“Wonders More in Number Than Any Other Land”: Ancient Egypt, Digital Community, and Expressive Ideology

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by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my grandfather, Juan Cruz Mendizabal—better known to me as To—for being an inspiration in so many ways, academic and otherwise. Eskerrik asko, y seguimos siempre adelante.

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I would like to thank, first and foremost, my informants and the digital communities to which they belong for being so helpful, willing to talk to a total stranger, and interested in my research. Next, I'd like to thank the faculty members on my committee who assisted me throughout this whole process with vital feedback and guidance: Dr. Benjamin Gatling, Dr. Jacquelyn Williamson, and Dr. Debra Lattanzi Shutika. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Sabina Magliocco and Dr. Tok Thompson for taking the time to speak with me about their experiences on *Ancient Aliens*. To my family, thank you for your ceaseless (but always welcome) words of encouragement—particularly from my parents and Jonchu—even as I've become more isolated and weird as I've worked on this thesis. I'd also love to thank my wife, Sarah, who has accompanied me on my gradual descent into madness but has simultaneously kept my spirits up with love, support, and care. It'll be great to feel human again with you! Last but not least, to my one-eyed basset hound, Selkie—your unique brand of wisdom matches Odin's omniscience.

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ABSTRACT

“WONDERS MORE IN NUMBER THAN ANY OTHER LAND”: ANCIENT EGYPT, DIGITAL COMMUNITY, AND EXPRESSIVE IDEOLOGY

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Ancient Egypt is (and has been) primarily communicated through ideas, ideas that have specific cultural and social uses for historically, politically, and geographically distinctive contexts. This thesis explores how a particular, contemporary brand of these Egyptocentric ideas—alternative theories—are expressed in digital communities on Facebook and Reddit, and how alternative theories contribute to and perpetuate a discourse of control over Egypt and its history and culture, i.e., alternative Egyptology. As such, I examine how control is continuously enacted through individual representations of ancient Egypt that alternative theories generate, often depicting Egypt in mysterious, anomalous forms. I argue that these representations can also be characterized by two main performative elements: ideological expressions and claims of knowledge, both of which frequently defy ‘mainstream’ ideas about Egypt. How alternative theories are discussed and evaluated in comment sections is just as important as the initial post in terms of social and cultural functionality. Alternative theories, their discussion, and alternative Egyptology in general colonize ancient Egyptian history in

order to legitimate a certain discursive position, constituting a communicative process I label the colonization of the anomalous. Finally, I posit that alternative theories and alternative Egyptology can be considered modes of vernacular Orientalism, both in their exoticizing representations of ancient Egypt and in Egypt's ideological/epistemological usage to these discursive vehicles and the discourse itself.

INTRODUCTION: THE INDETERMINATE WORLD OF ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

According to a recent survey conducted by Chapman University (2018), 57% of Americans believe that "ancient advanced civilizations, such as Atlantis, existed," while 41% believe that "aliens have visited Earth in our ancient past." This percentage is increasing with each passing year; belief in an ancient civilization with advanced technology increased 17.3% from 2016 to 2018, and belief in ancient aliens saw a rise of 14.4% in the same timeframe. Ancient Egypt features prominently within both of these discursive systems, although it is by no means the only ancient civilization to do so. Indeed, none of my informants answered that their engagement with alternative theories was limited to ancient Egypt. Alternative theories about the Americas, ancient Mesopotamia and the Near East, India, China, sub-Saharan Africa, and Antarctica (among other regions) were shared with me directly via the questionnaire or interviews, for example. However, ancient Egypt seems to generate more alternative theories than anywhere (or any*when*) else. As Erik Hornung (2001: 193) wryly remarks, "even extraterrestrials…seem to display a special affinity with and preference for Egypt." Per my own fieldwork among digital communities, too, more alternative theories concerning ancient Egypt are posted than about any other ancient civilizations, especially in communities devoted more explicitly to alternative history and/or archaeology, such as r/AlternativeHistory (Reddit) or the Ancient School of Lost Knowledge (Facebook).

Additionally, as another anonymous respondent to my questionnaire put it, alternative theories about Egypt are “the most credible alternative theories because of the amount of studying done and physical evidence [that] exceeds the others [civilizations].” During an interview, I asked Redditor u/irrelevantappelation if he agreed with this statement. With great conviction, he responded: “I think with Egypt, with Egyptian history, there is certainly a lot more meat on the bone, so to speak.” Due to u/irrelevantappelation’s answer, I asked this same question to each subsequent person I spoke with, and they all agreed—to various degrees—that more than enough convincing evidence exists for alternative, unconventional histories of ancient Egypt than other ancient cultures.

The immediate question that arises following these initial paragraphs is: but why? Why are Egyptocentric alternative theories more “credible” than others, and how is this “credibility” attained? What is it about ancient Egypt that not only stimulates more legitimate or credible alternative thinking, but why is it so popular within alternative paradigms in the first place? How do digital communities reinforce alternative representations of Egypt? What, if any, other factors should be taken into account?

My intentions for this introduction are to identify some of the common thematic and functional features of an alternative theory as I have observed through digital fieldwork, as well as to present useful theories and concepts with which to scrutinize this data. Chief among these is Edward Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism (Said 1994 [1978]), which I apply to the notion of alternative theory under the lens of alternative

Egyptology (Picknett and Prince 2003[1]). Orientalism has long been recognized as a beneficial approach to the reception of ancient Egypt, though mostly within the scholarly context of Egyptomania (e.g., Reid 2002: 21-63; Champion and Ucko 2003: 1-22; Jeffreys 2003: 1-18; Day 2006; Miles 2011: 1-20; Smith 2011; Matić 2017). Scholars from various fields have applied Said's model to their understanding of Egyptomania in accordance with their disciplinary training. An Egyptologist or a cultural anthropologist will utilize Orientalism in different ways to analyze the contemporary reception of ancient Egypt than a historian will, for instance. What these scholars have in common, though, is that their analyses of Orientalism in Egyptomania are always highly critical, as Orientalism in any form perpetuates a discourse of hegemonic 'Western' domination over the 'East' through representation. It is my hope, then, to approach this topic from a folkloristic perspective. However, due to the dynamic nature of an alternative theory or discourse as they are communicated digitally, as well as their epistemological intentions, it is more appropriate to view these theories as an alternative "discipline" rather than exclusively as a branch of Egyptomania. Nevertheless, alternative Egyptology and manifestations of Egyptomania are not mutually exclusive; both are "pillars of a remarkably broad Temple" composed of ever-fluctuating, culturally-contingent ideas and perceptions of ancient Egypt (Rice and MacDonald 2003: 16).

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[1] It should be noted that Picknett and Prince are themselves alternative theorists (Kreuger 2017: 65-6). I am using their term here because it more appropriately encapsulates the discursive essence of alternative theories than "Egyptomania" does, and throughout this chapter only because their goal in "Alternative Egypts" is to largely survey the genealogy of alternative Egyptology and some of its features.

Thus, although both examples of Egyptomania and alternative Egyptologies are generally considered products of either "elite" or "popular" culture, (e.g., Lant 1992; Humbert 2003; Picknett and Prince 2003; Luckhurst 2012; Coniam 2017), ancient Egypt can be "given new life through new uses" (Humbert 1994: 21) within vernacular communities, too (e.g., Krogh and Pillifant 2004a, 2004b; Day 2006; Harrison 2018: 127-96). Many of the theoretical frameworks developed by non-folklorists who research contemporary representations of ancient Egypt are relevant to a folkloristic analysis of a "vernacular" alternative Egyptology. They also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the discursive and expressive behavior behind alternative theories than simply placing them under an immense Orientalist umbrella.

"Alternative theories": What They Are(n't)

During my initial recruitment efforts in seeking participants for this project, I reached out to the administrative teams of several digital groups I had joined on Facebook and Reddit within which theories about ancient Egypt were discussed and disseminated. One such group—Forbidden Archaeology, on Facebook—was a promising prospect. Both alternative and conventional theories were commonplace and generated a huge amount of dialogue. The moderators had a zero-tolerance policy on "pseudoscientific bullshit[2]," but some members continued to "raise their heads" and they could not all be caught. I sent a message off to each of the moderators and administrators asking if I could post a description of my project with a link to the accompanying Google

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[2] Per the group's rules page

Forms questionnaire. Soon enough, though, I realized I was unable to access the group's page from my profile or from the search bar; it was as if the group had completely vanished. Later in the day, I received a message from one of the moderators explaining that I had been permanently banned from the group, simply for mentioning "alternative theory" in my recruitment text. "You're in the wrong group despite the title," he added. "This group is straight and doesn't entertain alternative theories."

What is it about alternative theories that elicits such a harsh response from "straight groups" like Forbidden Archaeology? For many archaeologists, alternative theories are most pernicious when they are presented as legitimate scientific information about the past to the public (Eve and Harrold 1986; Fagan 2006; Fagan and Feder 2006; Flemming 2006). On top of this, some alternative theories can and often do perpetuate racial stereotypes or fuel nationalistic agendas (Trigger 1984; Schadla-Hall 2004: 268-9; Pruitt 2009; Moshenska 2017: 126-31). Finally, alternative archaeologies coexist in virtual discursive spaces with objectively dangerous conspiratorial thinking, such as the dissemination of false information about COVID-19 or Q-Anon theories (Halmhofer 2021). These aspects are, of course, important and should be identified and criticized when apparent. They are, however, primarily etic critiques; generally speaking, nobody in these communities would label themselves or the theories they discuss as racist or dangerously conspiratorial. There are other factors to consider in a contextual analysis of alternative theories (Michlovic 1990: 104), beginning with how community members conceptualize them and what they accomplish.

"Alternative theories are simply new ideas about the past." Such is the definition given to me by an anonymous respondent to my questionnaire from the Facebook group Ancient Aliens. Take one look at the group's home page and you will find "new ideas about the past" in the form of links to articles or YouTube videos or questions posted by individual members. Topics range from questioning the technological or mathematical prowess of ancient civilizations (i.e., how did the ancient Egyptians align the pyramids *so perfectly* with specific star systems[3]?) to extending the chronology of ancient civilizations tens of thousands of years before "mainstream" historical consensuses would accept[4]. These "new ideas about the past" exist alongside speculations about the present regarding U.F.O. viewings or extraterrestrial involvement with recent scientific breakthroughs, for instance.

If alternative theories—as they are understood within digital communities like Ancient Aliens, whether on Facebook, Reddit, or some other platform—are "simply new ideas about the past," why do so many of the groups and the individuals who constitute them ruminate about the present, too? Brigittine French (2012: 339), paraphrasing Maurice Halbwachs, the father of "collective memory" within scholarly circles, writes that this concept "is a specific representation of the past based upon present concerns" and that anyone attempting a study of collective memory should do so "with this mediated perspective at the fore." In this sense, then, "new ideas about the past," as well as musings about the present, be they about ancient Egypt or not, are imbued with a given community's or individual's social values and ideologies and are continuously expressed in culturally familiar forms (Michlovic 1990: 104-106; Noyes 2016: 21-4).

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[3] Posted on 7/27/2020.

[4] Posted on 10/19/2020, though there are many other examples from past discussions.

Therefore, a digital community is maintained in light of the larger purposes of the group, which are, in turn, established and re-established by individual members (Bourdieu 1985: 729; 1991: 170). For Ancient Aliens, these larger purposes would be, according to their rules, "uncovering proofs [of] ancient civilizations and extraterrestrial origins." Explorations of and the dialogue generated by current possible extraterrestrial visitations thus function alongside theories concerning ancient history as (re)affirmations not necessarily of a homogenous collective belief system, but rather of the discursive intentions of the group as a whole. In other words, the community is superficially characterized by disagreement and discussion over posited ideas (see Goodwin 1986). This notion is encoded into the rules page of Ancient Aliens: "we are a Forward thinking forum…of independent and yet like minds…we are from different backgrounds and yet alike." I will have more to say about the dynamics of community in later chapters, but this attitude and multi-topical interest ("a remarkable campfire system," in the words of one of my informants) is prevalent among all the communities that I have observed for this project.

Alternative theories, then, are expressions of both the community's and the individual's inquisitive attitude toward the past as it relates to the present that also activate the goals of a given group in terms of the generation of dialogue. Elaborating on this point, Scott Lawton, a member of some communities on Reddit in which alternative theories are discussed and (coincidentally) a professor of philosophy, told me that he views theories as “pragmatic tools for investigating, predicting, and pursuing new ends, rather than as beliefs about the true nature of the world.” Although Scott clarified that he was “mainly thinking about scientific theories” with this observation, I find it extremely applicable to the functionality of alternative theories about ancient Egypt in the digital communities I have been studying.

As Scott suggested to me during an interview, alternative theories engage with a “completely different epistemological endgame” among these communities in relation to “mainstream” theories because of “their ability to make the world seem interesting.” In Kreuger’s (2017: 39) words, alternative theories are instruments to “re-enchant the world,” but, emically speaking, do so from legitimate epistemological starting points. Thus, Scott’s thoughts center our analytical conceptualization of alternative theories on an epistemological axis. Among these communities, knowledge is king, and alternative theories are the vehicles by which knowledge is pursued, performed, and negotiated.

Scott’s observation also further problematizes the “belief” vs. knowledge dichotomy that folklorists continue to debate (Hufford 1995; Motz 1998; Gatling 2020), as I will address in later chapters more profoundly. Viewing alternative theories as both knowledge-seeking tools and as vehicles used to express or perform garnered knowledge also evades the binaries that “belief” implies. When I tell people about my thesis topic, for instance, they typically ask me something to the effect of “do they [the digital community members] *actually* believe in this stuff?” Inadvertently or not, questions framed in this way cast value judgments on alternative theories and the people and communities who *do* value them. Folklorists do not typically employ such an approach to belief studies, and this is partially why I think that a folkloristic examination of alternative theories is beneficial.

There are many valid critiques of alternative theories. They perpetuate extremely racist visions of the past (Schadla-Hall 2004; Moshenska 2017) and, contemporaneously and historically, have added legitimizing fuel to nationalistic and/or xenophobic movements (Trigger 1984; Arnold 2006; Pruitt 2009). These are constructive approaches to criticizing alternative theories, but analyzing them through a polarizing "do they actually believe in them or not?" lens, in my opinion, does not get us very far and does not accurately reflect the nature of alternative theories in digital communities and communicative contexts. For example, Scott does not think that theories are true or false; they are, in themselves, instruments used toward investigative ends. They are "simply new ideas about the past."

Finally, and in this light, this observation touches on the behavioral and expressive dynamics of alternative theories in communicative and sociocultural contexts. As I mentioned above, alternative theories socialize a digital community through continuous performances and subsequent discussion. Folklorists and religious scholars might recognize this behavior as the practice of belief or frame it in similar terms (e.g. Motz 1998; Grünschloß 2006; Sørensen 2013; Kupari 116-33; Gatling 2020). Peck (2020: 342), after Kitta (2018), for instance, might frame alternative theories as performances of networked beliefs, i.e., in how individual and group belief is understood and interpreted per community norms and values, not by whether they are true or not.

After all, “cognition occurs within a network that extends into the environment,” not solely “within the skull” of a single member (Pasulka 2019: 140).

Broadly speaking, my usage of “alternative theory” is *similar* to that of more recent scholarship on folk belief, though, again, I wish to avoid the semantic and theoretical pitfalls of “belief” as a centering concept in this project (see De Blécourt 2012 and Gatling 2020). Instead, building on the distinction that Scott made between theory and belief, alternative theories are pragmatic tools with which to explore the past—as it relates to present concerns, of course—that deviate from “mainstream” conventions; hence the “alternative.” In this way, then, I would suggest that alternative theories can also be viewed as expressive articulations of certain worldviews —a text, or a “unit…that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73)—that at once potentiate discussion and socialize a particular community (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Additionally, and perhaps saving the most important part for last, my informants do not consider alternative theories in terms of their beliefs.

Alternative Egyptology:

Type in “Egypt” (or a metonym for ancient Egypt, such as “pyramid” or “Sphinx”) into the search bar of a digital community on Facebook and Reddit in which alternative theories are discussed. You will be met with a truly dizzying variety of results, each of them an individual grain of the discursive sand that comprises a flourishing desert of alternative Egyptology. There is little to no uniformity among these alternative theories, or among the people that share them within these group contexts. During my fieldwork, for example, I encountered or had direct contact with (all self-described): neo-pagans, occultists, conspiracy theorists, fundamentalist Christians, Afro-centrists, a podcast host, fellow graduate students, tech workers, the general manager of a restaurant in Texas, and a professional engineer, among others. The one thing they had in common was an image of ancient Egypt veiled in mystery, secrecy, or the exotic. An anonymous respondent to my questionnaire from the subreddit r/AlternativeHistory encapsulates the symbolic potency of ancient Egypt in this way: “Ancient Egypt is a mystical and mysterious place in my head. I don’t think I have such a fantastical view of other ancient civilizations.”

Let us recall now a poignant comment that one of my informants, Paul Dallas, made in which he metaphorized digital communities as a “remarkable campfire system.” Paul frequents the subreddit r/HighStrangeness, but in his non-virtual life he is a tech worker in Mississippi. He joined me for an interview from his apartment. His young daughter was also an occasional guest, and made her presence known by gently guiding a toy dragon in and out of the screen. Late in the interview, I asked Paul what he thought about Reddit as a medium in which alternative theories can be freely discussed—relatively speaking. Paul responded with the above comment, attributing Reddit with this construction of a “remarkable campfire system” within which “like-minded folks” can find a “circle” that caters to their interests. Alternative Egyptology, then, is one of these accessible “circles” comprising this “remarkable campfire system” enabled not only by Reddit or Facebook, but by the Internet as a whole. Continuing with this metaphor, alternative theories about Egypt can be interpreted as the “stories” like-minded people tell within the conditional confines of a particular circle. These stories can be influenced by other stories and ideas relayed at other circles, whether within the same campfire system or not; there are no fixed borders, and people are free to walk from one circle to another. However, this project is concerned specifically with the alternative Egyptological circle and how alternative theories, "new ideas about the past," reinforce representations of "the timeless *idea* of Egypt," (Hornung 2001: 3).

This idea requires some further explanation. Pierre Bourdieu (1985: 728) writes that:

> "the objects of the social world can be perceived and uttered in different ways because…they always include a degree of indeterminacy and fuzziness…and also because, as historical objects, they are subject to variations in time so that their meaning, insofar as it depends on the future, is itself in suspense…this element of play, of uncertainty, is what provides a basis for the plurality of world views."

If we apply Bourdieu's thinking to the symbolic function of ancient Egypt within digital communities, we can understand why there is no exact social or cultural consensus for what Egypt should "look like" and why new versions of Egypt continue to be generated. Alternative theorists tap into ancient Egypt as a symbolic wellspring, and the meaning of ancient Egypt is individually contingent (i.e., someone's own theory). However, the persistent amalgamation of these meanings and representations, within a sociocultural context that allows and encourages their discussion, renders alternative theories about ancient Egyptian subjects as socially and culturally constituted semiotic texts (Bauman 2016). It is in this conceptualization of ancient Egypt as a continuously objectifiable subject, enacted through the textual frame of alternative theories, that they can be seen as performances to be interacted with and interpreted per the social norms of a given community (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]: 9; Kress 2010: 10; 27). On one hand, an individual alternative theorist engages with and perceives or interprets ancient Egypt in a certain manner, which is then presented through an alternative theory (an object, or a text). On the other hand, the community in which the individual alternative theory is shared receives the theory—and its unique representation of ancient Egypt—in a similar way. Alternative theories about Egypt, as any "legitimate work[s]" do, "impose the norms of [their] own perception" by invoking a "certain disposition and a certain competence" (Bourdieu 1996 [1979]: 28) that are garnered by involvement and/or participation within a certain community. Alternative theories trigger negotiation and discussion, agreement or disagreement, but this is the normative behavior that accompanies the reception (and interpretation) of a theory and how it is engaged with. These discursive responses, however, both solidify and contribute to the perpetuation of the subject of alternative Egypt(s).

Ancient Egypt is played with and "uttered in different ways" because it is semiotically indeterminate, and this status can likewise find an historical basis, depending on the social world and how its culture is expressed and communicated (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]; Kress 2010). This indeterminacy is only amplified by the myriad array of people—each with distinct ideologies and social backgrounds, no less—and discourses that constitute a given digital community. Yet it is precisely this indeterminate subjective symbol of ancient Egypt as socially and historically objectifiable through alternative theories that enables its discussion and thereby glues a community together. Alternative Egypt is perpetually in flux; it is an "endless bricolage," (Lepselter 2016: 4) or, more pertinently, an endless pyramid of epistemological inquiry affirmed and reaffirmed by each new idea and/or image of Egypt presented by a new alternative theory. Here we have the “Egyptology” element of “alternative Egyptology.” Solely in this vernacular discursive regard, ancient Egypt is not unique in terms of contemporary representations of ancient civilizations

On top of the “fuzziness” of alternative theories about ancient Egypt as symbolic social and historical objects, it is equally important to address the “alternative” of “alternative Egyptology.” This is largely in reference to a community’s overarching ideology and social identity. Again, Bourdieu (1996 [1979]: 172) explains that these dimensions are “defined and asserted through difference” in relation “to everything that it [a digital community] is not and especially everything that it is opposed to.” Within the digital communities I have studied for this project, “everything that [they] are not” and what they are opposed to, first and foremost, is “mainstream” Egyptology. The “mainstream” can be both professional Egyptology and its practitioners as well as conventionally accepted knowledge about ancient Egypt (Picknett and Prince 2003). Although the degree to which this ideology is expressed varies among individuals and specific communities, and sometimes is expressed implicitly, it is nevertheless persistent and relatively consistent with each posting of an alternative theory and the dialogue it generates.

With both components of “alternative Egyptology” thus covered, we can begin to conceptualize what alternative Egyptology is from a theoretical angle. Chapter One will focus especially on how Egypt is represented in these communities, while Chapter Two is dedicated to exploring the ideological and epistemological dimensions of alternative theories. The Conclusion will offer an analysis of how alternative theories are performed and communicated within digital communities. Alternative Egyptology on the Internet can be considered a type of vernacular discourse, within which alternative theories can be classified as texts, or "discourse rendered decontextualizable," "lifted out of its interactional setting," (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73). Due to the observation here that an alternative theory about ancient Egypt is extractable from a larger discourse, the question of intertextuality, the "relational orientation of a text to other texts," (Bauman 2004: 4), arises. This issue will be explored in much greater detail in the following chapters, but, for now, I suggest that intertextuality within the alternative Egyptological discourse exists on a kind of genealogical or historical plane (the cultural memory of Egypt in the West; Assmann 1997; Hornung 2001; Jordan 2006; Kreuger 2017) as well as in a performative, contextually-oriented capacity.

Discourse is not exclusively concerned with language, but "provide[s] specific and distinguishable mediums through which communicative action takes place," (Purvis and Hunt 1993: 485). Digital alternative Egyptology is an excellent example of this kind of multimodal communication, as many performances of alternative theories employ images, videos, or other symbols to supplement, accompany, or even overtake their linguistic elements (Hull and Nelson 2005; Kress 2010; Machin 2016), as I will demonstrate in the following chapters. These features align well with folkloristic reconsiderations of performance theory for digital communication (Buccitelli 2012), as well as with the nature of hybridized vernacular discourse on the Internet writ large, chiefly, as Blank (2013) argues, in terms of material behavior and its role in discursive participation and community formation (Howard 2008).

Returning to Paul Dallas' idea that the Internet as a whole functions as a "remarkable campfire system" in which people can seek out a "circle" to connect with "like-minded folks," we can now visualize alternative Egyptology as one of these many "circles." In this "circle," ancient Egyptian history, culture, and religion is consistently and uniquely represented by its members, and free to be discussed at will: "New ideas about the past." However, these are "new ideas" in another important way. They are "new" in that they differ from the mainstream, the institutional, the conventional; they are alternative, but, in this "circle," selectively populated by "like-minded folks," ideological deviation from the mainstream is the norm. Images and ideas, interpretations and perceptions of ancient Egypt are tinged with alternative hues of varying shades, but are nevertheless painted with the same communal brush. This brush is available to anyone who ventures into the "circle," and anything it produces—any alternative theory—is interpreted and discussed by other members per the aesthetic, social, and communicative values that its wielder is both engendered by and engenders. Within digital alternative Egyptology, then, these values collide semiotically through the creation of individual alternative theories, their performances, and how they are received. Digital alternative Egyptology's emic goals—to create, to present and disseminate, and to discuss knowledge—thus undergo this process through the available expressive vehicles: alternative theories.

There are other factors to consider beyond the aesthetic disposition (Bourdieu 1995 [1979]: 28) for alternative Egypt(s) and the role of agonistic ideologies among these digital communities. Additionally, there are further issues within these realms to explicate, including undeniably negative attributes of some alternative theories/alternative Egyptology. For example, they (the theories and the discourse) can project racist attitudes toward ancient history (Schadla-Hall 2004; Grünschloß 2006). This critique has been leveled at alternative theories and discourses from both academic circles and popular writers[5]. Such critiques are valid, and must be pointed out where they are apparent[6]. However, demonstrating *that* or *how* alternative theories can be racist does not tell us much about their communicative qualities in context or about how they are visualized from the inside. Instead, a deeper dive into the communities elucidates how alternative theories work in terms of their social and cultural functions, their "epistemological endgame," and their discursive features. This approach affords a more nuanced understanding of alternative theories, and from this folkloristic vantage point we can better understand how the ideas they espouse—including racist and colonialist ones—are perpetuated amongst digital communities.

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[5] For example, Julien Benoit, in his article for *The Conversation* entitled "Racism is Behind Outlandish Theories about Africa's Ancient Architecture," writes that "profound racism and a feeling of white superiority that emanates from the rotting corpse of colonialism" motivates engagement with alternative theories.

[6] I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER ONE: REPRESENTING EGYPT

“I see ancient Egyptian civilisation as profoundly anomalous and a ‘Rosetta stone’…
to decipher the hidden nature of our origins.”
u/irrelevantappelation

What, as u/irrelevantappelation describes, is the idea of the anomalous as it applies to the characterization of ancient Egypt, and how is it achieved or enacted in the first place? If alternative theories about Egypt are the most “credible” of all alternative theories, what does the anomalous, which, by its nature, cannot be absolute, represent for these communities? This chapter will explore the dimensions that constitute the anomalous in terms of its representation of Egypt, both in an emic sense and what it accomplishes with respect to a vernacular discourse of control over the Egyptian Other, i.e., a vernacular system of Orientalizing. I will begin by explaining how I am using the anomalous as an orienting concept for alternative theories/alternative Egyptology, as well as how the anomalous is colonized. The anomalous exists only because of a “mainstream” narrative in which to find anomalies. As such, it is also important to discuss the strategies by which the “mainstream” is identified and articulated in alternative theories. I will also explore the degree to which popular culture affects the anomalous as a folkloric system of discourse among digital communities, as well as the history of ideas of ancient Egypt in the “West.”

Elements and characteristics from other discourses—especially the alternative historical/archaeological and Ancient Astronaut discourses (Grünschloß 2003, 2006;

Picknett and Prince 2003; Kreuger 2017), and conspiratorial thinking—are pervasive within these digital communities, and inform the reception and interpretation of ancient Egyptian themes and motifs. Additionally, there is a long genealogy of understanding ancient Egypt through *ideas* of what it stands/has stood for in various social, cultural, and political climates as well as in philosophical, religious, esoteric, and occultic circles—to which the alternative discourses of today can be traced (Assmann 1997; Hornung 2001; Grünschloß 2006; Kreuger 2017)—dating back to antiquity (Ucko and Champion 2003). In this sense, alternative theories about ancient Egypt are not so much intellectually autonomous "new ideas about the past" as they are diachronic links in an intertextual chain, "ingenious permutations of old hat," (Jordan 2006: 128).

The extent to which one can claim that alternative theories are simply notches in a particular historical discourse, i.e., how ancient Egypt is remembered on a mass cultural scale in Europe and the United States, however, is complicated by the vernacular usage and functionality of alternative theories. Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka (1995) assert that the former--cultural memory, "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society" that is, in turn, transmitted at an institutional level generationally and concretizes the group's social identity (1995: 126)--must be distinguished from what they call "communicative" and "everyday memory," or memory's role in vernacular culture. In my view, this is an unnecessary distinction, at least with respect to how both kinds of "memory" can be conceptualized folkloristically and in terms of their relevance to alternative theories. For example, Assmann and Czaplicka (1995: 128-9) suggest that the former dictates a given society's cultural canon and repertoire, and is thus interwoven into the fabric of what it means to be a member of 'society x,' as well as that society's mass cultural productions (Kelley 2020: 3-23). Would this cultural memory not also be expressed in vernacular discursive forms like alternative theories (see Gingrich 1998, 2015; Mitchell 2018: 96)?

Thus, the two concepts should not be considered mutually exclusive; they are interrelated and the one informs the other. It is true that the cultural memory of ancient Egypt in the "West" has endured in more specific social frames since ancient history (Assmann 1997; Hornung 2001; Champion and Ucko 2003; Harrison 2018). To this point, Egyptologists recognize several "principal phases" (Moser 2015: 1281) of external cultural interest in Egypt, often triggered by foreign political occupation of or economic involvement with the country, such as the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 (Miles 2011). To address the entire history of the cultural memory of ancient Egypt, then, is a nigh-impossible task for any one historical project to accomplish, compounded by the issue of how cultural perceptions of Egypt affect vernacular historiography (or to what degree it does so).

Additionally, to suggest that a typified corpus of alternative theories is merely a uniform manifestation of a particular cultural memory is a reductionistic notion, although not one entirely without merit. Egyptocentric Alternative theories, taken in conjunction with their more specific sociocultural functions within digital communities, do emphasize and maintain certain strands on the multi-faceted, ever-expanding constellation of "the timeless *idea* of Egypt;" (Hornung 2001: 3) its cultural memory. Thus, there is a larger historical discursive referent for alternative theories in small communities on Reddit and

Facebook. It is equally important to recognize, however, (to the extent possible) the contexts in which they are being developed, how they are performed, what their knowledge-building goals are with respect to specific communities, and how these theories perpetuate representations of Egypt that clash with the paradigm established by the "mainstream." The following section is devoted to an examination of what Egyptocentric alternative theories set out to accomplish in terms of their "epistemological endgame," to paraphrase Scott Lawton, regarding alternative Egyptological research.

Alternative Theories: Colonizing the Anomalous

Concerned for his privacy, the man known to me only as u/irrelevantappelation refused to show his face through his computer screen and told me that he lived in a "former British colony." As the founder and head moderator of the subreddit r/HighStrangeness, his primary intention for the community, as he described it to me during our interview, is to foster and curate an environment in which members are free to speculate about and discuss a bewildering array of supernatural topics that can be classified as High Strangeness. The term was originally coined to describe ufological phenomena and/or experiences (Knight-Jadczyk 2005: 19; see also Pasulka 2019: 185), but on r/HighStrangeness, there is very little in the way of "exotic questions," (that is, questions that push past the limitations of conventional knowledge) in u/irrelevantappelation's words, that is off the table—as long as there is evidence to support the claims. Posts covering cryptids, mysticism, interdimensional travel, geological anomalies, comparative religion, and ancient Egypt (among others) appear frequently alongside and commingle with posts about aliens. Sequentially, these posts traditionalize the kind of hybridized vernacular discourse (Blank 2013)—in this case, digital alternative Egyptology—intrinsic to a digital community, and potentiate future contributions to the same community. They are not simply static, curated texts in an archive; they are expected to be interacted with as more than just reference entries (Kaplan 2013). The ideas alternative theories posit call for critical engagement through dialogue and negotiation, not absolute rejection or acceptance, from other members. This ideal dynamic is applicable to all of the communities I have studied for this project.

Elaborating on this point, u/irrelevantappelation insisted that he and his fellow alternative theorists/historians do not claim that they have proof for their alternative theories: "[We're just] not satisfied with the jigsaw puzzle approach and the shoehorning approach that seems to prevail with the narrative…the evidence has been interpreted to fit into the existing narrative." I asked him what he meant by this allegation of confirmation bias. Continuing, he lamented that, due to a "vested interest in maintaining the status quo," mainstream Egyptologists either skew or ignore any evidence that would "challenge the larger narrative" or engage in mass suppression of this same evidence that could be potentially disruptive to the established Egyptological paradigm. For u/irrelevantappelation, whatever evidence that is being misinterpreted, ignored, or suppressed does not necessarily point to extraterrestrial influence in all areas of ancient Egyptian history, although these theories are common in his community and others on Reddit and Facebook. Instead, many of his own theories center on the notion of a technologically advanced antediluvian civilization (a la Atlantis) that provided subsequent generations of ancient Egyptians esoteric knowledge and techniques to construct elaborate monuments, knowledge that is either lost or deliberately hidden away. U/irrelevantappelation's theories, then, are formulated to push the envelope on the type of questions that can be asked of the "mainstream" representation of ancient Egypt. "We're allowed to marvel at Egypt to a point, but we're not allowed to cross over to exotic questions," he explained. "The mark of the educated mind is to entertain the alternative idea without outright accepting it."

The two "belief systems" that I selected from the survey conducted by Chapman University—belief in ancient aliens/astronauts and belief in technologically advanced lost civilizations—have prominent foci on ancient Egypt. Both of these are prevalent among digital communities like r/HighStrangeness, r/AlternativeHistory, and the Facebook group Ancient Astronaut Theorists. As such, a brief explanation of what constitutes these "belief systems" is necessary, although I follow Grünschloß's (2003, 2006) and Kreuger's (2017) lead in preferring to consider them discourses. In terms of the goals of creating and disseminating knowledge counter to the mainstream, both of these larger discourses are similar to alternative Egyptology. They are equally similar regarding interpretative techniques and communicative elements (at least in digital contexts), although the former two have a global scope whereas the latter is more explicitly concerned with Egypt.

Pointing out any distinctions among these discourses, though, is not to suggest that any kind of discourse is immutable or rigid, and this is especially reflected in vernacular communication among large groups on the Internet (Howard 2008; Blank 2013; Peck 2020b: 7-11). In Phillips and Milner's (2017) terminology, this is also reflective of the ambivalence of participation in these communities on Reddit and Facebook, in terms of an interdiscursive melting pot. Different alternative theories, created by different people, are motivated by different reasons—whether explicit subversion of conventional Egyptological knowledge, humorous trolling without absolute conviction in a theory, or the limitless spaces between (Phillips and Milner 2017: 1-24). The discussion that distinct performances of alternative theories elicit thus becomes a kind of comment section battleground in which discursive ambivalence takes center stage. Because of this wide discursive and behavioral scope, any attempt to typologize and differentiate disparate-yet-interrelated kinds of discourses is, ultimately, arbitrary; "ambivalent behavior forces us to consider each situation on its own [contextual] terms," (Phillips and Milner 2017: 22), after all. However, when this kind of ambivalence is centered on a specific thematic core—Ancient Egypt, for example—a somewhat clearer picture emerges regarding the dynamics of vernacular communication and interpretation in these communities. In this way, too, we can begin to describe and identify discursive types like alternative Egyptology as it relates to other kinds of discourses. Instead of viewing these as entirely separate strands of communication, then, we can say that alternative Egyptology certainly bears a resemblance to Ancient Astronaut and alternative historical discourses.

Sometimes referred to as paleo-SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence in Ancient Times) (Grünschloß 2006: 1; Richter 2012: 222-3), the basic goal of an Ancient Astronaut theory or discourse is captured in the acronym. At the risk of oversimplification, theories that can be considered Ancient Astronautic in the context of ancient Egyptian history posit that extraterrestrials contacted ancient humans and provided them with advanced technological knowledge, used to build the pyramids or functional spacecraft, for instance, or that extraterrestrials constructed the pyramids for a wide array of purposes that depends on the specific theory (Picknett and Prince 2003; Grünschloß 2006; Kreuger 2017: 59-65). In this vein, extraterrestrial visitors are also often identified as historical deities of ancient religions, leading some researchers to refer to this discourse as "ufological Euhemerism," (Grünschloß 2006: 9).

Alternative historical and archaeological theories about ancient Egypt are similar in that they are concerned with searching for the origins of human knowledge and civilization (very often attributed to Atlantis or another "lost" civilization; Andersson 2012: 128-30). However, because this discourse is built on a foundation of history, archaeology, and science (albeit constructed alternatively), it is often self-presented and understood as a more legitimate, less extreme option than Ancient Astronaut theories (Picknett and Prince 2003: 187). One (in)famous example of this strand of alternative theory is the dating of the Sphinx to 10,500 B.C.E. Although geologist Robert Schoch's alternative research dates the carving of the Sphinx to "between 7,000 and 5,000 B.C.E.," other alternative thinkers have pushed this chronology back to 10,500 B.C.E. (or further) to conform to the premise that Atlantean refugees were the progenitors of ancient Egyptian civilization and its technological prowess (Picknett and Prince 2003: 182-84; Andersson 2012: 131). Needless to say, the alternative Sphinx predates Egyptological chronologies by some 8,000 years (Malek 2003: 90).

In communities like r/HighStrangeness or Archaeology Uncovered, some members incorporate elements from both of these discourses into their thinking and theorizations. Along with u/irrelevantappelation, for instance, both Paul Dallas and Benedict Martinez (an informant who frequents groups on Facebook and Reddit) typically do not "go for that alien stuff" in absolute terms, i.e., their theories do not suggest that extraterrestrials are responsible for the construction of the pyramids and for imparting advanced knowledge on primitive Egyptians. Instead, they—and other—members are largely skeptical of claims of exclusively extraterrestrial influence in ancient Egypt, although they are "open to pretty much everything," as Benedict put it, and there are members who do favor the extraterrestrial approach. However, all three of these individuals, and other members I spoke with, whose theories largely are derived from and contribute to the alternative historical discourse, do not completely dismiss the presence of aliens in ancient Egypt. Though he has, in general, moved past staking any legitimacy on Ancient Astronaut theories, u/irrelevantappelation still thinks "it's [extraterrestrial influence] viable in terms of race seeding, mystery tradition, and dynastic origin," and other of the more intangible dimensions of Egyptocentric alternative thinking.

By no means are there boundary lines containing vernacular discursive systems, alternative or otherwise, and, in this vein, there is little to no homogeneity among alternative theories, aside from: a) thematic strands that constitute a certain discourse, like alternative Egyptology; b) what Andreas Grünschloß (2006: 15) calls a "lay-people's revolt against the academic establishment," or the primarily ideological bent of alternative thinking; and c) the commonality that links the two former points, an alternative theory or discourse's epistemological intentions. Although there is an element of both communicative and interpretative ambivalence to these alternative theories (meaning that any typological or characteristic assertion I make should be taken with a grain of salt), they do achieve the same effects, in that they poke holes into mainstream knowledge about ancient Egypt, thereby reinforcing alternative positions. In this respect, alternative Egyptology generally vies with institutional Egyptology about the less well-documented aspects of Egyptian history and culture, i.e., its most ancient periods (such as the Old Kingdom, when the Pyramids and the Sphinx were built; Malek 2003) or things that cannot be proven or disproven at all using archaeological means, like the idea of ancient Egyptians possessing and employing now "lost" or "suppressed" occult knowledge (Picknett and Prince 2003; Hammer 2004: 87-113).

To u/irrelevantappelation and Evan Harding, a moderator of the Facebook group Ancient Astronaut Theorists, ancient Egyptian history is rife with what they term "anomalies," as is demonstrated by the former's quote to introduce this chapter. Importantly, this terminology is extended to the version of Egypt that "they" offer, "they" representing anything from the media to "mainstream education systems," at least according to Evan. "The modern narrative does not explain away the anomalies that we can reference in the thousands," he wrote. "There seems to be a real conspiring effort to suppress the true history of man in favor of a fanciful story to be repeated and not questioned."

In an attempt to evaluate the psychological and sociological allure of "pseudoscience" and "pseudoarchaeology," archaeologist N.C. Flemming analogizes scientific and archaeological methods to "a network of motorways that takes the expert straight to the frontier of knowledge" while, in the meantime, enabling the "expert" a "trouble-free traverse through a maze of bogs, pitfalls, traps, and blind-alley diversions," (Flemming 2006: 60-62). Alternative theories and paradigms, meanwhile, occupy, in his words, "the forbidden spaces" sandwiching the freeway, those wild spots comprised of "belief" or "folk knowledge" and untouched by the infrastructure of the institutional. David Hufford (1995) would likely refer to this line of thinking as a legacy of post-Enlightenment societal valuation of empirical and rational knowledge due to the dichotomy that Flemming maintains and the implied authority of one knowledge system over another (see also Hammer 2004: 200-05). However, if we continue with Flemming's analogy, people like Evan, u/irrelevantappelation, and others—and their theories—populate those "forbidden spaces." Instead of wandering about aimlessly, though, the people and the communities they participate in are establishing and continuously expanding different kinds of thoroughfares through Flemming's "maze of bogs, pitfalls, traps, and blind-alley diversions." These are roadways that run counter to those of the "mainstream" because they are built from alternative approaches to thinking about ancient Egypt.

In less poetic terms, alternative Egyptology "colonizes contested space" not only "within the cultural memory" of Egypt in Western society (Jüdt 2003: 195; quoted in Kreuger 2017: 70-72), but also without the limits of concretized Egyptological knowledge. In this sense, perceived anomalies in "the modern narrative" can be claimed or highlighted as legitimizations of alternative positions within the larger discourse (Hammer 2004: 29-30). Concurrently, within these communities, the anomalous, accessed and supplemented via those "exotic questions" that u/irrelevantappelation referenced, tends to delegitimize Egyptology.

When it comes to ancient Egypt, I frequently came across or directly heard different versions of a major example of alternative positions laying epistemic claim (albeit in unique ways) to one of Egypt's most famous monuments: the Pyramid of Khufu. This structure was built during the 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom (Malek 2003; Roeten 2016: 24-29), dating to a timeframe for which less (but certainly not *no*) physical archaeological evidence/documentation is extant than in later periods of Egyptian history. Therefore, there are some questions about the more minute and specific architectural techniques used to construct the Pyramid of Khufu, for example, that are still discussed in some Egyptological spheres (Müller-Römer 2008)[7]. Nevertheless, Egyptologists are confident in their theories about how the Pyramid of Khufu was built and its funerary function, largely due to extant remains of methods (such as ramps and lever systems) used to build preceding and subsequent structures (including other pyramids) and the interpretation of a large corpus of religious texts/objects that strongly indicate the religious purposes of pyramids (Arnold 1991; Nuzzolo and Krejčí 2017; Ejsmond 2018).

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[7] Although the point still stands, it should be noted that Müller-Römer, an engineer, represents a relatively minor position among Egyptological circles.

As one Egyptologist told me during an interview, “we know how [the Egyptians] built the pyramids, for God’s sake!”

To alternative theorists, however, a lack of evidence of any kind—or alternate interpretations of existing evidence—signifies the anomalous, uncolonized gaps in Evan’s “modern narrative” of ancient Egypt. However, it goes without saying that the anomalous exists only because there is a “modern narrative” from which to find holes in. In his response to my questionnaire, Evan articulates this position in this way, citing a lack of evidence that, for many alternative theorists, discredits Egyptological theories about the purpose of the Pyramid of Khufu. “By having that original narrative to work off [it] helps to contextualize other information [alternative theories]. For example, the widely disputed pyramids are tombs theory is countered by the fact that no bodies were found in them.”

The theories of many people I spoke to or posts that I encountered during the course of my research resonated with Evan’s disagreement over the “pyramids are tombs theory.” Paul, for instance, is equally skeptical of this theory. “We really have no credible idea of what exactly [the pyramid] was used for. I don’t believe it was a tomb at all.” A member of the Facebook group Ancient Astronaut Theorists agrees with the original poster of an alternative theory suggesting that the pyramids on the Giza Plateau constituted the nexus point of a global power plant for extraterrestrials. “You could just go along with [the] mainstream and the brainwashed & agree it was a Tomb……???...now that sounds idiotic.” Repudiations of mainstream theories are frequently accompanied by statements like this one that reaffirm alternative postulations—even if they disagree with the original posting. Instead of concordance or discordance with the specific contents of a posted theory, discussion typically reinforces an individual or community's overall position on ancient Egypt because it emerges from a sociocultural climate in which the anomalous takes precedence over institutional knowledge. From this stance, the colonization of the anomalous is a multi-pronged, communal effort. It is a process composed of alternative claims to knowledge, claims infused with ideology, and one continuously enacted through the expression of alternative theories and the dialogue they generate.

The Egypt Question:

If, as u/irrelevantappelation pondered, Egypt is "highly anomalous," rendering it especially colonizable by alternative theories, how has it obtained this status? More relevant to folkloristic inquiry, how do digital communities further ancient Egypt's reputation per their own cultural values? How ancient Egypt is received, interpreted, and communicated is relative to the societies and cultures in which these actions occur (Moser 2015), whether on large or small scales. At any rate, "for us, there is no ancient Egyptian culture in and of itself, but only what we make of it," (Hornung 2001: 187). Ancient Egypt is not unique in this regard; elements from historic civilizations (or the *idea* of historic civilizations) are and have been constantly used to shape contemporary cultural expression and social identity, from the vernacular to the popular cultural levels (Briggs 1988; Beiner 2018); to justify political movements and nationalistic agendas (Arnold 2006; Molina 2014); and, depending on how and where they are presented, to influence how the past is received and how this reception informs the creation of knowledge (a museum exhibit versus a Facebook group; MacDonald and Shaw 2004; Moser 2010).

Few historic civilizations—ancient or otherwise—seem to inspire a sense of wonder and awe in the popular consciousness as ancient Egypt has (Hornung 2001; Champion and Ucko 2003: 1-2). According to my informants, alternative theories about Egypt are “more credible” than anywhere else; “the anomalous” is especially well-rooted here. In part, this is due to the longevity of external fascination with Egypt, often referred to by scholars as Egyptomania (Humbert 2014). Humbert (2014: 467-8) is explicit in his consideration of what constitutes Egyptomania; “the determining factor” that qualifies something as “Egyptianizing is the presence of decorative elements borrowed from ancient Egypt.” Therefore, Egyptomania is, primarily, a visual, artistic, architectural phenomenon, including if accompanied by other subordinate sensory stimuli.

If alternative Egyptology can be viewed as an example of Egyptomania (i.e., primarily in its usage of images), the Internet is an excellent bolster to this claim because it is a participatory medium. “Big helper, include some kind of picture(s). Those postings get MORE Attention!” This piece of advice was given to me by Mark Glass, the head moderator of the Facebook group Ancient Aliens, as I was seeking members to participate in this project. Scrolling through Ancient Aliens, other Facebook groups, and various subreddits, every post about ancient Egypt contains images representing symbolic icons of Egypt, like the pyramids, the Sphinx, temple complexes; artwork and/or hieroglyphics; or contemporary artistic depictions of Egyptian deities, to name a few recurrent elements (see Figures 1 and 2 for examples).

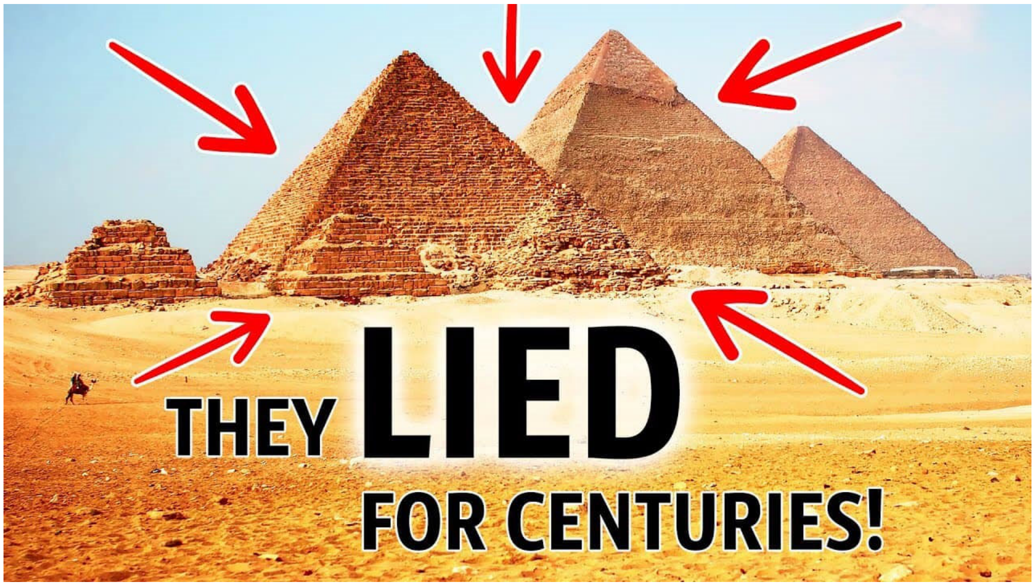
THEY LIED
FOR CENTURIES!

Figure 1: An image accompanying a post about the Pyramids of Giza shared to Ancient Astronaut Theorists.

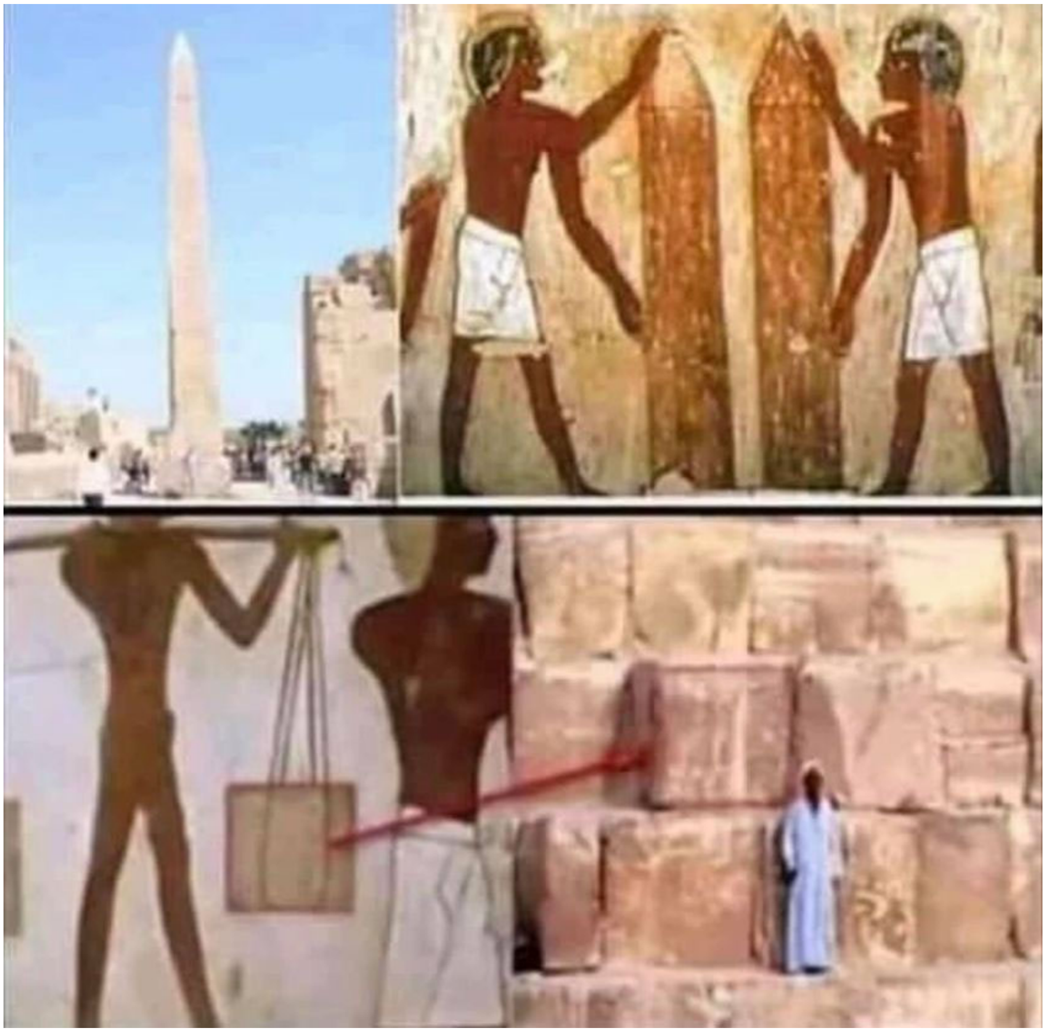

Figure 2: an image posted to the group Ancient Aliens III (Uncensored) suggesting that giants constructed many of Egypt's monuments.

A discursive, communicative type of Egyptomania such as alternative Egyptology—and the general position within this discourse (Hammer 2004) from which intended perceptions and interpretations of ancient Egypt radiate—is amplified and proliferated by digital communication, especially in terms of the sheer amount of accessible social media fora within which alternative Egypt can be discussed (Peck 2020b). At one point during our interview, Paul reflected on the growing popularity of alternative Egypts that the development of the Internet has provided. “So, at the dawn of the Internet, in the ‘90s, is when I got really interested in it [alternative Egypt], and there just wasn’t a lot on there [the Internet]. You probably had as much information in books as you were reading online. But over the past ten years or so, it’s really exploded.” A result of this “explosion,” regarding alternative theories, is a wider network of information dissemination (Howard 2008; Peck 2020a), from highly populated communities on social media platforms to websites with less content regulation, like Above Top Secret or the Black Vault. (Many of my informants told me they frequented fora like these, on top of being fairly active with their groups on Facebook and Reddit.) “There’s so much content on the web. It’s hard to keep up. There’s just so much out there, it’s easy to bounce from site to site.” For Paul and thousands of other alternative theorists, the Internet has provided a greater degree of agency in terms of selectivity; whatever he wants to research and whichever community on whichever website he wants to participate in is only a click or two away, as long as he knows where to look.

Despite the general recognition of the Internet as fruitful for folkloristic research, concise conceptualizations of how we communicate using the Internet (or how we behave) are relatively elusive (Blank 2009, 2013; Buccitelli 2012; Phillips and Milner 2017). Blank (2013: 108-14) suggests analyzing digital expression and communication through the lens of material behavior. “Virtualized communications” are similar to verbal communication in that they engage in the “process of imbuing an object with symbolic meaning." Visualizing digital behavior in terms of its materiality imposes a paradoxical sense of virtual objectivity on Internet culture. Blank refers to this as hybridized corporeality (110). Material behavior, though, focuses upon how the "object's" maker crafts the object itself and the motivation for its production, as well as on "what social, cultural, and folk processes" contribute to its emergence (110-13). Material behavior studies applied to the Internet shifts the emphasis to the individual from the wider societal or cultural picture, while recognizing how the individual contributes to the latter (108-15).

The "finished object," informed by a particular discursive network (but ultimately the work of the individual), enters that same discourse, and is expected to be interacted with, negotiated, and evaluated by other community members (Buccitelli 2012). On the Internet, as in face-to-face dialogue, "discursive practices emerge from heteroglossic communication," (Blank 2013: 119). Within an alternative Egyptological context, material behavior typically manifests in alternative theories that prompt some kind of a response. For example, many alternative theories directly ask their readers what they think about the posted theory, encouraging other members to contribute to the discussion. Apart from epistemological claims (i.e., colonizing claims) and expressions of ideological positions, alternative theories are almost always paired with images or symbols highlighting ancient Egyptian themes or motifs, hinting at both the material behavior and, in circulation, the social semiotic qualities (see Kress 2010) of these posts.

These images and symbols have a wide range of functions. For one, the Internet is a primarily visual medium, consequently making most digital communication visual, through both writing and images. Second, they bolster the text of a given alternative theory with further visual or aesthetic stimuli. In this vein, they further dictate the overall dispositional perception of the postulates of an alternative theory, per the social values of the community (see Bourdieu 1996 [1979]: 28; see also Evans 1985: 88). Their aesthetic quality(ies) are likewise determined and interpreted per the social disposition of these groups (Mitchell 2002). There is an accessible history of both the presentation of alternative theories and with the general position from which the idea of alternative Egypt derives. New posts create and disseminate knowledge and contribute to and engage with several discursive systems, like those specific to the community where the alternative theories are shared and wider, historical, and representational discourses, like Egyptomania or, in general, the social and cultural memory of ancient Egypt. Finally, the continuation of these discursive practices affirms and reaffirms ideas and perceptions of ancient Egypt, to the point that its status in these digital communities can, in part, be understood by the symbols and images employed to represent it (Moser 2015).

Ancient Egypt: "A Mystical and Mysterious Place in my Head"

"Mysterious." "Mystical." "Exotic." "Esoteric." "Fantastical." "Occult." "Secret." "Anomalous." "Lost knowledge." These and similar rhetorical descriptors of ancient Egypt are often affixed to alternative theories that I encountered during my fieldwork, with visual supplementation deliberately chosen to drive home the conveyed point of descriptive association. Symbolically speaking, ancient Egypt connotes these labels, as if to speak of it is to whisper, or to represent it is to blur it further. But there is a clear cognitive dimension, too, as is evident in the quote introducing this section, communicated to me by an anonymous member of r/AlternativeHistory. On r/AlternativeHistory, r/HighStrangeness, or The Ancient School of Lost Knowledge, then, ancient Egypt is primarily communicated symbolically, but much of this behavior—on an individual level—derives from cognitively held conceptions. If this is true, Egyptocentric alternative theories are technologically and symbolically mediated reifications of these same cognitive positions (see Kitta 2018). However, it is difficult to ascertain cognitive embracement on the Internet (as in the "real world;" see Gatling 2020). For every Carolyn Mills ("I have put my own theories together and truly believe in them") there is a Scarlett Armstrong ("I don't really believe any of it at all") or a u/tsjr96, somewhere in the middle of the spectrum ("the only thing I am convinced of is that there seem to be enough questions of the current narrative to start a conversation").

Another important question comes up. The missing part of the introductory quote attributes this anonymous viewer's perception of and fascination with Egypt entirely to "pop culture." Nor was this my only informant to do so. In fact, all of my informants attributed their initiation into alternative Egyptology to popular culture. For u/irrelevantappelation, the History Channel television program *Ancient Aliens* (2010-present) served as his "initiation" for his interest in alternative Egyptology. *In Search Of…* (1977-1982), featuring the late Leonard Nimoy, sparked Paul's interest in Egypt; for him, the series allowed a "boy from Mississippi" to "dream about visiting…a fascinating exotic locale full of mystery." Other informants credit the books of authors popular in the alternative history/Ancient Astronaut literary genre, such as Erich von Däniken, Graham Hancock, John Anthony West, Randall Carlson, or Robert Bauval. Still others point to other media sources—many are avid listeners of the Joe Rogan Experience, a podcast that frequently includes guests like Graham Hancock, who, on his last appearance on the show, discussed the construction of the Pyramid of Khufu along stellar ley lines. The Facebook groups Ancient Aliens and Ancient Aliens III (Uncensored) have discussion posts devoted to weekly episodes of *Ancient Aliens*. Popular media provides the symbolic template for Egypt to alternative theorists, but its elaboration, its negotiation, and its continued dissemination is, largely speaking, a vernacular effort.

The influence of popular media on vernacular discourse (and vice versa) is undeniable (see Hall 2006 [1980]), and undoubtedly plays a role in the public perception of ancient Egypt (writ large). For Day (2006: 2), historical figures, archetypes (like mummies), and Egyptian themes in general are "being manipulated" by the media "in order to create new meanings for its old images." From media representations, Day asserts, "people negotiate standard meanings for particular motifs and establish the manner of their use in particular contexts." When it comes to how motifs from the ancient world are "used in particular contexts," we must consider how that theme or motif—or its representation, the abstracted *idea* of that theme or motif—permeates those cognitive dimensions, from the individual to the societal level: reception, perception, interpretation, and the potential for the application of these areas to other cultural or discursive spheres. For Day (2006), these dimensions are centered on the figure of the mummy in various forms of media while Wyke and Montserrat (2011) examine the effect of the 1963 film *Cleopatra* on fashion trends in Europe and the United States.

By this logic, the reception of ancient Egypt is, at least initially, shaped by media-filtered representations. Popular culture provides the initial springboard into understanding ancient Egypt, alternative or not. The dominant culture, of which popular media is a powerful apparatus, dictates and enforces vernacular discourse by using the media to establish class-based hegemony, an "order in which…one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional manifestation," (Williams 1960; quoted in Woolcock 1985: 204). However, if the driving ideological tenet of alternative historical paradigms is anti-institutional, we are dealing with a somewhat paradoxical anti-institutional institutional structure (see Gramsci 2006 [1971; 1985]) that simultaneously perpetuates and materializes the multi-form discourse on the *idea* of Egypt, though from more particular positions. Or there could just be a large market demand for alternative Egypt, or ancient Egypt in general, a claim supported by the sheer amount of movies, books, television documentaries, and video games, to list a few popular mediums, that center on Egypt (see Lant 1992, 2013; Lupton 2003; Schadla-Hall and Morris 2003; Day 2006). The market reflects popular aesthetic demand for more and more visions of alternative Egypt (Schadla-Hall 2004; Fiske 2010: 102-04; Hiscock 2012). Schadla-Hall and Morris (2003: 195) assert that the popularity of Egypt in the media itself "lies in a paradox, for it is both unusual and mysterious as well as reassuringly familiar" due its unique culture and iconography, elements reinforced through specifically oriented cinematography or "Oriental" music (Schadla-Hall and Morris 2003; see Lant 2013: 53-55). Once again, Egypt is understood through its symbols; popular media facilitates the transmission of these symbols, thereby furthering the discourse on ancient Egypt on its own right as well as influencing vernacular discursive practice.

For many scholars, popular media reflects the central thesis behind hegemony, in that "everyday ideas and practices of citizens 'on the ground' are selectively picked up by culture industries, reworked and presented back to the people as their own," (Day 2006: 9). This creates a feedback loop, in which no idea or practice ever truly belongs to one party, even if the dominant class has control of their representation. This conceptualization, however, implies a kind of homogeneous passivity to characterize every facet of folk or vernacular culture and denies much of the expressive creativity within this stratum, even if such behavior occurs within hegemonic discourse. Through digital alternative Egyptology, we can examine the nuances of the role of popular media in vernacular discourse.

Take, for example, the anonymous member of r/AlternativeHistory whose quote introduces this section. The credit goes to popular culture for their initial interest in Egypt (as well as their perception of Egypt as a "mystical and mysterious place"), but their involvement with and participation in digital communities in which alternative Egypt is collectively researched and negotiated is/was their choice. In other words, there is a degree of agency in vernacular engagement with popular culture in alternative Egyptological discoursing. Some alternative theorists discredit popular media almost entirely. "I have long since dispensed with seeing them as being instructive," writes u/irrelevantappelation. "I find many representations of Egypt to be intentionally sensationalized, fantastical, and absurd (e.g. the TV show *Ancient Aliens* has done a terrible disservice to the ancient alien theory).” His disdain for popular media again suggests an element of vernacular agency. *Ancient Aliens* is no longer “instructive” for u/irrelevantappelation, demonstrating disengagement from some popular media in his pursuit of knowledge. During our interview, though, he recommended that I listen to the Joe Rogan Experience episodes featuring Graham Hancock and Randall Carlson, another popular advocate of “lost” antediluvian civilizations. “It’s really important stuff.” Similarly, Paul does not care for *Ancient Aliens* beyond pure entertainment, but Hancock’s alternative historical classic *Fingerprints of the Gods* (1995) was an “alarm clock wakeup moment” in terms of his interest in alternative Egypt.

That alternative theorists like u/irrelevantappelation, Paul, and others can be so selective about which representations of alternative Egypts from popular media to incorporate into their own knowledge frameworks (see Hall 2006 [1980]: 165), and which to jettison or disregard completely, is not only indicative of vernacular agency or authority (Howard 2008), but also points back to problems with an overarching conceptualization of a discursive feedback loop between the hegemonic class and “those on the ground.” Ethnographic anecdotes of individual refutations, of course, are not enough to invalidate the model in totality, but they do nuance the reception of alternative Egypt from a folk perspective. This also implies that there is a degree of agency at the vernacular and the individual level in terms of semiotic reception (Langlois 1985; French 2012). Some discursive codes are decoded and deemed worthy of a place within members’ frameworks of knowledge, and some are not (Fiske 2010: 83-101). Some codes are negotiated and discussed on the spot, as the weekly discussion posts of *Ancient*

Aliens episodes on Facebook groups indicates. Many members whose entrance into alternative Egyptology they attribute to popular media (including every one of my informants!) now think of their alternative theories in proprietary terms. Carolyn has formulated her own theories and feels great pride in them to the point that they are an intrinsic part of her identity; "it's a normal part of my life." U/tsjr96, from r/HighStrangeness, has shed all "outside influence" (i.e., popular media) since strengthening his research skills. Then again, many alternative theorists engage with popular media (usually books and podcasts) or other digital fora as a normal step in their research, elements of which can selectively be repurposed into perceptive frameworks and alternative theories. The hegemonic discourse of/on alternative Egypt, and the symbols used to articulate it, persists in its dominant pole, but the codes it disseminates are not decoded equally by those "on the ground" (Hall 2006 [1980]).

But what, exactly, is the hegemonic system in place here? Alternative theorists certainly do not see themselves as operating within an institutional structure; quite the opposite, in fact. "We have to take what they are telling us and apply what we know to come to our own conclusion," writes Evan, in reference to the "widely disputed pyramids are tombs theory" mentioned above. Alternative Egyptology exists in opposition to the institutional narrative, the mainstream, professional Egyptology (Picknett and Prince 2003; Grünschloß 2006: 15; Kreuger 2017), which themselves are legitimizations of "particular organizations of meaning," (Trouillot 1991: 17; quoted in French 2012: 338). Any alternative hegemonic discourse, then, must be either established and maintained out of a staunch-yet-contradictive alterity—the development of an anti-institutional institution—or it is itself a smaller, negotiated branch of a wider discursive tree. In this case, there are perhaps two intertwined trees that can be identified: the social and cultural memory of ancient Egypt and Orientalism.

"A Certain Nexus of Human Thought": Cultural Memory and Intertextuality

Joining my questionnaire from the Ancient School of Lost Knowledge, Andrés Pérez ruminates that "Egypt seems to be a certain nexus of human thought at a certain point in time." His response is phrased differently than others—nowhere are the words "mysterious" or "secretive" or the like apparent, even if it evokes a similar sentiment—but this in itself is not what makes his answer stand out. "Nexus" is a curious word to describe Egypt with. Ancient Egypt, at various points in its history, was a *trading* nexus (Eyre 2010; Moreno García 2017), but it is impossible to archaeologically support the notion that it was a "nexus of human thought." Instead, we are again observing ancient Egypt from within the horizons of the ideal, the perceptive, and the symbolic. Andrés' thoughts do not come from a vacuum, though. There is a long 'tradition' of what Hornung (2001: 3) calls Egyptosophy, "the study of an imaginary Egypt viewed as the profound source of esoteric lore," (see also Champion and Ucko 2003; Hammer 2004). Under this definitional framework, ancient Egypt can indeed be construed as a nexus of now lost or suppressed occult knowledge and energy; all esoteric roads lead back to Egypt.

More broadly, though (and perhaps more abstractly), we can also consider Andrés' point in terms of the cultural or social memory of ancient Egypt. According to

Assmann (1997: 15-20), how Egypt is ‘remembered’ is carried out over generations via discursive vehicles, which only qualify as discursive due to “the double relationship” these vehicles have with their sequential predecessors and to the overall thematic dimensions of a particular discourse. Thus, the social and cultural memory of Egypt is itself another discourse, but one that manifests differently in distinct social, cultural, and ideological contexts, as in virtual communities on Facebook and Reddit. The discourse is malleable, but does not completely shatter; negotiable but still dominant (Hall 2006 [1980]: 170-3). Andrés’ statement, then, is not merely a parroted byproduct of this discourse, but rather a creative articulation of it. This is true of all Egyptocentric alternative theories, which, collectively speaking, point to Egypt as a *discursive* “nexus of human thought,” the thematic center from and to which discursive vehicles connect.

That a discourse can be spoken of in sequential terms implies intertextuality, the relationship of texts to its preceding and succeeding texts (Bauman 2004; Bauman and Briggs 1992). If the social and cultural memory of Egypt is a discourse, then, it is more appropriate to conceptualize the ‘history’ of ideas about Egypt as an intertextual chain. In this regard, Egypt has been associated with the mysterious and the esoteric for millennia (Assmann 1997; Hornung 2001; Champion and Ucko 2003; Kreuger 2017). Later generations of ancient Egyptians themselves “looked with something approaching superstitious awe at the products of their most distant ancestors,” an assertion reinforced by a narrative in the Middle Kingdom Papyrus Westcar (ca. 1650 B.C.E.) in which the pharaoh Khufu searches for the “secret things of the House of Thoth,” including the knowledge to construct his pyramid (Picknett and Prince 2003: 179; see also Gardiner

1925). A laundry list of subsequent external societies, cultures, empires, and historical figures, from the Greeks and Romans to modern Americans and Europeans, from Spinoza to Napoleon to H.P. Lovecraft, have contributed to and thereby perpetuated the discourse of the memory of Egypt, painting it in tones of mystery, the esoteric and the occult, the mystical, and the secretive (see, for example, Assmann 1997; Montserrat 2000; Hornung 2001; Curran 2003; Jeffreys 2003; Lloyd 2010; Miles 2011; Moser 2015; Fritze 2016; Schotter 2018: 127-64).

The origins of the alternative Egyptological position within this discursive system can largely be attested to in the 19th and early 20th centuries and coincides with major movements among esoteric and occultist circles, as well as in literature (Picknett and Prince 2003; Hammer 2004: 87-100; Jordan 2006; Kreuger 2017). The centrality of Egypt in, for instance, Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, was, Hammer (2004: 87) argues, an attempt to "engage in the construction of a historical lineage," that is, a legitimizing engagement with the memory of Egypt, establishing a link in the intertextual chain. The works of authors such as Edgar Cayce, Ignatius Donnelly, Alice Bailey, R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz, and Charles Hoy Fort (and science-fiction writers like Garrett P. Serviss and H.P. Lovecraft, although they claimed their work was strictly fiction, through and through; Richter 2012: 223-27) achieved similar goals by carving out specific niches within the negotiated cultural memory of Egypt (Picknett and Prince 2003: 179-86; Kreuger 2017). These were among the first developers and proponents of the lost civilization/Atlantis and extraterrestrial involvement in ancient Egypt theories, and their ideas directly influenced succeeding generations of alternative historians, including Erich von Däniken, Zechariah Sitchin, John Anthony West, Robert Bauval, and Graham Hancock. (Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods* is partly dedicated to Donnelly and de Lubicz.) Many of my informants, some of whom are also especially interested in the esoteric and occult dimensions of Egyptian culture, were initiated into the world of alternative Egyptology by this "second generation," suggesting that vernacular alternative Egyptology is superficially a direct continuation of this branch of the discourse.

To suggest that virtual alternative theories are merely the next homogenous articulations of the reception of ancient Egypt from a particular discursive position, however, diminishes what they accomplish in terms of communal goals and values, knowledge making, creativity, and material/symbolic behavior. The folkloric dimensions of alternative theories fall by the wayside in such conceptualizations, even if they are, indeed, influenced by their "textual predecessors," (Assmann 1997: 17). Alternative theories may "belong" to the larger mnemohistorical discourse surrounding ancient Egypt, but they are deeply rich in their own rights, too; vernacular practices inform the social memory just as much as the other way around (French 2012; Beiner 2018). With that said, another major feature of alternative Egyptology that occurs at every socioculturally communicative level in which it appears is the continued representation of Egypt by its associated terminology and iconography.

"Tell Me Any Great Civilization That Were Not Built by White Men": Racism, Representation, Orientalism

A member of the Facebook group Ancient Astronaut Theorists asks in a recent post: “Why were all the ancient gods white?” A gallery of white or lighter-skinned depictions of deities from a various ancient pantheons—including the Egyptian one—was included with the post. “Were they [ancient civilizations] trying to show what aliens look like?” Another member, who is “usually quiet when people post stupid shit,” has had it; he calls the original post out for its overt racism. “Why does it just have to be white so-called Gods that came is it because you’re ‘well there just no way natives could have been smart enough to do anything on their own.’” His concerns are not taken seriously; four other members have reacted to it with laughing emojis. Finally, a third member responds to the aggrieved commenter accusing the original post of racism. “You’re so funny. Tell me any great civilization that were not built by white men.”

Some alternative theories (and the dialogue they elicit) are blatantly racist, like the above and the response to the member who took umbrage with the original post. The point made by the initial respondent highlights a key critique of alternative archaeology overall. It tends to diminish and devalue the cultural and technological achievements of non-Western civilizations, supplanting human ingenuity with ethnocentric notions of “primitive” non-white populations only being able to accomplish what they were able with assistance and guidance from “lost” civilizations or aliens (Moshenska 2017: 126). Sometimes the civilizations are removed from the equation entirely. Evan, for example, is a strong advocate for extending the accepted chronology for the Sphinx back to around 11,000 B.C.E., due to the “weathering” on the geological formation it was carved from. Humans were inhabiting Egypt 13,000 years ago (Hendrickx and Vermeersch 2003), but the Sphinx was not carved until the 4th Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, some 9,000 years later (Malek 2003). To suggest or to theorize otherwise is to adopt a "derogatory view" of Egypt and to engage with an ethnocentric, racializing dialogue on the past (Schadla-Hall 2004; Andersson 2012; Moshenska 2017).

To be sure, Egyptocentric alternative theories are racist (and often xenophobic, colonialist, and othering in general), whether implicitly or explicitly so. But this does not mean that they are devoid of social and cultural aspects within situated or specific temporal contexts, such as in political or nationalistic movements. (Nazis, for example, used (and use) alternative archaeology and folklore to legitimate their despicable ideologies; Mieder 1982; Arnold 2006.) The same is true of these digital communities; more is at play than racism, though this aspect should not be ignored in the slightest. Schadla-Hall (2004: 268), in his analysis of the boom in alternative archaeology's popularity, touches on this point, and suggests that "we now need to differentiate between different kinds of views [of alternative archaeology], treating some as legitimate individual myth-making, but some as dangerous and denigrating to others." The reason for this differentiation, he writes, is "our tendency to treat all its manifestations with the same weight." While I agree that we should not analyze alternative theories as if they represent a typified corpus, the differentiation is not exactly necessary; "legitimate myth-making" can exist while also being racist, even if it is less blatant than the quote introducing this section. These are not mutually exclusive perspectives.

Another complicating factor is the demographic make-up of these communities. As is clear in the above exchange, there are members who post racist alternative theories or racist comments, but there are also members who recognize that alternative theories are racist. Scarlett, for instance, is concise—“obviously racism is bad”—but justifies her participation by acknowledging that she would not have learned of many monuments or locales without having been exposed to alternative theories. Additionally, many members participate in these communities from distinct social and ideological backgrounds that, in turn, influence individual interpretative frameworks for understanding ancient Egypt. Perceived racism is relative to these frameworks, and is thus qualified by different criteria for different members—if it even registers at all.

However, alternative theories are objectively racist, even if they do have social functions within cultural contexts. “Racism,” writes Frantz Fanon (2016), “is not the whole, but the most visible, the most day-to-day and, not to mince matters, the crudest element of a given structure,” (206). Sometimes this “crudest element” is plain to see. To pose the question of “why were all the ancient gods white?” with the insinuation that this is what aliens really looked like is to engage and to perpetuate a racializing discourse, to wave away the cultural ingenuity of entire ancient civilizations in one racist, Euhemeristic fell swoop. And even if this is an especially egregious example, it is nevertheless stitched into the communicative fabric of these groups because it is framed with the social values and the expected performative characteristics of a particular community in mind; “the most visible, the most day-to-day.”

There is a pattern with alternative Egyptology and the groups in which it is circulated, a discursive pattern that, with each performance of an alternative theory, further normalizes derogatory perceptions of the past. In these emic contexts, then, it is not a question of whether racism is permitted, tolerated, or even hesitantly accepted; generally speaking, it does not register at all. Accusations of racism are scoffed at with laughing emojis or downvotes. U/irrelevantappelation suggests that to view alternative theories as racist is an issue of a “neurological trigger” that conflates alternative Egyptology with “QAnon or Pizzagate, whatever, and you immediately shut down any more critical thought.” If racism is recognized by members, it is followed by a “pro and con” type statement that front-facingly addresses that racism is a negative, but in spite of the negative, there is some positive epistemological value that accompanies it. Scarlett’s comment above is evidence enough of this. “Obviously racism is bad, but—” is a disclaimer, perhaps one to nominally distance herself from this aspect of alternative theories, to sublimate her position. The effect, however, is profound (at least to an etic observer); though there is a recognition, there is no condemnation of a racializing dialogue over ancient Egypt here, but instead an attempt to dismiss and justify it.

Alternative theories represent Egypt symbolically and iconographically, and these material and visual representations serve to continue both the communal virtual discourse of alternative Egyptology as well as to prolong, on a larger scale, the social and cultural memory of ancient Egypt. When we speak of this social and cultural memory, though, to which society and culture’s memory are we referring? For many, this would be the “West’s” memory of Egypt, i.e., how it is “remembered” in Europe and the United States. At its most simplified, this describes Said’s (1994 [1978]) model of Orientalism, a discourse of control through institutionalized “Western” representations (or misrepresentations, depending who you ask) and perceptions of the “Orient,” a large, temporally frozen region demarcated by epistemologically and ideologically established imaginative borders (Said 1994 [1978]: 49-55). Geographically speaking, the imagined Orient is comprised of North Africa and Asia in its totality. Said's particular focus, though, is centered on the Middle East and North Africa, including its historic civilizations, like ancient Egypt, that corresponds with more modern political and regional borders.

Said contrives an "us" versus "them" binary, where "we" are of the West and "they," the Other, are of the Orient. He writes: "It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds; 'they' become 'they' accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from 'ours,'" (1994 [1978]: 54). Within this binary, the dominant, hegemonic culture—the "West"—controls the "distribution of geopolitical awareness" into its social, cultural, and academic institutions, its ideologies and epistemologies (for "alterity is an epistemological problem before it becomes an ontological issue;" Varisco 2007: 48) inevitably impacting vernacular culture in the process (Said 1994 [1978]: 12; see also Gingrich 1998, 2015). To be clear, Said details the genre of Orientalism that he documents primarily from its textual and academic examples in French and English-speaking circles, ranging from the *Description de l'Égypte,* commissioned following Napoleon's Conquest of Egypt in 1798 (though its first volume was not published until 1809) to contemporary texts (Said 1994 [1978]: 84-94; 256-83). However, due to the wide array of social and cultural spheres and institutional apparatuses from which Orientalizing texts can be mediated through (such as popular media), our scope need not be limited to academic realms.

As with the social and cultural memory of Egypt, Orientalism should not be approached through the lens of history. “It has a genealogy,” explains Edmund Burke III, “but it has no history,” (Burke III 1994; quoted in Reid 2002: 13). Orientalism is inextricably linked with the period of European colonialist and imperialist endeavors of the late 18th and 19th centuries and its political legacy/ramifications (Said 1994 [1978]: 31-48), so to speak of Orientalism during the ancient world, for example, is inaccurate, for the simple reason that there was no such thing as the Occident, let alone the Orient! (Varisco 2007: 63-70.) Thus, we should be careful in our consideration of what the history of Orientalism is, if one exists at all, “for we otherwise risk transforming an historically limited relationship of inequality into a quasi-ontological affirmation of the differences between two opposing cultures,” (Dobie 2001; quoted in Varisco 2007: 64). Our focus consequently shifts to how—or if—a vernacular Orientalizing discourse appears today in an alternative Egyptological context, while recognizing its niche on a culturally pervasive, ever-growing intertextual constellation.

U/irrelevantappelation claimed to me that he viewed ancient Egypt as a “Rosetta Stone” for humanity’s secret origins. Like Andrés’s thoughts on Egypt as a “nexus for human thought,” both of these statements evoke a sentiment of human unity, a search for the benefit of man—no binaries or perceived alterity to speak of. However, two things come to mind. For one, Egypt is still being painted using the same rhetorical palette of “mysterious,” “esoteric,” “exotic,” and “lost wisdom” as is also apparent in Ancient Astronautic and lost civilization alternative theories, albeit in a more subtle manner. (u/irrelevantappelation, for example, is especially interested in sacred geometry and occultism as they pertain to the pyramids.) Second, the idea of claiming Egypt as an origin for any kind of "wisdom" or "esoteric" tradition is to view Egypt through an exoticizing, Otherizing lens. Alternative theories formulated from within this lens further serve to exoticize ancient Egypt through representation. The nature of these digital communities (and the Internet as a whole) as a kind of participatory, interactive archive perpetuates the alternative Egyptological *status quo*; ancient Egypt is mysterious, exotic, foreign, "profoundly anomalous," but it is this way only because it is represented in these terms. Representation conditions the reception of ancient Egypt in any community context, of course, but, in terms of alternative Egyptology, the representation—the unique alternative theory--is crafted in a way that continues the exoticization, the mysterious, and the "anomalous" dimensions of Egypt while also shading it in their own particular ideological hues. In his discussion of Romantic Orientalism, Said (1994 [1978]) points out that "what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia's *use* to modern Europe," (115). The same principle can be applied to vernacular Orientalizations of ancient Egypt: what is Egypt's ideological use to alternative Egyptology, and how is it enacted? In this sense, the discourse of alternative Egyptology is a representational constellation composed of a diversity of points characterized by, in u/irrelevantappelation's words, "exotic questions" that center on ancient Egypt. These questions are exotic both in terms of exoticizing representations of Egypt and in relation to the narrow scope of the questions that the "mainstream" allows to be asked. "Exotic questions" about Egypt push past convention on one hand, but Orientalize on the other.

That Egypt is construed as mysterious and exotic goes hand in hand with the *why* and *how* of representational behavior and how it exacts control over Egypt. It is in this controlling element of the representative aspects of alternative Egyptology that we can consider it an Orientalizing discourse. In this vein, the specific content of an alternative theory is not as relevant as the visual method of control—representation—and the perceptive/interpretative effects of the representation. This can be a result of popular culture and other institutional realms, as has been discussed. As a young boy, Paul dreamed of going to ancient Egypt, a "fascinating exotic locale full of mystery," due to a television program that represented Egypt in an Orientalizing light, but it is far from the only program to do so, and Paul was far from my only informant to speak of Egypt like this.

Vernacular discourse on the Internet amplifies manifestations of this dynamic, too. Alternative theories, then, become not so much "permutations" of the "old hat" (Jordan 2006: 128) of particular strands of the social and cultural memory of Egypt, but operate from within a category that occupies the space between the "mysterious" and the "familiar," between the "completely novel" and "completely well known," (Said 1994 [1978]: 58). This category, explains Said (1994 [1978]) "allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing." Representations within this category are "not so much a way of receiving new information as [they] are a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established way of viewing things," (58-9). Orientalizing representations reinforce preexisting communal perceptions and conceptions of ancient Egypt while contributing to the discourse that led to the initial representation.

Virtual communities showcase this ambivalent category in both real time and in past posts. A member can post on Ancient Astronaut Theorists or r/AlternativeHistory and be met with a message advising them that “several people are typing” to discuss that person’s theory. Or a member can search from within the group to see how that community has negotiated Egypt in the past. Maybe that member can spark a new debate on an old post. Ephemerality and permanence go hand in hand on the Internet (Blank 2018), and in this way an Orientalizing discourse is established and maintained at hyper-speed on a massive scale with each instance that Egypt is posted about. Different alternative theories are novel in terms of their content, but they are also representations of “a previously known thing,” i.e., the community disposition for the reception of an Orientalized version of ancient Egypt, a status reaffirmed by both the alternative theory and how it is discussed in the comment sections.

Said dissects the ambivalence of the Western understanding and representational strategies of the Orient while zeroed in on French and English scientific works, political rhetoric, literature, art, and academic disciplines like linguistics and anthropology. He details how, during the 19th and 20th centuries especially, these two European powers utilized such institutional apparatuses to justify, legitimate, and maintain their colonialist and imperialist ambitions (Reid 2002). Said’s chronology for Orientalism begins with Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798 [1994 [1978]: 53-60). “Because Egypt was saturated with meaning…its role was to be the stage on which actions of a world-historical importance would take place. By taking Egypt, then, a modern power would naturally demonstrate its strength and justify history," (1994 [1978]: 84-5). To ideologically legitimize the colonization of Egypt, or any other Oriental territory, control over the Orient and its residents was implemented through its institutionalized representation. It is a crucial point, though, that this representational framework is entirely one-sided; the Orient cannot represent itself, and how it is represented depends on socially specific cultural forms, from academic texts to artistic movements (Moser 2015).

Said's Orientalism documents the mechanics and evolution of Western control of the Oriental Other at the highest levels of culture: the state and its various instruments. However, the effects of an Orientalizing discourse are not and cannot functionally be limited to these upper echelons for the Othering of the Orient to take root. Surely, as Gingrich (1988) demonstrates, such a pervasive system is not only widely apparent in vernacular discourse but is also bolstered and partially structured by "on the ground" (digital or otherwise) Orientalizations. I have mentioned *that* vernacular discourse on the Internet holds the capacity for Orientalizing ancient Egypt through its alternative representations, but not how this potential is materialized, i.e., vernacular strategies of Orientalism. As a point of clarification, though, vernacular Orientalizations are likewise enactments of control over an ancient Egyptian Other, and alternative Egyptology in particular is an interesting case study in this regard.

The representative constellation of ancient Egypt that alternative Egyptology establishes is ambivalent in itself. Consider u/irrelevantappelation's assertion that no alternative theorist claims that they have “definitive proof” about Egypt one way or another; “they’re just not satisfied with the jigsaw puzzle approach and the shoehorning approach that seems to provide the [mainstream] narrative.” Alternative Egyptology’s practitioners consciously set themselves apart from a mainstream epistemic discourse on ancient Egypt, one that, to alternative theorists, either provides answers where there can be none (“I’m baffled that Egyptology can be so smugly confident in their conclusions,” laments u/irrelevantappelation); rigidly and blindly accepts or defends its position while denigrating alternative postulations right off the bat; or nefariously suppresses evidence that would refute the mainstream narrative (“no matter what is hidden from us it is HIDDEN,” writes Adam with palpable fury). The mainstream narrative, for alternative theorists, is immutable, rigid, unquestionable by design and by its essence.

Alternative Egyptology, on the other hand, is a permeable constellation, a malleable discourse engaged with by people with “open minds,” in Evan’s words. This condition, however, is not what makes alternative Egyptology ambivalent, nor necessarily what makes it Orientalizing. It is the “exotic questions,” Otherizing questions that stray from the mainstream, that fulfill these characteristics. “Exotic questions” continually represent ancient Egypt in shades of the “mysterious,” the “anomalous,” the “technologically advanced due to exterior influence” and leave very little in the way of absolute claims about Egypt—a common rhetorical strategy for alternative archaeologies in general (see Story 1976). Instead of suggesting definitive answers, then, alternative Egyptology is composed of questions and the hypothetical; ancient Egypt is elucidated from the perspective of the mysterious, the shroud never being removed completely. Here we take notice of the ambivalence of the alternative Egyptological position. With each subsequent posting of an alternative theory, alternative Egypt is blurred and familiarized further. It is both, to circle back to Said (1994 [1978]: 58), "completely novel" and "completely well known."

With this implication of an intertextual ambivalence comes the existence of a discourse of control over ancient Egypt, but a control approached and enacted from distinctive, anti-mainstream ideological positions. Control over Egypt is enacted through the colonization of the anomalous, itself potentiated by the individual alternative theory and its subsequent discussion. This process occurs within the "contested space" (Kreuger 2017: 70-72) of knowledge about ancient Egypt among alternative Egyptological communities pitted against the mainstream. At its most basic, then, the colonization of the anomalous is to wrest consensus knowledge about Egypt from the mainstream narrative and to claim it for the alternative position. In this sense, the colonization of the anomalous also reorients the discursive control of the perception, comprehension, and communication of Egypt into group-specific receptive frameworks; it creates a counter-discourse of a mysterious, anomalous Egypt to the mainstream narrative. However, this counter-discourse retains the similar feature of controlling Egypt through ideologizing representations, the hallmark trait of an Orientalizing discourse.

The colonization of the Egyptian anomalous, then, enacts control over Egypt by continuously representing it in not only mysterious tones, but also occasionally more overtly colonialist alternative theories. The idea that extraterrestrials or Atlantean refugees, for example, were involved in advancing the technological, intellectual, or spiritual prowess of “primitive” humans or these being the true constructors of the Pyramids or the Great Sphinx is an inherently colonialist premise, and promotes a derogatory view of the past. For more than simply Orientalizing Egypt itself, alternative Egyptology also otherizes Egyptians, ancient and contemporary. The former can be represented as either secret holders of exotic, esoteric wisdom; subservient, primitive recipients of wisdom and knowledge from alien sources; or as cultural appropriators of the ruins of more ancient civilizations. To this last point, one member of the Facebook group Ancient Aliens, Jason Milner, recently suggested that the ancient Egyptians “stumbled on the great pyramid and scratched their names into its walls” so that future generations would think that the Pyramid of Khufu was an Egyptian monument. “Just look at what happened when they tried to make their own one [pyramid],” he continued, attaching an image of the Bent Pyramid[8] (see Figure 3). These are examples of the representational poetics by which alternative theories subjugate the people of ancient Egypt in order to legitimate ideological positions through the diminishment or negation of their achievements, casting derogatory projections onto the past. In terms of Orientalizing contemporary Egyptians (or, more accurately, Egyptian Egyptologists and their interpretations of ancient Egypt), many alternative theories are overtly racist and/or Islamophobic. In this vein, Egyptian Egyptologists are used as metonyms for the “mainstream” and their actions as a whole. This exchange between two members of

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[8] The Bent Pyramid is the name given to a pyramid commissioned by the 4th Dynasty Pharaoh, Sneferu (r. ca. 2613-2589 B.C.E.) that, during its construction, suffered an architectural miscalculation that its engineers attempted to rectify by designing its remaining sides at much shallower angles than its earlier stages to avoid structural collapse (Malek 2003).

Ancient Astronaut Theorists on a post about the age of the Sphinx demonstrates this characterization:

> Commenter One: Let's be real, Egyptology is the most respected pseudoscience out there…real science says the Sphinx has been there far longer and was repurposed more than a few times. Why is there still debate…
>
> Commenter Two: Because over 90% of Egyptologists are of the Muslim religion and their faith states that the world is no more than 6.000 years old. These gatekeepers make it tough for you to go against the grain and so that the Egyptians claiming they built it so the world will think they are high power and intelligent peoples.

This short dialogue suggests that a vast majority of Egyptologists practice Islam (despite the fact that a vast majority of Egyptologists are not, and never have been, Muslims; see Gange 2006) and that their "faith" dictates the closed-mindedness of the "mainstream" and its suppressive practices, thereby invalidating their interpretations and contributions as illegitimate to the study of ancient Egypt. Thus, conflating all Egyptologists metonymically into this camp is an act of silencing the contemporary Other in relation to the ancient Other.

Figure 3: image of the Bent Pyramid included in Jason's post on Ancient Aliens.

The representational framework of digital alternative Egyptology, for both ancient Egypt itself and its people, is key, and points to alternative Egypt's social semiotic qualities that come with participation in these communities as well as the individual material behavior that contributes to the formulation of an alternative theory. Together, these two dimensions—and the overarching issue of representation—comprise the symbolic and material aspects of alternative Egyptological discourse. The process of continuously colonizing the anomalous using these means reinforces the social and ideological valuations of these representations and what they accomplish in terms of an "epistemological endgame." It is also through this discursive process, though, that Egypt is Orientalized and controlled among these communities. Popular cultural representations of alternative Egypt contribute to this vernacular Orientalization, but they typically only provide a template or a springboard for vernacular discourse; what to do with it, how to interpret it, and to what degree it influences knowledge frameworks is up to the group members. The result, though, is the same: Ancient Egypt is consistently and actively Orientalized.

"Do You Have a Theory about the Pyramids?"

A recent post on the Facebook group Ancient Aliens III (Uncensored) poses this question to the rest of the group. The text is superimposed over a photoshopped image of the Pyramids of Giza standing against a pitch-black night sky, dotted with ominous red clouds at the top. The moon hovers over the tip of the Pyramid of Khufu, a bright lens flair completing the intended mysterious effect. The post attracts a fair amount of attention: 241 likes and 514 comments, each espousing a different alternative theory. “It predates the Egyptians, I think.” “There are no tombs inside the pyramid…it was built by man with amazing technology given to them by the gods. ‘Aliens.’” “They were built to create wireless energy and ancient knowledge is more advanced than we can imagine.” “My guess about them is they are at least tens of thousands of years old.”

The responses to this post describe and perpetuate the anomalous essence of alternative Egypt. “I think.” “Ancient knowledge is more advanced than we can imagine.” “My guess.” The assertive ambivalence of this language characterizes the multi-pronged colonization of an Egyptian anomalous and enacts control over Egypt following the initial representation. As far as alternative theories go, the original post is relatively innocuous in terms of its symbolic representation, but its performative effects are clear from the comments that it elicited. Together, the original post and the responses to it engage in the Orientalization of Egypt, through the symbols and language used to represent it. The constellation of alternative Egyptology is a complex discourse of control, but one painted with continuous representations that highlight the communicative and epistemological qualities of alternative theories.

CHAPTER TWO: EXPRESSIVE IDEOLOGY AND THE NEGOTIATION OF KNOWLEDGE

During the course of this project, I lost access to two Facebook groups. The first, Forbidden Archaeology, as I discussed in the Introduction, removed me merely for mentioning “alternative theory”—an apparent violation of the rules of a “straight group” that “doesn’t entertain alternative theories.” The second, Ancient Egypt,, ufologists,, spirituality,, frequency,, alien beings,, was not, *per se*, an individual revocation of my membership. Instead, the entire group had completely vanished from Facebook for consistently violating the site's newly implemented rules regarding the dissemination of false information about COVID-19. Alternative theories about Egypt were heavily outweighed by "claims that deny the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic," "claims that downplay the severity of COVID-19," "claims that wearing a face mask does not help prevent the spread of COVID-19,"[9] or posts advocating similar claims. Other conspiratorial claims, too—such as unsubstantiated evidence of rampant pedophilia among Democratic politicians and "Hollywood elites"—were frequently posted in this group before its termination. Occasional posts from the group's moderators pleaded that its members refrain from such posts because Facebook was "threatening to kill the group." The request, evidently, fell on deaf ears. By August of 2020, the group was no more.

This anecdote is not intended to conflate alternative theories with COVID-19 or political conspiracy theories. Rather, it is meant to demonstrate the extreme poles of the ideological continuum along which alternative theories exist. From outright rejection of alternative theories for promoting "pseudoscientific bullshit" (as they are described on the rule page of Forbidden Archaeology) to inhabiting a social environment in which they are shared alongside more objectively inflammatory claims. Elements of alternative theories can certainly be conspiratorial. Invoking notions of the suppression of ancient

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[9] Per Facebook's article, "COVID-19 and Vaccine Policy Updates & Protections" (Accessed 2/7/2021).

Egyptian wisdom or of their access to advanced technology by the Mainstream, for instance, is probably the most prevalent of these conspiratorial elements within alternative Egyptology. In methodological terms, Tim Schadla-Hall (2004) refers to this facet of alternative theories as 'the X-Files approach,' taken after the popular television program's slogan: "the Truth Is Out There." (258-59) Speaking more generally on the phenomenon of UFO belief in America, D.W. Pasulka (2019) further delineates this 'X-Files approach,' writing that it "incorporate[s] a fundamental belief that there is other intelligent life in the universe with a concomitant recognition of doubt, thus brilliantly preserving the potential believers' credibility." (128)

Both Schadla-Hall and Pasulka, however, frame ufology and alternative archaeology (of which alternative Egyptology can be considered a subset) in terms of belief, a designation I have been attempting to avoid. The previous chapter examined how symbols are used to represent ancient Egypt among digital communities and how these representations function in the colonization of the anomalous, as well as how representations perpetuate an Orientalizing discourse of Egypt. This chapter is intended to analyze the ideological dimensions of alternative theories, primarily in their expressive and behavioral manifestations. Additionally, this chapter explores the role of ideology within epistemological frameworks. I begin with an overview of the "other side," or the "mainstream" side, of alternative theories; that is, how scholars from various disciplines conceptualize alternative archaeologies. Next, I discuss the semantics of the "mainstream" and how it is identified in the expression of ideologies, as well as the notion of a self-selected type of epistemic marginalization and its role in a group's socialization. I will conclude with an examination of the pursuit and valuation of knowledge as it pertains to alternative Egyptological communities on the Internet.

Observations on the "Lunatic Fringe:" Scholars and Alternative Theories

Forbidden Archaeology's position on alternative theories generally mirrors how some scholars—especially archaeologists, as Holtorf (2005) argues—view alternative archaeologies. For alternative theorists, archaeologists of all different stripes represent the "mainstream" and directly contribute to the conventional narrative of ancient Egypt. This section, then, is to briefly demonstrate scholarly approaches to the study of alternative theories, to discuss their ideological characterizations presented by the "mainstream," so to speak. It is important to note, though, that scholarly reactions to alternative theories are constantly in flux and are largely dependent upon the field from which they emerge.

A large lexicon exists to refer to both the nature and postulates of an alternative theory. Pia Andersson (2012) and Michael G. Michlovic (1990) provide some of these keywords, including: "pseudo-, nonsense, non-scientific, creationist, quasi-, or bogus archaeology" (Andersson 2012: 127), a "fantastic archaeology" pursued by "deluded believers," (Daniel 1977: 74; quoted in Michlovic 1990: 103). Although the wording of each epithet is designed to distinguish the exact connotations and implications of one alternative theory from another, their terminological function is similar in that they dismiss alternative theories from the equation as the "mistaken assumptions of the lunatic fringe," (Jordan 1981: 211; quoted in Schadla-Hall and Morris 2003: 201). One of my informants puts it more concisely, writing that "those terms exist to cast dissenting ideas away" without "critical evaluation." Archaeologists in this vein tend to concentrate their focuses particularly on deriding alternative archaeological claims from the perspective of "legitimate archaeology" or "good science." (Holtorf 2005: 545; Harambam and Aupers 2015: 467-70).

Nasira Femetti, an archaeologist and co-founder/head moderator of the Facebook group Archaeology Uncovered (another "straight group" similar to Forbidden Archaeology) was quick to let me know that her community was rooted very much in scientific archaeology. Members discuss recent archaeological finds and interpret them from within a scientific and historical lens. Posts on Archaeology Uncovered likewise adhere to this value; articles are cross-linked to the forum from academic journals, the Smithsonian, or the *National Geographic*, for example. "With every discovery made," Nasira explained, "we move forward in our understanding of our shared past. Therefore, archaeology is not a static science, unlike these pseudoscience fairytales which are being heard over and over again." She later shared with me a poll circulating through the group deriding the construction of an amusement park in Blackpool, England, based on Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?*: "this is a dangerous decision," she writes (see Figure 4). The division of archaeological approaches into "pseudoscience fairytales" and "straight," "legitimate" camps reinforces an ideological binary, an oppositional hierarchy in which "one of the two [poles] governs the other" (Derrida 1982: 41) in both methodological and epistemological terms.

Figure 4: A photoshopped image of Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods?*, signifying his approval of an amusement park in England (pictured in the background) based on his book. (Image source: https://www.vice.com/en/article/vbwa73/this-theme-park-devoted-to-ancient-aliens-really-makes-you-think).

The early 2000s saw a paradigm shift of sorts among some archaeological circles on the topic of alternative theories, not necessarily in serious engagement with their espoused content(s), but in viewing them as viable areas of research (e.g., Denning 1999; Schadla-Hall 2004; Holtorf 2005; Moshenska 2017). These scholars are generally more charitable to alternative archaeologies and recognize their contribution to public perceptions of archaeological information without feeling the need to debunk alternative theories strictly on the basis of them being "bad science." Indeed, many of these archaeologists critique their more scientifically hard-lined colleagues for "explicitly aligning themselves with a model of archaeological reasoning tied to an increasingly anachronistic notion of scientific objectivity" (Moshenska 2017: 135) following the advent of post-processualism in archaeological thought (Denning 1999: 30-4). Beyond archaeologists, religious scholars (Grünschloß 2006; Richter 2012; Kreuger 2017) have taken notable interest in alternative theories, about Egypt or otherwise, and accordingly conceptualize them using their own disciplinary toolkits.

A brief note on why scholars of religion view alternative archaeologies as religious discourses is necessary here. First of all, some religious scholars approach the study of practitioners of alternative archaeologies in terms of their identification within its social framework. In this vein, a religious analytical framework, as applied to an "invented religion," centers its subject(s) and object(s) of study within the domain of belief as it applies to identification (or vice versa). The central argument, then, seems to rest in the idea that belief as applied to "invented religions," a definition that "can harmonize with fiction and invention," (Cusack 2010: 20), emerges from a social and cultural dissatisfaction in the disenchantment of the world, as well as "the desire for a monocausal narrative of *agency*," (Kreuger 2017: 72). In other words, alternative archaeologies seek out single origins for…anything, really, "because these explanations attribute cultural phenomena to specific agents, and are thus functionally equivalent to religious explanations," (Cusack 2010: 24; quoted in Kreuger 2017: 72-3).

Following this line of thought, individual alternative theories mythologize the human past, though explicitly through a Euhemeristic lens (Grünschloß 2006). The gods of ancient religions were thus alien visitors or Atlantean refugees that bestowed their gifts upon our collective ancestors, concentrated on a single civilizational point from which advanced technology and esoteric wisdom was diffused to the disparate corners of the world. For many alternative theorists, Egypt is not only a viable locus for this brand of neo-religious thought; it is the most viable of all, to the point of achieving "nexus" status. (Recall Andrés Pérez' statement that "Egypt seems to be a certain nexus of human thought at a certain point in time.") Naturally, another criterion for considering alternative archaeologies as religious discourses is the ideological divide between the "mainstream" and the alternative. One disenchants while the other re-enchants (see Possamai 2005: 29-32; 103-05), the latter an act of reclamation, of a sort, that "resources and is resourced by popular culture," (Partridge 2004: 4; quoted in Kreuger 2017: 70).

Popular cultural representations of ancient Egypt are worth mentioning in the context of religious discourse because, Kreuger (2017) argues, films, television, video games, and other media constitute simulacra, or a "kind of virtual reality with which something is imbued," (68). Simulacra are effects of the hyper-real, in which the 'real' and the 'unreal' become impossible to distinguish due to "an economy of symbols and signs that are exchanged for each other and whose reference to a physical reality…has become irrelevant," (68). The "implosion" of the 'real' and the 'unreal' into a hyperreality can thus "intrude into serious belief" (68-9) and develop into full-fledged religious movements, such as Jediism (Pasulka 2018: 126-39). In terms of alternative

Egyptology as a vernacular religious discourse, both Kreuger (2017) and Hiscock (2012: 167-9) focus on the eponymous device from the 1994 film *Stargate* (an interplanetary transport system that ancient Egyptian gods—who were really aliens—used to enslave native Egyptians). *Stargate* also suggests that Egyptian pyramids were alien spaceships, but the film's director, Roland Emmerich, has insisted that fiction was always his goal (Kreuger 2017: 68). Nevertheless, the idea that a Stargate actually does exist has indeed been incorporated into alternative Egyptology, an instance of hyperreality. "Belief" in a real Stargate somewhere in Egypt, however, is by no means representative of the *whole* of alternative Egyptology and its practitioners.

The major problem (from a folkloristic perspective, at least) with preceding scholarly output on alternative theories, theorists, and archaeologies is that, with some exceptions (e.g., Pruitt 2009; Parle 2014), it tends to describe them purely from the standpoint of what they are (religious discourse, neo-mythologies, beliefs, etc.) and, stemming from the explication of the form, their characteristics regarding what they accomplish (Grünschloß 2006: 15-22). This is undoubtedly an important step to take, but this initial description does not suffice—except in a relatively abstract manner—in examining the behavioral, ideological, and communicative dimensions of alternative theories. In other words, there is an over-emphasis on the text, and not enough focus given to the social and individual contexts in which the text occurs or is formulated. It is in this realization that a folkloristic approach is particularly beneficial. Indeed, the "field of folklore deals with the *social life of cultural forms*," (Noyes 2016: 131). Though folklorists have not specifically written about alternative theories or alternative

Egyptology, projects focused on similar vernacular genres or discourses—typically from the perspective of vernacular religion—offer excellent methodological springboards in terms of treating alternative 'beliefs' as vernacular knowledge (e.g., Sutcliffe 2019).

Another issue with this concentration on the form and the nature of alternative archaeologies is that it lends itself to essentialization and assumptions of homogeneity among alternative theorists, and thus to the typology of alternative theories into externally marked analytical categories of both genre and cultural conceptualizations (see Shuman 1993; Ben-Amos 2020). This is not to argue that alternative Egyptology cannot be approached from the vantage of religious discourse, neo-mythology, or belief, but, for one, this is only looking at one side of the coin; the examination of the cultural form or pattern needs its situated social complement. Consequently, an emic "theory" of alternative theories is preferable for understanding the presence of ideology in alternative Egyptology and in how ideological systems at play within the larger discourse contribute to the generation and dissemination of knowledge.

An etic approach may be a valuable "stepping stone…into a new culture," but "it cannot account for…linguistic and cultural events" (Mostowlansky and Rota 2016: 323) or behavior specific to a particular social context. From an emic view, alternative theories are visualized as "legitimate" research ("new ideas about the past"), whereas, for the most part, scholars consider these theories beliefs, whether directly under this categorical label (Fagan and Feder 2006), as "illegitimate" science, or as discursive practice/narratives couched in 'belief,' (Grünschloß 2006). Grünschloß (2006), however, warns that "one of the field traps for a cultural studies researcher" regarding an emic approach to alternative archaeological communities "is to take the self-description 'we are doing research' all too seriously…since they always claim to share an academic agenda," (17). Treading the arbitrary emic-etic distinction and its consequent knowledge-belief dichotomy is, as researchers, a difficult task, especially for a topic as polarizing as alternative archaeology. If one of the main goals of ethnographic research, though, is to give equal consideration to how community members visualize their own culture (see Bauman and Briggs 1990: 61), in my case, I will continue to view alternative Egyptology as it is communicated in these communities—legitimate knowledge instead of belief--, knowing full well that I have fallen into Grünschloß' "trap."

Knowledge and belief are not mutually exclusive ideas, of course, and for folklorists they are synonymous. The debate over the relationship/separation of the two as *concepts* persists among philosophers (e.g., Turri 2012). For my purposes, though, I am focusing on how they exist, on a grander scale, in an *epistemic* sense, i.e., a discursive system "that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge," (Foucault 1989 [1966]: 183). Epistemes and discourses of power are inherently hierarchical and establish "legitimate/illegitimate" dichotomies within which, to paraphrase Derrida (1982), the dominant pole ("actual archaeology," "straight groups," etc.) governs the societal perception of the other. Elaborating on this dichotomy from a folkloristic perspective, David Hufford (1995) explains that, beginning with the Enlightenment, the secularization of "Western" culture and its institutional valuation of "official" knowledge has simultaneously overseen the devaluation of the legitimacy of "unofficial" knowledge, including "beliefs," "deviant views that contend with consensual reality," (24). The "official" study of ancient Egypt produces an especially stringent paradigm in which knowledge is differentiated on the basis of what is deemed acceptable or not. Egyptology is not unique in this regard, but the mass appeal and proliferation of its alternative counterpart entrenches polarization—at least superficially—on either side.

Categorizing alternative theories as expressions of "belief" can be construed as a *perceived* act of epistemic violence (Harambam and Aupers 2015), though much of this "violence" is rooted in the ideological imaginary, as I will discuss later[10]. Binaries and dichotomies like "legitimate vs. illegitimate" or "*un*official belief vs. official knowledge[11]," however, are only so useful, especially for an ethnographic, practice-based project. The poles or positions that comprise them frequently have "little social or logical reality." Prescriptivist statements or actions that advocate one extreme or the other, such as Forbidden Archaeology's and Archaeology Uncovered's zero-tolerance policy for "pseudoscientific bullshit," "ultimately seem ideological in nature, often rhetorically ill-justified, and potentially harmful to our understanding of the spectrum of 'beliefs' about the past," (Denning 1999: 89-90). With that said, distinction to the "mainstream" is plainly evident among alternative theorists; how it is enacted and expressed is simply more nuanced than ascribing alternative theorists to one pole on a discursive binary.

"It Does Tie to the Big Global Master": Identifying and Contesting the Mainstream

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[10] By using the phrase "epistemic violence" here I do not wish to lump alternative theorists in with communities and demographics who suffered/suffer actual epistemic violence, such as colonized populations (see Spivak 1988), as this would be a major ethical *faux pas* on my part. I use it here merely for argument's sake.

[11] For further discussion on the rhetorical effects of this dichotomy, see Primiano 1995: 38-41.

U/irrelevantappelation suggested to me that a severe lack of funding for alternative archaeological research in Egypt explained the severe lack in physical evidence of lost Egyptian technology, remembered now only through artistic depictions and mythology. “I’ve got my tinfoil hat on now, I know, but I think that [the lack of funding] might be by design,” chuckles a faceless screen, projecting his voice into my headphones. Perhaps he really does have a tinfoil hat on. “But, like, the actual origin of the human race may be spectacularly more provocative than what the current consensus suggests, and there might have been a lot more going on in the past than what is being acknowledged.” Following this response, I asked him what his thoughts were on the possible consequences of this information coming to light. “It could totally, completely change our perspective of ourselves in this current society, in the way that we’re expected to adhere to the global power structure…it does tie to the big global master.”

Who—or what—is this “big global master,” anyway? What exactly is the “current consensus” that it propagates? Why does the “global power structure” either refuse to look into what alternative theories espouse or actively suppress evidence that would contradict or dismantle both the structure and the “mainstream” narrative? How far is the extent of the “mainstream’s” reach? Alternative theories exist only due to the presence of a shadowy “mainstream” nemesis; the anomalous Egyptian past is colonizable, for example, due to perceived gaps or gray areas in “the current consensus.” In this sense, alternative theories are similar to how folklorists conceptualize legends in a number of meaningful ways, including through the post-performative discursive spaces they generate in which colonization also occurs (see Dégh 2001: 2); in their function “to identify and channel the anxieties [and social values] of folk groups," (Kinsella 2011: 8); and particularly in a legend's potential to "offer either explicit or implicit arguments against some other, often dominant systems of belief and established truth," (Valk 2012: 26). The colonization of the anomalous through alternative theories, like legends, is an act of vernacular authority, even if that action is ultimately still contained within the boundaries of dominant discourses (Valk 2015: 143).

Contestations over the "true" history of ancient Egypt roar on, but the "mainstream" wears many faces as it—or they—operates in and from the shadows. On my questionnaire and in interviews, alternative theorists identified the mainstream and its activities by various names. U/theskiffyd, representing r/FringeTheory, discussed the power of the mainstream in shaping public thought. "If the 9 companies that own every media the vast majority of Americans see today do not want you to think about something, it's a conspiracy theory." Carolyn Mills and Evan Harding lament over the "conspiring effort" that mainstream educational systems engage in to "suppress free thinking" about Egypt. Paul Dallas, during my interview with him, indicated on several occasions that Egyptologists (and academics in general) are agents of mainstream suppression: "something's going on in the background to the point where they don't want to release information, unless it's beneficial to a special group." This was in reference explicitly to Zahi Hawass, the former Secretary General of the Egyptian Supreme

Council of Antiquities, a frequent target and a vocal combatant of alternative archaeologies and, to put it lightly, a highly controversial figure.[12]

In an alternative Egyptological discourse, names like the "mainstream," the "establishment," the "current consensus," or the "Modern Narrative" are used interchangeably and idiosyncratically to both identify and create a "sense of distance from *the powers that be*" (Lepselter 2016: 9, italics in original) as they are concentrated on Egypt. The *powers that be* can also be identified through their enacting agents, whether through whole professions/academic disciplines or via individuals in these fields. A nebulous web of the 'what's,' 'why's,' and 'who's' composing the "mainstream" emerges, but, as Tangherlini et al. (2020) point out, this is a common narrative trait of conspiratorial thinking. "Actants," they explain, "are…an aggregation of characters or objects into classes," (42). The "mainstream," "the Big Global Master," "Egyptologists," "Zahi Hawass;" all are "aggregated into [a] single entity," (42) so that the one refers to the other and so that intertextual links can be made with seemingly disparate topics, characters, historical events, or places (see Tangherlini et al. 2020: 43-6).

A recurrent idea among groups on both Facebook and Reddit (and alternative archaeology in general) is that Egypt was in contact with cultures across the globe, teaching them how to build pyramids and sharing their gods with them. Luka Petković posts many such alternative theories on the Facebook group the Ancient School of Lost

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[12] Hawass has, to a degree, "Egyptianized Egyptology" (Parker 2009) during his career by controlling where work was allowed and by whom, but has been seriously accused of corruption, claiming major archaeological discoveries for himself, of having too much say in what research was allowed to be conducted, and of shoddy archaeological work in favor of crafting a larger-than-life T.V. persona (Parker 2009; Hammer 2013).

Knowledge. His latest asks, “How is it possible that the ancient Olmec, Aztecs, Egyptians, and cultures as those in New Zealand share depictions of their gods with mindboggling similarity?” Another recent post asks of the community why they think pyramids in Mexico and China (as well as the Moai on Easter Island) are built along the exact same longitudinal coordinates as the Pyramid of Khufu, and why they are all aligned with the Orion constellation. His post ends with: “but history won’t tell you this!” Several members provide their thoughts on the theoretical aspects of Luka’s post while also mocking “‘experts’” for their “inane, cringeworthy theories” about Egyptian pyramids. Luka has impressively reacted to each comment, occasionally contributing further comments to the discussion. The most reacted-to comment (98 likes) begs the question of the “mainstream”: “why are the clever people lying about these things. What is there [sic.] purpose. What will they gain. Why do they want to keep mankind in the dark about these things.”

Two items of note can be gathered from the preceding paragraph, both of which are relevant to the wider aims of this chapter. First, we can observe the presence of performative framing devices through which a social and ideological value is expressed, i.e., Luka asking for the community’s thoughts on his theory combined with the “but history won’t tell you this!” statement. This exchange demonstrates the premise of ideology in practice. Second, the ambivalence of the power of the *powers that be* as they are conceptualized in these communities is on full display. “They” are, in the same breath, vulnerable and ignorant, to be mocked and derided on the grounds of “inane, cringeworthy theories,” yet also ominously powerful, capable of the mass distortion of historical and archaeological information to craft and maintain a “master narrative.” This ambivalence potentiates the contestation of mainstream knowledge about Egypt and renders its perceived gaps colonizable (see Kreuger 2017: 71).

Many alternative theorists view themselves as being able to “lift the veil” placed over Egypt by the mainstream, so to speak. During his teenage years, u/irrelevantappelation “realized that (whether an elaborate delusion or not) the true nature of our history and of reality itself is vastly different (and profoundly stranger) than we are conditioned to believe.” Through the expressive medium of alternative theories, individual theorists are able to both pursue the “hidden” history of humanity as it is evident in Egypt and critique the discourse doing the “hiding.” The colonization of the anomalous, as I have mentioned, is an act of contesting dominant paradigms, but it is also a social effort through which a community’s ideological and epistemological positions are reinforced, even if there is disagreement over the details of any given alternative theory. The “mainstream” is an imposing beast, menacing within the discursive domain of digital alternative Egyptology, but it can be challenged; it just takes a village to do so.

“Ignored Scoffed At and Considered Nonsense”: Manufactured Epistemic Violence

“I gotta be honest with you, Teo.” I was not sure where exactly u/irrelevantappelation was going with this, so, anxiously, I asked him to elaborate. “Well, when you initially sent through your questions…you know, my interpretation was initially, ‘Okay, so he’s assuming that people in this sub [r/HighStrangeness] are going to instantly jump on the ancient alien theory to explain the construction of the pyramid.’” I did not get a chance to ask him why he thought this, but I suspect it derives from a false "mainstream" assumption that every alternative theorist "believes" in the exact same thing, as if there is a dogmatic religious orthodoxy in terms of espoused content and the symbolic/rhetorical vehicles used to express this content. There are members in each of the communities that I have been researching whose theories are constructed from an "aliens built the pyramids" foundation, to be sure. By Paul Dallas' estimation, these members comprise "around 30%" of a given community's population, but represent a very vocal, very extreme, and overly credulous minority: "they'll believe in anything with great conviction and shout it from the rooftops without doing any real research," as Paul explained.

Many of my informants excoriated the effects that this "overly credulous minority" have on the wider social perception of alternative Egyptology and how the "mainstream" hones in on the minority view to suggest that it represents alternative positions in general. U/irrelevantappelation, for instance, indicated that these "very credulous, very poorly informed people" render alternative theories and theorists "very much low-hanging fruit to debunk and ridicule." The generalization of alternative theories along these lines facilitates the discursive equation of alternative theories to conspiracy theories in the same vein as political and medical conspiracy theories posted in the now-defunct Ancient Egypt,, ufology,, spirituality,, frequencies,, alien beings Facebook group or, perhaps less nefarious, to "make it [alternative Egyptology] seem like sci-fi info," as Carolyn Mills puts it.

To be fair, some “mainstream” scholars do recognize the *potential presence* of a spectrum of cognitive and ideological embracement of a particular position within alternative archaeologies--hence their common conceptualizations as discourses, religious or otherwise (e.g., Denning 1999; Schadla-Hall 2004; Grünschloß 2006; Andersson 2012; Kreuger 2017). Beyond this recognition, however, there is little examination of how the spectrum appears in context. “Observations” remain to “be made from 30,000 feet,” in Paul’s words. A top-to-bottom, hierarchical approach, from an emic perspective, fosters a supposed tradition of marginalization and silencing from epistemological discourses about Egypt, i.e., a perceived sustainment of epistemic violence.

Of course, the inverse is true, too; it is easy to generalize about the “mainstream” that lurks in the sky, 30,000 feet up, about what it is and what it does. Those on the “ground” are kept there by the “mainstream” because the knowledge of the former threatens the Master Narrative of the latter. There are boundaries consistently being set up to continuously differentiate between the two along the lines of “legitimate” science and “illegitimate” belief (Harambam and Aupers 2015: 467-70). However, the ambivalent methodological space between the poles is often more productive for critical analysis in ethnographic research (see Tedlock 1991). From within this space, we can explore the emic perception of epistemic violence and how it can reinforce ideological positions and collective identity.

Dotson (2011) defines epistemic violence as a “failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owning to pernicious ignorance,” (242). Applying Dotson’s definition to wider social and cultural discourses of control implies the silencing of certain social groups and their knowledge frameworks, including "'general, non-specialists,' 'the illiterate peasantry,' and 'the tribals,'" (Spivak 1998: 282-3; quoted in Dotson 2011: 236). As such, epistemic violence figures prominently in colonialist discourses, for example, in order "to constitute the colonial subject as Other," (Spivak 1988: 75). The question of whether a group that has suffered epistemic violence can "speak" for itself and contribute to dominant epistemological paradigms is therefore central to subaltern studies in general.

In the context of digital alternative Egyptology, epistemic violence is, largely speaking, constructed. It is true that academic and professional Egyptological and archaeological discourses do not seriously allow alternative claims into their research or knowledge frameworks—except to criticize them, outright polemicize them (e.g., Jordan 2006) or to dissect their form as religious expression (Kreuger 2017). Much of the extreme criticism and polemicizing is ideologically rooted, as Denning (1999) explains. In critiques of alternative archaeological methodologies, the most vituperative polemics invoke "Reason [as] a shibboleth for authority or academic prudence," (Birchall 2006: 71, quoted in Harambam and Aupers 2015: 469) to craft science's illogical Other. Benedict Martinez, a member of r/HighStrangeness, provided his own perspective on the boundaries that, in his words, the "collective understanding" has laid out. "Culturally anything that goes against the collective understanding…gets pushed to the side and labeled as extreme…if you're perceived as being against you are pushed out and made illegitimate." Epistemic authority over what knowledge is conventionally acceptable and what is not certainly exists, and what is not is evaluated by its alterity to dominant paradigms.

Within digital community contexts, though, it is not so much Egyptologists or Egyptology as a field committing objective epistemic violence. Rather, it is these two in their guise of the nebulous "mainstream" as it is identified, conceptualized, and communicated within the discursive brackets of alternative Egyptology that epistemic violence is located. Consider the quote that opens this section ("Scoffed at ignored and ridiculed"). This comment was made under a post that suggested a "major paradigm shift in the study of human history in Egypt" was imminent following the discovery of a 200,000-year-old city in South Africa, complete with a petroglyph of an ankh. "[It] may threaten mainstream human history," added the sharer of the post. "It won't threaten anything," wrote a commenter, "because anything outside the narrative is ignored scoffed at and considered nonsense." The comment was upvoted 120 times.

Epistemic violence regarding alternative Egyptology exists in a more abstract and rhetorical sense outside of these digital communities, but, in context, it is constructed, disseminated, and socially valorized with each reference to the "narrative" or the "mainstream" that is included in an individual alternative theory. This manufactured marginalization that permeates digital alternative Egyptology thus serves to socialize a given community along ideological and epistemological demarcations, to take pride in what they are not (see Bauman 1971): as Howard (2008) puts it, "in order for the vernacular layer to appear as distinct, it must invoke its opposite, the institutional," (205). My usage of the word "manufactured" here as a behavioral/formal descriptor of alternative theories is in reference to the agency that members have in the formulation of individual theories (including invocations/evocations of epistemic violence) and in participation within a community of similar interests, values, and ideological frameworks (Goldman 1995).

Getting involved with an Internet community highlights the act of agency and choice needed to join or identify with a community in the first place. In their analysis of the subreddit r/Conspiracy, Klein et al. (2019) frame community membership in terms of social self-selection, in that “individuals select a social milieu” based on a “shared set of interests which can feed into a conspiratorial worldview,” (3). In turn, members come to “manipulate” their particular social spheres “to create and reinforce a niche,” (3). The alternative Egyptological niche, then, is an intrinsically social construct, continuously structured and restructured by its members’ articulation(s) of a given community’s discursive/ideological position(s), reminiscent of Bourdieu’s (1996 [1979]) concept of habitus.

Alternative Egyptological communities—or forums that allow and encourage alternative Egyptological dialogue—foster a space in which members can feel “comfortable,” per r/HighStrangeness’ site description, in “exploring the paranormal, UFOs, ancient cultures…fringe science, anomalies,” and so on, supposedly free from the eyes of the “powers that be” (except in a community’s ideological construction of them). “I wouldn’t go around actively preaching that I don’t subscribe to what’s held as current fact,” writes Tyler, a member of the Facebook group Ancient Astronaut Theorists. Fora like r/HighStrangeness and Ancient Astronaut Theorists allow individuals like Tyler to negotiate perceived flaws in "current fact" and to contribute to a vernacular discourse on the topic without fear of external repudiation, thereby engaging in a communal contestation of dominant cultural knowledge in the simultaneous colonization of the anomalous.

As Howard (2008, 2015) points out, though, this expressive "freedom" is ultimately dictated by the technological institutions that regulate participation on the network apparatuses they provide. As such, the expression of a given community's vernacular discourse, how it "behaves" culturally and ideologically, must take a degree of caution, lest its removal and eradication from a site entirely. The slow death of Ancient Egypt,, ufology,, spirituality,, frequencies,, alien beings for its violation of Facebook's rules seems inevitable in retrospect, then, despite warnings from the group's moderators to alter members' behavior. Its ideological and social milieu, an environment in which alternative Egyptology resided alongside political and medical conspiracy theories, was deemed too volatile and was subsequently swept away by the institutional broom. The group's annihilation likely would not have happened on a forum located deeper in the "digital void," such as Above Top Secret, where the perception of free expression and vernacular authority is stronger, further away from institutional power than social media platforms (Dawson 2001: 38-40; Henriksen 2016: 102-35).

Conflict and Concordance: The Spectrum of Ideological Engagement

A point I have repeated *ad nauseum* throughout this thesis is that, in terms of content, alternative theories cannot be typologized into homogenizing categories. The same is true of a given community's embracement of alternative Egyptology along ideological lines. As I have mentioned, many of my informants lamented the presence of a "very credulous, very poorly informed" minority for making an easy target for the ridicule of alternative theories. The "mainstream," too, is not always derided or mistrusted simply because it occupies the opposite pole of an ideological binary. Benedict Martinez, for instance, told me that he "mostly agrees" with "mainstream" theories about Egypt—a common sentiment on both r/AlternativeHistory and r/HighStrangeness. Additionally, one does not necessarily need to subscribe to alternative theories at all to join one of these communities; motivation for involvement is relative to the individual. Scarlett Armstrong, a member of r/HighStrangeness, wrote to me that she does not "really believe any of it [alternative Egyptology], but I like looking at the world in different ways, and I find them [Egyptocentric alternative theories] fascinating to look at." I believe that Scarlett's involvement with these communities, however, is not based exclusively in entertainment. She told me during our interview that "she was more, but not 100% convinced by other" alternative theories—just not any ones featuring aliens. Scarlett demonstrates the ideological continuum present amongst these communities.

The examples above are intended to demonstrate not only the diversity of a given group in terms of ideological embracement, but how this demographic, motivational, and ideological diversity deconstructs notions of immobilizing and homogenizing boundaries. These are ambivalent groups populated with ambivalent purposes for being there, rendering simple categorizations extremely difficult, if not impossible (Phillips and Milner 2017). The process of marking boundaries by their rigidity as they exist in "local cultural groups" is an essentializing practice that "calls attention to what is outside the binary opposition…the value system that controls [it]," (Shuman 1993: 347). This process cuts both ways; the dominant side of a binary essentializes the other side and vice versa, as in the essentialization of the "mainstream," and, as Shuman observes, points to the value system that dictates the binary opposition. It is from the dominant position of this binary—that is, Science, Reason, and their social and cultural valuation (see Hufford 1995; Motz 1998)—that alternative archaeologies are analyzed in terms of "lunacy," "illegitimacy," "bad science," and the like, or as beliefs, myths, religious expression, etc., but *rarely* as a legitimate pursuit of vernacular knowledge[13]. It is also in this vein that an assumption of a uniform ideological system is derived.

Thus, a folkloristic approach shifts focus from a more abstract concept of ideology and can argue that ideology in practice—an expressive, performative ideology (Byford 2014: 6-10)**]**—is preferable, as Harrison (2018) shows in his analysis of virtual Kemetism. This approach can also better highlight how ideology exists on a spectrum within these digital communities, and the social valuation of ideological distinction in its performative capacity. Of course, distinction from the "mainstream" constitutes a large degree of the self-selection into these communities, and, in this regard, boundaries are drawn from the inside, "in order to protect particular positions," (Shuman 1993: 351). Discursive positions are culturally contingent, as is the behavior and ideological engagement permitted within their frameworks.

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[13] The works of Denning (1999) and Harambam and Aupers (2015) consider alternative archaeologies legitimate knowledge, in an emic sense, and thus are two notable exceptions.

Klein et al. (2019) distinguish between the passive endorsement of and active engagement with, in their language, conspiracy theories. A large (and growing; see Fenster 2008: 1-20) number of Americans engage with conspiracy theories, despite the potential for stigmatization, as Wood (2016) and Tangherlini et al. (2020) demonstrate with empirical data. Strictly in terms of alternative archaeologies (often dismissed as/considered "conspiracy theories"), the results of a Chapman University Survey (2018) on belief in the supernatural show that 57% of Americans at least passively endorse the idea of a "lost" civilization while there is tacit support for the idea that aliens visited ancient civilizations in 41% of Americans. However, most Americans (and people around the world) do not actively engage with any kind of conspiracy theory to the point of self-selection into an online group. R/HighStrangeness was the most highly populated community I joined for this project; at the time of writing, there are a little over 325,000 members.

This is undoubtedly a high number, but a fraction of the number of the above percentages. Nevertheless, the growth of the subreddit reflects the proliferation of alternative archaeologies in public discourse and has presented some challenges for u/irrelevantappelation with respect to moderation. "You have sceptics coming in and castigating the more speculative comments, and that leads to discord and disagreement. It doesn't even matter; you're always gonna have certain conflict or discordance from what is posted to this subreddit." With apologies to u/irrelevantappelation's struggles as a moderator, this is an incredibly fruitful comment as it describes the wide-ranging spectrum of ideological and discursive engagement with alternative Egyptology present within r/HighStrangeness. Speaking to the dialogic dimensions of ideological discourse, Byford (2014), quoting Billig (1988: 2), explains that this discord is inherent to any ideological system. It is not a "'complete, unified system of beliefs'" but "it involves arguments, debates, and clashes which reflect its essentially 'thinking nature,'" (9)[14]. Naturally, this is not a dynamic unique to r/HighStrangeness; it is observable in any community, digital or otherwise.

For example, Calvin Marcus, an administrator for the Facebook group Ancient Aliens, wrote me to let me know that his "theories don't jive with many of the other admins…not that they disagree with it it's just they have different ideas." In his response to my questionnaire, however, he explained that, as a "host of a [YouTube] show that interviews 'experiencers'…I have to try not to laugh or belittle the more crazy ideas out there…some say MY ideas are nuts too…so it is all about the person involved." It is indeed all about the person involved, or, rather, how that person, their theories, and their ideologies participate in their selected social spaces on the Internet and engage in a vernacular discourse about alternative Egyptology. It is also in this positional idiosyncrasy—discursive and ideological—that, with each performance of an alternative theory and the discussion that follows, socialize a given community.

As Bauman and Briggs (1992) explain, this process "render[s] the discourse maximally interpretable through the use of generic precedents," (149) and thus constitutes a minimization of a discourse's intertextual gap, in which a performer can claim “textual authority,” (i.e., “here is my theory and why it might be correct,”). Textual authority, in this case, can be considered a code for an assertion of individual ideological embracement of a particular discursive position on the topic of alternative Egypt. However, performances of alternative theories also condition the potential for their own deconstruction (or support) due to the wide-ranging ideological spectrum present within these groups. Opening up the challenge to an alternative theory’s own claim to textual authority likewise potentiates the maximization of intertextual gaps, achieved through a dialogue of other ideological assertions that center on alternative Egyptology. Both the minimization and maximization of intertextual gaps hold the capacity for socialization. Thus, the fact that in r/HighStrangeness (and in other digital communities) “you’re always gonna have conflict or discordance from what is posted in this subreddit” is not necessarily a negative (except logistically; again, apologies to u/irrelevantappelation). Conflict and discordance, as well as concordance, are the social and discursive characteristics surrounding the cultural forms of alternative Egyptology. Ideological embracement of an alternative theory often draws the dividing line between engagement and rejection, though positional boundaries remain largely intact, if not permeable. The colonization of the anomalous Egypt, then, is a social effort, but it need not be a perfectly unified one.

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[14] Again, this is reminiscent of legend discourse and the dialogue they elicit (see Oring 2008).

An Interruption: Homo Technologicus, Religion, Belief

Harry Wolfe, a member of r/HighStrangeness, has an impressive resume in the “hard sciences,” as he puts it. During his career as a ballistics engineer, he has worked in “high strain rate physics, nuclear power, advanced manufacturing, and water technology." This is relevant information because he credits this background with his view of Egypt as "one of the biggest enigmas," and is positive that ancient Egyptians possessed a repertoire of now "lost" technologies, a holdover from a "lost," advanced civilization. "With my knowledge of how things are made and how people work, I can't reconcile concepts such as the great pyramid being built in 20 years…I don't think [lasers and aliens are] the case," but "the technology [from this advanced civilization] had to be lost." He was inspired to conduct independent research into discovering this "lost" technology after reading Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods* (1995).

Andreas Grünschloß (2006) considers Ancient Astronaut Discourse in its entirety as "basically *technological projections* onto the surface of ancient religious texts—projections from a space-age era into a remote religious and cultural past," (16), a methodology popularized by Erich von Däniken in *Chariots of the Gods?* (1972). My copy of the latter asks, before the text begins, "was God an astronaut?" This is essentially what Grünschloß is arguing: the gods of Egypt were really aliens; petroglyphs, paintings, or reliefs depict Egyptians using electricity or possessing tanks, helicopters, and airplanes[15]; the pyramids were power plants. Harry's theories are rooted in a modern engineering knowledge foundation, out of which he "can't reconcile" the conventional timeframe for the construction of the Pyramid of Khufu. For Grünschloß (2006), "Paleo-SETI uses uncritical hermeneutics of technological self-reassurance: it is heavily based on a modern worldview which reconstructs man…almost exclusively as 'technological man,' as *homo technologicus*," (16). It is in this analysis that Grünschloß (and others, e.g., Lewis 2012, Kreuger 2017) frames alternative archaeologies in terms of religious discourses or movements: they are concerned with mythologized origins of humanity from a technological perspective. The same is true of zeroing in on Egypt as a "nexus of human thought," as Andrés views it, or as an origin of wisdom traditions and human cognition, an externally reinforced reputation ancient Egypt has undergone since ancient Greek accounts of a country with "wonders more in number than any other land" (Herodotus, *Histories,* II: 35; Tait 2003).

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[15] Respectively, the Dendera Lightbulbs and the so-called Abydos Technoglyphs.

Classifying an alternative archaeological discourse as religious implies that belief (or a willingness to believe, especially in contrast to the "mainstream") is, for its members, the primary social, organizational, and participatory polestar. Such attributions to collective belief in an abstract sense as a structuring concept lend credence—for believers—to a religious system in its totality, and, consequently, allow religious beliefs "to become explanatory of action," (Gatling 2020: 316). This seems to be a conflation of "belief" with "faith," a common equivalence in "Western" society, though the former is "more fluid, contextual, and emergent" than the latter (Magliocco 2010: 10). Following this distinction (or, rather, building on Motz' (1998) observations) Magliocco (2010) argues for a methodology of belief analysis in terms of its contextual usage and manifestation "within the hermeneutic cultural world" in which in it operates, (7). Gatling (2020) takes this a step further in his critique of belief as a central concept to folkloristics, its somewhat opaquely polysemic utilization, and its colonialist undertones. He proposes the switch to the term *believing* in the folkloristic analysis of "those narratives, practices, and objects we have previously examined under the rubric of belief," (323). My project has explored some of the ways in which folklorists can and have used belief, including: "propositional statements, ideologically determined practices," and "marginalized knowledge,[16]" (Gatling 2020: 308). However, these are concepts and ideas in themselves; they do not need to be placed under the umbrella of belief. Moreover—and perhaps most importantly—*none* of my informants view alternative theories in terms of belief or of religious discourse. For them, alternative theories are vehicles to express cultivated knowledge designed to "(inter)actively deconstruct official versions of the 'truth'" (Harambam and Aupers 2015: 471).

A Different Way of Knowing: Alternative Egyptology and Epistemology

A great deal of research goes into discursive alternative Egyptology, and alternative theorists take advantage of resources available on the Internet (and other mediums) to further finetune their research networks. R/HighStrangeness has a hyperlink attached to the forum's margin that takes one to a list of suggested literature, with PDF versions also linked if available. Like Harry, many of my informants specifically credit the "classics" of alternative history (*Chariots of the Gods?* and *Fingerprints of the Gods*) with inspiring them to conduct research into the alternative. However, articles, lectures, papers, websites, blogs, podcasts, documentaries, YouTube content creators, and other groups on Facebook and Reddit were mentioned by name and highly recommended when I asked members about the kind of sources they engaged with to formulate their theories.

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[16] Though, as I have discussed, this marginalization is a result of self-selection.

Others preferred to go straight to the source, so to speak, as is often the case with alternative archaeologies (Moshenska 2017). Andrés Pérez refers to himself as an "independent researcher of mythology, theology, and philosophy," and performs close readings of "the ancient myths and religious texts" to devise his theories that often clash with the "mainstream;" it has taken him many years of strenuous research to "learn how to take mainstream archaeology with a mountain of salt."

Evan Harding, though, does not discount the "mainstream" from his research process entirely. "It is important to seek out the experts you also disagree with to come to a fully formed conclusion," he explains. "I consider an open mind to be the only prerequisite to discussion of ideas…I feel active conversations and discussions…are an overlooked method of research, even if you disagree with the other opinions and ideas." These points are especially pertinent here, as they highlight some of the main characteristics of an alternative Egyptological epistemology: the nature of and openness to alternative ways of obtaining knowledge, how alternative knowledge frameworks contribute to the colonization of the anomalous, and the social negotiation of knowledge (see Goldman 1995) through alternative theories in performative contexts. This section, then, will review how these characteristics intersect to discern a sense of a vernacular epistemology and what it accomplishes within the context of alternative Egyptology.

U/irrelevantappelation is a "huge fan of occultism, sacred geometry, and esoteric knowledge" as they are evident in ancient Egypt. These topics account for about, in his estimation, "45%" of his alternative Egyptological research, with the remaining 55% devoted to the search for "lost" technologies or civilizations. Like other members, much of u/irrelevantappelation's research consists of consulting both primary and secondary sources. His own theories incorporate elements of other alternative treatments of academic disciplines, including geology, philology, comparative religion and literature, and art history, "displaying," as Schadla-Hall (2004) puts it, "a veneer of academic respectability and methodology," (256). Indeed, u/irrelevantappelation's qualms with the "mainstream" are not founded so much in a disdain for academic methodologies and theories (except in their conformity to "staunchly atheistic scientific paradigms" that refute "exotic questions" without hesitation), but rather in how "smugly confident" Egyptologists can be in their interpretations of yielded evidence, and how these interpretations are molded to "fit into the existing narrative." Like Evan—and alternative theorists in general--u/irrelevantappelation values an "open mind" in terms of an epistemological framework and its resultant hermeneutic; pretty much anything is on the table, scientific, esoteric and occult, or otherwise.

The research that such an approach affords has led him to the conclusion that Egypt is a "'Rosetta Stone' to decipher the hidden nature of our origins," a decipherment, in turn, fueled by his own research, that conducted and shared by other members of r/HighStrangeness, and the ensuing discussion of the performance of this research. Despite the amount of research conducted to support a particular epistemological position, though, I return to something u/irrelevantappelation mentioned during our interview: "what the alternative theorists…discuss and speculate…I don't think any of them are claiming that they have definitive proof;" they are simply not satisfied with the "mainstream" approach. However, where there is certainty for alternative theorists is that there is more to ancient Egypt than meets the eye, and that the "mainstream" may be controlling what we see.

Speaking of eyes, Bakhtin and Medvedev (1991) introduced the metaphor of the "eyes of genre" to describe the notion that "every genre has its methods and means of seeing and conceptualizing reality, which are accessible to it alone," (133; quoted in Valk 2010: 162). Valk (2010: 162-3) modifies the metaphor to eyeglasses to reflect a sense of human agency with respect to discursive engagement. We can "exchange them with another pair" with different lenses "and also with the fashion that shapes their design" while asking of our new pairs "what frames hold the lenses in place." How we perceive and know our social and cultural spheres, therefore, is a practice "formed within the limits of discursive constraints," resulting in a narrower worldview (Valk 2010: 163). As a discourse, alternative Egyptology does shape how its practitioners view history, though the inverse is also true; the constraints of a vernacular discourse are structured by social involvement and cultural expression through the genre of alternative theories. The question, then, shifts to an understanding of the conceptual frames that hold alternative Egyptology together and, in conjunction with its social and cultural engagement, dictate perception, as I have detailed with its representational and ideological dimensions.

Alternative Egyptology's epistemological framework is characterized by its intentional ambiguity and ambivalence, in many of its aspects. In the previous chapter, I discussed some of the representational mechanics by which the colonization of the anomalous is enacted, in that representations of alternative Egypts elucidate its study through the lens of the mysterious, by knowing that it is unknown. Alternative

Egyptology's social epistemology functions in a similar manner, interwoven with representation and ideology. It is an epistemology of "is it possible?" manifesting idiosyncratically in what u/irrelevantappelation describes as "exotic questions." Scholars outside of folkloristics may take issue with this description because they tend to view this ambiguity not in terms of epistemology but as either a failure in logic or the scientific method (e.g., Story 1976; Vetterling-Braggin 1982) or as a rhetorical poetic device (e.g., Schadla-Hall 2004; Moshenska 2017). Moshenska (2017) explains, for instance, that the "Just Asking Questions approach" as a rhetorical style allows alternative theorists to "claim that they are not…promoting a particular view, but merely asking awkward questions that highlight flaws in the mainstream view," (129). In fact, this is *exactly* what alternative theories do, but just because they include rhetorical elements does not invalidate them as epistemological (see Harpine 2004), and certainly not from an emic perspective. An ambiguous, ambivalent epistemology thus serves to socialize the colonization of the anomalous through the participatory—if not heterogeneous and behaviorally ambivalent--contestation of "mainstream" knowledge, supplanting its perceived holes with claims that at once plug the gap and dig the hole deeper, to know and to not know.

Another way in which alternative Egyptology's epistemology is ambiguous and ambivalent lies in its methodology and in its presentation, although I will focus on the latter in the following chapter. "Good" research is clearly valued among these groups. Consider Paul's annoyance with "overly credulous minorities." His grievances were rooted not in their theories themselves but in their lack of any "real research."

U/irrelevantappelation specifically critiqued these “very poorly informed people” for representing “low-hanging fruit” for debunkers with which to generalize all alternative theorists, theories, and discourses. Clearly, there is high value placed in strong research among these communities, and this standard for research constitutes an important epistemic characteristic.

That strong research is valorized so profoundly in these groups is not what makes alternative Egyptology’s epistemological frameworks ambivalent and/or ambiguous. Instead, these traits reside in alternative Egyptology’s methodology. Despite being positionally opposed to the disciplinary apparatuses of the “mainstream” and how its agents conduct research (accusations of selective interpretation of evidence to perpetuate a certain narrative or agenda, for example), alternative theorists utilize similar tactics, though applied *very* differently, almost as if they were vernacular modes of these same disciplines (see Hammer 2004: 236-53). This is a practice common to alternative archaeologies (Hammer 2004: 225-70; Lewis 2012; Moshenska 2017), and is reminiscent of scientism (even if this term is somewhat harsh), i.e., the understanding that science and spirituality are “two sides of the same coin,” (Hammer 2004: 238) or the usage of science to legitimate non-scientific discursive positions (see Valk 2010).

Because of the valuation of “good,” “strong,” or “informed” research among these communities, many alternative theorists adopt an empirical format to the presentational aspects of their research. Posts of alternative theories often include graphs or charts, diligently researched captions or red arrows, links to lectures or links to “expert” YouTubers, cartographic coordinates or mathematical equations, among other things, to lend credence to their espoused content. “If I see that someone put some real scientific effort into a theory, I’m probably gonna take it more seriously,” explains Benedict. This is an especially performative take on the semiotic valuation of empiricism, but the performance takes place within a discursive context that evaluates an alternative theory based on its epistemological merit and thereby its worth in the social creation of knowledge. However, the context on the whole is doubtlessly ambivalent through the use of institutional, “mainstream” techniques to express counter-ideas, derision, or conspiracy in the very same virtual breath.

Embedded within alternative theories are assertions of ideological embracement and less assertive (albeit rhetorical) epistemological claims. For Gerken (2017), knowledge is a “relation between an agent, who has certain mental states, and the proposition known,” (10). The knowledge proposition(s) (a “warranted belief,” in Gerken’s philosophical terms) of an agent, to some degree, are formed within a framework of epistemic rationality, that is to say, how the knowledge statement reasonably makes sense for a particular episteme, given the agent’s cognitive, social, or cultural competence within it (see Gerken 2017: 10-12). In a communicative sense, a knowledge proposition is likewise evaluated by other community members by an episteme’s norms and its social goals toward truth-conduciveness, i.e., the characteristic of a warranted belief that “explains its constitutive relationship to knowledge,” (Gerken 2017: 11; see also Goldman 1995: 172 and Warenski 2019).

This is a rather rudimentary and cursory glance at social epistemology from a philosophical perspective, and we cannot exactly consider philosophical terminologies as one-to-one correlates to folkloristic principles. In that light, nor is the above some major revelation for folkloristics. As McNeill (2018) writes, "folklorists have known…for a long time" that if the epistemological espousals of a narrative or a proposition "fit into our worldviews" they are "more likely to be believed, accepted, and passed on," (498). McNeill's statement also hints at the role of ideology in the social and epistemological valuation of cultural forms like alternative theories. Regardless, the preceding is helpful in understanding the ambivalent nature of the discursive episteme developed by digital alternative Egyptology.

Self-selection is the hallmark characteristic of participation in digital communities in general. As such, an alternative Egyptological community can contain members from a wide array of discursive and epistemic backgrounds. Though there are too many to enumerate in total, some self-described backgrounds that I encountered in my research include: conspiracy theorists (theskiffyd); fundamentalist Christians (Calvin Marcus and Evan Harding); Afro-Centrists (a member of Ancient Astronaut Theorists using the name Cleo Patra); occultists and "radical philosophers" (in the words of Mark LePont, the moderator of the Ancient School of Lost Knowledge); well-researched alternative historians (Paul Dallas and u/irrelevantappelation); and people who are, at least front-facingly, simply entertained by alternative theories (Scarlett Armstrong). With such variety within the somewhat malleable bounds of alternative Egyptology, there is bound to be a great deal of discord on ideological and epistemological grounds, to u/irrelevantappelation's dismay. This is a communicative world of participatory and positional ambivalence, materialized through alternative theories.

As Goldman (1995) argues, though, it is precisely because of this argumentative state that we can observe social epistemology in practice. “The folk practices of interpersonal argumentation,” he writes, “feature a set of tacit rules that govern what speakers may properly assert in the course of argumentation, and these rules seem to be devices to help promote the community’s quest for true belief [in the philosophical sense, i.e., that ‘true belief’ is knowledge],” (172), or in its truth-conduciveness. This is, again, similar to the behavioral and dialogical elements of legend discourse, particularly in terms of their dialectical characteristics (see Dégh 2001: 98-203), even if, in form, they “look” more like myths.

The point I wish to make about social epistemology is that, following Goldman (1995), discordance and argumentation serve to socialize an alternative Egyptological community—as do concordance and agreement—in the pursuit of the communal creation of knowledge. These states are not necessarily determined by the presence of various discursive and ideological backgrounds, but they are certainly amplified by this element. An alternative theory’s epistemological value is thus evaluated within a context that gauges its contribution to the “truth” of a certain episteme. It is in the argument that the colonization of the anomalous is also enacted on the basis of knowledge. What is the “truth,” though, in alternative Egyptology if it is characterized by ambiguity, by alternative theories that do not claim definitive proof? Because we cannot know our informants’ cognitive positions, as de Blécourt (2012) argues, whatever conclusions we come to must be couched in a practical analysis. Any commonality with respect to the “truth” we can identify should thus be rooted from this approach.

Brief Notes on Othering:

If the “truth,” as it can be discerned, of alternative Egyptology is based in the idea that Egypt is a “Rosetta Stone to decipher the hidden nature of our origins” as humans, a nature deliberately obscured by “the mainstream,” alternative theories are designed to flesh out this truth. Accordingly, they are evaluated by the community in which it is performed on the grounds of seeking out this “truth,” but never quite fully; “certainty is always a little obnoxious,” as a member of r/AlternativeHistory commented on a recent post discussing the Sphinx. This is a discourse concerned with parsing the secrets of human reality and existence, either in relation to aliens, Atlanteans, or simply as humans. As such, it is tempting to analyze alternative theories and alternative Egyptology through an ontological lens.

However, as I argued in the last chapter, alternative Egyptology is a discourse of control, a control enacted through the colonization of the anomalous. The preceding paragraphs discussed how alternative theories and their surrounding dialogue maintain the “anomalous” (or “mysterious,” “secretive,” “exotic,” etc.) status of ancient Egypt through ambiguous, ambivalent epistemological claims. Likewise, the “colonization” in the phrase is not an idle choice of words. The act of claiming knowledge for the anomalous is an act of colonization in one sense, but, because alternative theories are also Orientalizing, they are, to varying degrees, colonializing and Othering, too. I understand I am breaking with the methodological precedent I have set for myself in previously prioritizing the emic perspective, but it is an important point to make.

Alterity is, in itself, epistemological; to know the Other in relation to the Self is a matter of knowledge and its justification. There are two apparent and interrelated Others in alternative Egyptological discourse: the "mainstream" and ancient Egypt, including its people and those in the "mainstream" who study it professionally, i.e., Egyptologists and archaeologists in general, as well as historians. The Narrative that the "mainstream" provides about Egypt functions as the catalyst for alternative Egyptology, but the Egypt that this discourse generates is one characterized by its status as a controlled Other. This is not to suggest that "mainstream" Egyptology is not capable of Othering; its history especially is marred by Orientalism, for instance (see Reid 1985, 2002). Alternative Egyptology, however, promotes Otherized versions of Egypt through the colonization of the anomalous, by keeping Egypt mysterious and continuously Orientalizing it.

Viewing Egypt as an origin for humanity's ingenuity is an example of hyperdiffusionism, an idea common to alternative archaeologies, as Moshenska (2017) describes. Hyperdiffusionistic theories tend to diminish the achievements of ancient civilizations, in the name of the search for human origins. These ideas can be overtly racist or colonialist in content (such as discussions of aliens or Atlanteans), but, in effect and in practice, they all contribute to the colonization of the anomalous by claiming knowledge for one discourse by wresting it away from another. This phenomenon can be seen as a kind of internal Othering of humanity as a whole, removing the nuances of ancient Egypt and its people from the equation and reshaping them for social and ideological purposes. Those that keep the "hidden history" away from us—the "mainstream"—are "keeping mankind in the dark," as one of the comments on Luka

Petkovic's post about the pyramids declared. Such activity has been a hallmark for alternative archaeologies since their earliest literary developments during the 19th century (Hammer 2004; Jordan 2006; Kreuger 2017), when more and more people and movements "looked to the Orient" for ideological legitimation and positional justification (Hammer 2004: 87). The idea of Egypt as an origin of human civilization—a trial run, of a sort—extends all the way to ancient Greece (Hornung 2001). Although we should not consider alternative Egyptology as equivalent to ancient Greek Otherizations of Egypt in any serious way, there is a long discursive precedent for such epistemological and ideological activity toward the pursuit of, in my case, the colonization of the anomalous.

"Who Needs Beliefs When You Have Evidence?"

This comment was made by Jon Djehuty, a member of the Facebook group Forbidden Archaeology and other Mysteries. It was one of the final comments in a long, discordant thread in which Jon advocated for an Afro-Centric position regarding the genetic make-up and pigmentation of ancient Egyptians. Comments like Jon's are very often derided among these communities, whether through the use of laughing emojis or more hostile name-calling ("idiot," "dumbass," "moron" being frequent). Nevertheless, Jon persisted, using images to bolster his arguments in some places or cross-links to videos and articles in others. Finally, another member chastised Jon for "spreading his ridiculous beliefs" throughout the thread, to which Jon replied, "who needs beliefs when you have evidence?"

“Ambivalence collapses and complicates binaries within a given tradition,” write Phillips and Milner succinctly (2017). Ambivalence is not restricted to “everyday expression,” but it is most discernible in these behavioral and expressive contexts. This chapter has argued for a consideration of alternative theories following this ideal and how such an approach better highlights the social and communicative dimensions of vernacular contestations of the institutional through the use of alternative theories. The example above, though it examines an argument from only one side, shows the dimensions in which expressive ambivalence resides in terms of alternative Egyptology, chiefly in the ideological and the epistemological and in their interrelations according to discursive backgrounds, present due to self-selection into these groups. How these dimensions are materialized in alternative theories and dialogue socialize a given community towards the process of the colonization of the anomalous. This process involves the construction of the “mainstream” as a nebulous entity committing epistemic violence on the community as well as the social evaluation of an alternative theory’s epistemological claim. The argumentative nature of such a process highlights the ambivalence that characterizes behavioral and expressive participation in and engagement with an alternative Egyptological community, and individual representations of Egypt are likewise infused with such elements.

CONCLUSION: A PLACE FOR SACRED BULLS

Located within the vast Saqqara necropolis, northwest of Egypt's very first pyramid—Djoser's Step Pyramid, completed during the 3rd Dynasty (c.2686-2613 B.C.E.; Malek 2003: 85-87)—the Serapeum, as it is known today, is a subterranean burial chamber for sacred bulls. Bull cults were prevalent throughout ancient Egypt for most of its history (see Kessler 2002), but perhaps the most important was that of the Apis, a cult centered in Memphis in which a specially marked bull was designated, "in essence, an incarnation of the Memphite creator-god, Ptah," (Dodson 2005: 72). These Apis bulls were the ones buried in the Serapeum. In death, the Apis bull was also associated with and transformed into Osiris, the god of the dead and king of the underworld, becoming Osiris-Apis. It is from this association that, during the Ptolemaic Period (332-30 B.C.E.), the ancient Greeks developed a new syncretistic deity, known eventually as Serapis, from whom the name for the burial complex derives (Pfeiffer 2008: 389-92). The structure itself can be traced to the reign of the New Kingdom ruler, Amenhotep III (r. 1390-1352 B.C.E.; Dodson 1990), but was expanded during subsequent dynasties, most notably by Psamtek I (r. 664-610 B.C.E.). Psamtek I's expansions are known as "the Greater Vaults," (Malek 1999).

Two rows of sphinx statues once flanked the path to the Serapeum, but most of them are now on display at either the Cairo Museum or the Louvre (Marković 2015: 137). The burial chamber consists of individual galleries, each of which contains (or contained) a wooden and/or stone sarcophagus; some of the stone sarcophagi in the Greater Vaults weigh up to 70 tons (Malek 1999; Dodson 2005). The Apis bulls were laid to rest in these sarcophagi, but, with one exception, no animal remains have been found in any of them, due either to crumbling architecture, natural decay, or grave robbers (Dodson 2005). Remnants of various stelae dedicated to the individual bulls and canopic equipment were all that remained in either their corresponding vaults or nearby the Serapeum (Farag 1975; Dodson 1999). Like the other monuments of the Saqqara Necropolis, the Serapeum—and the treasures included with the mummified bulls—was looted heavily, for thousands of years. Nevertheless, the Serapeum of Saqqara and its accoutrements were built and designed to house the bodies of sacred bulls.

Giant Batteries, Electromagnetism, and Power Plants: "Free the Knowledge!"

In an identical post entitled "Was the Pyramid of Giza an Ancient Powerplant?" a member of both r/AlternativeHistory and r/HighStrangeness, u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear, writes, "The accepted theory is that these were coffins for…wait for it…the Pharaoh's prize bulls. Oh, forgot to mention. No bulls (in mummified form or otherwise) were found at the Serapeum." Due to the perceived lack of evidence for the "accepted theory," u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear details—with links to articles and images comparing the objects in the Serapeum to science-fiction movies—that the sarcophagi in the Serapeum were large batteries used to power the Pyramid of Khufu. He cites that granite (the stone that some of the sarcophagi were carved from) is conducive to piezoelectricity[17] and that the general area in which both the Serapeum and the pyramid are located is a "precise point that magnifies electromagnetic forces on the planet." In support of his theory, a link to a recent study by a theoretical physicist that posits that the Pyramid of Khufu is capable of concentrating electromagnetic energy is provided. “Look, I know it’s far out there, but it’s just so silly to me that we have…incredibly constructed pyramids…and we’re just, like, oh yeah, it’s prob a tomb.” U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear’s theory is not the only alternative theory on r/HighStrangeness or r/AlternativeHistory to suggest that the Serapeum is an anomalous site, but it is uniquely his, albeit presented in a similar manner to theories posted previously on these fora.

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[17] This is a kind of electricity that results from a "response to applied mechanical stress" to solid materials, like certain kinds of stone or metal.

If an individual’s alternative theory is presented in a similar way as others, there is likewise a precedent for its social reception in terms of its interpretation, evaluation, and discussion. U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear’s theory happened to be popular on the grounds of its information; on r/HighStrangeness, the post was upvoted 78 times with 43 comments. Reactions to his theory were mostly positive: “I’ve always liked/supported this theory;” “Love the write-up and all the links for everything;” “Fantastic theory. Sure as shit not just some gravestone marker.” Some resonated more with his ideological position, agreeing that the “accepted theory” was likely not the case and that, in some way, knowledge of ancient advanced technology is being hidden: “so much we don’t understand;” “free the knowledge!” Other commenters, though, disagreed with the theory entirely: “I’ve seen the evidence and I’m not convinced. It’s an interesting theory, but it’s ultimately more speculation than substance;” “Too much of it is based on conjecture…you can’t convert speculation to fact simply because it sounds plausible.”

Facebook groups also regularly post alternative theories about the Serapeum, though they are naturally performed and received in different styles than on Reddit. One recent example on Ancient Astronaut Theorists includes a photo of one of the sarcophagi, dwarfing a group of visitors (see Figure 5), but no links to outside research. The poster, one of the community's moderators, Linus Arquero, writes that "these boxes are not sarcophagi, they were part of some kind of ancient technology and today we are trying to discover what type and what their true purpose was." A slurry of likes, hearts, and "Wow!" emojis socially bolster Linus' theory. In the comment section, many of the responses are similar to those on u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear, echoing the notion that the sarcophagi were batteries capable of harnessing electromagnetic energy. These are the most popular ideas, going by how they were reacted to, but comment sections are fertile landscapes for presentations of other alternative theories. Comments indicated that these were not coffins for bulls, but for aliens or giants. Or that the "only answer" as to how the sarcophagi were transported into the Serapeum was via levitation, as one member wrote. Or that they were "incantation amplifiers," allowing their user to "lie inside & recite the words of power," immortalized in the Pyramid or Coffin Texts, "& the granite box would vibrate & amplify the incantation." Finally, one member framed the Serapeum in terms of a "vanished civilization," invoking the pertinent question of whether "we've arrived onto an abandoned planet…trying to make sense of what was here before…a lot of missing information."

For these communities on Facebook and Reddit, there is no simple answer for the function of the Serapeum and its various components. The "accepted theory," from this position, is either too myopically conservative or deliberately suppressive of advanced mechanical technology or esoteric knowledge. At any rate, the Serapeum is not a place for sacred bulls, at least not exclusively; it is anomalous, a site socially and discursively colonized by exoticizing claims of possibility and the hypothetical. It is a microcosm of the alternative Egypt that is continuously constructed, theory by theory, among these digital groups. The previous chapters explored the representational, ideological, and epistemological dimensions of alternative theories and alternative Egyptology. Here I will explore the expressive horizons in which these elements collide; chiefly, in performance and its role in the communicative colonization of the anomalous.

Performance, Alternative Theories, and the Colonization of the Anomalous:

U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear's and Linus' performances of their theories about the Serapeum of Saqqara are typical examples of the generic expression of alternative theories in the communities in which they were shared, thus representing the "conventionalized orienting frameworks" apparent in these groups that guide "production, reception, and circulation of discourse," (Bauman 2004: 2). The following, then, will first explore the productive elements/poetics of these performances, followed by the characteristics of their situated receptions/interpretations in the comment sections. Focusing exclusively on the formal and aesthetic properties of a performance, however, subordinates the wider socio-cultural discursive contexts in which performances occur (see Bronner 1988: 76-8; 2016 and Frog 2016 for more lengthy discussions of this); it is kind of like not seeing the social and functional forest for the poetics of individual trees. As such, I will examine how the intertextual circulation of this discourse, and its dynamic relationship between performance and reception, achieves the socialized colonization of the anomalous Egypt, thereby enacting a discourse of vernacular Orientalism.

Bauman and Briggs (1990) describe the necessity to examine poetics as features of particular linguistic structures. What, then, are the poetics of individual alternative theories that constitute alternative Egyptology in performative terms? Consider, first, the styles employed by U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear and Linus to articulate their ideological positions: “the accepted theory is that these were coffins for…wait for it…the Pharaoh’s prized bulls,” while Linus mentions lost technology in his. U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear’s statement is tinged with mockery; the “accepted theory” is ludicrously simple in light of his theory of the possibility of the sarcophagi as batteries to power the Pyramid of Khufu. While Linus’ theory does not explicitly distance himself from the “mainstream” in terms of style in the same direct fashion as u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear, his invocation of the notion of lost advanced technology is in itself an ideological expression, reinforced by the image of one of the sarcophagi, for the idea is an inherently anti-mainstream one. Expressive ideology in the performance of alternative theories can look like both of these examples, at least in the sense that it can be presented either explicitly or implicitly, embedded within the contents of a theory. Ideologically distancing oneself from the consensus, institutional narrative (that is, a discourse of textual authority) through the vehicle of alternative theories is to maximize the intertextual gap. Maximization builds textual authority “through claims of individual creativity” or “resistance to the hegemonic structures associated with established genres,” (Bauman and Briggs 1992: 149). In this case, the “mainstream” view of Egypt--as it manifests in an alternative theory and as it is understood within a certain community—represents a hegemonic structure against which to resist. This intertextual gap, though, exists more as a continuum with respect to ideologies. This phenomenon is amplified in digital performative contexts, as the performance is open to a wider, more diverse discursive audience, including people that respond with ideas or values more akin to “mainstream” ones.

Alternative theories espouse individual epistemologies that are evaluated in terms of their socially epistemic rationality, but it is important to reiterate that these are ambiguous claims. Nobody on these communities wants necessarily that their theories about Egypt to be “true,” except to the extent that the “mainstream” narrative does not accurately reflect the “true” history of Egypt. Otherwise, Egypt would not be anomalous; claims of “definite truth” remove the mystery. This characteristic is essential to the generic framework of alternative Egyptology, and, as such, is noticeable—to varying degrees—in each performance of an alternative theory. As with ideological positions, individual epistemologies are poetically expressed. However, individual alternative theorists need not rely entirely on their own words to articulate knowledge, using outside research to supplement their ideas and to signal validity to the community writ large. U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear’s theory is an especially good example of this. In all, there are ten links to sites that feature videos, posts from archaeological blogs, news articles, a research paper, and a podcast episode with “expert” discussion of the Serapeum.

Perhaps this process in which the sources were materially decontextualized and recontextualized into his performance can explain why his theory is the most popular post about the Serapeum on both r/AlternativeHistory and r/HighStrangeness. The theory expresses a claim of knowledge that is supplemented with evidence of strong, apparently empirical research from reputable sources (see Lewis 2012 for a discussion of how this phenomenon is common to alternative archaeological literature). This is a highly valued element in both communities, but there is no instance in which U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear claims to know the "real" answer. In fact, performative a metacommunicative device and a disclaimer poetically sandwich the post. The forner is "but before I go soapboxing" and the latter is "look, I know it's far out there." These are not epistemological claims in themselves, but they are framed in a way that, while also rhetorical—to paraphrase Pasulka (2019), they preserve the individual's position in terms of credibility—signify to audiences an ambiguous knowledge framework.

Expressive ideology and epistemology in the performance of alternative theories, articulated most often through the mode of writing, create an inscriptive kind of representation (somewhere "*between* speech and writing;" Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 74; quoted in Bronner 2011: 400) of Egypt, because the Internet is first and foremost a visual medium. The mode of image is also frequently used. U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear uses image only through the links he provides. One of these, included in the theoretical physicist's study on the Pyramid of Khufu and electromagnetism, depicts the "propagation of electromagnetic waves inside" (Karamova 2018: 2) the pyramid (see Figure 6). The image is steeped in science that, at the very least, symbolically looks legitimate, bolstering U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear's credibility as a researcher. Linus Arquero's theory, though, includes only one image (see Fig. 1), a rather innocuous photo of one of the sarcophagi in the Serapeum. In semiotic terms, Linus' image—out of context--is iconic of the sarcophagus, but, in conjunction with the written representation (and its social context), the image is accompanied by a particular claim, advocating the case for lost technology. Instead, the image becomes symbolic *and* indexical, albeit subject to a wide receptive array of interpretants. It is indexical in that it signifies the anomalous. Linus' theory is a multimodal representation of Egypt, made socially communicative by his assumption that the "ensemble of codes" at his disposal is similar to that "shared by his possible reader." The potential reader is "supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them," (Eco 1979: 7). This "ensemble of codes" is expressed within the contents of a given alternative theory, like Linus' or u/A_Wise_Mans_Fears, and code to the "possible reader" ideological positions, epistemic rationality, claims of knowledge, and the perpetuation of Egypt as a kind of anomalous signifier. These dimensions are expressed through a multimodal poetic system accessible to the author and create individual representations of Egypt that are in turn interpreted and, to some degree, shaped by their intended, highly polyphonic, audience(s) (Fine 1994 [1984]: 54).

The foreseen reception/interpretation of a performative text is critical to its initial production, as well as to the notion of a text as socially constructed. The performer cannot be removed entirely from the equation, though. Otherwise there would be no direct text with which to interact or to enact intertextuality in a situated context, that is, how digital readers respond to and evaluate a given performance in the comment sections. Readerly interpretation is "free" to the extent to which cultural codes "that constitute each person *as* a reader" in a certain social setting allows (Scholes 1982: 14), and, in a more generalized sense, that the participatory structure of a website permits, in terms of its "institutional limits" (see Price 2016: 43-8). The receptive framework for digital alternative theories, then, allows members from diverse discursive backgrounds the freedom to agree or disagree with a theory on the grounds of social values, such as "open mindedness"/distance from the "mainstream" and its overall contribution to communal knowledge. However, very often responses to a performance take on performative characteristics themselves, blurring the lines between performance and reception. This is particularly apparent in responses that argue with a given theory, refusing to accept it as valid, pointing out a text's "blind spots" in this regard and removing its authority (Scholes 1982: 10-13).

Take, for example, the responses to u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear's theory. Many were positive, lauding his provision of links to support his claims and praising his theory for its aesthetic qualities. For these members, his theory clearly resonated with their positions; his manipulation of cultural codes was successful. Some, though, were not as impressed: "I've seen the evidence and I'm not convinced. It's an interesting theory, but it's ultimately more speculation than substance;" "Too much of it is based on conjecture…you can't convert speculation to fact simply because it sounds plausible." These members point to a (lack) of convincing empirical evidence in the theory; they are epistemological evaluations, making use of and focusing on one of the flexibly applicable semiotic resources of textual production (Frog 2016: 79). Their comments, while not as popular as u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear's post, clearly struck a chord with some other members, judging by their upvote counts (9 for the first, 3 for the second). Regardless, these are performative texts, too, but texts that only make sense in relation to the original theory (in this example, dissent to it), a textbook case of situated intertextuality. They are subject to the same evaluative criteria and interpretative dynamic as the original theory—and every other presentation of a theory among these communities.

Comment sections provide a space for performative reception, a communicative field within which expressive interpretations can clash in perpetuity, digital inscriptions frozen in time yet fully capable of active interaction. The same is, of course, true for the initial performance. As such, alternative theories and their digital communication seem to represent the notion of unlimited semiosis, paradoxically contained within a given social and cultural semiosphere, that is, a certain dialogical "universe of discourse," (Eco 1990: 5; see also Lotman 2005 [1984]). Simply put, this concept rests in the idea of a potentially indefinite textual dialogue between signs and signifiers as connotative representations and interpretants, the latter becoming the former in its articulation/materialization, and so on and so on. I believe this tracks with Buccitelli's (2012) ideas of both "temporal extension" and "durability and audience mixing," though more in the sense of a 'written' text and its social life. As a process, unlimited semiosis as applied to the phenomenon of a 'written/spoken' text (an inscriptive one, as on the Internet) does not necessarily require a real-time or face-to-face context to lose its social functionality or its readability. In other words, the performer does not need to be 'there' for their performance to be evaluated. As restricted to a social semiosphere, though, a text must be "filtered" into it using specific cultural and semantic codes that discursively constitute its particular linguistic structure (Scholes 1982: 146). The links to outside sources in u/A_Wise_Mans_Fear's theory is an example of this filtration. External media are recontextualized, through their appearance in the theory, to conform with r/AlternativeHistory's and r/HighStrangeness' established conceptions of ancient Egypt.

Another feature of unlimited semiosis, if it can indeed be applied to digital performance and intersubjective participation within a given discourse, is that signs (objects) ultimately signify some dimension of the significatory "reality" of their subjects (ancient Egypt). In individual representations and interpretants, meanings of ancient Egypt are constantly in motion. In the case of alternative Egyptology, the "reality" is that Egypt is, as u/irrelevantappelation put it, "profoundly anomalous." Egypt's status, its ontological "reality" as anomalous as it appears on the Internet, though, is epistemologically and ideologically constructed, perpetuated, and indexed with each performance of an alternative theory, actions enacted as well through interpretation. These factors likewise constitute the construction of community. While the 'rules' for expressions of ideology and epistemological claims are not set in stone, these dimensions socially resonate with other members of these communities who have actively chosen to join them. Performances that feature these aspects, as well as how they are received, structure a community and its goals, i.e., the colonization of the anomalous.

The anomalous is the ultimate symbolic reality of Egypt among these communities, played with and uttered in different ways, but we cannot forget the aspects in which this discourse acts as dominative, in that alternative theories colonize the anomalous. For Egypt specifically, the colonization of the anomalous is an ongoing pursuit of vernacular, communicative Orientalism through representation. In this sense, it is a discourse of control, claiming ancient Egypt for a particular discursive system. The colonization of the anomalous is fragmentary, front-facingly disjoined, woven together argumentatively by individuals with varying discursive experiences and ideological positions. In a 2013 speech honoring the legacy of Edward Said, though, Judith Butler explains that representations of power over the "East" "*must* be fragmentary, [they] must be partial…there's no single narrative we can tell" (17:10-17:20). This is a crucial observation, as it is directly applicable to the colonization of the anomalous and the generic framework used for its expression and reception in terms of its social functionality. Because it is a digital process, previous texts that enact colonization are readily accessible, rendering it visibly intertextual and providing potential performers a template for social engagement. As such, it is multivocal and argumentative, but it is socializing *because* of this fragmentary dynamic. Irrespective of this characteristic, the colonization of the anomalous is Orientalizing in that it perpetually casts ancient Egypt in an exoticizing lens to legitimate particular worldviews. This lens is devised ideologically and epistemologically, reinforced semiotically, and applied poetically to the performance of alternative theories. To engage with it is simply a matter of knowing how to use and look through it in praxis ("connotative, repeatable action;" Bronner 2016:18) on both the performative and the interpretative end.

"New Ideas About the Past"

While Herodotus' superlative that entitles this thesis is highly subjective, he was correct in his description of Egypt as a land full of wonders and marvels. He, like so many others who have followed, was enthralled by it. There is some speculation over whether Herodotus ever went to Egypt (Armayor 1978). For my purposes, though, the historical veracity of his writings almost does not matter. Fact or fiction, Herodotus was disseminating *ideas* about Egypt, something we continue to do today. These ideas can take and have taken many forms, depending on the medium used to represent or articulate them, e.g., film, literature, art, or the Internet. These ideas likewise circulate through and pervade the tiers of cultural hierarchies, from the elite to the folk. The more important matter, though, is what these ideas about Egypt *do* for the specific groups in which they are communicated, i.e., what interpretations of the past do for a particular present.

Alternative theories about Egypt, as one anonymous respondent to my questionnaire concisely put it, are simply “new ideas about the past.” They are ‘new’ both in terms of content and in terms of their ideological/epistemological distancing from “mainstream” theories about Egypt. Digital communities on Facebook and Reddit showcase how these values and elements appear in performative contexts, thereby engaging with and contributing to the wider discursive frameworks apparent on particular fora, such as the Ancient School of Lost Knowledge (Facebook) or r/HighStrangeness (Reddit). Just as important as individual performances, though, is the dialogue, the argumentation, surrounding them. Both the performance and the reception, then, are crucial in understanding the structure that alternative theories, “new ideas about the past,” continuously construct, that is, alternative Egyptology.

However, alternative Egyptology also constitutes a discourse of control over ancient Egypt as Other, enacting processes of vernacular Orientalism through representations of Egypt as ‘anomalous,’ as ‘mysterious’ and ‘exotic.’ These representations are infused with ideological assertions that diminish the cultural and technological achievements of ancient Egyptians, attributing them to external agents (aliens, Atlanteans, or other ‘lost’ civilizations) or their provision of wisdom/technological devices. These ideas consequently run counter to those of the “mainstream,” but they are more than just alternative claims of knowledge. Without getting too lost in the semantic weeds of ‘colonization’ and ‘colonialization,’ alternative theories, either explicitly or implicitly, colonize the past through their expression but espouse intensely colonialist ideas about Egypt in order to legitimate a particular network of present worldviews.

In addition to the expressive/receptive spheres of alternative theories, where their study is especially fruitful for readers is what they can reveal with regard to the ways in which the ancient world is understood in the present, and how ideologies or discursive systems affect these understandings. Some scholars speak of the West’s cultural memory of Egypt as Other in largely universal terms, but, in a vernacular sense, Egypt as it exists in “memory” is highly variable, contingent on the social, historical, cultural, and ideological contexts in which it is manifested. For alternative theorists, ancient Egypt is a subject that the “mainstream” does not explain adequately, and in this sense it is rendered colonizable, perceived and represented through an Orientalizing gaze. As such, alternative theories and alternative Egyptology also provide a case for exploring instances and strategies of expressive colonialization through folk culture and vernacular discourse. Johann Gottfried Herder explained that what we know of Egypt “appears to us as a ruin or a vanished dream; what we know from written sources we know only from the mouths of passing Greeks,” (quoted in Marchand 2014: 168) like Herodotus. Although we can now read what the Egyptians themselves wrote, the sentiment behind Herder’s statement rings true for many communities. Alternative theories may simply be “new ideas about the past,” but a folkloristic approach to their analysis is beneficial in parsing the discursive, cultural nuances that inevitably are secluded by this apparent simplicity.

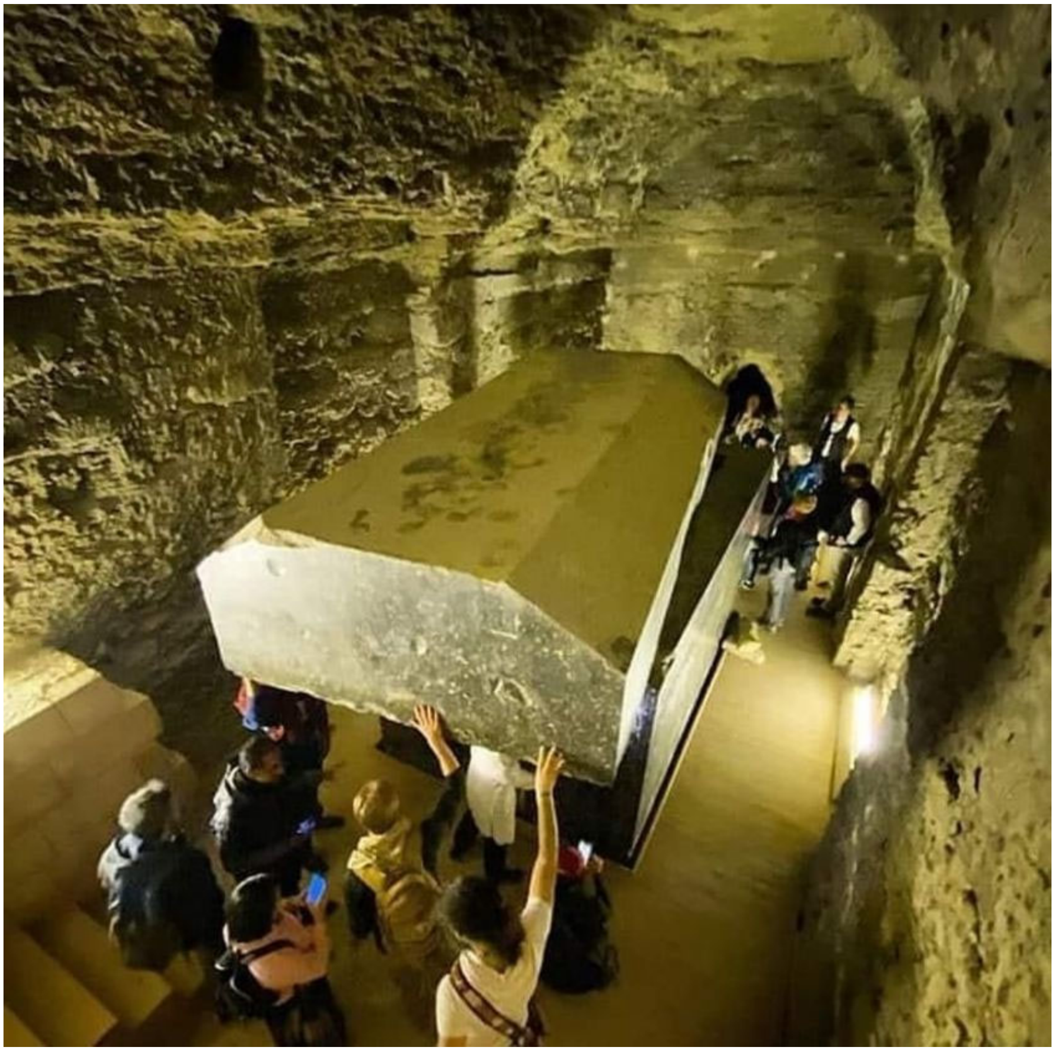

Figure 5: an image of tourists interacting with one of the granite sarcophagi in the Serapeum, included in Linus Arquero's post to Ancient Astronaut Theorists.

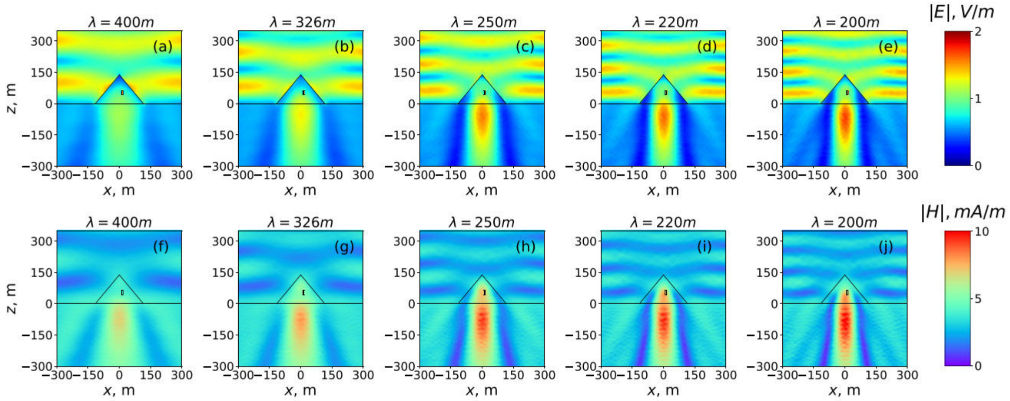

Figure 6: image used in Anastasia Komarova’s 2018 article reviewing a recent study of the electromagnetic potential of the Pyramid of Khufu, linked in U/A_Wise_Mans_Fear’s alternative theory.

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Timothy “Teo” Rogers received his Bachelor of Arts in History from George Mason University in 2018, also graduating with a minor in Folklore and Mythology. During his time at George Mason University, he was involved with the school’s Folklore Roundtable, serving as its vice-president in the 2018-19 school year; served as an intern at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in the summer of 2018; was awarded with the inaugural Margaret R. Yocom Student Paper Prize in 2019 for his paper “Claiming the Witch’s Cave: Basque Identity through the Legends of Barandiarán;” and participated in the 2019-20 Field School in Ireland.