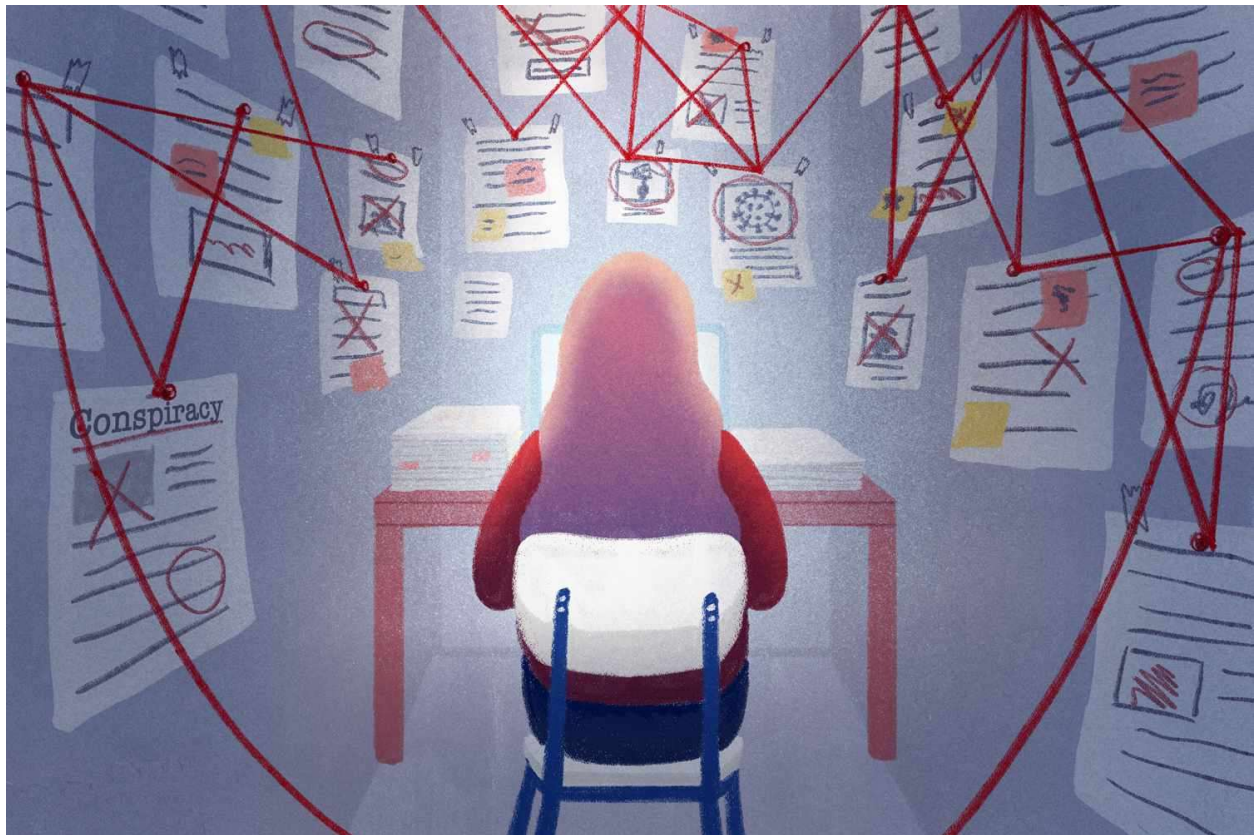


**Expos 20: Thinking with Conspiracies**  
**Spring 2024**  
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“QAnon.” “Rigged elections.” “Anti-Vaxxers.” These days, conspiracy theories seem to lurk around every corner. But what do the conspiracy theories of today have in common with those of the past? In this course, we examine the history and inner logic of conspiracy theories. Why are they believed in the first place? How do they spread? And why do certain conspiracy theories persist? In unit one, we begin with a seemingly remote example: a group of Jews falsely accused of the murder of a child in 1475. As we shall see, however, this accusation—an example of what is known as the “blood libel”—has unsettling connections to the present. Next, we move to a modern-day conspiracy theory promoted in the 2022 Netflix series, *Ancient Apocalypse*, in which the villains are, improbably, professional archeologists (whom the show’s host disparagingly refers to as “Big Archeology”). Finally, students will research a conspiracy theory of their own choosing and make an argument about why it is (or was) so alluring to a particular audience. Readings will include works of history, journalism, and social psychology.



“Very Well” – [Catherine Song](#)

## Nuts & Bolts: How the Course Works

You will write three essays in this course, each corresponding to one of the three Units of the course described above. In each Unit, moreover, you will first complete one more or more assignments that focus on particular writing skills (**Response Exercises**); then, you will submit a **Draft**; and finally, you'll submit a **Revision**.

### **Cover Letters for both Drafts and Revisions:**

Each of your drafts and revisions should include a cover letter in which you provide guidance to your reader about the aspects of the essay you are struggling with in addition to whatever other comments or questions you might have. (This requirement is described in more detail below.)

### **Draft Workshops:**

The week after each draft is due, we'll have an in-class draft workshop in which we work through two student drafts (chosen by me) and offer the writers constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement. You will be expected to provide written comments, in the form of a letter, on each draft that we workshop together. (I'll provide more detailed instructions about this step closer to the draft workshop dates.)

## How to Submit your Assignments

Submit your drafts and revisions, as either a Word doc or PDF, on Canvas.

For your Response Exercises, submit those to me by e-mail (as a Word doc or PDF attachment).

Also, please include your surname in your file titles, e.g., "Potter\_RP#1," "Potter\_D1," "Potter\_R1."

## Grading

In this course, I grade only the revisions (that is, the final version) of your essays, not the drafts.

Course grades will be determined as follows:

Revision of Essay #1:	<b>20%</b>
Revision of Essay #2:	<b>30%</b>
Revision of Essay #3:	<b>40%</b>
Participation and Engagement:	<b>5%</b>
Research Proposal/Annotated Bibliography	<b>5%</b>

Participation and engagement include being prepared for and contributing to class discussions, in-class workshops, and conferences, as well as completing all response papers, drafts, cover letters, and responses to drafts being workshopped. While you will not receive individual grades for each of these activities and assignments, they are all essential components of the course.

## Unit 1: Simon of Trent (Overview)

How do conspiracy theories first form? And how do they spread? In **Unit 1**, we will explore these and other questions by examining a murder that allegedly took place some 500 years ago (in 1475, to be exact). As we'll see, however, the case isn't as removed from the present as one might imagine (or wish). The alleged victim: a three-year old boy named Simon, affectionately called *Simonino* ("little Simon") in the sources. The location: [Trent](#), a city in what is today northern Italy, but what was then a part of the [Holy Roman Empire](#). As we investigate this case, you will practice an essential skill of academic writing, namely, formulating an arguable claim based on a close reading of a primary source.

### Primary Source

Tiberino, Giovanni Mattia. Giovanni Mattia to Raffaele Zovenzoni, Trent, 1475. English translation by Stephen D. Bowd and J. Donald Cullington. In *"On Everyone's Lips": Humanists, Jews, and the Tale of Simon of Trent*. Tempe, AZ: Brepols, 2012.

### Additional Sources

Teter, Magda. "The Death of Little Simon and the Trial of Jews in Trent." In *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020.

<https://thebloodlibeltrail.org/images/>

All sources available on Canvas.

## Unit 2: "Big Archeology" (Overview)

In Unit 2, we turn to a present-day conspiracy theory that is, thankfully, less gruesome than the Blood Libel case we considered in Unit 1. Our primary source will be an episode of *Ancient Apocalypse*, a surprise hit for Netflix that first aired in 2022. In this series, the host (Graham Hancock) puts forward an unusual theory in which modern archeologists (whom he disparagingly refers to as "Big Archaeology") are cast in the role of villains. The series has been widely criticized by the relevant scholarly community, with the Society for American Archaeology even calling on Netflix to reclassify the series as "science fiction" rather than a "documentary" or "docuseries." Such criticisms, however, have not diminished the show's popularity.

### Primary Source:

*Ancient Apocalypse*. "Survivor in a Time of Chaos." *Netflix* video, 33:01. November 10, 2022. **[N.B.: Make sure to watch episode 2, not episode 1!]**

<https://www.netflix.com/title/81211003>.

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8lhnhh>

## Syllabus Preview

### Theoretical Lens Text:

Stef Aupers, “‘Trust No One’: Modernization, Paranoia and Conspiracy Culture,” *European Journal of Communication* 27, no.1 (2012): 22-34.

All sources available on Canvas.

## Unit 3: Choose Your Own Conspiracy! (Overview)

In Unit 3, it'll be up to you to choose both your subject and your sources. Choose wisely!

### Primary Source/s

You will choose your own primary source/s for this essay. Your first step, however, will be to select a *particular* conspiracy theory to investigate. Fortunately (and unfortunately!), there is no shortage of examples: QAnon, Flat-Eartherism, Holocaust revisionism, mass shootings as “false flag” operations, etc. Once you’ve made this selection, you’ll then need to locate primary sources *about* your conspiracy of choice. These will be sources in which the *proponents* of a particular conspiracy theory make their case. Such sources could be texts, videos, social media posts, etc. **(If you’re not sure whether a source you’ve found would work well, please run it by me first!)**

### Secondary Sources

You will also be responsible for finding your own secondary sources (i.e., peer-reviewed scholarly work), and you’ll need to draw upon **at least three secondary sources** to make your argument. Also, please confine your selection of secondary sources to those that come from either the **social sciences** or **humanities**.

