that they believed time was coming to an end. Groups like this often form when there is stress on society, as we saw with Jonestown, where the stress was segregation, and as we will see with QAnon, where the stress will be politics. For Heaven's Gate, the social stresses included Watergate and the Vietnam War.

According to religious studies professor Benjamin Zeller, the 1970s was the first decade in which large numbers of people came to believe in UFOs. *Star Trek* had come out less than a decade prior, in September of 1966, and people were fascinated with space travel (Siede). Additionally, Erich von Daniken's book, *Chariots of the Gods*, which theorizes not only that aliens have been to Earth, but also that we are descended from those aliens, was one of the bestselling books at the time (Chariots). Therefore, when people found Heaven's Gate, it did not seem that wild of an idea. The group seemed like a combination of *Star Trek* and religion.

The members of Heaven's Gate believed that if you followed the leaders' — Ti and Do's — approach to life, your body would chemically and biologically transform into a perfected space alien. Ti and Do said that they were aliens who were millions of years old and had a way to bring their followers to Heaven if they renounced their mortal connections. They said that Earth's existence would be ending soon and that the only way to "live" would be to escape with them to the "Next Level," and that the key to entering was to shed your humanness — a process which they called "human individual metamorphosis." There was a "baptism" where members would stand in a body of water and wash the humanness out of themselves so that they could be reborn as a new creature.

The leaders, Bonnie Lu Nettles and Marshall Herff Applewhite, called themselves "The Two," which was a reference to the Bible, in which there are two witnesses foretold in the Book of Revelation who are destined to be martyred and rise from the dead three and a half days later and ascend to Heaven in a cloud (Revelation 11:3-12). They explained that when the Bible was written, people would not have understood what a UFO was, so they called it a cloud. Nevertheless, The Two were firm believers that they would be leaving in a UFO. They explained that they would lead their followers into space with them, an event that they called "The Demonstration," which would initiate the end of the world. During The Demonstration, they would be martyred, perhaps physically or even metaphorically, by the press.

The Two also went by the names “Bo and Peep” (Bo was Marshall and Peep was Bonnie) because their followers were their sheep. They most commonly went by “Ti and Do” (Ti being Bonnie and Do being Marshall) from *The Sound of Music*. I would like to note here that Marshall never went by Marshall, he went instead by his middle name, Herff.

Ti and Do met as Marshall and Bonnie, however. Ti was a registered nurse who was involved in New Age thinking, such as seances, crystals, UFOs and ascended beings, even before she met Do.

Do was a music teacher at the University of Alabama in the ‘60s and was said to be a natural performer. “He had a lot of charisma. . . he would have the audience in the palm of his hand” according to Neely Bruce, a former music student of his. This natural ability to capture an audience carried forward into his time in Heaven’s Gate, making him a stronger speaker and leader. After a psychotic episode, Do was hospitalized and met Ti, who was his nurse. Ti convinced Do that they were soulmates and told him that they were fated to work together on a grand project and be spiritual partners.

After meeting, Ti and Do traveled around the U.S., holding meetings where they recruited members to join them in working towards ascendance into the Next Level. They appealed to people who did not feel like they belonged, or who felt that there was more out there beyond Earth to be experienced. Given the cultural context, their ideas were more accepted than one would perhaps expect today. Many people joined and these members were, for the most part, normal, functional members of society who had decided to try something new. Janja Lalich, sociologist and former member of the Democratic Workers Party, notes that “Cults don’t want lonely, strange, weird people. Cults want

highly functioning individuals who can help run the cult.” Additionally, Steve Hassan, a former cult member, cult exit counselor, and licensed mental health counselor says, “intelligent, educated people get sucked in because they are ignorant about cult tactics like manipulation, deception, hypnosis, behavior modification and situational vulnerability (moving, death of a loved one, illness, job change).” In the case of Heaven’s Gate, the major sign that was ignored or accepted was behavior modification, as will be explained.

At first, the members travelled around the U.S. in groups with no real instruction. They lived off of church donations and money from odd jobs in campgrounds and held tuning forks up to their heads, trying to tune into the Next Level. They would go out into the desert and wait to be picked up by a UFO, spending much of their time looking up at the sky, ensuring that someone was always awake to keep watch for a spacecraft.

After giving many talks around the U.S. looking to gain more members, rumors began to swirl about Heaven’s Gate. There was talk that there was a connection to the Charles Manson family, that they were trying to starve themselves to death, and that they were mutilating cattle. People stopped attending the meetings and those who decided to stay were told they had made the first cut and that “the harvest” was “closed.” Ti and Do then led their members into hiding. Former members note that when people decided to leave, the energy within the group always increased, because it meant that everyone who had stayed really wanted to be there.

In 1985, Ti passed away, leaving Do as the sole leader. Over the next decade, he led his followers further along the arc toward suicide, as I will explain in the next section. 21 women and 18 men committed suicide over the course of several days, beginning on

March 22, 1997. It was and still is the largest mass suicide on U.S. soil. In killing themselves in such a performative fashion, the group made worldwide news and ensured their “immortality” in history. After their deaths became public, at least three additional former members committed suicide in order to join them in the Next Level.

Ti and Do led their followers through a series of behavior, language, and belief modifications that led to their eventual mass suicide. Though popular culture dismisses the group as a bunch of brainwashed hippies, there was far more going on than simple manipulation. In fact, as one (unfortunately) unnamed speaker in the documentary, remarked, “This wasn’t just something that ‘oh there’s a spacecraft let’s kill ourselves,’ these people spent 22 years preparing for what they did, and I wish people would examine that 22-year period instead of just examining their method of leaving.” I intend to do exactly that.

When those 22 years are viewed in terms of Burke’s psychology of form, it is evident that Heaven’s Gate collectively created a rhetorical environment that was so strong that even the leaders of the group got carried away, acting perhaps against their own best interests at times as they were pulled along by the arc of practices they no longer controlled.

Analysis

Several practices developed over the two decades of Heaven's Gate's existence that created an environment which induced people to act differently than they would have in the outside world: behavior, language, and belief modification. These practices created an environment, carefully maintained by Ti and Do, that eventually took hold of the leaders themselves as well and created an arc toward mass suicide.

Behavior

Deindividualization

A major part of the behavior modification — which began mainly in 1977 in Heaven's Gate — was the process of removing individual qualities from the individuals, creating a community of like-minded individuals who looked, spoke and acted similarly. After 20 years of this identical appearance and mindset, for a member to go against the rest of the group and refuse to commit suicide would have been like going against themselves. Their everyday differences and independence in appearance and dress had been substantially removed. In other words, their visual and physical likeness became part of their everyday environment.

Members were supposed to look androgynous, with short hair, no makeup, and long-sleeved shirts buttoned all the way to the top. If someone had a look that they had been attached to for years, such as a beard, they were instructed to get rid of it and adopt a new appearance. Your individual appearance symbolizes your identity as a human, and that was not desirable in Heaven's Gate. Supposedly, members did not feel that they were living in an oppressive state — they were really enjoying it. When talking about the

uniforms, Do said, “It does not restrict them, it frees them. But you have to have been there to know what we are talking about. Otherwise, you can easily doubt it.”

The achievement of visual similarity was so complete that it confused people outside of the cult. Even in death, the members looked the same. When the police arrived, the bodies looked so androgynous that they were all reported to be men before the scene was thoroughly investigated. They were all laying on the backs with their hands at their sides wearing black pants and black Nikes. Most had purple shrouds over their heads and were wearing the wedding bands that signified their marriages to Do.

The performance of genderless identity went beyond simple clothing. As part of looking and acting androgynous, sounding too masculine or feminine was frowned upon. Ti and Do explained that the Next Level is genderless, so they did not want anyone to identify with a gender — this was also part of stripping the members of their individual selves. One member spoke in too husky a tone and Do made fun of him so much for it that he developed a speech disfluency, making it very difficult to talk. He then left the group after 18 years, never recovering from the disfluency.

In her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler describes the idea that identity is created through behavior. Butler explains that “. . . gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 519). In the case of Heaven’s Gate, the members “performed” in an androgynous way, separating themselves from the male/female binary and creating a group of

genderless “aliens.” Their deindividualization was also a kind of bodily performativity, creating a group identity by psychically looking and acting in a very similar way.

Living with a group of people who all looked and sounded similar created a unique community in which sameness, not individuality, was celebrated, which translated into other aspects of life as well. One can argue that uniformity is a form of targeted compliance, but it is also environmental. This gender uniformity can be understood as ambient in the sense that Thomas Rickert uses the term. The performative androgyny of Heaven’s Gate was a transformational way of dwelling. It was an “always ongoing disclosure” that called “for some response” (Rickert, xii). This transformation, for the members of Heaven’s Gate, was into a group of similar-thinking, similar-looking, similar-acting individuals who wanted to follow their leaders. Ti and Do created an arc leading to suicide for their followers over the course of 20 years by creating an incredibly persuasive rhetorical environment through changes in behavior, language, and beliefs.

The sameness of the group created an atmosphere that inherently discouraged individual action — as did the fact that every move had to be cleared by one’s check partner, which contributed to an especially closed environment. The fact that a deep voice was considered too far out of line demonstrates the severity of the deindividualization in the ecology of Heaven’s Gate, which would later make it difficult for any one member to go against the group decision to ultimately commit suicide.

Human Disconnection

Ti and Do convinced their members that their families were not actually their families, and that their true families were the members of the Next Level and the other

people who shared their purpose. The act of reframing the family closed the community of Heaven's Gate even further, suggesting that everything and everyone that the members needed was in the cult with them. Adults who joined the group had to walk away from their children completely, and some did. Ti and Do explained that you cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven when you still have attachments to people, things and careers, and told the members that when you are going through an awakening period, it is normal for your life to begin to fall apart, justifying the problems that these people were leaving in their wake and the trauma that they were going through.

Kenneth Burke states that "'Belonging. . . is rhetorical'" (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 28). He goes on to explain that how we see ourselves is created through association, meaning that people identify and divide themselves based on how they associate with other people and things. The environment that encouraged disassociating from their biological families and relying on their new family allowed members to identify themselves as transcendents rather than humans and moved them closer toward their goal of becoming aliens.

Furthering the disconnection from other people, members were strictly forbidden from acting or thinking sensually, meaning that couples who joined had to break up and were not allowed to touch each other at all. Some couples remained in the group, broken up, for decades. Men who had what they called a "nocturnal emission" had to sign on a sheet admitting to it so that they would feel defeated and ashamed. The shame was a mix of social pressure and the fear that they would not be allowed into the Next Level if they could not learn to control themselves. This guilt around sexual activity created an environment that placed limits on human desire, which, after 20 years, changed the way

that the members thought about and interacted with their bodies and each other. Furthermore, Ti and Do were exercising their power and pushing the limits, seeing how far their followers would go for them. Both of these practices — deindividualization and human disconnection — created isolation and reinforced sameness. Each member was less able to form their own contrary or resistant space within the cult.

Spatial Discipline

Ti and Do developed a clever system to keep tabs on their members with minimal involvement so that they would be seen as inspirations rather than disciplinarians, while maintaining a group of regimented followers.

Ti and Do wanted their members to feel that they were in a classroom 24/7, explaining that everything that happened to their followers was a test to see how they would respond as members of the Next Level. This sense of being constantly tested and judged was a tactic that ensured the members were always following the leaders, strengthening their commitment. The environment was intended to feel productive and educational rather than coercive.

Heaven's Gate had strict rules, which they called the "17 Steps," to become a member of the Next Level. These rules were not to be changed or interpreted to suit individual needs or desires. Every aspect of life followed a specific code and form — even the process of making and eating pancakes. They had to all be the same size, made with the same mixture, and each person was allowed a certain amount. Even the syrup had to be poured in a specific way. Members were only allowed to watch approved programs, such as *Star Trek*. These small exercises of control made it easier when the

time came to ask for larger changes, like those of appearance and name. The rules were truly a way of conditioning the members to become comfortable with Ti and Do exercising control in most, if not all, aspects of their lives. Their actions were not so much that of charismatic leaders, but more like teachers, preparing their followers not only for the Next Level, but also for the next level of conditioning.

There is a technique in persuasive communication and psychology developed by Freedman and Fraser called the “foot in the door technique” which states that asking someone for a small favor first makes them more likely to comply with a larger favor later (Patel). Freedman and Fraser call the method “compliance without pressure” (Patel). Whether or not there was pressure in Heaven’s Gate is arguable, but, unlike Jonestown, members were always welcome to leave and often did so — though many returned. Interestingly, the research question that led to the discovery of the foot in the door technique was “How can a person be induced to do something he would rather not do?” (Patel). This seems like a rather fitting question for cults in general, as most cult members at some point end up doing something — whether suicide or a smaller act — that they would rather not do.

Heaven’s Gate used what they called the “check partner” system to make sure that everyone was following the rules. Members could not do anything without running it by their check partner, and the members were always paired with the person that they would be least likely to want to be paired with. This could be for a couple reasons: to discourage human connections, to stop partners from being lenient with each other, or for a variety of other reasons. Janja Lalich, sociologist, “Having that kind of discipline and struggling through it and knowing that you’re all strolling through it together creates a sense of

family, which is part of what binds people to these groups and when you think about years and years and years of that, that's what makes it so difficult for people to leave. This is the only world they know" (Tweel).

Though many attribute the actions of cult members to their charismatic leaders, that did not seem to be the case in Heaven's Gate. The rules and check partners instilled regimented practices into the followers' lives every day for 22 years. Using check partners to enforce the rules created an environment in which everyone was always watching everyone else, making adherence to the rules the key to social acceptance. Michel Foucault explains this idea of spatial discipline via the concept of panopticism, in which the surveiller is always watching (Foucault, 455). He explains, "So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary" (Foucault, 456). Heaven's Gate perfected this tactic, creating a community in which one can never step out of line and so conditions one to instinctively abide by the rules until they become an inherent part of the individual's behavior — one that they stop second-guessing. Therefore, by simply pairing people together, the rigid system of rules implemented by Ti and Do created a disciplinary space within their closed system that successfully managed to control virtually all aspects of behavior at every moment with very little effort.

Language

As religious studies professor, Benjamin Zeller, says, "Every religious group has its own terminology. As you join the group you have to learn the language. It's sort of an

unofficial initiation process” (Tweel). Ti and Do wanted the members to have a collective consciousness and feel like cogs in a machine, and internal language was an incredibly effective way to do so. The internal language of Heaven’s Gate worked to separate the person from their human body and human needs, as they believed they were trying to become less human and created a community of people with their own language, which, in turn, changed their thinking as well.

Members of Heaven’s Gate used words to make their bodies seem more like machines than bodies, calling their bodies their vehicles; their minds, computers; their meals, experiments; their beliefs, programming; and their underwear, seat covers. They also wanted to remove all sexual aspects of themselves, calling their sexual organs “plumbing,” and bras “slingshots,” as desire is a human emotion and therefore not fit for the Next Level. Even their homes had names to make them less comfortable and human. They called their houses “crafts,” like spacecrafts; their kitchens, nutriLabs; their laundry rooms, fiber-labs; and their bedrooms, rest chambers. Former Heaven's Gate member, Sawyer, said that they often changed these words, and that “They didn’t explain it when they changed the terminology, but all of these terminology changes also changed the way we thought about things. So it didn’t stimulate memories.”

This tactic of changing words to remove connections to place, the self, and others helped build the arc of non-humanness, alienating the self from the Earth, and making their eventual escape to the Next Level all the more necessary. The linguistic rhetoric instituted by Ti and Do made life on Earth seem uncomfortable and wrong for people who saw themselves as aliens and prompted the members to look forward to an existence where they would truly live in crafts and have no sexual organs. Additionally, inhibiting

the retention of memories created people who were not experiencing life in a human way, making it all the easier to convince them that they did not belong and that the Next Level would be a better place for them. Considering that some of these people had been in the group for two decades, yearning for belonging in another realm of the universe, their suicides seem less shocking. They were made to feel inhuman and told that there was a place for people exactly like them if they could just follow Ti and Do. The language of Heaven's Gate was a key part of its controlling, disciplined atmosphere. This is a clear example of a psychological arc being built.

Another part of internal language was changing one's name, which helped the members disassociate from their family trees and enter further into the Heaven's Gate family. Each member of Heaven's Gate had a six-letter name composed of two parts. The first part was one syllable, which was considered to be their "first name" and was a series of three consonants. The second part of their name was their "last name," which was always "ODY." This put them all into the "ODY" family, sharing a last name. All of the letters in their names were capitalized. For example, Rob would be RBBODY, Logan would be LGGODY and Sawyer would be SWYODY. The "ODY" was seen as a diminutive term that would mean "little member," and when they became "adults," they would drop the "Y" and become members of the family of "OD," like "God." Therefore, the names show that they are all on their way to joining the family of God.

The name changes signify a communal movement along the arc toward death — changing from human to “alien” and looking forward to joining the family of God, which, in Christianity, literally means dying. Living for 20 years with names that symbolically meant they were ready for death unquestionably impacted the thoughts and beliefs of the members, creating an environment with an expectation of death.

Beliefs

Disregard for Evidence

In late 1996, the group started moving toward a plan for “exiting.” They began to buy into the conspiracy theory that the U.S. government was hiding the fact that a UFO four times the size of Earth was trailing the Hale-Bopp comet. This theory really resonated with Heaven’s Gate members, because they had been anticipating an extremely large craft — and because they had been looking for a sign for over two decades. The members believed that there was a spaceship behind Hale-Bopp and that it was the late Ti coming to get them, so they bought an expensive telescope. When they used the telescope, they were unable to see a spaceship, so they brought it back to the store, claiming that it was faulty. Evidence against their claims made no difference, even when they saw with their own eyes that there was no craft accompanying the comet. As Jenny Rice explains in her book, *Awful Archives*, the existence or quality of evidence does not matter once one is deeply involved in a conspiracy (Rice 114). Furthermore, even if something is not readily available as evidence, it can still have immense power. This is a concept that Rice calls “empty archives evidence” (Rice 99). In fact, a lack of evidence

can even strengthen one's conviction, or in the case of Heaven's Gate, strengthen the belief that something is being hidden (Rice 114).

In terms of the rhetorical environment that had been created, it did not matter whether Hale-Bopp truly had a companion object or not, because the members of Heaven's Gate decided that it was time to leave. They chose an exit date in March, both because it was when the comet was closest to Earth and because it coincided with the spring equinox and Easter that year. Do told his followers, "The Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst. In other words, the door is open. If you follow me, you believe in me, you do exactly as I say, and you'll get there. You will not know death."

Leaders Being Led

Over time, the rules against sexual activity became an issue for Do, so at the suggestion of a member, he decided to be castrated. Do defended his choice saying, "If something is so offensive to you that your control is threatened by it, then why shouldn't you dispose of it if you have that option to do it?" Other male members decided to follow Do's lead. The members took it upon themselves to perform the first castration and did so on another member, but it went poorly, and Do asked to be taken to the police to confess. The members convinced him that he was not in the wrong and threw the testicles off of a pier to dispose of the evidence. This is one of the first instances in which the followers believed in the leader more than he believed himself — a concerning shift in dynamic, as the followers were now just as devoted as the leaders, if not more. They then found a doctor who was willing to perform the operation and Do was castrated along with five to seven others — the true number is unknown.

At this point, other members were feeding Ti and Do extreme ideas that they would latch onto, and it seemed that Heaven's Gate was starting to take control of them as well. The leaders were becoming victims of their own creation, while some of the members started to leave. Former Heaven's Gate member, Dick Joslyn said, "Ti and Do never were out to con anybody. If they coned anybody, they coned themselves first." I do not believe that Do would have castrated and killed himself if he did not believe — at some level — what he was saying. In terms of the psychology of form, the form was becoming dominant over the leaders themselves. They were unable to separate themselves from the message they were creating, and they became their own followers. Thus, although one can argue that Ti and Do "conned themselves," it is not just that they were convinced by their own words. I argue that the rhetorical environment had taken over, shaping conduct rather than individuals (including the founders).

In the mid-90s, the members on Heaven's Gate began to view staying on Earth as suicide. They felt stuck here and believed that it was time to ascend to the Next Level. Because they were averse to humanness, they believed that the way to get to the Next Level was to shed their vehicles, meaning that their bodies would have to die. Interestingly though, they expected somebody else to cause this death. They thought that the U.S. government would kill them, as had happened at Waco or Ruby Ridge, which they viewed as a good thing. In fact, Do talked about buying guns and learning to use them so that they could be seen as a threat. They decided against this plan, because they figured that some of them would come out of the battle maimed or crippled and still stuck on Earth.

The one option that they seemed to have left was suicide. In the video lectures that Do recorded where he talked about their coming deaths, he is seen crying, which causes cognitive dissonance, deviating slightly from the arc. He was not supposed to be a human or have human emotion, so why was he crying about the death of his human body? Furthermore, former members say that Do made it known that he was unsure about the suicides. However, he was bolstered by members who said that they believed in him and would do whatever he deemed right. Once again, we see an instance of the followers being more assured than the leader of the leader's own thoughts, confirming the ambient nature of the rhetoric of Heaven's Gate. This causes a dangerous situation in which it would go against everything the leader has built — the arc — to take a step back and evaluate the situation. It is quite possible that Do did not see any other way out after all of these people had been so committed to him for years, walking away from their lives and viewing him as a God. Do had set up a belief system that he then had to make the ultimate sacrifice to prove his own belief in, which matches with Burke's understanding of form.

In 1994, Do held a meeting, much like Jim Jones had done repeatedly, asking each person if they had any reservations about suicide as a way of exiting via barbiturate. Notably, Jones' meetings had been more like tests of loyalty, whereas Do seemed truly concerned about the wishes of his followers. At Do's meeting, people cried, but only five left.

In 1985, Ti developed cancer and passed away shortly after (Nettles). Aside from the grief, Ti's death created another problem: cognitive dissonance. Until this point, Ti and Do had been preaching that they would leave Earth together, guiding their followers.

The Two had claimed that they were not human, so it did not make sense that Ti had died of cancer. Her death disproved the idea that their bodies had chemically or biologically turned from human into alien, and she had not climbed into a UFO. Ti's death undermined the idea that the members would undergo a bodily transformation, which broke the expectation at the end of the arc that The Two had created, so Do changed the message, explaining that the transformation would be spiritual instead. It is notable that this changed the shape of the arc itself, but not its final destination. As long as the arc would eventually lead to suicide — where it had been going all along — how it got there did not matter. Another way to think of this is that the expectation had to be satisfied, so the path to meeting it was simply altered (Burke Counter-Statement 31).

Do admitted that it was hard for him to take Ti's place. At this point, he began to second guess his teachings, but, as with the castrations, his followers bolstered him, assuring him that he was one of "The Two" and that it was his duty to bring them to the Next Level. Once again, Do was caught up in the reality that he and Ti had created, and could not escape it, if he even wanted to. Instead, Do sent the members home to their families for a few days — something that had never been done before. Only one person failed to return to the group afterwards, demonstrating how committed these final members were. When they returned, Do explained that while it had looked to humans like Ti had had cancer, it was actually her Next Level consciousness burning up her human body. He explained that Ti's death strengthened his relationship with her, as she was now guiding him from outer space as his heavenly father. This change in the narrative quickly corrected for the discontinuity between Ti's supposed alien body and her very human

death, and the followers of course believed every word of Do's explanation, perhaps even more than Do believed it himself.

The members, whose beliefs grew ever stronger after two decades of devotion, became mirrors in which Ti and Do saw their own beliefs. The followers pushed the leaders to follow their own teachings, which became especially clear when Do's faith in himself wavered, and he had no choice but to follow the arc that he had created, even into castration and death. An atmosphere of expectation that had been lived for so many years pulled nearly everyone along, despite reservations even of one of the founders, and at the same time created freedom to rewrite the basic narrative so that they could see the arc to its end.

Conclusion

Though Ti and Do's intentions were not necessarily malicious, there is no question that the rhetorical environment they created was leading to a mass death, if not a mass suicide. The ecology of Heaven's Gate was different from Jonestown: more peer-to-peer oversight rather than a leader with an omnipresent voice, but clearly, just as effective. The changes to behavior, language and beliefs primed the members for "exit," which was inevitably death, even if they did not view it as dying. This is the creation and satisfaction of the arc. Much like Jim Jones, Ti and Do created an environment where the members were so invested in the rhetoric that when the leader (Do) saw suicide as the way out, they followed. Whether or not Ti would have led the members to suicide if she had been alive, we will never know. Would she have instead just continued to prepare her

people for an end of the world that would not come? That seems unlikely, given what we know about cults and arcs, but we can never say with certainty.

Comparing the Suicides

It is fascinating to compare Jonestown and Heaven's Gate — two groups that were so completely different, but which so many simply lump together and write off as “suicide cults.”

Coroners stated that the deaths of the members of Heaven's Gate were peaceful. They used phenobarbital, a much gentler poison than the cyanide used by the Peoples Temple. The phenobarbital induced a sleep-like feeling before ultimately ending their lives, while the cyanide induced 5-20 minutes of choking and oxygen deprivation. The members of Heaven's Gate died in three groups, each group helping the one before it by cleaning them up and respectfully covering them with purple cloths once they had died. On the other end of the spectrum, the followers at Jonestown were instructed to kill all of the children first, injecting the babies, making the parents listen to the cries of their children as they died, which can be heard in the recording. The bodies of the members of Heaven's Gate were found laid in beds, as if they were sleeping. At Jonestown, over 900 bodies were found splayed all over the ground, some having been shot.

A comparison of the final moments of each group reflects their stark differences as “cults.” Jonestown was a group led by a man who beat, drugged and electric shocked his followers, while Heaven's Gate was led by people who were relatively uninvolved in disciplining their followers and went to them for guidance and support when they did not know how best to lead. Jim Jones was coercive and violent while Ti and Do were

controlling, but not violent by any means, according to former members. The suicides at Jonestown are better characterized as murders, while the suicides in Heaven's Gate are better characterized as ritualistic. Aside from what I have laid out thus far in my thesis, at a very basic level, Jones ordered those who did not drink the cyanide to be shot, while Do invited anyone who did not want to exit to leave if they wanted to.

The differences between the two groups are worth noting, as popular culture often tends to combine them as one entity (suicide cults), which does a disservice to those who died in completely different environments and for different reasons.

However, the similarities between the groups are also important to note. Aside from the fact that both groups had unique rhetorical ecologies that eventually led to suicide, there was a final tipping point in each. Jim Jones carefully built this ecology, whereas Ti and Do only began the ecology of Heaven's Gate, which then proceeded to grow around them. Due to the fact that an arc toward death was created in each group, the question was not if this tipping point would be reached, but when and how. The death of Ti had a similar effect on Do as the shooting of Senator Ryan had on Jim Jones. Both leaders felt that they were losing control, and decided to end their lives, bringing their people along with them, to avoid failure and escape the world that they no longer wanted to lead their people through. Though their routes to this eventual goal differed, the end of the arc was the same: mass suicide.

CHAPTER III

CASE STUDY 3: QANON

Introduction

I originally intended to use QAnon, a far-right conspiracy group, as a way to synthesize what I had learned from Jonestown and Heaven's Gate, using the commonalities to identify what I like to think of as "pre-violent cult red flags" to predict a large-scale act of violence. During the majority of my time writing this thesis, there had been no violent act, so my goal was to simply find and present evidence that the group was following in the footsteps of groups like Jonestown and Heaven's Gate and would ultimately move to violence.

On January 6th, 2021, in the middle of writing this, Trump supporters, including members of QAnon, stormed the U.S. Capitol in what is now referred to as an insurrection. Since then, the structure of my thesis has changed. What began as a group that I wanted to inspect for pre-cult red flags reached (what we hope will be) its zenith before our very eyes, as I write this thesis. My prediction came to fruition and examining why this happened is crucial to understanding that the rhetorical ecologies of groups like Jonestown and Heaven's Gate are not things of the past.

The next section of this chapter will have two distinct parts: The first will be a pre-insurrection background, written prior to the Capitol siege. Due to the time of its writing, it will be left in the tense in which it was written, with Donald Trump referenced as the U.S. President, though at the time of editing this thesis, the current president is Joe Biden. The second part was written after the insurrection and looks at QAnon's involvement in it.

A Brief History of QAnon

Pre-Insurrection

QAnon is a conspiracy theory group comprised predominantly of Trump supporters. Their beliefs include, among other things, that there is a Deep State working to undermine President Trump; that governments around the world are controlled by a group of cannibalistic, pedophilic Democrats who farm children in underground caves and use their blood to ward off aging; that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring in the basement of a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., a theory referred to as "Pizzagate"; and that the COVID-19 pandemic was planned by China, Democrats, or both (Bomey; Rameswaram). This extreme group believes that all of this evil can only be stopped by President Donald Trump, who is seen as the "ultimate patriot" (Rameswaram). Their hope is that Trump will lead the world to justice, likely under Martial Law or through some type of war (Rameswaram). When examining the messages of QAnon, it is clear that the group sees themselves as militants, holding signs that say things like "We are digital soldiers" and "Q Army" (Roulet). This is a warning sign, hinting that the group is anticipating a revolt, uprising, or the need for violence at some point.

In 2016, a QAnon member, Edgar Maddison Welch, brought an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, a .38 handgun and a folding knife to a pizzeria called Comet Ping Pong, the basement of which QAnon members believed Hillary Clinton was using to run a child sex ring (Robb). After firing shots in the building, Welch discovered that the building did not even have a basement. He was sentenced to four years in prison (M. Kennedy). For this and other reasons, the FBI labelled QAnon a potential domestic terror threat in 2019 (Rameswaram). “Pizzagate,” as it is known, is just one example of the psychology of QAnon. That false claims are so strongly believed that people will go to extreme lengths is an indication that the group is prime material for Burke’s psychology of form: that they will create an expectation and follow through with it.

Prior to the 2020 presidential election, I decided to examine QAnon, which was receiving considerable media attention due to its presence at protests and rallies. At this time, I noticed the rhetorical ecology that had been created over the course of a few years and saw that despite the fact that the pandemic made it difficult for many groups to meet, COVID-19 actually helped strengthen QAnon’s community, increasing its visibility online. Due to my experience researching Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate, I saw a behavioral arc forming once again, and predicted that it would be concluded, not with suicide necessarily, but with a large-scale violent act.

Capitol Insurrection

On January 6th, 2021, Donald Trump’s supporters, including members of QAnon, stormed the U.S. Capitol building in hopes of starting a coup and preventing the confirmation of president-elect, Joe Biden (Tan). They managed to break into the Capitol,

despite a police force present, and were able to roam the building for hours, sitting in the seats of major leaders and taking off with their furniture and belongings. One woman who broke into the building, Ashli Babbitt, was shot in the neck and killed. She was a staunch QAnon supporter, and according to NBC News, “Babbitt’s Twitter account was almost singularly focused on radical conservative topics and conspiracy theories” (Zadrozny & Gains).

Though not everyone at the Capitol was a QAnon member, it is safe to say that the act was strengthened by the strong and oppositional community that QAnon has created. One image from January 6th went particularly viral: a man in the Capitol dressed like a Viking wearing horns and fur with his face painted and carrying a spear. His name is Jake Anthony Chansley (also known as Jake Angeli), and he calls himself the “QAnon Shaman” (QAnon Shaman). Many in and around the Capitol were holding QAnon or QAnon-inspired signs, showing the group’s support for the demonstration (Adkins & Burack).

Though other white supremacist and neo-fascist groups participated as well, QAnon’s participation in the violence at the Capitol as well as the breaking in, stealing, and damaging of belongings can be explained by the rhetorical environment that was created in the group before January 6th. In fact, one can argue that the mixture of groups interspersed with QAnon followers suggests that militias, white supremacist groups, and political extremists blur the rhetorical differences attached to the rhetoric of “cults.” In the next section, I will detail the elements of the environment of QAnon, as with Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate.

Analysis

Creation of a Virtual Rhetorical Environment

Though the radical ideas of QAnon seem a little far-fetched to gain unwavering support from the average American, the *New York Times* reports that QAnon has hundreds of thousands of followers (Roose). So, what is drawing so many people in? I argue that QAnon creates a rhetorical environment using the public's distrust of government; the excitement of participation; appeals to patriotism, fear and duty, and the fear of alienation. The fact that a rhetorical ecology was created is further underscored by the fact that people are willing to believe outlandish claims, even in the absence of proof, as I will explain.

QAnon is different from Heaven's Gate and Jonestown in that it is not a closed, controlled environment. Rather than members living in a shared physical reality created by the cult, QAnon members live in their normal communities and must make an effort to engage with the group online and at QAnon conferences. This makes the nature of the rhetoric different, particularly in that rather than controlling what happens, QAnon must instead work to explain it after the fact. For example, in Heaven's Gate, if Do was worried about his people seeing a particular news story, he could simply stop them from reading it by keeping everyone inside with the television off or by telling them that the group was swearing off news all together. In QAnon, an open environment, this would not be so easy. Rather than preventing members from reading the story, QAnon would have to accept that they had likely read it and then adapt their rhetoric to explain it away or factor it into their narrative.

Michel Foucault talks about this kind of discipline and surveillance in an open environment, explaining that the best way to keep an eye on everyone is to give the sense of “. . . permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible” and keeping track of “. . . behaviour, attitudes, possibilities, suspicions—a permanent account of individuals’ behaviour” (Foucault, 464). The best way to determine how to change the narrative is to gauge how followers feel about it. If a news story breaks and QAnon members say little about it, it is probably not worth interpreting through the Q lens. If when the story comes out members are in an uproar and doubting their leader, changes need to be made to the rhetoric, as Do did when he explained away Ti’s cancer.

Though this sounds unrealistic for such a large and separated group, social media has made this possible. Without thinking, people make surveillance easier by self-reporting on social media every time they post about their thoughts, feelings or beliefs. Rather than trying to gather information, others can simply view your page to see where you stand on something. This makes surveillance easier than ever before and helps QAnon see what needs to be done to keep their following, despite a changing world that is out of their control.

Because it is impossible for QAnon to control what its members see, hear, and read, the group is saturated with messages and emotional contexts such as fear, patriotism, and alienation, as I will later detail. The messages and actions put out by the group are a response to these emotions, shaping the group over time as an ever-growing ecology.

Distrust of Government

We are living in an era with a strong feeling of distrust toward the government (Public). Many Americans believe our leaders are misleading us, hiding things and not acting with our best interests in mind. Under the Trump administration, these concerns seemed to be particularly prevalent in the wake of Russia's involvement in the 2016 election and the poorly handled COVID-19 pandemic (Public). QAnon capitalized on this distrust and took advantage of the national attitude toward our leaders. It is unlikely that such wild claims — children hidden in underground tunnels, waiting for their blood to be harvested — would have gained any traction at a time when people felt safe and secure under the administration. QAnon came at the right time to be effective and to develop a following that would likely not have formed during most other times in our country's history.

Politics in 2020 America were convoluted, with unusual elections and interference from other countries, making it difficult for Americans to trust their leaders. In fact, according to Pew Research, public trust in government reached an all-time low since the study began in 1958 (Public). This social phenomenon is directly reflected in the acceptance of QAnon. During a time of political stability and national prosperity, it would likely be difficult to convince three million people that one of the two major political parties engages in underground cannibalism (Sen & Zadrozny). However, when the general public is living in fear of a deadly virus and violent acts of racism and awaiting what could be a contentious transfer of the presidency, people are primed to hear the worst. This was the perfect time for a conspiracy theory group to gain traction, as people needed a way to understand what was going on around them (Andrews). The fact

that QAnon caught on so quickly and with so much support not only confirms that many people do not trust their leaders, but also implies that they believe their leaders are not only corrupt, but truly dangerous and evil.

Participatory Coding/Decoding

QAnon is extremely participatory and decentralized in its structure. Its followers scour websites like 4chan and 8kun looking for what they call “Q drops,” which are messages from the leader, Q, who could be one person or a collection of people — a fact which is still unknown (Rameswaram). The messages are written in code and QAnon members congregate in chat rooms and Facebook groups to decode the messages and come up with their own theories (Rameswaram). Especially at a time when many people are quarantining at home, cracking codes to help save children and the American government is an unusual and appealing prospect that creates a community of people working together toward a common goal. This crowdsourcing also allows for ideas to quickly be created and spread, and makes the group seem accessible to most, as all one needs is internet access to join QAnon.

The group believed that President Trump sent secret messages to them during press releases and other public forums (Roose). For example, they believe that he was talking to them when he said the number 17, because Q is the 17th letter of the alphabet, or that when he wore a pink tie, he had just freed trafficked children, because a “code pink” in a hospital signifies a child abduction (Roose). Elements such as secret codes, mysterious leaders, and a dangerous group of “enemies” make participation in the group feel like a large multi-player game, which makes it more interesting and fun to be a part

of (Roose). This gamification of political matters helps gain involvement from those who were previously uninterested and makes the involvement more “fun” for those who were already pro-Trump, while crowdsourcing helps to create an inclusive internet community where everyone’s ideas are welcome and quickly spread. Being a member of the virtual QAnon community, living in that online environment was a fun way to be involved in something on a large scale.

The problem with this “decoding” is that members are not unearthing a definite truth — they are creating the code as they go. Therefore, by creating the language, they are also creating the meaning, and therefore the truth. If someone yelled to you “TQUP” and you decided that T=F, Q=I, U=R and P=E, you would hear that as “FIRE”, and assume that there is a fire. However, if you cracked the code differently and decided that T=H, Q=E, U=L and P=P, then you would think that the person is screaming for help. In both cases, you “cracked the code” and in both cases, you created a truth. This is very similar to what members of QAnon do.

There is no proof behind the idea that Trump wearing pink means he has saved children. As Bradford Vivian explains, “Facts of this nature need not be empirically valid in order to serve the dissemination of powerful forms of truth. . . Cycles of fact-checking and counter-fact-checking may thereby defer substantive and pluralistic deliberation over. . . particular forms of truth” (Vivian 431). As is common these days, false information spreads quickly, and not even fact-checking is enough to stop it. As Burke states, when it comes to rhetoric, ideas owe “their convincingness much more to trivial repetition” than to fact (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 26). Repetition of an idea leads, over time, to belief

in it. In a system, even an open one, like QAnon, this leads small ideas to spiral into largely believed “facts”, as in the case of Pizzagate.

Patriotism

Though QAnon has international support, the group employs patriotic appeals specific to the United States to create an environment of people who feel that they are helping to save the country. Donald Trump was seen as the figurehead during his presidency, as he was believed to be the only one who can stop child trafficking (Donegan). Followers called Trump the “ultimate patriot” and believed that he would mount an attack against the cabal of Democrats (Rameswaram). Putting their faith in the President of the United States to save the world from Satanists, and adorning QAnon signs with pictures of the American flag, made QAnon more than a conspiracy theory group, but one based on American values. This creation of a group with specific morals calls into question the morals of anyone that does not support QAnon. Are you not a true American? Do you not want to fight the Satanists with your country? It makes participation in the group seem noble, reinforcing the rhetorical environment, making members feel good about themselves.

Patriotism is not only an ideal, but also an identity. As we know from Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate, interacting with your surroundings in a certain way creates your identity. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke states that, “Any specialized activity participates in a larger unit of action. ‘Identification’ is a word for the autonomous activity's place in this wider context” (Burke *A Rhetoric of Motives* 27). Members of QAnon interacted with each other and with non-members online and in-person at rallies,

conferences, and elsewhere. Through these interactions, they identified themselves as “patriots,” members of a group that would stop evil. This ending would, of course, necessitate violence.

Fear

One way that QAnon moved toward violence is through intense emotion. Emotion fills the ambience of the rhetorical environment, causing followers to act differently than they would if there was not a perceived threat. In the absence of fear, there may still be something to fight for, but not with such immediacy or passion. Fear stokes the fire in a conspiracy group, giving the members something to fight for.

The #SavetheChildren movement is perhaps the most well-known example of a fear appeal within QAnon (Donegan). Parents of young children who once felt safe living in a country where most children could walk to school without fear of being dragged into underground military bases and eaten now have to worry about high powered Democrats abducting their children. When such appeals are repeated routinely, they become ambient. This general distrust, discomfort and fear makes people look for a sense of power and a way to fight back, which leads them right to QAnon.

In particular, accusing a group — Democrats — of engaging in perverse rituals that target a group of innocents — children — creates an environment where that group and everyone who supports it must be stopped. This is a powerful political tactic, and child abuse is a cause that everyone cares about. Being a member of the QAnon ecology makes one feel good, as if they are helping to save innocent children from a horrible fate.

As Sara Ahmed explains, emotion is created through the circulation of objects (objects being anything from pets to language) that one encounters on a regular basis, which then establishes boundaries that can reinforce political identity (Ahmed 1). In the context of QAnon, these objects are cracked codes, clues, signs, and messages that are traded and debated on forums. In fact, QAnon is distinguished by the highly active creation and circulation of “hidden” objects that are revealed through decoding, which generates intensely political emotions and identification. The objects that are “unearthed” by “doing the research” create a sense of fear and opposition toward the satanic cabal. As a result, the answer to this form — these fears — is to fight it.

Duty

Members of QAnon seem to operate according to deontological ethics (or duty ethics), which Gass and Seiter define as “an ethical approach that focuses on moral imperatives, rather than specific consequences (Seiter & Gass 395). A person has a duty to adhere to rules of moral conduct. One may be morally obliged to take some actions, regardless of their consequences” (Seiter & Gass 395). In short, certain deontological ethics can demand one to fulfill moral obligations, no matter the consequences.

We see this take place among the followers of QAnon in quite an apocalyptic way. The moral obligation in this context is to stop the cabal and save the children from child trafficking and blood harvesting. This once again creates the form — an expectation that QAnon’s victory is necessary to save lives, and that individual followers can help.

Followers stop at nothing to fulfill these duties, as evidenced by Edgar Maddison Welch, the gunman who pleaded guilty to shooting into the floor of the Comet Ping Pong in 2017 (M. Kennedy). According to the court documents, Welch said that he believed stopping the Satanic ring would involve "sacrificing the lives of a few for the lives of many" (Kennedy, 2017). This willingness to sacrifice his own life — or at least his freedom — without grave concern for the consequences is a clear example of deontological ethics and moral imperatives: Welch believed it to be his duty to save the children and uncover the truth. In a letter to the court, Welch wrote that he was "truly sorry for endangering the safety of any and all bystanders who were present that day" and claimed that he "came to D.C. with the intent of helping people" (M. Kennedy). Despite his good intentions, Welch was sentenced to four years in prison (M. Kennedy). The environment of QAnon — one in which members feel they are helping the nation by solving puzzles — makes it difficult to not follow the group's conspiracies, satisfying appetite created by the arc.

Alienation

Because QAnon is so strongly tied to politics and because we are living in a very politically divided time, many Republicans feel that they should join QAnon simply because it is pro-Trump and because the leader that they support refuses to speak against it (Rameswaram). Due to the radical nature of the group, those who are involved in QAnon are often alienated by their friends and family who are concerned by their beliefs (Andrews). This alienation strengthens the trafficking in coded/decoded messages, the sense of patriotism, and the fear-inspired identification with the group's apocalyptic

fantasies. Like with Heaven's Gate and Jonestown, an environment in which one only interacts with those who hold similar beliefs strengthens their own beliefs, reinforcing their ideas, regardless of their validity.

Furthermore, because members of QAnon believe that others — Democrats, celebrities, politicians, etc. — are Satanic, it is difficult for them to trust anyone not in their group. The environment created in QAnon is one of fear and opposition, so members are taught not to trust anyone outside of their group. This creates alienation from both sides: QAnon members think that nonmembers are Satanists and non-members see QAnon members as terror threats. This division makes it increasingly difficult to be a member of both groups, drawing members in further and strengthening their ecology.

Belief in the Absence of Proof

Like the idea that the U.S. government would go to Guyana to kill 900 Americans or that you can turn yourself into an alien by not acting human and then kill yourself to board your aircraft, the validity of QAnon's claims is quite questionable if not laughable. This helps to prove that a rhetorical environment was created in QAnon. I argue that in a rhetorical environment, strong rhetoric and persuasion are not needed to influence those who dwell in that environment.

For example, followers of QAnon believe Democrats are harvesting children because a compound called adrenochrome can be extracted from their blood to make those who consume it immortal (Lavin). However, there is no clinical evidence that this is true, and the blood would need to be injected, not drunk, to even have a chance of being effective in any way (Frymorgen). Proof is unnecessary and disproof is

meaningless once one is in deep enough. In a book recommended by Jenny Rice, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*, authors Tavis and Aronson say, “Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Even irrefutable evidence is rarely enough to pierce the mental armor of self-justification” (Tavis & Aronson). In Heaven’s Gate, the members still committed suicide with hopes that they would board the space craft behind the Hale-Bopp comet, even after seeing with their own eyes that there was no such craft. In Jonestown, the members committed suicide so that the government would not kill them, despite the fact that that very day, the U.S. government had come to help save them.

In fact, QAnon relies very little on credibility. The credibility of a political group like QAnon is typically a combination of the credibility of the leader and the credibility of the group’s claims. In the case of QAnon, both are missing. QAnon’s central leader, Q, is an unknown entity who is believed to have access to classified information, but that has never been proven (Rameswaram). Furthermore, there has never been any proof that the claims they have made are true. Despite extreme miscalculations like Pizzagate, which one would think would blow the group’s credibility, QAnon followers still hold fast. This again is what Rice calls “empty archives evidence,” the idea that even if something is not readily available as evidence, it can still have immense power to it (Rice 99). This lines up with Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate, in which fraudulent claims were made without evidence and believed, even after disproven, as a result of the reinforcement of the rhetorical environment.

QAnon's ability to gain a following of three million without any believable evidence behind their claims and without a credible source guiding them reflects how strongly people can be swayed by the rhetorical environment in which they dwell (Sen & Zadrozny).

Conclusion

Since 2017, QAnon has built a follower base in the U.S. and internationally with support from American politicians and candidates. The group has built a rhetorical environment by using distrust of government; the excitement of participation; appeals to patriotism, fear and duty, and the fear of alienation. As with Jonestown and Heaven's Gate, proof and credibility are not the main pillars of rhetoric and persuasion. Especially during a time of unrest, such as President Trump's administration, but also segregation for Jim Jones and Watergate and the Vietnam War for Ti and Do, people are more easily affected by their rhetorical environment than they are by warnings from their own government agencies (such as the FBI) or by proof that a particular group's claims are incorrect (such as Pizzagate). When salvation from the democratic cabal under President Trump did not come, the form was broken, and members took matters into their own hands, along with other groups, to complete the arc.

It is clear that rhetorical ecologies are even more powerful than one would think when it comes to a conspiracy theory group. When gaining followers and instilling a code of ethics and moral obligation, one truly does not have to prove anything, they just have to create an environment — even a virtual one — in which people have no choice but to believe.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The way we talk about cults is misleading. It over-defines what a cult is, and contrary to popular belief, cult members are not crazy people who are brainwashed into committing extreme acts. This explanation is simplified and does not do justice to the victims of groups such as the Peoples Temple. Cults, by my definition, are groups that live in a rhetorical environment — whether physically, virtually or otherwise — with an arc toward violence. This definition tends to include groups such as police and the military, who, based on your personal beliefs, may or may not deserve the label. That is an issue for another thesis.

As evidenced, a charismatic leader (or two) alone is not enough to convince hundreds of people to commit suicide or violence. Neither is a single speech. What really causes these groups to commit mass violence — to themselves or others — is the creation of a rhetorical ecology in which a behavioral arc leads toward that action.

Via this framework of thought created by my analyses of Jonestown and Heaven's Gate, I looked at QAnon, a group not necessarily classified by popular culture as a cult and saw the making of a violent cult. After analyzing QAnon's rhetorical environment, I concluded that they would, at some point, commit a violent act. Interestingly, during the time of my writing this prediction, it came true. This impending violence seemed likely to me, as the group and its leader(s) had been talking for years about a day when they would face their enemies. They discussed the coming of a military regime, a day of reckoning for the democratic cabal, and a slew of other social and political doomsday events.

Members prepared in their own ways for this, but what mattered most, in my opinion, is that they built an expectation — a hope — for violence and destruction, whether literal or social. According to Burke’s psychology of form, this would have to be concluded. When doomsday did not come under the guidance of President Donald Trump as they had expected, the group took matters into their own hands, attacking the Capitol building and targeting those inside, completing the arc. This goes to show that a behavioral arc must be concluded, even in nontraditional ways when necessary.

After seeing their loved ones take part in a violent group activity, people often say things like “I never thought he would do something like that!” So, how do they actually get there? As Heaven’s Gate and Jonestown have shown, there are multiple ways to get to the same place — suicide, in these cases. The shape and path of the behavioral arc do not matter as much as the endpoint to which the arc is leading. In Jonestown, Jim Jones created a rhetorical ecology using practice suicides, loudspeakers, abuse, and disconnection from the outside world. In Heaven’s Gate, the ecology was created by Ti and Do, but later strengthened by all of the members, as the followers began bolstering the leaders. In this case, the main pillars of creating the ecology were behavior, language, and belief modification. These elements led the followers to expect suicide, and they lived in such anticipation of it that when the time came, many were more than ready to go through with it. Though the two groups took very different routes and committed suicide in very different manners, both achieved the same base-level goal: mass suicide.

I want to note that while mass suicide links Jonestown and Heaven’s Gate and underscores the fact that they both ended violently, mass suicide was not their defining

feature. Both groups existed for much longer than their brief endings and, as discussed, years of events took place before their eventual deaths.

Members of Heaven's Gate and the Peoples Temple could have committed some other form of violence — killing others or committing terror attacks — and they still would have fit under the umbrella definition of violent groups that I have created.

However, other violent groups, like a drug cartel, would not fit, as they do not exist in the same strong rhetorical environment, in most cases. The fact is simply that mass suicide is a strong and undeniable example of violence and makes these cult-like groups particularly interesting to analyze. The arcs could just as easily have led to something else — such as a siege, as QAnon did — and would have been as effective if performed within a fitting rhetorical ecology.

A comparison of Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, and QAnon demonstrates that what matters most is the creation of an environment — virtual or physical — in which followers are trained by actions, words, sounds, etc. to act a certain way, and these elements create an ultimate expectation for the future that, according to the idea of trained incapacity, must be satisfied. At school, this expectation is graduation. At work, this expectation is retirement. In cults, I argue that this expectation is violence. Just as a student is constantly thinking about, hearing about, and acting in a manner that will lead them to graduate without consciously thinking about graduation itself, cult members in a rhetorical environment engage in actions that lead to an inevitable ending: violence. Not following through would be difficult, as they prepare for so long to do so, just as a college graduate would struggle to not accept their diploma and join the working world after years of preparation.

After seeing this pattern in Jonestown and Heaven's Gate — the creation of a unique social situation, the lead up to an act, and its conclusion — it only made sense to me that QAnon would follow the same path. Though virtual, the environment created by QAnon's leader(s) was so strong that it pulled millions of people from around the world, and the members attended rallies, protests, and talked about a day when they would have to face their enemy. Of course, according to the psychology of form, this day came and the members could not help themselves but to join in.

My overall claim, then, is that groups are moved to violence by living in a rhetorical environment, according to Rice, in which an expectation is built up and, according to Burke, needs to be satisfied. But how does this knowledge affect how we think about cults or what we should do about them? What can we learn from this information and what can we use from it for the future?

One suggestion would be to more actively examine the expectations that are being built by groups that you are a part of or groups around you. For example, some claim that religion is a cult, and that may be true by some definitions. That is also not inherently bad, depending on the definition. By my definition, the Catholic Church, for example, is not a violent cult for the members involved, at least not in modern times. If one thinks of the Church during the expansion of European empires or the Inquisition, that is a different question. This is true because the expectation created by the Catholic Church is that you will die when it is your time and go to Heaven, if you have been a good person. The expectation is not that you will kill someone else or yourself, or even have to hurt anybody to get there.

On the other hand, as I did with QAnon, you may be able to use this framework to positively identify a potentially violent cult or group. To do so, as explained, you must look at the expectation that is being built. If the group is looking toward a violent uprising, an attack, a sudden ending (likely via death), then an arc toward violence is being created. More actively analyzing the expectations and ecologies around you is a good way to know where you are heading before it is too late.

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