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Do Legends Need Narrative?

Towards an Understanding of the Structure of Conspiracy Theories

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION (3:00)

To answer the question posed by the title: no. Or, at least, I don't think it is clear if legends need narrative, and by *need* I mean it is a requisite feature that any instance of a legend, a text, is narrative in nature, is structured by narrative, or deploys at least one narrative passage. Legends are not alone in this: other folklore genres, like personal anecdotes and folk histories, that are more conversational in nature appear to have a similar relationship to narrative. Their dialogic nature seems to create an emergent semantic space distributed pragmatically across speakers, and often seems to be part of a negotiation of consensual reality and its inherent, probable, or possible events.

It may also be the case that in some instances, certain strains of genres like conspiracy theories as a subset of legend, narrative is not needed: other modes of discourse may not only suffice but may actually be preferred by performers.¹ For example, in a number of American discourse communities I or my students have studied, locative descriptions appear as often as historical anecdotes when talking about the past. From the point of view of contemporary narratology, which has advanced the notion that the feeling of being there, or *qualia*, is a feature of narrative modes of discourse, this suggests that other modes are capable of this as well. That is, when we imagine or represent worlds, we do so with a variety of texts and modes of discourse.²

In this essay, I want to remind you/readers of what narrative is and then I want to use that precise definition to map out the nature of conspiracy theories as they

¹ I prefer *performer* here over *speaker* because the texts under consideration today were transmitted and received digitally. I also prefer performer here over user because it calls attention to the dynamic nature of these interactions: that they are dialogic in nature. That is, people perform for others, perhaps in different ways, in both actual and virtual spaces.

² For similar reasons as noted above, I prefer discourse to speech because it allows us to open out the possibilities for verbal production and reception. I also prefer the somewhat ungainly discourse-world over the more familiar storyworld. Text-world is completely acceptable except part of what of the effort here is to map how texts emerge as texts out of discourse—the role of worldmaking as part of text-making is not treated here.

appear in the Gab corpus. My goal in doing so is to explore what greater precision in examinations of texts might bring to our understanding not only of those texts, and the genres in which they participate, but also in how people negotiate discourse worlds as a form of consensual reality.

As a reminder to those less familiar with my work, this is part of a larger effort to understand how texts are embedded in discourse clause by clause in order to understand how some clauses stick together and some do not. And it seems to be the case that those clauses that do stick together into what we call texts also seem to persist—stick around, if you prefer—in a way that other sequences of clauses do not. This is not at all an unusual proposition: all of us are familiar with amicable enough conversations that we have with partners, friends, or coworkers that a half hour after you have had them, you can't recall what was talked about. Oh, yes, Barbara did mention something she did over the weekend. What was it? Compare this to Barbara's humorous story about the time she found a snake in her shed which you can recall with a fair amount of precision. Thus, I am not arguing that stories do not matter, that narrative does not matter. What I am arguing is that with greater precision we might be able to track how much narrative must be present in a stream of discourse in order for it to be taken out of its context as a text.³

THE GAB CORPUS (3:00)

There are a few shared moments for which folk history, in its generosity, grants us the ability to recall when and where we were when he heard the news. For an older generation, it might be the assassination of John F. Kennedy. For a later generation, it might be the explosion of the space shuttle Columbia. And, for the older individuals in this room, it is probably the event we now simply call "nine-eleven." Many of you might also remember where you were on 6 January 2021, the day we watched a large mob gather on the National Mall and storm the American Capitol building. Learning of these events while stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas for the beginning of two years spent working for the U.S. Army added a very different dimension. The Army's response from the Secretary for the Army on down was quite clear: this is unacceptable and if you think it is, then maybe the Army is not for you.⁴

³ Briggs and Bauman here on contextualization and decontextualization.

⁴ In my two years with the Army I found they were very focused on narrative and messaging, and largely understood narrative as messaging. That is, they did not think about narrative so much as a way to shape or structure information but simply as the content. What they needed to learn were two things: genre and people. Genre because stories come in different packaging that affects how

As 2021 wore on, I found myself immersed in a variety of tasks associated with my assignment, but the announcement a few months later that one of the social media platforms which had been used to foment dissent and, later, destruction, had had its data backend leaked grabbed my attention. I reached out to the organization hosting the leaked materials and was granted permission to download.⁵ There were two “dumps” available, one from Parler and one from Gab (JaXpArO: 2021). I chose the Gab one, if only because I knew the least about it.⁶ The download was 70GB, and it contained user accounts, statuses, and groups (in SQL files) as well as a compilation of the chat logs (a mere 10MB by comparison). The chatlog file contains, according to its internal documentation, “70593 messages in 19683 chats with 15322 users.” Each entry contains a date-time stamp, the user, and the message, e.g. “2020-12-22T20:18:32 @OsmanAbbaker: hi.” Having worked with both online and oral materials before, and after some hand inspection of a random sampling of texts, I decided to break the texts into six groups with break points at 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 words.

Table 1: Word Counts for Gab Texts

Word Count	Number of Texts
< 20	47,344
20–50	12,831
50–100	3,742
100–200	1,099
200–500	303
> 500	16

we receive those stories: indeed, if we mark them as “stories” or as “news.” E.g., jokes vs anecdotes. People because stories only get around because people tell them, as they themselves are getting around, and they only tell stories that are useful, that help them get around. What the team assigned the task of developing a framework for the Army eventually arrived at was the concept of social information systems. (That is, folklore with network theory built in.)

5. I learned of the leak via reporting by Ars Technica in a report posted on 1 March 2021 (<https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2021/03/gab-the-far-right-website-has-been-hacked-and-70gb-of-data-leaked/>). The contact point for the data was Distributed Denial of Secrets (<https://ddosecrets.com/>). It should also be noted that I did all of this work while off-post and on my personal computer: at no time were any DoD resources used in any part of this work. (There are strict rules and regulations, authorizations, having to do with who can examine materials generated by U.S. citizens that DoD personnel must follow.)

⁶ Gab Hate Corpus note here.

I repeatedly sampled within each of the six groups to determine the probable utility of including texts of that size in my analysis. It became quickly apparent that texts of less than 20 words were largely phatic in nature or contained too few words to offer a discursive sequence. A few examples suffice:

it worked !!!
just checking out the new chat feature

At the other end were texts of 500 words or more, which, as it turned out were largely full of HTML links. The richer territory for examining vernacular discourse seemed to lie with texts from 20 to 500 words in length. Below is a sampling of texts from the shorter end of the spectrum:

20-50 words: if he hadn't done that to me, i may never have gotten pilled so in a way he did me a great favor

50-100 words: cos if you say stuff like a girl is a girl and a boy is a boy and boys shouldn' t just say they are girls to watch us in a changing room you get called out or like the video of a white woman asking a black boy what he is doing messing about in a car being called racist even if she didn' t do anything wrong and he was super rude

100-200 words: are you crying telling me you know about q i 've been since the beginning i am in and on and i am a digital soldier i know everything and i moderate most of the shows we are good people we love god we love each other and we are patriots and they lied about us and they put in tifa with t-shirts and cute and then one guy in congress try to say we were a terrorist or organization look what they have done but the truth will be revealed so are you watching the youtube channels to learn all that and which ones so you say i can not say a whole lot but i lost all my accounts every famous person followed me years of work everywhere they took me down i never did anything wrong except love my president and the people

Dropping texts that are less than 20 words as well as texts that are nominally larger than 500 words brings the useful texts in the corpus from the original 70,593 to 17,975. (See Table 1.)

MODELING DISCOURSE (6:00)

Many folklorists will recall that in their examination of a small collection of personal experience narratives, William Labov and Joshua Waletzky argued that the smallest unit of linguistic expression which defines the function of narrative [is] primarily the clause" (1967:13). Their analysis suggested that clauses could be categorized into a discrete number of types and that the clauses regularly appear in a particular sequence. The close attention to observable linguistic phenomena, words and the clauses in which they are ordered, is important here: first because

so many observers are prone to move quickly to abstractions and, second, because the impulse simply to state that something is a narrative seems remarkably indefatigable.⁷

Labov and Waletzky's framework assumes that, at least in personal experience narratives, the preference of both performer and audience is to recapitulate the represented series of events in the same order in which they occurred. In this way the verbal sequence has a one-to-one correlation with the source sequence. That is, while syntactic embedding is available in a variety of oral and scribal discourses, the preference in day-to-day, face-to-face oral performances of personal experience narratives is to stick with the sequence as told being the sequence as it occurred. (As we will see in a moment, this preference for ordinate correspondence occurs across a number of oral genres.)

In their model, texts are made up clauses which can be considered free or narrative. Free clauses, clauses that describe a scene or provide information, can be deployed more freely within the sequence of clauses that make up a text without changing the meaning of the text. At the other end are narrative clauses which must proceed in a particular sequence, bonded to each other in a particular order which produces the meaning of the story itself—to change the sequence would be to tell a different story. Labov and Waletzky refer to this ability, or inability of clauses to move forwards and backwards within the overall sequence as their *displacement*. Free clauses exhibit wide displacement, while narrative clauses exhibit narrow to no displacement.⁸ One of their central examples is a story about the time the performer almost, from his point of view, drowned:

1. And we was doing the 50-yard dash,
2. racing,
3. but we was at the pier, marked off,
4. and so we was doing the 50-yard dash.
5. There was about eight or nine of us, you know, going down,
coming back.
6. And going down the third time, I caught cramps
7. and I started yelling "Help!",
8. but the fellows didn't believe me, you know.
9. They thought I was just trying to catch up,
10. because I was going on or slowing down.

⁷ The larger argument of this research stream is that not all texts that we imagine are narrative are in fact narrative.

⁸ There is a third category of clause in Labov and Waletzky's scheme, the restrictive clause, but the essential point of their scheme is that narrative clauses are fixed in relationship to each other and not be re-ordered without changing the meaning of the story.

11. So all of them kept going.
12. They leave me.
13. And so I started going down.
14. Scoutmaster was up there.
15. He was watching me.
16. But he didn't pay me no attention either.
17. And for no reason at all there was another guy,
18. who had just walked up that minute.
19. He just jumped over and grabbed me.

In this story the first five lines are, from the perspective of the story, essentially interchangeable: they can be in any order and still set the scene (1-5). At the sixth line, the action starts, and it continues for the next seven lines (6-13) in a then-this-then-that fashion. The action pauses at the fourteenth line to return to the scene itself, and, in essence, is coordinate with the next two lines which describe an indifferent authority figure who is, the story suggests, responsible for the performer's safety (14-16). After that pause, the text delivers a quick resolution in the last three lines (17-19).

These clusters of ordered and unordered lines reveal, in Labov and Waletzky's analysis, a larger syntagm at work in this and other texts in their corpus. The overall structure of such narratives, as reflected in the story about almost drowning is: first, an *orientation* that establishes the who, what, when, where of the story. We see in the first five lines eight to nine boys or young men engaged in some sort of swimming competition. After the orientation comes the *complication* section, here the near drowning, that conveys a series of events that can often lead to a resolution. Because performers often remind their audience what the point of a story is, there is sometimes an *evaluation* after the resolution. The evaluation is not required but when present, they note, it seems to suggest a more fully developed story, one that have been told more than once. As they note:

It should be apparent here that the evaluation sections are responsible for those deviations from the order of the primary sequence of the narrative that complicate the a-then-b relationships of narrative. The functions of the evaluative section must be added to the primary narrative function, in order to understand how the primary sequence is transformed in the more complex structure we see here. (36)

Because they can be contained in words and phrases that are themselves embedded in the narrative, evaluation passages are not straightforward. They are more semantic in nature than necessarily structural. And so, some stories may contain very clearly marked evaluations, like the example above, and some have either no evaluation or an evaluation embedded in either the complication or the subsequent *resolution* section, which Labov and Waletzky define as simply the section constructed of narrative clauses that follows either the complication and, usually but not always, the evaluation. Finally, they note, while many narratives

end with the resolution, some narratives reveal the need of the performer to locate the story in the moment of the performance. The coda is the label they give to the optional last cluster of clauses that return the discourse to the present moment, shifting the focus of the discourse from the storyworld to the world in which the story is situated.

Labov and Waletzky's grounding of a story's larger structure in the actual discourse which conveys the story deepens, and perhaps complicates, the syntagm offered by Vladimir Propp in his analysis of 100 folk tales drawn from Alexander Afanasyev's *Народные русские сказки* [*Traditional Russian Tales*] (1859). To some degree, Propp's analysis obviously benefits from a more regular set of characters and features. The variability of the personal experience narrative drives Labov and Waletzky to arrive at a fairly abstract structure—like orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution—structures which, if we are being honest, do not seem all that far from Freytag's pyramid of exposition, rising action, climax, and denouement.

The tension is working with enough texts to derive a normal model and working with those texts sufficiently closely to be able to locate the model in actual discourse. In the 65 years since Propp's translation into English and the 55 years since Labov and Waletzky's investigation into the structure of personal experience narratives, there has been remarkably little work done to sequence other genres.

Transition here.

Legends about buried treasure run the gamut from strictly narrative accounts like the one below which features a tombstone-like object appearing in the middle of the words. After an initial series of orienting clauses that are to some degree coordinate in relationship to each other, the text proceeds to tell the story first through coordinate pairs and then with a clear narrative sequence.

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | Along with his brother, they went looking for cypress moss for cushioning their pillows and blankets. | {1-3} |
| 2 | This was way back in the day. | {1-2} |
| 3 | As they were searching, they noticed a stone slab on the ground beneath a tree. | {1-3} |
| 4 | It was odd because the husband and his brother weren't able to move the slab of stone. | {4-5} |
| 5 | It seemed to be stuck in the ground. | {4-5} |
| 6 | Then, they got this weird feeling. | {6-7} |
| 7 | Something wasn't quite right with the stone. | {6-7} |
| 8 | The two men freaked out, and they climbed the tree in fear. | {8} |

- 9 When they looked down, the slab of stone disappeared. {9}
- 10 They jumped down from the tree and ran home. {10}

Compare this to another legend from the same collection, and you will note that the narrative nature of the text is a bit blurry. The text offers a chronology, but it is not of a particular event, but rather of a typical event. That is, this text is really informative in nature: the events described are generic. The text itself reflects this nature by proceeding through a series of coordinate clause clusters.

- 1 Right there where the trees is they use to have a house in there. {1-4}
- 2 Probably got the mark where the house is now. {1-4}
- 3 We used to go in there. {1-4}
- 4 We use to hear they had gold there. {1-4}
- 5 We'd go try to dig it, couldn't dig, couldn't dig. {5}
- 6 Me, Dexter, Kenneth, your daddy. {3-7}
- 7 Just about all of us, I think Roland too. {6-7}
- 8 We all tried. {4-8}
- 9 Couldn't. {8-12}
- 10 You couldn't even get the shovel in the ground. {8-12}
- 11 It's a certain time you could've get it in. {8-12}
- 12 But you wasn't finding nothing. {8-12}
- 13 And you would hear noise in there. {13-17}
- 14 You hear ... you hear strange noise. {13-17}
- 15 There in the trees. {13-17}
- 16 Yeah they had some stuff in there. {13-17}
- 17 A spirit. {13-17}

My focus here has been on establishing the varieties of forms that legends take in discourse, with the idea that perhaps, as meta as conspiracy theories seem to be, they are operating within the same discursive frameworks as legends.

WHAT CONSPIRING LOOKS LIKE

Finally, three legends from the Gab corpus.

The first example is in some ways a reminder of what CT posts on Gab tend to look like. They are a grab bag of ideas asserted in a sequence whose logic appears to be entirely accretive: the more, the better. This post is representative of those

that are focused on the platforms involved. There is on Gav a lot of concern about who is where, as people switched from Twitter, which is represented as restrictive, to Parler and Gab, which are figured as “free.” As people seek to re-build, quite literally, their information networks, there is understandably a variety of expressions of anxiety. A lot of this amounts to “Is X here?” or “Does anyone know how to find X?” There is also a subgenre of posts that address the matter of the platforms themselves, folding them into a conspiracy theory. This post combines concerns about Parler being out of service with not only the then-president working with the in-group’s platform (Gab) but also with some sort of papal conspiracy. (More on this in a moment.) The only logic that connects all these events seems to be the one that motivates CTs like Qanon: if you know, you know. [It would be useful to expand on the puzzle-solving nature of these posts: these are about glimpsing the bigger picture from the clues that are available.]

It's so evident white hats are behind parler going down. I know you like it there, but this causes me great joy and gives me even more assurance (as if i needed more) that patriots are in control. I fully believe parler is compromised. I also think potus has been working with gab. Post about having a phone call with “someone special” today. Listen to @ post today about “they told us to build our own back in august of 2016.” Who is “they?” (That one may be a stretch.) Anyway, parler going down is very exciting to me. :) So are the lights being out at the vatican. So is getting to comfort and encourage eleven people in my life today! I’m so grateful to God for using me and making me feel so helpful and alive . My life is amazing. I love it so much ! : -d

The next conspiracy theory emerges out of a longer dialogue between DemsFearTruth and CrawfishFestival. After some back-and-forth focused on the notion that the Capitol was the site of a crime, the “steal,” and that key figures will be “perp walked” and “crying like a bitch” on live television, CrwafishFestival makes the following series of posts:

- 4 I saw that Italian authorities ARRESTED Obama's Cybersecurity Chief in Italy,
- 5 surveilled them from the moment they entered their country.
- 1 Obama hired him to create the algorithms for the Steal.
- 3 Election results sent thru server in Frankfurt, Germany were then sent to them in Italy to be manipulated.
- 2 They also have records of Obama flying pallets of cash to fund THE STEAL, and Bank records of Bank accounts.
- 6 Flight logs, and CIA operatives involved have been identified.

The numbers to the left of the clauses, represent the apparent sequence being offered: Obama hired his cybersecurity chief to create the algorithms for the steal which occurred by having election results sent through Germany to Italy. This was

funded with cash flown in on pallets, and there is proof in the form of bank records, flight logs, and identified operatives. This summary, as Bill Ellis would call it, re-orders the clauses considerably. In fact, as the numbers to the left of the clauses suggest, there is a significant divergence between the order of represented events and their order in the representation. (Much of the infrastructure that would suggest embedding is absent.)

As analysts, we have to decide if there is a story being told here, and if there is, is it being told through narrative or through some other means? I would argue that the story here is a report: it does not begin at the beginning but, rather, begins with the resolving conclusion: someone has been arrested. The rest of the text seeks to explain, through the accrual of evidence, to support the claim.

My final example today is a post made by a user on January 14, near the end of the time frame for the Gab corpus. (I am not including her username here out of concerns for her privacy.) I have broken the post into a series of sentences, some of which are single clauses and some of which have subordinate clauses:

<i>PROPOSITION</i>	I have been hearing we are at war.
<i>FACT</i>	I have heard Chinese ships and submarines are on their way to us.
<i>APPEAL TO AUTHORITY</i>	Attorney Lin Wood said we are at war with China and Iran.
<i>PROPOSITION</i>	I have heard from multiple sources that the troops in DC are there because we are at war.
<i>FACT</i>	That would make sense about all the generators being delivered.

The Chinese threat is a regular feature in the alt-right imaginary, and it would seem to begin with the end in mind: an explanation for the presence of generators in Washington, DC. (I have no idea if generators were actually present, but we will take it as given that this represents a fact for this particular text.) Working backwards from generators, they must be there because there are more troops in DC and more power is needed. If there are more troops in DC, it must be because we are at war. If we are at war, it must be with China (and Iran), and, if so, they have sent ships and submarines. It is, of course, a rather extraordinary series of causal relations, but that's what the discourse actually is: it's an argument.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Almost a quarter century ago, Bill Ellis noted that “fragmentary, incoherent plots are the norm rather than the exception among legends” when treating legends as a performance. My suggestion here has been that these texts should not be considered fragmentary but rather simply products of different discourse processes than that of narrative. Not all texts wish to be stories, and if they don't wish to be a story, it is quite possible that they will seek a non-narrative shape, one

based in description, information, reporting, or argumentation. Allowing texts to be what they are should drive folklorists to understand those texts *as they are*, rather than how we wish them to be. Such a drive will, I argue, lead to greater precision in our description of vernacular texts and perhaps even make it possible to develop a model of folklore forms.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

2021-01-03T23:45:09 @DemsFearTruth: Yeah, I think Trump is going to arrest a bunch of people on the 6th... Like US Marshals roll into the House and Senate and perp walk Pelosi type thing

2021-01-04T05:14:19 @CrawfishFestival[P]: I hope so. President Trump said, It is going to be WILD.

2021-01-04T05:40:37 @DemsFearTruth: I cannot think of anything wilder than when Pelosi pisses herself, and Schumer cries like a bitch on live CSPAN while being handcuffed

2021-01-06T05:51:40 @CrawfishFestival[P]: WILD, for sure.

2021-01-06T05:53:35 @CrawfishFestival[P]: I saw that Italian authorities ARRESTED Obama's Cybersecurity Chief in Italy, surveilled them from the moment they entered their country.

2021-01-06T05:56:01 @CrawfishFestival[P]: Obama hired him to create the algorithms for the Steal. Election results sent thru server in Frankfurt, Germany were then sent to them in Italy to be manipulated.

2021-01-06T05:58:25 @CrawfishFestival[P]: They also have records of Obama flying pallets of cash to fund THE STEAL, and Bank records of Bank accounts.

2021-01-06T05:59:07 @CrawfishFestival[P]: Flight logs, and CIA operatives involved have been identified.

2021-01-06T17:11:15 @DemsFearTruth: none of this will matter if Biden ends up in the WH

2021-01-07T09:09:58 @CrawfishFestival[P]: That's what former LEOs told me, too.

2021-01-07T09:11:29 @CrawfishFestival[P]: What about US Military - w everyone taking \$ from our enemies = Communist China?

2021-01-07T13:24:39 @DemsFearTruth: It's over. Trump surrendered last night

2021-01-07T18:17:37 @CrawfishFestival[P]: He did not say "concede", just "orderly transition".

2021-01-07T18:19:13 @DemsFearTruth: yeah, his staff is quitting left and right... it's over.

2021-01-07T18:21:06 @CrawfishFestival[P]: What about Ukraine having international arrest warrants for their Criminal investigation w Burisma Scandal, plus....

2021-01-07T19:31:14 @DemsFearTruth: Who here is going to prosecute it?

2021-01-07T19:31:22 @DemsFearTruth: Nobody

2021-01-07T19:31:53 @DemsFearTruth: No more than he was punished for SEAL Team Six

APPENDIX B

Table 2: A Gab chat from 6 January 2021 from 16:48 to 21:00.

@RedCoors9	Id ask for help but 100% of people where I am are Chinese, obv.
@dykstra89	brutal. get away from those chicom agents wild VICTORY OR DEATH KILL THEM ALL

pence on the run lmao

@RedCoors9 Capitol has been breached

@dykstra89 pentagon denying requests for national guard at the capital. LOLOL
dude im watching it all, is wild
theyre in pelosis office going through her email

@RedCoors9 You know way more than me. Updates. Just got back to car completely dead

@dykstra89 trump confirmed pence is a total cuck. senate and house evacuated through their underground pedophile tunnels
people funneling into the capital , just chaos. police seem to be standing down at this point

@RedCoors9 Where we just were but I was to
Dead. Walked min 50 miles on no food
Just went by a caravan of cia big boys
Trump's a faggot loser. Flynn or sidney 24
This is so goat. Torba floor level based. I still have a racing heart for 20 mins after we get back, driving for 10 and still yelling at these faggots about how cares how it looks.