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STUDIES

A PROJECT OF UC BERKELEY'S  
**Center for Right-Wing Studies**

SPECIAL ISSUE: GENDER, SEXUALITY,  
AND SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF THE FAR RIGHT

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# THE JOURNAL OF RIGHT-WING STUDIES

A PROJECT OF UC BERKELEY'S CENTER FOR RIGHT-WING STUDIES

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## *Letter from the Editor*

We are publishing this special issue of *JRWS* in an extraordinary moment, near the end of a time of fearsome liminality. A friend of mine told me the Biden-to-Trump interregnum reminded her of the stretch between a defendant's sentencing and the day—a month or two thereafter—to present themselves for detention. The illiberalism of Trumpism is empowered and blueprinted as never before, including aspirations toward deportation and ethnic cleansing on an unheard-of scale. Movements like Christian nationalism, which have used Trumpism as a vehicle from the start, have been joined by health and anti-vaccination fanaticism. They were joined as well by an extreme free-market libertarianism that aspires to obliterate the welfare state and that has grown out of a branch of the tech world already deeply inserted in US defense and space policy, and that seems intent on scripting the future of cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence.

On the world stage Trump 2 tips the balance toward the othering nationalist regimes and parties that by now span the globe. In parallel to how they scoffed at the institutional principles and norms of liberal democracy's domestic politics, these forces have now taken increasingly bellicose steps toward undermining the values and practices of the international order liberal democracy created in the wake of World War II. Certainly, that system was breached so frequently by even its loudest champions that it paved the way for its own disintegration. But the coming US regime looks primed to make the qualitative leap toward sanctioning land grabs through war in Ukraine and Palestine, while Trump himself is openly talking of aspirations to take over Greenland and the Panama Canal.

In 2016 Trump's presidential campaign mobilized an online manosphere of alienated young men who were networked via gaming and were predisposed to a self-pitying misogyny. By 2024, this world had morphed into a hypermasculine and anti-gender online industry given to far-right views of sexuality and traditional male and female roles. This special issue of *JRWS*, guest edited by Catherine Tebaldi and Scott Burnett, probes this online world in a variety of countries, uncovering its dynamics using linguistic and psychoanalytic tools. We believe this makes an essential contribution to understanding the current "anti-woke" and often atavistic march to the right that already has the wind in its sails and seems poised to profit expansively from the new American government that we await.

Lawrence Rosenthal  
December 31, 2024

INTRODUCTION

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## Heroes and Hard Truths

### *Gender, Sexuality, and the Sociolinguistics of the Far Right*

CATHERINE TEBALDI

University of Luxembourg

SCOTT BURNETT

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#### **Introduction: Heterosexual Hierarchies**

In his May 2024 commencement address to Benedictine College, a Catholic liberal arts college in Atchison, Kansas, American football player Harrison Butker positioned his Christian faith as “countercultural” and threatened by “the tyranny of diversity, equity, and inclusion.”<sup>1</sup> He claimed that Catholics “fear speaking truth, because . . . truth is in the minority.” He offered an example to prove his case: “Congress just passed a bill where stating something as basic as the biblical teaching of who killed Jesus could land you in jail.” In the face of these imagined enemies he argued, brave little Benedictine College should feel pride—not “the deadly sin sort of pride that has an entire month dedicated to it, but the true God-centered pride that is cooperating with the Holy Ghost to glorify him.”

While antisemitism and queerphobia are by no means limited to traditionalist Catholics or “TradCaths” (Tebaldi and Baran 2023), Butker’s self-image as a plucky underdog with the truth on his side facing down a seemingly indomitable foe is exemplary of the rhetorical dynamics that animate a broad range of contemporary far-right movements. Nestled close to the David-and-Goliath fantasy at the heart of these discursive formations lies a political imaginary in which truth, bravery, and moral goodness align with traditional mores governing gender, sexuality, and reproduction. As Butker explains, women have had “the most diabolical lies” told to them about “promotions and titles” in their careers, when what truly excites them is “marriage and

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1 All quotes from this speech are taken from “Read a Transcript of Harrison Butker’s Controversial Commencement Speech in Full,” *USA Today*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.today.com/news/harrison-butker-speech-transcript-full-rcna153074>.

the children [they] will bring into this world.” Men, on the other hand, have been told by dominant societal forces that they “are not necessary in the home or in our communities.” This specter of the independent career woman, who replaces men while pursuing her own advancement, is “what plagues our society.” But after the darkest hour comes the dawn, heralded in Butker’s speech by a man who is willing to speak the truth (i.e., himself):

It is only in the past few years that I have grown encouraged to speak more boldly and directly because . . . I have leaned into my vocation as a husband and father, and as a man. . . . As men, we set the tone of the culture, and when that is absent, disorder, dysfunction and chaos set in. . . . Be unapologetic in your masculinity, fighting against the cultural emasculation of men. Do hard things. Never settle for what is easy.

One might be tempted to suggest that being paid millions of dollars to occasionally kick a ball does not, in fact, make for a particularly hard life. But what Butker means by “doing hard things” and never settling for “what is easy” is performing an idealized masculinity heroically willing to stand against what he constructs as “the chaos of the world.” The material ease he enjoys as an able-bodied white, heterosexual athlete in prime physical condition with a boyishly handsome face and a broad, white-toothed smile, earning good money in one of the world’s richest countries, is symbolically counteracted by his assertion of the difficult things he is called upon to do. Making easy things appear hard is an interesting discursive accomplishment. In his speech, Butker combines theological and paleoconservative language with elements of the militaristic and the motivational, as he tells graduates, “You are entering into mission territory in a post-God world, but you were made for this.” The epic, against-the-odds valor required to succeed in this mission is missing only a swelling cinematic soundtrack.

Butker’s rhetoric and prosody is energetic, emphatic, inspirational, positive. With his neatly trimmed beard indexing hipster culture and millennial belonging, and his academic gown worn over a crisp white collar and colorful tie, he is at once youthful, stylish, educated, and authoritative. All of this is extended by his wealth and status as a football player, the top of the stereotypical High School USA hierarchy, and the companionship of his submissive, stay-at-home prom-queen wife, whom he tearfully thanks in his speech. Sitting atop this immense horde of cultural capital, he can only establish himself as an underdog hero by conjuring up a world in which he is embattled, his white masculinity exceptional, and his pursuit of reactionary truths a matter of cultural life or death. Tapping into discourses that position masculinity as a lost, stigmatized, ordering principle of a degenerate world, Butker urges graduates to snatch their reactionary victories from the jaws of progressive defeat.

In Italy nearly a century ago, the fascist Filippo Tomasso Marinetti called on “ardent males and inseminated females” to rejuvenate the nation (quoted in Spackman 1996,

12). Not much has changed, it would seem. And yet the centrality of the phantasmagoric aspects of gender (Butler 2024) to far-right imaginaries remains an understudied phenomenon, given only sporadic attention by scholars, analysts, and commentators (Burnett and Richardson 2021; Wodak 2021). Male supremacism might not have a necessarily racist character, but it is hard to imagine a virulent ethnic nationalism that does not police women as “breeders for race and nation” (Women and Fascism Study Group 1979). Gender is so much more than “symbolic glue” (Indelicato and Magalhães Lopes 2024; Kováts and Põim 2015): it is the foundation on which the edifice of nationalism and racism is built. Nationalism is already a profoundly gendered project, which can take diverse shapes when combined with racism and a distrust of democratic systems (Yuval-Davis 1997). To properly understand how these structures work, we must pay attention to their discursive construction, and to the articulatory practices of their leading subjects. The linking together of words and other symbols into ideological constellations that shift and evolve across geographic, temporal, and generic contexts is a fundamental political practice. Thus to truly get to the heart of what is going on in the contemporary far right, we must pay close attention to semiosis. It is for this reason that we have brought together scholars who focus on the semiology of sexuality and gender in far-right movements to contribute to this special issue of the *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*. It is our belief that the linguistic and semiotic methods mobilized by these authors could and indeed should be taken up more broadly by researchers investigating our contemporary moment. Though the hour is late and the future of critical humanistic inquiry in many of our institutional contexts is uncertain, deconstructing the sexed and gendered symbolic structures of would-be authoritarians and latter-day protofascists is an urgent task that lays bare their affective dynamics and political logics.

### **Why Study the Language of Gender and Sexuality on the Far Right?**

Why focus on language when we discuss gender and sexuality? And what do these things have to do with the far right? This is not just football players waxing poetic on feminine submission; from J. D. Vance’s hatred of cat ladies to Hulk Hogan’s striptease at the Republican Convention, and from Senator Josh Hawley’s book *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs* to Tucker Carlson’s brave reporting from the heart of the “war on men,” the contemporary right is united in what it sees as a heroic discursive defense of “traditional” sexuality and gender. We suggest that reactionary gender ideology is central to far-right political imaginaries. In this issue we analyze how this ideology shapes reactionary political imaginations, social hierarchies, and subjectivities, and how it defines the far right’s discourse of truth and makes that discourse circulate, persist, and be desired.

Much analysis on reactionary narratives has focused on the far right as “left behind” and motivated by anger and resentment (Norris and Ingelhart 2019; Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016). A parallel tendency in critical approaches to far-right discourse has been to fixate on the “politics of fear” (Wodak 2021). What analytical purchase would

it give us to reformulate resentment as thwarted desire, shifting the focus from fear to a *politics of desire*? In our view, constructing far-right ideology as purely negative—as preoccupied with fear, hatred, and violence—mystifies the attractions of fascism, subduing the erotics of the boot heel and obscuring analysis of the sensual pleasures of embodying a racial-sexual fantasy of personhood. By placing sex and gender at the center of far-right political discourse we inevitably center desire. Centering desire asks: What do reactionary movements want, who do they want to be, and how do they provoke desire in their audiences? The studies in this special issue of the fathers and mothers of the nation, the heroic bodybuilders, the digital meme warriors, and the alt-right bad dudes show how right-wing desire is structured expansively as ontological political and sexual desire. By presenting gender and sexual hierarchies as threatened, forgotten, or stigmatized, far-right discourses present reactionary actors as rushing to their defense, desirous of their restoration. Right-wing actors narrate themselves as embattled but not as decisively victimized; they are underdog soldiers and unsung heroes whose defense of difficult truths makes them the heroes we have been waiting for—the ones we need, the ones we want to be. These discourses of martial masculinity protecting cookie-cutter families from the “woke mind virus” revitalize reactionary gender roles as embodiments of moral truth, and recast far-right reactionaries as heroes.

The processes through which these figures of personhood become available are the semiotic ones that culturally “make people up” in language. In political science, however, too much of the close attention to language has been on the correct terminology to use—for example, on defending “populism” as a weasel word for fascism (see Mondon and Winter 2020), or on precisely categorizing a discourse on the ideological spectrum as conservative, far-right, extreme-right, or fascist (Mudde 2019). Linguists working on the digital right (e.g., Lawson 2023; Russell 2021; Heritage and Koller 2020) have tended to focus on its novel lexicon, disambiguating “roasties” from “Stacys” and explaining why “Chads” benefit from “hypergamy.” Yet we need not focus simply on the terminology or lexicon of the right but on what those words *do* and *how they do it*. Close analysis of semiotic processes is clearly needed, and this approach becomes explanatory only if it can explain why social actors are willing to invest so much of their energy in them.

The linguistic anthropologists, discourse analysts, sociolinguists, and linguists in this issue explore the intersections of language with gender and sexuality as a way to understand how far-right discourses are made to seem meaningful, true, and connected with desirable imaginaries and actor fictions. Their articles have a common theorization of identities as creatures of discourse, and of discourse as produced by and productive of different hierarchies of value. These scholars describe valued ways of being human that give or restrict access to social, political, and economic capital. These “subject positions” (in the Foucauldian jargon) are created in language. Several articles in this issue explore these subjectivities using the linguistic anthropological concept of *register* (Agha 2007). A common theme of linguistic work on the far right is the call to investigate its registers more closely (Borba 2022; Gal 2021). Register denotes how particular ways of speaking,



looking, and being are linked to morally evaluated kinds of people. Soft speech and slender bodies become linked with desirable conservative femininity, for example, or hard bodies and hard truths with conservative masculinity. This framing allows us and the articles in this issue to explore how language shapes affective, moral, and material subject positions on the right, and how discourses of gender and sexuality are privileged sites for the production and circulation of subject positions as *desiring subjects*.

As scholars who look at language in social life, we know that the content of the ideology—what it asks one to believe—is necessary but not sufficient. The form the ideology takes—the subject positions it offers, its narratives, its promise of status and sociality—is another key to understanding its persistence and why it is desired. The resurgent right is swelled not merely by people who have swallowed red pills and Fox News disinformation, but more importantly by people who are self-actualizing in ways that draw on available discourses and characterological figures and that guarantee their status within particular social groups. They yearn to be main characters: they could be heroes. This issue explores how these notions are made to seem rational, compelling, and persuasive in far-right discourse.

The authors pay close attention to the symbolic value of sexuality and gender in the construction of right-wing social imaginaries: their truths, their hierarchical social visions, and the subjectivities they structure. Each article focuses on how language is used in defense of some rigid definition of gender and sexuality, which is often connected to the “traditional.” We suggest that reactionary gender ideology organized hierarchically taps into a fantasy of heterosexual personhood that makes the structure persistent precisely because it is conflated with sexual desire. Two articles (Kosse; Tebaldi and Burnett) focus on how reactionary gender discourses are grounded in epistemologies of a “natural” truth located in “hard” sciences and communicated through transparent language. Four articles (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto; Schmidt; Tebaldi and Burnett; Westberg and Årman) explore how manhood in particular is produced as a kind of simple truth that demands strong fathers of the nation, handsome visions of a hard masculinity, and the desirable subject position of the truth teller. Every hierarchy has an apex, and at the pinnacle of these discursive formations stands the hot, hard hero: impervious to the lures of modernity, socialism, and decadence, he stands for moral clarity, strength, and dominance in the face of societal degeneration and decay.

Gender and sexuality infuse far-right political formations in ways that spread across part of an ideological spectrum that seems to be rushing ever rightward. Gender is central to meaning because of how the embodied and affective commitments to the “right” way to be a man or woman play in practice and in propaganda. Appeals to the strength of a nation’s men and the motherliness of women infuse a fantasy of the reproductive futurity of the nation (Burnett and Richardson 2021), which finds its perfect synecdoche in the nuclear family structure as a “divine institution” (Bjork-James 2021).

Gender and nation are intimately entangled, and morally saturated discourses of gender and sexuality are central to the far right’s normalization and its success at coalition building across the political spectrum. Ideological fragments associated with

right-wing politics are frequently taken up by the center. Liberal femonationalist (Farris 2017; Bauer et al. 2024) and homonationalist discourses—in which feminist and pro-gay rights positions align partially with ethnonationalist ones—share a significant amount of their content with far-right conspiracies of “Eurabia” and the “Great Replacement”—or with “Love Jihad” in India (Frydenlund and Leidig 2022). The figure of the Muslim rapist is used in these discourses to undergird Hindu religious nationalism in India and anti-immigration policy in the UK (Leidig 2022), as well as Islamophobia in the US (Bergozza, Coco, and Burnett 2024; Brotherton 2023). Transphobia, similarly, stretches from far-right conspiracies to the evangelical right to mainstream Western politicians. Thus, one speaker at CPAC, the Conservative Political Action Conference, in 2024 could call for states to “destroy transgenderism” with no fear of reproach, while opposition to trans rights unites figures as disparate as the supposedly liberal and feminist British author J. K. Rowling and the self-described “fascist theocrat” Matt Walsh.

Gender and sexuality are deeply symbolic, but they are not just symbols: they are embodied materialities that form the frontline of what is under attack in the rise of the reactionary right. The (far) right’s defense of men from the specter of gender attacks us across the lifespan: from forced birth laws spreading across the United States, to challenges to children’s right to learn about sex and gender equality in schools, to full-frontal assaults on the legitimacy and even legality of other LGBTQIA experiences and identities. In this imaginary, deviance from normative white cisheterosexuality must be punished in racial and sexual Others; the aim of such punishment, however, is simultaneously the restoration of rigid hierarchies of gender and sexuality for the ethnonational in-group. For members of the far right to discursively produce themselves as heroes, defending the nation and renewing its (masculine) strength, they must have an enemy. That enemy is sexual, religious, and ethnic minorities, but finally it is all who wish to choose whom we love, how we live, who we are, and what we mean, outside of the ideologies the far right represents. Defense of heterosexual hierarchies enregisters the right as “heroes” saving the nation, rather than violent thugs oppressing women, LGBTQIA people, minorities, and the poor.

Gender and sexuality are thus a kind of bedrock on which reactionary imaginaries are built. A “return” to traditional gender, for the reactionary, is a metonym for a return to tradition itself (Tebaldi 2024). Gender and sexuality shape the affective investment in far-right ideas of the resurgent nation (Burnett and Richardson 2021). These are deeply embodied truths, defining the persons they can become, their social order and sexual hierarchies, and the political the world to which the reactionary wishes to return.

In what follows, we articulate the role of language, gender, and sexuality in upholding far-right hierarchy. We first outline how we understand this as editors, before unpacking the individual contributions of the articles. The right’s adherents argue that sex and sexuality are natural, biblical, or moral, and they want to frame themselves as countercultural heroes for announcing this. Through highlighting the discursive nature of gender, we uncover the semiotic, social, and political work that “naturalness” does. This work binds reactionary ideology to essential truth, and to those defending it as hot,



hard, and heroic. In the following subsections, we detail first how the man of the right, whose “manly virtues” are mobilized in defense of the truth, is constructed in discourse. Second, we examine the use of melodramatic and militaristic language to undergird these “truths”; and third, we discuss how gender itself is presented as “hard truth.”

### **The “Right” Man**

Far-right discourse seeks to define the correct performance of genders imagined as natural. Books prescribing this, such as *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs*, by the US senator from Missouri Josh Hawley, show how masculinity assumes political importance in resurgent Christian nationalism, where gender is both natural and ordained by God. It is also discursively positioned as threatened and in need of protection, as in Tucker Carlson’s propaganda film *The End of Men*. These media pieces, like many of the texts analyzed in this issue, prescribe what it means to be the “right” man: white, tall, and statuesque, with Oxford button-downs, boat shoes, and gleaming white teeth.

Defending these ideologies requires embodying them—one must be the right kind of man. A particular figure is thus enforced: cisgender (as examined in this issue by Kosse), straight (Baran), a loving parent and patriot who is prepared to provide for his family (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto; Westberg and Årman). And, despite the abundance of visual evidence to the contrary, being the “right” kind of man also means being beautiful (Tebaldi and Burnett). Beauty brings authority as it proves the man who possesses it may speak on health, discipline, sexuality, power.

From the naked bodies immortalized in marble adorning Rome’s Foro Italico, previously called the Foro Mussolini (Antliff 2001), beauty has long been intertwined with fascist visions of power. We can see the current resurgence of fascist beauty in a post (figure 1) by the Christian editor of the right-wing magazine *The Sentinel*, Ben Zeisloft, which features Harrison Butker along with the academic Jonathan Keeperman, who publishes the far-right magazine *Man’s World* (analyzed in this issue by Tebaldi and Burnett).



**Figure 1.** Social media post by Ben Zeisloft (@BenZeisloft), Twitter (now X), May 16, 2024, 08:16 a.m., <https://x.com/jennycohn1/status/1791491720250859650/photo/1>.

The image of Butker and Keeperman clearly shows the importance of beauty and its role in communicating that the “right man” is conventionally attractive and white. These men are described not (just) as attractive but as having the “best conceivable physiognomy.” The pseudoscience of “physiognomy,” to which Zeisloft refers, is firstly inseparable from the biological racism advanced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by physical anthropologists such as Aleš Hrdlička and Samuel George Morton (Mitchell 2021). In these enduringly stupid ways of categorizing the world, a person’s moral character and value to society may be read off the contours of their face, as can the different and hierarchically arranged values of human “races.” Zeisloft’s assertion that these young white men have the “best conceivable physiognomy” is thus as bald a statement of white supremacy as one is likely to find.

Secondly, this assertion of the “best physiognomy” shows how the morally marked ideal is proven by beauty. Beauty is composed into an icon of all that is “best”: a figure that is rich, white, muscular, youthful, and poised for action (see the articles in this issue by Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto; Tebaldi and Burnett). Beauty—conventionally understood as kindling desire in the viewer—is here instead a discursive weapon against the “pagan left,” who are constructed as ugly (Tebaldi and Burnett). Thus is masculinity perfected and aligned with a specific style linked to a harder version of the hipster: slenderness becomes a hard body, with full beards shaping strong jaws. Masculinity is made to mean strength, heroism, and dominance.

Manhood is an ideal site for the renewal of fascist and eugenicist ideologies. Beauty grants them authority, shapes transgressive truths, and becomes an embodied metaphor for the perfection of the white nation. We might imagine much of this as rebranding of the “male fantasies” (Theweleit 1987, 1989) that infused Nazism. From contemporary

right-wing presses selling Nazi fitness guides,<sup>2</sup> to bodybuilders using Mussolini's statues as their Twitter icons, beauty is one element of a broader ludic reiteration of fascist ideology—and its ideology of virile heterosexual masculinity as the heart of national renewal.

### Heroes Made in/of Language

A reactionary body is made into a hero's body through language. Heroes must be articulated—they must be made not simply to look or even to speak, but to *mean*. Once heroes have been articulated, to play a reproductive role they must also be *articulate*, made to speak in defense of hard truths and reactionary ideology. In the hypersemiotic spaces of far-right internet discourse, ordinary men are shaped into heroes: dominant and desirable, defending truth, family, and the Western way. Women, meanwhile, reproduce discourses of gendered submission and sacrificial femininity to articulate their own heroic femininity (Tebaldi 2024). The discourses in these spaces defend a heterosexual hierarchy organized to value men—cis, white, straight, wealthy—at the top of a social hierarchy and a strong nation. The linguistic work done to elevate such men to the head of the cis-capitalist heterosexual hierarchy consists in the construction of what we term *heroic registers*.

Register describes how a particular style of speech, writing, or other semiotic process links to a particular character—spitting and walking like a cowboy, yelling in unison like a soldier, saying thee and thou like a knight, or using the ecclesiastical cadences of a pastor. Registers are said to “make people up” (Gal 2019), to create particular characters. *Heroic registers* make up men as elevated, powerful, and embattled—but still dominant—figures. We draw on work that sees registers as morally evaluating types of people (Del Percio 2022) in deeply gendered ways (Tebaldi 2024) as heroes or villains, good guys or bad guys. Heroic registers transform the ordinary, mundane practices of doing gender and family into ideologically, affectively saturated drama, and in so doing promote investment in far-right gender politics as the heroic defense of atavistic “hard truths.”

In Hawley's book, different ways of “talking like a real man” draw on “strong” speech as simple and plain, referential and clear, provocative and transgressive, imperative and dominant. Strong speech is in implicit contrast to feminine speech, which is constructed as deferential, unsure, or polite (Lakoff 1973), or as the liberal political correctness associated with the “snowflake” (McIntosh 2020).

Across the six articles in this issue, heroic registers are shown to create distinct but congruent figures of the male hero, using different elements of everyday speech

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2 See, for example, *The Wehrmacht Fitness Manual*, translated into English in 2020 and sold by Antelope Hill Publishing (previously associated with *Man's World* magazine): <https://antelopehillpublishing.com/product/wehrmacht-fitness-manual/>.

and typified elements of “strong language” to perform reactionary selves or truths. Provocativeness and the ability to withstand degrading speech, in Schmidt’s article, produce the semiotic strength that shapes posters into *meme warriors*. Kosse shows how *bad boys* are enregistered by similarly provocative speech, which extends to the bold use of referential speech, or simple declarative sentences. “Masculine” norms are associated with emotionlessness, strength, and epistemic power; the bad boys’ mundane epistemic dominance, produced by “saying it like it is,” is in implicit contrast to feminized language, which is seen as vacillating, evasive, emotional, and unclear.

Perhaps the key element of the heroic register is the imperative. This can be the instructional commands of a “bro-scientist” to do X number of weightlifting sets and reps, along with nutrition advice that will help you “t-maxx” or boost your manliness, as in Tebaldi and Burnett’s article. Or it can be instructions on the value of sexual continence, as in Burnett, Borba and Hiramoto’s work on NoFap adherents. This is also expressed in spiritual imperatives. Baran’s article shows how speaking God’s truth centers masculine authority in an idealized Catholic family, where the morally worthy values of a Christian and cisheteropatriarchal order are reproduced by “true” Poles. Similarly, everyday authority is evoked in Westberg and Årman’s rhetoric of family values, which uses the everyday moral authority of fatherhood to support Nordic fascism.

A defining characteristic of heroic registers is their use of war metaphors to characterize language, and to produce extremist meanings from everyday speech that allow mundane manhood to become melodrama. War metaphor is a commonplace in American political discourses (War on Drugs, War on COVID), but it is extended here to make gender performances into battles in the war to preserve heteropatriarchy.<sup>3</sup> Baran shows how opposition to LGBTQIA rights is framed in hyperbolic terms as a fight to save life itself. Propagating life, of course, involves everyday embodied actions: exercise, relationships, diet, and sex (or abstention). Through turning these mundane gendered actions into melodrama, as Anker (2005) shows, a triangle of victim, enemy, and hero is constructed. Heroic registers use military language to give everyday practices extreme meaning: diet becomes the war on “soy globalists”; sexual self-control one front in a battle for male sexual control over women; heterosexuality the battle to restore Poland to the center of Europe; and of course, every white baby is a fight for the (here Swedish) nation. Among the most prevalent militarized discourses is that of the courageous fight in defense of “hard truth.”

## Hard Truths

Heroism, as we saw in the case of Harrison Butker, involves standing up for what is true, good, and right against overwhelming odds. Each of these discourses of martial manhood in the culture wars not only shapes men into reactionary heroes but also

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3 On the “War on COVID,” see Catherine Powell, “War on COVID,” *UCLA Law Review*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.uclalawreview.org/war-on-covid-warfare-and-its-discontents/>.

defines reactionary manhood as one of the “hard truths.” These relate to the “reality” of binary sex, gender roles, the necessity of heteropatriarchy, and the value of men at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. It is quite neat, actually—male supremacy is the hard truth everybody has to swallow, and a guy develops his manhood by heroically defending this “truth,” which becomes more and more obvious the more opposition he faces. There are two stages to establishing these truths. First, they must be constructed as obvious: simple, incontrovertible, and plain to see. Next, they must be constructed as controversial: transgressive, unsayable, and revolutionary. The contrast between these stages is what makes them so “hard.”

As Michael Knowles put it in his speech at CPAC 2023, speaking “simple truths,” which are self-evident to all right-thinking people, requires “moral courage” because things have gone wrong at a societal level. The truths he referred to may be pronounced in simple language, as plain moral prescriptions: “just be a man.” Manhood is understood as a simple fact, self-evident just by looking at someone. What makes this truth revolutionary and thus hard to say is the supposed hegemony of “transgenderism,” which includes feminism, gay rights, and anything and everything that mounts an ideological challenge to a white, male, and Christian nationalist and capitalist order. In the articles published here, ideologies of obvious-yet-unsayable truths are frequently mobilized against gender and sexual fluidity, as Kosse shows in her contribution, and as Baran outlines in the Polish reaction to the “simple” moral truth of Catholic norms of gender and sexuality. Opposition to “simple truths” is seen not as dissent but as moral weakness, expressed in Tebaldi and Burnett’s data through tropes of physical unfitness.

The scope for “simple” truths to become “transgressive” truths is vast in right-wing discourse. Tucker Carlson recently invited the notorious historical revisionist Darryl Cooper onto his show, giving Cooper free rein to present Holocaust denial as speaking a simple yet stigmatized truth. Hate speech is reimagined within these martial metaphors as needing defense from liberal groupthink. Male supremacy and female submission are similarly reimagined as stigmatized truths that must be rescued from the screaming feminists of the hegemonic left. This allows the recovery of fascist ideology as transgression, which one can then be seen to be courageously defending. We argue that this helps explain what has been called the “shamelessness” (Wodak 2021) of the far right. The far right’s defense of racism, sexism, and trans- and homophobia is constructed as courageous violation of a degenerate norm, and therefore nothing to be ashamed of. Reframing truth as that which transgresses norms does not just rescue conspiracies. It frames ideals—like all people have equal value and fundamental rights—as mere liberal groupthink and allows the far right to rescue even ideologies considered anathema in the post-Second World War order. Nazi race science, for example, once considered morally abhorrent and scientifically vacuous, was supposed to remain unsayable but now clogs our social media feeds. These latter-day Nazis are able to style themselves as courageous golden heroes of the “dissident right.” Theorizing this inversion, and how it creates affectively appealing positions for abhorrent ideology, is one of the strengths of sociolinguistic analysis of the far right.



## Articles

The articles in this issue contribute to far-right studies by exploring not only libidinal investments in status, hierarchy, and the heroic defense of society from the Gender Studies Department, but also how this heroism is made attractive (to some), shaping desired ways of being through specific linguistic and semiotic repertoires. These may include mundane practices such as working out, meal planning, and dieting (Tebaldi and Burnett), or abstaining from masturbation (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto), which are reframed as heroic quests for the righting of historic wrongs against common sense. Changing the shape of your body becomes a practice linked to restoring the natural order, revitalizing the nation, or reproducing the race (Westberg and Årman). Language itself can be worked on in these registers, where the mundane definition of manhood and womanhood becomes a site for the production of tough masculinity (Kosse) or true national belonging (Baran). Heroic registers finally, in these texts, produce language as both transparent truth and the site for the recovery of proper masculinity. Masculinity is discursively constructed as the “hard truth,” and saying and defending far-right ideology a courageous act that proves one’s manhood and strength. In the imagined act of recovering these lost ideals he becomes a questing hero, a hard man, a truth warrior.

In the first article, Catherine Tebaldi and Scott Burnett explain the enregisterment of the far-right hero through discourses of health, nutrition, and beauty. Analyzing the far-right magazine *Man’s World*, they show how the value of “hardness” is assembled and made to describe morally desirable forms of masculine beauty. The bodybuilding platonists of the far right see fitness as the physical realization of truth, where beauty is equated with genetic fitness and masculinity with embodied scientific authority. Through diet and bodybuilding, readers of *Man’s World* become harder and harder right in a rather literal take on fitness fascism. Following these simple truths and barked commands, a heroic register is assembled from semiotic elements and mundane practices that together are elevated to the status of a glorious battle, enregistering the figure of the hard man and bro-scientist.

In the article that follows, Scott Burnett, Rodrigo Borba, and Mie Hiramoto introduce readers to the global spread of the NoFap masturbation abstinence program through English-, Portuguese-, and Japanese-speaking online contexts. The abstemious man enregistered through NoFap may be a questing knight in some contexts, a bearded hipster in others, or a smooth-faced salaryman. The specific combination of elements is in a dialectic relationship with what is understood as masculine strength against feminine degeneration. The authors trace the postmodern hybridity and rearticulation of reactionary, antimodern visions of masculinity. In particular their article demonstrates the international connections of gendered nationalisms, showing how the heroic register is always shaped by interactions between global and local. A global flow of far-right

discourses must adapt to local contexts and markets as reservoirs of local cultural values and “truths.” The local constrains the practices and discourses that a man must embody in order to be a real man, but local conditions are also shaped and changed by these circulating flows and the broader neoliberal order.

Johanna Maj Schmidt offers a powerful contrast to traditional “hard” heroism through her study of the abject, post-heroic, ironic warriors of the “Great Meme War.” She offers a particular contribution to analysis of the heroic register’s martial language: social media becomes the battlefield, and language a weapon. While the meme warrior serves a vision of god-emperor Trump as a kind of sainted Robocop in golden armor, his own self is represented by a limbless, ugly Pepe-the-Frog meme, reiterating a hierarchy within himself. Schmidt’s depth hermeneutic analysis reveals an ambivalence within the far right’s longing for heroism in the ironic denial of it. She reminds us that conservative discourses of disgust or abasement are frequently a cover for power, here positioning meme warriors as both strong and provocative and as underdogs speaking from a position of stigmatized truth. So while abjection and post-heroism may at first seem to contradict the thesis of the heroic register, Schmidt’s article in fact shows how simple/hard truths may be spoken from these ambivalent positions. She helpfully expands notions of male dominance to include the manipulation of psychological discourse, including disgust and provocation. Far-right discourses of abjection and pathos are sources of power. They work to reaffirm masculinity and create alternate hierarchies, ironic underdog positions from which mocking provocation but also powerful truth can be enunciated, while other positions can be destroyed.

Gustav Westberg and Henning Årman show how the figure of the family man is enregistered in two far-right groups: the Swedish Nordic Resistance Movement, a fascist groupuscule, and the Sweden Democrats, a far-right party with substantial political representation. Through critical discourse analysis of party documents and media, the authors show how far-right manhood speaks in two voices: a vague one that broadens these groups’ appeal through a neoliberally inflected “lifestyle semiotics” of family and nature, and a more radical and coded appeal to their core issues of pronatalism and national renewal. We read about the heroic figure of the family man as organizing two sets of tensions, between the extreme and the mainstream, and between the global and the local.

In her article, Dominika Baran analyzes the Polish front in the global defense of men from gender. Examining email newsletters from the extremist Catholic NGO Centrum Życia I Rodziny (Center for Life and Family) circulating in Poland and Polish expatriate communities, she tracks the globally circulating discourse of family values and shows how “true Poles” who speak the “real truth” are constructed as ideal figures of personhood. True Poles are cisheterosexist figures who go to war for the traditional family against “gender” but most crucially for “truth.” Following the work of a number of scholars (e.g., Gal 2021), Baran’s critical discourse analysis identifies how discursive strategies associated with the academy and with the left are mobilized by the right to support the construction of gendered hierarchies and heterosexuality as an assumed

“common sense.” Here the relationships between truth and expertise are inverted by the pastoral hero, so that critical academic inquiry is reduced to political pseudoscience, and language is made to support the simple moral truths of Catholic faith and a right-wing agenda.

Maureen Kosse’s article, which concludes the issue, extends this focus on “truth” and the regimentation of discourses to language ideology. Her contribution explores two parallel conspiracy theories, “gender critical” conspiracies about transgender attacks on “tomboys” or masculine women, and white nationalist conspiracies about attacks on white women. Anti-trans politics are used in the enregisterment of the transgressive alt-right as “bad dudes” who save women from (trans)gender identity. In these conspiracies of tomboy extinction, concerns about gender are made to parallel conspiracies of white genocide. Despite this melodramatic conspiracy discourse, Kosse illustrates how anti-trans conspiracism comes to defend the transgressive truths of sex from postmodern gender through referential ideologies of language that position masculine speech as rational and strong.

The discussion pieces, by Tommaso Milani and Janet McIntosh, trace the implications of these case studies for further linguistic analysis of far-right discourse. Milani offers a deep theorization of affective microfascism to explain the persistent desire for far-right ideologies. McIntosh explores how these registers metaphorically “enlist” participants in a militaristic, masculine discourse that quite often mirrors enlistment in a broader US imperial political project.

## **Implications**

Far-right discourse is ludic, a semiotic game like football often held in the virtual and hypersemiotized space online. Like football, it shares distinct warlike, nationalist overtones and even military backing. And also like football, it produces stars, structuring social hierarchies and political imaginaries at various scales. Intertwined play and battle in ludic nationalist discourses are perfectly exemplified in discourses of gender and sexuality. While gender calls attention to the persona-building element of these discourses, sexuality highlights the ludic aspect of this fantasy of men on top. This focus on building attractive and valued personae in a right-wing hierarchy speaks to the persistence of the far right via the creation of desire and value, not just anger or resentment.

It is our hope that close semiotic analysis denaturalizes these mythological quests for meaning, deconstructing their attempts to (re)build heroic registers with white manhood at the apex of the heterosexual hierarchy. Attention to language shows how the everyday is made to seem extraordinary, so that every squat thrust is a fight for national renewal. It is up to us to remind them that it is just leg day at the gym, and to tone down the melodrama. We also explore how discourses of the courageous defense of simple truth make reactionary ideology heroic. They revitalize received wisdom, recasting it as transgressive truth in the face of power. This allows the shallow and the



shameless to seem like sages and heroes, operating a moral and metapolitical inversion whereby LGBTQIA and intersectional feminist movements are no longer seeking justice, but domination and oppression, and where men are heroically defending truth, life, and the Western way from specters of gender and sexuality.

They are thus the heroes of the war on gender, in a world in which the Nazis are the good guys, cool, and even beautiful. What may appear to be a discourse of marginality—that of the heroic underdog or defender of stigmatized truth—is in fact working from a base of great power and privilege undergirded by hegemonic assumptions of patriarchy, capitalist class rule, ableism, white supremacy, cisgenderism, and heterosexism, which persistently skew the odds in their favor. This material fact is precisely what must be obscured in reactionary registers in order to make heroes instead of bullies.

Their discourses of victimhood are ploys for power that construct them as heroic defenders, framing gender as hegemonic power and allowing them to position their privilege as fringe, edgy, and countercultural, and their time-worn stereotypes and sexist, racist conspiracies as stigmatized truths. The cachet of “speaking the truth even if your voice trembles,” as Butker put it, is profoundly different if the truth you are speaking is building intersectional feminist solidarity or restricting political participation legitimized through biological appeal to natural differences. The courage required is very different if one speaks of solidarity from a position of material inequality, or if one is like Hogan or Butker, using a sporting career to articulate reactionary masculinity from the heights of a national stage, or like Senator Hawley or Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, advocating Christian Nationalism from a congressional platform. Legitimizing the latter position as heroic requires hard work at the discursive level. Whereas the left fights material inequality, the right fights discursive inequality: their arguments are just worse, their culture less interesting, their scriptures less joyful. Despite claims to be standing for love, nature, and truth, they stand on the side of patriarchy against love, for petrol and the ecocidal status quo against nature, and for the hegemonic assumptions of the world of white supremacist capitalism against any truth. They derive meaning from these ludic and ludicrous discourses of “truth.” We must contest this, denaturalizing their propaganda and reminding their audiences that they are, in fact, deeply unsexy. The defeat of the (far) right will be at the material level, but it must also be discursive. We hope that exploring the mechanism by which the far-right heroes for the heterosexual order are constructed, revealing them for what they are, is a first step toward this end.

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## The Science of Desire

### *Beauty, Masculinity, and Ideology on the Far Right*

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**Abstract:** *Scores of male right-wing influencers offer advice to young men online on fitness, diet, and bodybuilding. Representations of the “right” kind of man draw attention to rippling muscles, square jaws, and beautifully symmetrical faces as evidence of racial superiority. This contemporary resurgence of “body fascism” in the hypersemiotized online spaces of the far right, however, remains underexamined. In this article, we analyze Man’s World magazine, a digital publication edited by the neofascist lifestyle influencer “Raw Egg Nationalist.” Through gendered semiotic and linguistic anthropological analysis of the text, we argue that hardness, understood in myriad ways, is the moral flavor of a far-right masculinist speech register that combines elements of mental fortitude, muscular strength, sexual potency, and physical beauty at the individual level with racial renewal and national invulnerability at the political level. We show how readiness for violence and the “return” to traditional masculine violence are legitimated through graftings onto scientific and academic registers, and how neofascist influencers ultimately operate within boundaries delimited by neoliberal modernity. We argue that the production of a “dissident” right-wing male subjectivity is intimately interwoven with the dissemination and use of this register.*

**Keywords:** register, rhematization, masculinism, weightlifting, diet, health, media

The readers of the far-right *Man’s World* magazine find in its glossy pages minute instructions for transforming themselves into living Greek statues: how to build rippling muscles, what to eat to become rock-jawed, how to stare with stony-eyed stoicism at women’s manipulative charms. Whether in preppy popped collars and crisp button-downs, or nothing more than a neon speedo, they become alpha males who dominate soy boys and other betas living the “yeast life.” In the fight against “wokeism,” they join together with like-minded masculine comrades in a *Männerbund*: a tribe of fearless

male warriors who pound their chests naked in the forest, go gaming on a quest to rescue maidens from orcs, or perhaps sail the seven seas as masters and commanders.

*Man's World* is a quarterly edited by “Raw Egg Nationalist,” whose fourteen pseudonymously published digital issues feature contributors from the world of far-right bodybuilding, masculinity, and health. Claiming physical strength builds national strength, the magazine aligns discourses on white male dominance with discourses on health and nutrition. The opposition of (dominant) alpha males and (weak) betas becomes the raw egg nationalist versus the soy boy. To build dominance, the magazine offers pseudoscientific advice on health, fitness, and nutrition for building a muscular physique, and it contains real and parody advertisements, borderline homoerotic fashion and fitness photo spreads, and short historical and fantasy fiction focused mostly on manly heroics. In the magazine’s detailed instructions for the correct performance of manhood, the desiring gaze on the muscular male body is transmogrified into a science of desirability. This (race) science of desirability instructs man in the renewal of his masculinity, and with it the renewal of the nation and the race. In this fascist mythology of renewal, male beauty is a kind of expertise, a charismatic power articulated around physical and intellectual hardness—anything but the object of same-sex desire. The hot, rippling, hard physiques that appear in the pages of *Man's World* are instead muscular avatars of the white nation.

In this article, we explore the *enregisterment* of the hot, hard man in this far-right lifestyle magazine. As we discuss below, to *enregister* a figure is to compose a type of person from a variety of linguistic and semiotic elements that are constructed as somehow *belonging* together. Drawing on an explanatory framework for gendered semiotics (Tebaldi 2024), we explore the ideological utility of far-right masculine aesthetics. This framing allows us to ask what hot, hard men are made to *mean*. What does their hardness signify, and for whom? Which kinds of desires are foregrounded, and which are elided? We address these diverse imaginings of hardness and white nationalist desire with humor—a statement on our part against the far-right bathos that uses “hardness” to elevate diet culture to civilizational renewal.

We theorize the “hardness” of the men in *Man's World* as what Susan Gal (2013) calls “moral flavor.” Moral flavor is the aligning of distinct physical and psychical qualia (i.e., attributes) into a single term. Hardness is thus both physical strength and intellectual determination, bringing together the sensory and ideological into an icon of idealized male dominance. This link between the ideological and the sensory is enregistered through a series of instructions for the practice of manhood that we, drawing on Silverstein (1993), term a metapragmatics of masculinity. *Man's World* tutors its readers in how to appropriately perform masculine hardness in a series of detailed instructions and in illustrations of an idealized masculine aesthetic.

In our analysis, we argue that hardness engenders desirable manhood as a physical characteristic of strength—a well-muscled “hard body” as well as the personal discipline needed to achieve such a physique—and an intellectual quality (“mental fortitude”) linked to the way far-right actors imagine intellectual strength as impassivity (see Ging



2019), often with a white marble statue as iconic of stoicism. Renewing one's own hard masculinity in this way is linked to the renewal of the (white) nation, in both highly dramatic discourses and minute instructions. Manhood as this ideologically weighted hardness is produced through a cluster of practices from speech down to the kind of extra-hard chewing gum a hard man chews. These instructions are framed as a kind of far-right expertise established as objective through a pseudoscientific discourse that indexes white supremacist racial and nationalist ideologies, belief in which is constructed as smart and rational. We then show how these beauty discourses depend on borrowings from the social and natural sciences for their authorization, becoming a race science of desire. Finally, we show how these instructions connect to a broader social vision, a pseudoanthropology that valorizes the recovery of a lean, strong body as part of a return to tradition, health, and racial purpose, while guarding against potential accusations of homosexual desire. By becoming strong, hard, and hot, you can embody male beauty as the meaning and power that have been lost due to modern degeneracy.

In the first section of the article, we offer historical and discursive context for *Man's World* magazine, first reviewing research on "body fascism" (Gottlieb 2011) and far-right sexual and gender politics, and then on the current digital far right. In the second part, we first describe our approach to analyzing the magazine and then explain our theoretical framework, outlining the way hardness functions as a moral and physical phenomenon. In the analytical sections we focus on the "scientific" authorization of a white and male supremacist discourse of beauty. In the conclusion, we look at the effects of this mythos, offering some thoughts on how this understanding of male beauty as science is meaningful—telling us about charisma, domination, and power on the right—and on how it elides unwieldy desires in the framing of beauty as myth, science, and power.

### ***Man's World*, Youthful Virility, and "Body Fascism"**

*Man's World's* images of marbled muscles have long aesthetic and ideological roots in historical Italian Fascism, which saw classical statues of well-muscled young men as icons not only of youthful virility but of the "regenerative effect" of fascism on society (Antliff 2001, 59, 61). This virility aligns bodily practices conflating youth, health, and physical strength with the renewal of the nation. As Spackman (1996, 2001) has argued, youthful, energetic men are called on to clear away all that is decrepit and effeminate in national life. In her study of the interwar fascist movement in the United Kingdom, Gottlieb (2011) shows how this was realized in "body fascism," which constructed the athletic male body as an object of admiration, and as a desirable social goal. A man's ideally muscled body was a symbol of national glory—a winning athlete at the Olympics, or the strapping blonde men in a Leni Riefenstahl propaganda film—demonstrating the superiority of the Aryan "race." Body fascism links the individual and the social body through a series of everyday practices that promote investment in and preparation

for fascist violence. For the fascist body politic to be powerful and resilient it must be made up of individual bodies that are themselves healthy and strong.

These embodied practices and aesthetic ideals suggest the centrality of gender and sexuality to the fascist concept of the nation. From German Nazism and the Vichy regime in France to postwar British and other neofascist movements in Europe, a nation's strength in fascist imaginaries has been equated with its virility, and the feminization of its men or masculinization of its women are imagined as the main symptoms of degeneration (Burnett and Richardson 2021). Theleweit (1987, 1989) noted the psychosexual roots of fascist thinking in gendered divisions between hard men and always potentially dissolute women. Women are the soft places in the nation where enemies can get in. As the Italian fascist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared in 1933, fascism demands "ardent" men and "inseminated" women (quoted in Spackman 1996, 12). Affirming gendered difference in meaning-making practices requires returning to a "correct" gendered, national, and indexical order where women are in their traditional place (Inoue 2003). Fascist ideology thus seeks a renewed social order, opening the possibility for a true, masculine, and strong modernity in opposition to a feminine and decadent present (Tebaldi 2023b). Enemies both internal and external are constantly luring women into feminism and men into socialism and homosexuality, softening and emasculating the state, in order to supplant the native (white, Aryan) population. Racial purity is central to fascism to the extent that it depends on women's loyalty to reproducing the nation. The fascist imaginary is thus articulated around an "imagined zero-sum contest for ethnic or racial dominance in which a regressive vision of the gender binary is both arsenal and battlefield" (Burnett and Richardson 2021, 11). Only a martial state that is unapologetically masculine and a domestic sphere that is passionate about procreation and the wombs of its women can protect the eternal values of the people from degradation and secure the reproductive future of the nation.

There are echoes of this fascist imaginary today, as both idealized forms of masculinity and healthy bodies are central to current far-right cultures. Bjork James (2020) shows that sexual politics are central to US far-right and right-wing Christian political cultures. In the United States, the development of a highly mediatized white supremacist social order is parsed, maintained, and policed in sexual terms (Tebaldi 2023a). Kelly (2017), for example, notes that the resurgence of white nationalism after 9/11 was deeply gendered as a project of masculine renewal, part of a long revival of imperial masculinity as muscular Christianity during the lead-up to the second Iraq war (Du Mez 2020). In the European context, Goetz (2021) has shown how Muslims are constructed as enemies of white heterosexuality in the "Great Replacement" theory, which proposes that shadowy elites are replacing white people with diverse immigrants to create a rootless, replaceable society. Brotherton (2023) argues that right-wing homonationalism—a sexual politics that characterizes Muslims as both asexual fanatics and hypersexual predators—uses sexual norms to legitimate racial social exclusion, producing Muslims as monstrously other (for more on the notion of Muslims as inherently predatory, see Frydenlund and Leidig 2022 on "love jihad").

Health is the second element of these politics. A persistent link between contemporary far-right politics and “alternative” health and wellness has been identified (see Baker 2022; Burnett, forthcoming). Many of these wellness contemporaries have clear links to historical body fascism, mainstreaming explicitly fascist ideals and building far-right community through lifestyle and health practices (Miller-Idriss 2020). Examples include Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fight clubs, which harken back to boxing clubs in early British fascism (Collins 1999); and Andrew Tate, the former MMA fighter turned male supremacist influencer recently arrested for sexual assault and sex trafficking. The mainstreaming of fascist ideals in these groups is made possible by the longstanding links of fitness and “physical culture” to the cultivation of “superiority” as a socially dominant form of masculinity (Petrezela 2022), while fatness has long been linked to blackness and social othering (Strings 2015).

Muscular white masculinity is imagined both as preparation for actual battle and as a kind of spiritual battle for racial or civilizational health, a type of “white wellness” (Tebaldi 2024). This nexus of body, health, and masculinity has been linked to eco-fascism (Farrell-Molloy 2022; Lubarda 2024). As has been pointed out by a number of scholars including Ruth Wodak (2021), a vaguely defined “retrotopia” is the animating myth of many far-right movements. These highly mediatized discourses of producing and protecting “pure” unspoiled natural beauty also produce idealized gendered personae that are linked to the ideal of a return to tradition and nature (Tebaldi 2023a). As Baker (2022) adds, these discourses frequently link fascist politics to alternative health and wellness sites that challenge medical and scientific discourses. In this article we deepen the analysis of this juncture, linking far-right masculinity to the production of both “expert” discourses on health and mystical discourses of a return to the natural. These discourses of return to tradition are produced and marketed in the highly modern online world of the “manosphere” and the “dissident right.”

### **The Manosphere and the Men of the Dissident Right**

Retrotopia discourses are circulated in, and target members of, the online “manosphere” (Ging 2019). This is a (counter)public of websites and social media platforms populated by a variety of masculinist ideologues including PUAs (pick-up artists), who offer advice for achieving status with men by dominating women; adherents of “red pill” philosophy; promoters of countertruths such as that modernity is a female-dominated “gynocracy” (Van Valkenburgh 2021); and incels who claim to be “involuntarily celibate” as a cover for misogyny (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2021) and who are frequently engaged in aesthetic masculinization called “looksmaxxing” (Usborne 2024) in order to achieve domination over women. This ragtag group of highly online young men frequently combines a personal desire for success in dating to a political desire for male domination, making them easy targets for the dissident right’s discourse of white male supremacism.

This dissident right is a loose coalition of self-described “cultured thugs” (Burnett and Tebaldi, forthcoming), including technofascists, monarchists, traditionalists, far-right



hipsters, bodybuilders, and far-right intellectuals (Maly 2023). They frame themselves as mentally and physically strong, linking stereotyped forms of desirable masculinity embodied in a particular hyper-masculine aesthetic to an imagined countercultural resistance to groupthink; they are self-styled soldiers for Western civilization and brilliant scholars fighting leftist propaganda. The utility of these external and internal enemies is that they allow for the (re)production of white masculinity as a desirable physical and national characteristic. These discourses emphasize strong white manhood as losing ground to Islam, and call for female submission as necessary to the West with what they term “white sharia” (Laryš 2023). A focus on the hard white male body as the defender of the West against invading others capitalizes on social atomization and alienated young men anxious about their self-actualization in neoliberal capitalist societies.

A dominant theme in the health and lifestyle discourses mobilized in these spaces is self-help and personal development (Elley 2021; Trancoso and Burnett, forthcoming). Focusing on financial and fitness goals, as well as abstaining from pornography and masturbation, becomes a crucial technology of the self for right-wing masculine subjects (Burnett 2022). Developing the masculine qualities of strength, discipline, and control, whether in MMA fight clubs or at the gym, these self-described “lifters” found new audiences for their alt-health and fitness advice in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Suspicion of government intervention, “globalist” pharmaceutical companies, and the mainstream media combines with the idealization of a return to the land and traditional cures to provide a fertile substrate for transforming racist, antifeminist, and alternative health discourses into a heterodox consensus about what is wrong with Western societies (Baker 2022). The pseudonymous “manfluencers” that have emerged to lead the charge by embodying the ideal strong, hard masculinity we analyze here include major contributors to *Man’s World* such as Carnivore Aurelius (351K Twitter/X followers), Sol Brah (216K), Bronze Age Pervert (148.6K), The Golden One (45K), Spinach Brah (24K), and Raw Egg Nationalist himself (216K). At the intersection of diet and dictatorship, these ideological entrepreneurs (Finlayson 2021) dispense weightlifting and dietary advice while endorsing novel forms of provocative nationalism, from the pronatalist “breast milk nationalism” to the wryly retrotopian “long ass nationalism,” which refers to the 1980s women’s fashion for high-cut swimsuits and jeans, or the more recent “Abercrombie nationalism,” which recalls advertising for a clothing company featuring young, virile men. While many of these ideas are closer to viral memes than well-developed political philosophies, they are clearly calculated to entertain, even as they recruit their audiences to misogynist and racist politics.

Raw Egg Nationalist (REN) is a British fitness and diet influencer who brings together health and bodybuilding with far-right ethnonationalism. His books, including *The Raw Egg Trilogy*, focus on recipes for high-protein foods, vintage bodybuilding exercises, the lives and practices of “golden age” bodybuilders, and the idea that eating specific kinds of locally grown raw foods builds personal and national health. In his latest book, the *Eggs Benedict Option* (a play on Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option*), he

links this advocacy to explicitly far-right conspiracy theories about the “Great Reset,” a COVID-era update of the “Great Replacement” theory, which suggests that “soy globalists” aim to destroy white manhood and white nations with unhealthy food. Raw egg nationalism may seem fringe, but it has a surprisingly large reach. REN appears in the “mainstream” in former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson’s documentary, *The End of Men*. The magazine we analyze here brings together the major manfluencers of the digital right; some of these contributors, such as Bronze Age Pervert, have written influential far-right manifestos read by staffers of the first Trump White House (Schreckinger 2019).

### Language, Visuality, and Fascist Ideology

In this section, we present sociocultural linguistic analysis of the first six editions of *Man’s World*, published between 2021 and 2022 and available online and from far-right booksellers, focusing particularly on depictions of, and prescriptions for, male health and beauty. We contextualize this data with reference to all four books published by Raw Egg Nationalist, three of which he made freely available on Academia.edu, suggesting he views these as scientific texts.<sup>1</sup> To understand how the nexus of bodybuilding and far-right politics is discursively formed, we also refer to Scott Burnett’s longstanding digital ethnographic research on the social media of his major contributors. This latter group includes Herculean Strength, Bronze Age Pervert, Sol Brah, Orwell N Goode, The Golden One, and other leading manfluencers. These ideological entrepreneurs personify the use of this “hard man” register and demonstrate its effects. Their livelihoods depend on it through selling training advice, supplements, and branded clothing to their followers. In analyzing the discourses presented in these magazines, we unpack how text and image combine to link male beauty to far-right ideology with a framework drawn from three intersecting ideas in linguistic anthropology: register, rhematization, and moral flavor. This framework has already been theorized to understand the use of femininity manuals in far-right discourse (Tebaldi 2024), and we now mobilize these concepts to analyze prescriptions for masculinity. Specifically, we consider how *Man’s World* creates an idealized, politicized male persona, and then in the ensuing discussion show how this is created through borrowing authority from existing scientific registers.

We analyze how gender is prescribed, performed, and given political meaning with work on *register*. Register (Agha 2003), simply put, is the way language “makes people up” (Gal 2019). That is, using Eckert’s (2016, 76) examples, register involves how specific words or speech styles are linked to “some widely recognized character type such as Posh Brit or Surfer Dude.” Registers can borrow elements from popular culture, lifestyle, and social media but also authoritative discourses, such as science, history, or mythology. Recent research has explored how these personae are morally marked, expressing ideals

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1 No money was spent on getting these materials nor given to right-wing causes.

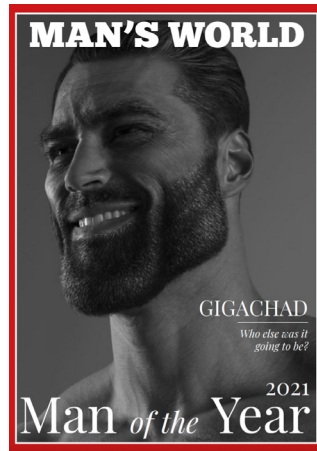
of masculinity, such as being the ideal worker (Del Percio 2022) or marrying a perfectly feminine “tradwife” (Tebaldi 2024) who never works. Here we analyze the register of the “hot hard hero,” which we have elsewhere called the “cultured thug” (Burnett and Tebaldi, forthcoming).

The “hot hard hero” is one such idealized persona constructed by a register, his virile manhood established through the frequent repetition of signs and social practices, much as a bodybuilder’s reps increase muscle mass. Gal (2019) shows how, for a register to form, links need to be articulated and repeated, over and over, to become socially established as clusters of indexical relationships in a process she terms “rhematization.” Through rhematization, different elements come to seem to “belong together.” It may best be shown in the popular meme format of the “starter pack,”<sup>2</sup> which shows multiple elements linked to a particular character type. For example, a follower of raw egg nationalism might be represented by eggs, ice cream, a speedo, weights, and a copy of *Mein Kampf*. While raw egg nationalism, or a variant like Abercrombie nationalism, may seem quite niche, rhematization links acceptable forms of manhood (and ice cream) to unacceptable politics.

This linking happens through *cycles of rhematization* (Tebaldi 2024). When this relation is so frequently repeated that elements seem not only to belong together through convention but to be essentially linked as parts of a natural whole, it is termed an icon (Gal and Irvine 2019). Tebaldi (2024) argues that far-right constructions of gender in particular become iconic through these frequent repetitions. This apparent link allows gender to be naturalized through multiple cycles of rhematization that connect the physical presentation of gender to morally marked personal qualities. In the data we present below, manhood or virility is expressed as physical “hardness,” which also indexes mental hardness. Mental hardness is expressed as mental fortitude or strength (conveniently measured by one’s commitment to racist and misogynist ideology), but also expressed through a strong body, which in turn indexes mental discipline, and so on in endless cycles that work to tie symbolic and material hardness. The repetition of this link then allows these qualities to be naturalized as innate to masculinity, and iconic of manliness itself. This process works to naturalize far-right gender ideology as essential to “real” manhood.

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2 For more examples, see “The Alt-Right Starter Pack,” Know Your Meme (website), accessed December 31, 2024, <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1193692-starter-packs>.



**Figure 1.** A *Time*-style mock cover from *Man's World* celebrating the Russian model and bodybuilder Ernest Khalimov (a.k.a., Gigachad) as 2021 man of the year.<sup>3</sup>

These qualities are apparent in figure 1, in which the unusually square jaw, prominent deltoid muscles, dark beard, and slicked-back dark hair of the model suggest toughness. His confident smile and middle-distance gaze speak to a mental invulnerability that matches his muscular strength. As it is culturally known that maintaining such an appearance requires discipline, we may assume that his physical hardness relies on his mental hardness, while his bodily toughness contributes to his confident attitude, and so on in cycles. This specific masculine icon is Gigachad, *Man's World's* man of the year for 2021. Gigachad is the title given to the Russian model Ernest Khalimov, whose exaggeratedly angular features make him the ideal embodiment of so-called “Chad” masculinity. The figure of Chad, or Chad Thundercock,<sup>4</sup> is emblematic of the man who is athletic, attractive, and sexually successful. As much a target of ridicule and derision as of admiration, especially on incel forums where he is the focus of resentment (see Heritage and Koller 2020), Chad is problematized as the embodiment of the kind of man that “hypergamous” and feminist women desire in a globalized world. The Gigachad icon exceeds the virility of Chad by being more virile, more angular, and more “alpha.” Khalimov’s impossibly angular jawline introduces an element of hyperreality to the Gigachad icon, thereby exceeding the interpretive frame of “chad versus normie” masculinity.

Cycles of rhematization are always ideological processes. They are the repeated linking of sensuous qualities (hard jaws) to personal ones and attitudes toward them (masculinity). Thus the muscled body becomes linked to the quality of hardness, which is in turn linked to the mental quality of argumentativeness, which is in turn expressed in a thick-set jaw that looks “determined,” and so on. These cycles join multiple disparate

3 *Man's World*, no. 5 (Spring 2022): 17.

4 See “Chad,” Know Your Meme, accessed July 25, 2023, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/chad>.

sensory and physical qualities as being like each other and make them appear naturally linked. Judgments about qualities, sameness, or difference are always morally marked—this is what Gal (2013) calls “moral flavor.” This moral flavor is produced via cycles of rhematization: for example, hardness as mental toughness and hardness as physical toughness are conflated and indexed in social interaction by semiotic material that itself comes to be seen as expressive of the quality of “hardness.” Moral flavor theorizes the link between a sensory quality (the “flavor”) and an ideological judgement (its “moral” dimension)—as when visible/tangible bodily hardness is seen as the expression of personal discipline and therefore valuable and morally good. Moral flavor allows us to closely analyze the links between the physical process (of, for example, devoting one’s time and energy to weightlifting) and its insertion into ideals of masculinity, which also reflect fascist myths of national renewal.

We are interested in the sensuous qualities of “hardness” in the analysis that follows, and the ways these are entangled with ideology to produce an ideal man who is made to seem authoritative and dominant. We show how this happens through “grafting” (Gal 2018, 2019) far-right masculinism onto more authoritative discourses. The sources for this authority are a “hard” scientific register drawing on racial pseudoscience, and a social science register drawing on evolutionary psychology. This analysis explores the embodied semiotic practice of fascist masculinity that creates particular physical and social types, and embeds physical practices with metapolitical meaning.

## Hard Men, Hard Science

### *Building the Hard Man*

Hardness has numerous associations in relation to masculinity. The manly man has a thousand-yard stony stare, a rock-hard erection,<sup>5</sup> and a tough, muscled body. All of these distinct sensuous qualities are ideologically linked as expressions of the same “hardness.” Hardness is always poised for violence (see also the discussion of the “hard man” stereotype of the Scottish criminal in Lawson 2023, chap. 4). The sensory-ideological complex of hardness is not only visible on the surface: it is also internal fortitude and an ongoing mental and physical commitment to staying hard, impervious, invulnerable. Hardness is a *practice*: of healthy eating and exercise, of abstention from masturbation (Burnett 2022), of stoic resistance in the face of temptation from women and attacks from enemies. The sensuous and the ideological characteristics of hardness are intertwined in how we think about the kind of strength one needs for this practice. Hardness also describes the things that a real man must do.

In *Man’s World*, even eating requires mental fortitude. A frequently endorsed food is organ meat, which is said to be

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5 See REN, “Health,” *Man’s World*, no. 10 (April 2023): 204.



masculinity incarnated as a food. It is the ultimate representation of what it means to be a man. Beef liver wouldn't be beef liver if it were just an easy pill. Beef liver is special because it's hard. It's hard to find. It's hard to prepare. It's hard to eat. And frankly, it tastes like bloody socks.<sup>6</sup>

The hardness of finding, preparing, and eating beef liver is contrasted to an “easy pill”—a reference to manospheric red pill / blue pill lore (Van Valkenburgh 2021). Eating beef liver is the “hard” pill as it is understood to be full of necessary nutrients but wholly unappetizing, especially when eaten raw (for more see the Liver King, an influencer who grew famous for eating raw liver to gain huge muscles). It therefore provides nutrition and serves as evidence of one's masculinity because *hard men do things that are hard to do*. The unpleasantness of its flavor is confirmed in how difficult it is to chew (the liver in question is dried in bite-sized chunks and sold in unappetizingly labelled plastic bags).

The difficulty experienced in consuming organ meat metaphorically reflects, just as the food itself biologically shapes, the physical hardness of male virility. While sold as a highly modern packaged food supplement, organ meat is also made to align with historical hunting cultures:

After the animal is trapped and killed, the tribesmen begin quartering and dividing the edibles amongst themselves, starting with the heart, the liver, and other organs—the “honor cuts,” given out of respect to the superior hunters because they are the most valuable parts of an animal to have.<sup>7</sup>

This feature story on organ meat goes on to explain that it is the nutrient content of the “honor cut” that makes it desirable: the best hunters need plentiful sources of vitamins A and B12, iron, selenium, and cholate to keep on top of their game. The idea that beef liver is “masculinity incarnated as food” can thus be interpreted as a cyclical claim: the best hunters get the most nutrient-dense parts of the animal, which are also the least pleasant to eat; eating these parts gives them what they need to maintain their status as the best hunters and deserving of the “honor cuts” in the first place. In a manner that confirms the conflation of hardness, masculinity, and eating hard food, “easy” food is associated with softness, femininity (and thus emasculation), and “estrogenizing” substances, as we will discuss below.

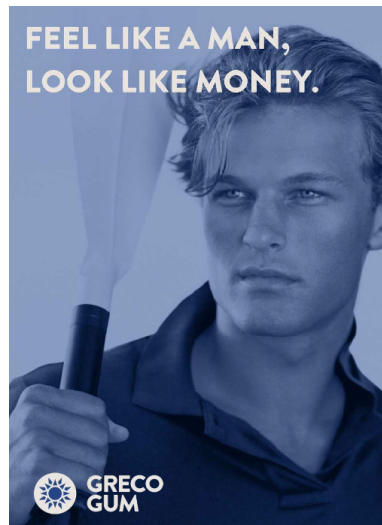
*Man's World* features a brand of mastic gum that is so hard to chew it is marketed as a way to build the muscles of readers' jaws, making them more “attractively” square

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6 Carnivore Aurelius “Beef Liver Will Make Men Men Again,” *Man's World*, no. 3 (July 2021): 124.

7 Lars Debrus, “The Heart: Why You Need to Eat Organ Meat,” *Man's World*, no. 6 (April 2022): 269.

and closer to the Gigachad icon. The model in figure 2 (most images in *Man's World* come from stock photography libraries) is pictured staring into the middle distance, his hand grasped firmly around an oar. Rowing has an established association with prestigious, old-money universities, and the blonde hair and tanned skin of this man connect his image to the “overwhelmingly white and upper middle class” (McBride 2005, 65) aesthetic of Abercrombie & Fitch and similar fashion brands. Looking “like money” in this sense is 1) to be white, blonde, and tanned; 2) to row; and 3) to be the kind of person whose jaw is set and whose gaze is fixed on the horizon.



**Figure 2.** Greco Gum advertisement in *Man's World* magazine.<sup>8</sup>

A feature advertorial by Greco Gum in the second issue is entitled “Hard Times Create Strong Men”—with the word “Times” crossed out in red and replaced with the word “Gum.” The first paragraph of the article reads as follows:

Small mouths, cavities, crooked teeth, obstructed airways; these are all modern-day problems. Analysis of hunter-gatherer skulls show nearly perfect dental health, superior facial development, teeth alignment and jaw size compared to skulls from the last few hundred years. Despite advancements in technology, medicine and hygiene, modern man grows uglier and sicker each year. How can this phenomenon be explained? Soft foods create soft jaws, and soft-jawed men create hard times.<sup>9</sup>

8 Greco Gum, “Feel Like a Man, Look Like Money,” advertisement, *Man's World*, no. 2 (May 2021): 93.

9 Greco Gum, “Hard Times Gum Creates Strong Men,” *Man's World*, no. 2 (August 2021): 94.

This passage assumes an authoritative stance (“Analysis of hunger-gatherer skulls show . . .”) that presents itself as irrefutable and scientific. Important indexical work is done in problematizing a particular cluster of phenomena: modernity, ugliness, poor dental health, and sickness. The broader ideological scaffolding for this cluster is revealed in the final sentence, which riffs on a favorite manospheric maxim from the 2016 science fiction novel *Those Who Remain*: “Hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times” (Hopf 2016 n.p.). The advertorial goes on to explain that it is the softness of modern diets, including fitness supplements (especially the Soylent brand of fitness milkshakes), that have caused the modern degeneration of the facial muscles. The conclusion is simple: “We have to go back.”<sup>10</sup>

While there is much evidence in *Man’s World* of retrotopian longing for various “golden ages”—of Hollywood, of weightlifting, of car racing, or of imperialism (discussed in Burnett, forthcoming)—the appeal to a vaguely defined ancient human (hunter-gatherers, Bronze Age warriors, Ancient Greeks, Romans, Celts, even “barbarians”) is also common. Again, a cyclical theorization of masculinity is at work: easy lives and soft foods allow weak men to take charge of the world, and it is their substandard leadership that creates the hard times from which only strong men who have rejected that which is easy can save the world. This idea is repeated in various formats throughout the *Man’s World* corpus.

The “softness” of a diet inheres not only in whether or not you have to work hard to chew and stomach it, but also (as was the case with beef liver) in whether or not it contains the right substances to maximize your manliness. A hard man is full of testosterone, and he must avoid all “estrogenizing” and emasculating substances in his food. *Man’s World* is filled with recipes and dietary advice on how to maximize testosterone. Soy, beer, and other products associated with modernity are identified as sources of feminizing “phytoestrogens” and must therefore be cut out. Maximizing testosterone on the other hand requires eating cruciferous vegetables, spinach, certain fruits, garlic and—of course—plenty of raw eggs.<sup>11</sup> Low testosterone is associated with low libido, fertility problems, and the worst kind of softness: erectile dysfunction. It is also associated with a list of moral and physical shortcomings: “ill-discipline,” “low trustworthiness,” “bitchiness/gossiping,” “mental/physical frailness,” “excuse-making/inaction,” “lower energy levels,” “self-image issues,” and “obedience.”<sup>12</sup>

This is a fairly comprehensive list of the range of general masculine insecurities that the ideological entrepreneurs of the manosphere seek to capitalize on. Given that most people will at points in their lives have low energy, self-image issues, or ill-discipline,

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10 Greco Gum, 94.

11 Herculean Strength, “Eat These Five Foods and Boost Your Testosterone Levels,” *Man’s World*, no. 3 (July 2021): 109–10.

12 Orwell N Goode, “A Brief Introduction to the Metapolitics of Lifting,” *Man’s World*, no. 3 (July 2021): 19.



diagnosing this general malaise in young men as attributable to low testosterone turns every reader into a potential client: for dried beef liver, fitness supplements by Herculean Strength, or the “Legio Gloria” gymwear sold by Swedish neo-Nazi Marcus Follin (Trancoso and Burnett, forthcoming). A lack of testosterone attributed to modern lifestyles explains to young men that they lack self-discipline or positive self-esteem not due to ontogenic factors emanating from their genetic makeup but to sociogenic factors imposed on them by a decadent, soft, feminized, degenerate society. The only solution to the self-defeating cycle of eating food that prevents you from being strong enough to break out of “normal” society is to follow the teachings of *Man’s World*: change your diet, maximize your protein intake from raw eggs, increase your testosterone levels and your virility, and in so doing see through the lies of society.

This awakening from normie slumber is claimed to lead inexorably to an ideological shift. As argued by frequent contributor “Orwell N Goode” in his essay on the “metapolitics” of weightlifting, high testosterone and weightlifting are presented as part of a virtuous circle, where higher testosterone enables more manly lifting, and lifting increases levels of testosterone. These biological processes, however, have clear moral and ideological dimensions. A “high-T” man rejects egalitarian politics and “fuzzy feel-good buzzfeeds in favor of the pursuit of something greater than oneself.” He protects his family and rejects feminism as this entails critique of the patriarchy, and “it’s rarely strong men who despise their own identity.” Lifting weights is thus a “revolutionary act,” which builds a dominant masculinity that attacks both egalitarianism and feminism. Starting to lift weights “almost without exception guarantees the lifter will reject the prevailing feminized order, becoming ‘right wing’ in the process.” Those who do not reject what is deemed a “feminized” or egalitarian social order are leftists, called “bugmen,” who “sabotage” their masculinity “with estrogenic foods/drinks, avoid sunlight,” and “eschew physical activities.”<sup>13</sup>

Describing rejection of traditional gender hierarchies as equating to unhealthiness and ugliness, Orwell N Goode argues that because only right-wing men uphold traditional gender norms and social hierarchy, only right-wing men fit traditional beauty standards. Right-wing belief can be literally read off their muscular physiques as “high T bodybuilders,” who do not “fanatically demand equality” or have “preferred pronouns in their bio” because they reject “estrogenized iterations of masculinity as the norm.” Basically, it is the old argument that conservatives are hotter—shaped into a defense of hierarchy itself. To do otherwise is to be a bugman who “vocally embraces obesity, ugliness, redefining beauty, destroying traditional standards, and physical apathy.”<sup>14</sup>

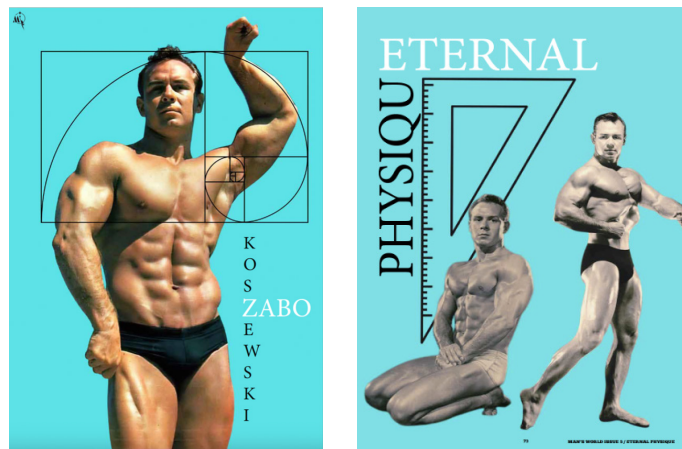
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13 Goode, 18–19.

14 Goode, 18–19. That conservatives are more attractive is a well-worn trope both on the far right (see Tebaldi 2024 for the tradwife-versus-modern-woman contrast) and in the mainstream, as illustrated by Ana Swanson’s reporting in “Conservatives Really Are Better Looking, Research Says,” *Washington Post*, January 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/01/10/conservatives-really-are-better-looking-research-says/>.

### *The Science of Desire*

*Man's World* writers conflate male beauty with earned dominance in a hierarchical and violent political imaginary constructed as fact. Their embrace of the “hard sciences of the hard man” refers to a borrowing of concepts and visual and lexical items, frequently from math and medicine, whose implementation echoes evolutionary psychology, eugenics, and phrenology. Beauty is not subjective here, but an aesthetics grounded in “objective truths.” The aim of this discourse is to appear objective, technical, authoritative, warrior-like—a masculine discourse of male beauty. Theories of physical attractiveness and beauty are formalized as obeying eternal mathematical laws, a “harmony of the spheres” that also regulates social and personal practices described in the language of economy.



**Figure 3.** Geometric proportions of the “eternal physique” as displayed by the US bodybuilder Irvin “Zabo” Koszewski.<sup>15</sup>

Possessing the correct proportions as a male bodybuilder is expressed as a geometric ideal (figure 3). The model’s glistening pectoral muscles and rippling biceps conform perfectly to the golden ratio, an ideal of Platonic perfection. As REN states:

Beauty is not subjective. From the dawn of time, we’ve had men like Plato, Pythagoras and Leonardo da Vinci who have studied the ideal proportions of the human body. There is clearly a science (or mathematics to be precise) behind what we see to be beautiful or ugly. You’ve probably heard of the Fibonacci Ratio, or Phi, which is commonly referred to as the “Golden Ratio.” This ratio (1:1.618)

15 *Man's World*, no. 5 (Spring 2022): 72–73.

represents perfect harmony not just in our bodies but across the entire spectrum of nature and design.<sup>16</sup>

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For REN, beauty is a geometric ideal inflected with social meaning. The golden ratio is observable in the most beautiful faces, where it is described as “nature’s geometry” or a perfect sign of objective beauty across all ages and cultures. The article goes on to say that beauty, as symmetry, is a sign of eugenic fitness. It is also evidenced by medicine, of a sort, the plastic surgeon’s “Marquardt Mask,” which has been implemented in a computer program for facial mapping.<sup>17</sup> On the app, beauty is “objectively” characterized with mathematical values measuring symmetries, angles, shapes, and minute differences in distance between facial features. These results are given medicalized jargon like “canthal tilt,” referring to the position of the eyes, or “orthotropics” to refer to the jaw. The measurements are also evaluated with respect to forms of masculinity, so that the eye shape called “predator eyes” is seen as expressing desirable masculinity, while Marilyn Monroe below (figure 4) has large, round “prey eyes,” expressing desirable femininity.



**Figure 4.** The “Marquardt Mask” as described by Raw Egg Nationalist.

The possession of the ideal ratios for face and body does not merely reflect an objective standard for physical beauty but, following the old race science of physiognomy ratios, expresses personal traits such as health, fitness, dominance, and strength. Achieving the golden ratio in your facial and bodily proportions requires a number of steps outlined in the pages of *Man’s World*: cut out seed oils and phytoestrogens, increase your testosterone, stop masturbating to porn, and work out regularly. Some preexisting natural beauty,

16 REN, “Seed Oils: Ugly In a Bottle,” *Man’s World*, no. 4 (Autumn 2021): 138.

17 REN, 139. REN’s valorization of the “Marquardt Mask” is accompanied by an illustration (figure 4).

which is obscured by the soft life of modernity, is thus theorized as potentially revealed through exercise and diet.

The potential for improvement is asserted to be guaranteed by DNA, as a “perfectly symmetrical face proportioned according to the golden ratio is the epitome of genetic wealth.” “Genetic wealth” here is a discursive interlinking of economy and biology, or as Raw Egg Nationalist explains, “Beauty is health. Beauty is wealth.”<sup>18</sup> This echoes many other circulating discourses that adapt the often questionable science of evolutionary psychology, which has been frequently taken up to evidence right wing ideology as Rothermel (2023) explains. Theories of evolution are imagined to clearly explain and justify all human hierarchy; *Man’s World’s* vision of predatory masculinity draws heavily on Jordan Peterson’s famous discussion of equality as resulting in depressed lobsters.<sup>19</sup> Here, however, it is explicitly stated that hierarchy makes ideal men: strong males with good posture, hard muscles, and happy lives. In the pseudoscientific register of *Man’s World*, high dopamine means high testosterone.

“Genetic wealth” aligns circulating biological and economic discourses with this project. Discourses about “traditional food” and “pure food” (Eberhardt 2024) operate as a kind of eugenic radicalization of the paleo diet, where just-so stories about our tribal ancestors give meaning to cutting out carbs. This is frequently described in *Man’s World* (for example, in issue 10) as maximizing testosterone, referred to as “t-boosting” or “tmaxxing,” through practices ranging from eating traditional food to getting sunlight (and even contracting toxoplasmosis). These are couched in scientific terms, such as “Magnesium lowers sex-hormone-binding globulin’s affinity to testosterone,” while masturbation makes you “suffer from low basal dopamine and high prolactin.”<sup>20</sup> Testosterone in this quasi-medical discourse stands in for vitality, beauty, and manliness itself.

In the world of economy, *Man’s World* links physical strength and health with success in “dominance structures,” including the market. The dissident right is an upper-class phenomenon, engaging in practices from the purchase of land to the celebration of boating to spare time at the gym. You are encouraged to “look like money,” as in figure 1 above, and to “accumulate as much genetic wealth as possible” in order to have increased “sexual market value”—and eating healthy is equated to passing down “generational wealth.”<sup>21</sup> Here the dissident right borrows from manosphere discourses around

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18 REN, 139–40.

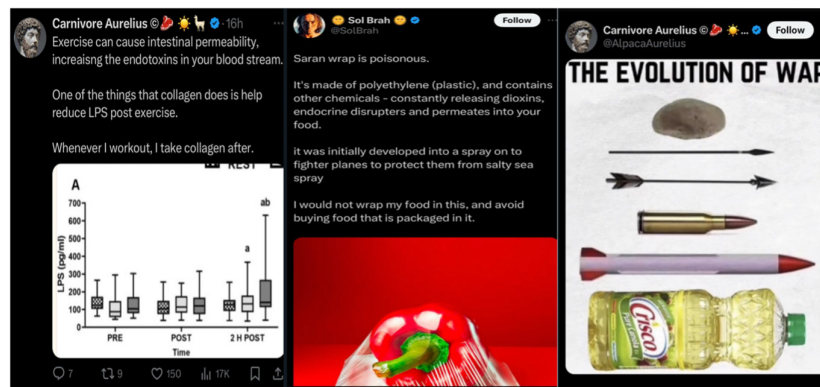
19 Peterson argued that dominance hierarchies were necessary to human society through analogy to lobsters, which he stated grew in strength and increased their serotonin as they moved up a dominance hierarchy. The lobster became a symbol of the naturalness and desirability of inequality. For more, see Leonor Gonçalves, “Psychologist Jordan Petersen Says Lobsters Help to Explain Why Human Hierarchies Exist—Do They?,” *The Conversation*, January 24, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/psychologist-jordan-peterson-says-lobsters-help-to-explain-why-human-hierarchies-exist-do-they-90489>.

20 REN, “Health,” 204.

21 REN, “Seed Oils,” 139.

“hypergamy,” the “marriage market,” and the “sexual market,” where mathematical facial regularities are also believed to govern social and sexual success because women, following “genetics and the natural laws of attraction” (Kelly and Aunspruch 2020), respond mechanically to male beauty and status. Bringing medicine and economics together, REN goes beyond marriage markets to eugenics, seeing his practice as the fight against the “soy empire,” which wants to tax his genetic wealth. The food we eat is designed to “biochemically engineer modern men into homunculi. Either deliberately or by omission they’ve demolished testosterone levels.” Echoing far-right eugenic discussions of racial decline, man is now a “shadow of [his] ancestors” and should “instead embrace sun and steel . . . to build muscle and lose fat, or just have a raging boner again.” Manliness in this discussion is “wounded” and constantly under threat from the state, unhealthy food, and social others.<sup>22</sup> Male eugenic fitness is expressed in testosterone levels, where fitness is a preparation for, and proven through, the eugenic and spiritual battle for personal, racial and civilizational health.

This register is similar to what Rothermel (2023, 2) terms “evidence-based misogyny,” that is, the manosphere’s embrace of authoritative, often academic, language to elucidate claims about female inferiority. We can see the uptake of a scientific lexicon clearly in figure 5. Here Carnivore Aurelius, a meat-based health influencer and right-wing bodybuilder who also owns a collagen company, uses a box-plot graph to prove the effectiveness of his workout—transforming this from a feminized “advice” register to a masculine “science.” With this he includes medical jargon: endotoxin, blood stream, intestinal permeability, LPS (lipopolysaccharide). Next, frequent contributor Sol Brah suggests Saran Wrap is poison, with origins in industrial chemistry, and, again, laces his argument with jargon: dioxin, polyethylene, endocrine disruptor. The final tweet reminds us again that this “scientific” discourse is always linked back to a violent political imaginary, where oil is not merely undesirable but a weapon against the white race.



**Figure 5.** Tweets from two *Man’s World* contributors and health influencers.

22 REN, “Health,” 204.



This represents a register graft, which, as Gal (2019) explains, is when a register (here that of the right-wing bodybuilders) draws authority from a more powerful one, such as geometry or economics, much like when a smaller plant is grafted onto a larger and more powerful trunk. Here the language of the market, the laboratory, or the mathematical harmony of the spheres is used to give authority to theories of masculinity in lifestyle magazines. This register graft means these images of hot men are, far from being gay pornography or “girly” guides to beauty, guides for real, hard men who are building their bodies to fight the “yeast life” of soy, softness, and beer, and the cultural decadence they symbolize. The science is there to invest these practices with authority, to distinguish them both from more feminine “influencer” and lifestyle branding, and also from homoeroticism. Those rippling abs are symbolic of a better and deeply heteronormative future, despite whatever unruly desires the viewer might feel.

### *Rejecting the Yeast Life*

Masculinity is essentialized not only as testosterone and a muscled body but through opposition to an antonymic other: normies, betas, and blue-pilled leftist cucks. The metaphorical battle between modernity and tradition is transmogrified into a culinary battle between consumers of bread, beer, sugar, soy, and seed oils, and those who eat hunted meat, devour the “honor cuts” of organs, or “slonk” raw eggs. A “civilized” and sedentary modern society, with processed food and plenty of soy, is what contributors to the magazine refer to as the “yeast life.” This also refers, of course, to beer and the weight gain known as a “beer gut,” but also to hops, which are said to contain feminizing “phytoestrogens,” the converse of the testosterone-boosting egg.

Another enemy is seed oils—the corn, soy, and sesame oils commonly used in fried and processed food. *Man’s World* again grafts its claims onto scientific registers: soybean oil is said to “inhibit” the release of “oxytocin” and thereby to disrupt “empathy and social bonding.”<sup>23</sup> The men who eat these goods develop physically soft bodies and mental degeneration, which allow the Other to enter the national body. In figure 6 we see the deployment of a pseudoscientific discourse that includes terms such as “researchers,” “neuroendocrine,” and “neurochemical function,” as well as the suggestion that soy is bad for insulin levels and linked to obesity. In this discourse soybean oil is made characteristic not only of modern food but of modern social isolation. The discourse is also gendered and racialized. Fatness is linked to softness and femininity, as in the term “soyboy” for an effeminate man. Then, in a play on the food soy and the first-person conjugation (soy) of the Spanish verb *ser* (to be), fatness and femininity become indexically linked to immigrant status, further confirmed in ironic deployment of American flags alongside the man’s claim, “Soy americano” (I’m American). The

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23 REN, “Be Proud to Say: Soy Americano,” no. 6 (April 2022): 176. This micro-article is reproduced in figure 6.



multimodal joke thus links soy not only to obesity but to right-wing anxieties about demographic change. If we eat soy, the future of America is fat, feminized, and Spanish-speaking.



Figure 6. Soy Americano!

To fight this, *Man’s World* magazine as well as several other of REN’s manifestos suggest that white American men—and white men generally—develop their bodies and their beauty, but always with the aim of defending the nation. The value of raw egg nationalism is supposed to be proven in the aesthetic superiority of a high-protein nationalism over a high-carb leftism. You battle against the beer weight, but also against the leftists, the yeast life, and the social values of feminism, equality, and modernity. The yeast life is visually represented as ugly, with distorted, degenerate faces and badly dyed hair (figure 7).

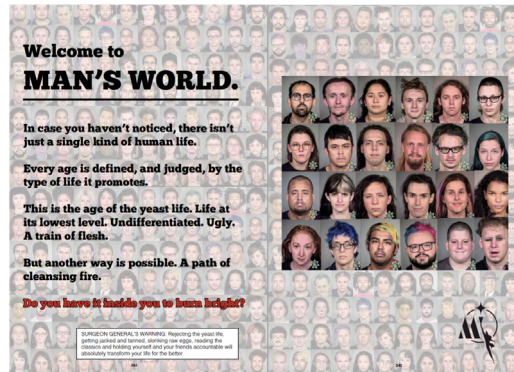


Figure 7. *Man’s World’s* vision of the ugly denizens of the modern “yeast life.”<sup>24</sup>

24 *Man’s World*, no. 5 (Spring 2022): 242–43.

In this image, eating food with soy, yeast, or seed oil is shown as sabotaging your own attractiveness, ushering in a world populated by faces unkindly described as “ugly,” “undifferentiated,” and “a train of flesh,” expressing “life at the lowest level.” As Tebaldi (2023b) shows, right-wing politics are frequently glossed as natural beauty, and leftism is represented as its opposite. For the right ugliness means unnatural hair colors, asymmetrical or injured faces, glasses, and piercings. “Undifferentiated” here refers to the idea of similarity among all the faces, the opposite of right-wing individualism, as well as to the lack of visual differentiation between men and women, also key to far-right aesthetics. In this gender binary-affirming (and by extension transphobic) discourse, the right locates beauty in hard and manly men and their perfect complement, “soft” tradwives. The androgyny of the faces, the blue-haired woman as iconic of modern feminism, are furthermore contextualized within an antisemitic frame. The fascism of beauty standard discourses (Gottlieb 2011) is confirmed in this image by the small logos visible to the bottom right of the faces, consisting of seven-pointed stars around what appears to be a planet. This combination evokes a connection between the “globe” of the globalists, and a (six-pointed) Star of David, here expanded for plausible deniability of any indexical relation to Jewishness.

This is not just a metaphorical battle. The language of war used to describe dieting (as in a “battle of the bulge”) here becomes a “path of cleansing fire.” For REN, *Man’s World* is metapolitical battle in preparation for actual war. Citing anthropologist James C. Scott, REN argues that carbohydrate consumption was the basis for not only sedentary bodies but sedentary civilization, and with it state control. Carbs are not merely fattening but stultifying, pushed upon us by our urban elite overlords. The figures who benefit from this culture are described in conspiratorial terms as “globalists” and a “secret society” invested in effecting a “Great Reset” of society—elites bent on dispossessing white men of their manliness to create a weak and governable society.<sup>25</sup>

The opposite of this governed society is a return to the tribe, where a sedentary life is rejected by nomadic warrior bands. Idealized homosocial male groups, what the Nazis and some *Man’s World* contributors refer to as *Männerbänder*, are described as the protean force within Western civilization, which went on to conquer the world. *Männerbänder* are small groups of warriors who form a close-knit tribe through engaging in battle and ritual homosocial tasks. Across the Asian steppe and eventually on the seas, these warlike men have only lately been domesticated by modernity and emasculated by globalists: the point now is to resuscitate their virility and their aggression in a new age of conquest and heroism.

The term *Männerbänder* recalls the Freikorps analyzed by Klaus Theweleit (1987, 1989), which went on to become such Nazi homosocial groups as the SA (Sturmabteilung). *Männerbänder* have a variety of sources across history and popular

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25 Stone Age Herbalist, interview with Raw Egg Nationalist, “Drugs ‘n Roll,” *Man’s World*, no. 3 (July 2021): 73.

culture, from the fantasy world of *The Lord of the Rings* to the pseudohistorical television show *Vikings*. However, the original and key *Männerbund*, according to *Man's World*, is the Yamnaya, imagined as a heroic ancient Aryan tribe that conquered the Eurasian continent from Russia to England. In illustrating this, *Man's World* contributors often draw on pseudoanthropological and Nazi-era race-science discourses, frequently imagined as the “true” knowledge, which has been displaced by current “woke” discourses. For example, in a line blending 9/11 references, *The Lord of the Rings*, and racial pseudoscience, a contributor called Stone Age Herbalist refers to these as “the two towers: the woke and the steppe,” in which older “bioarcheological” accounts of “history-culture” that looked at the origins and superiority of the Aryan race are replaced by “woke” and feminized studies insisting on gender parity, queerness, and egalitarianism. Against this, Stone Age Herbalist and others call for a history done with “the absolute precision of genetics” to reconstruct the mythical prehistory and culture of whiteness.<sup>26</sup>

### *Mythmaking*

While white male dominance is characterized through discourses of hard science, it is also legitimated through mythopoetic discourses drawing from anthropology and poetry. Contemporary alt-health and far-right movements often refer to such writers as heroic “warrior poets” with physical and mental hardness, and sometimes with shamanic powers, who will renew the culture. This is both an aesthetically and socially desirable figure: the beautiful man who embodies the strength of the nation or the white race.

Fascism has long been said to rely on poetry (Hutton 1999) and mythology, in particular myths of national rebirth or palingenetic ultranationalism (Griffin 2013). Here we see how this physical and cultural renewal, rebirth, and recovery is effected through a specific aesthetic vision. Weight loss and muscle building are not merely about looking good but the recovery of masculinity—your own, and the nation’s. This moves from a social Darwinism of desire to a retrotopian desire, in which masculinity and male beauty represent the lost meaning, tradition, and vitality of the past.

This is shown clearly in the longer manifestos of REN, which point to a return to the land, farming, and a traditional way of life that is part Nazi propaganda film and part *Little House on the Prairie*—but in a Russian twist he calls this a return to the dacha. (Confusingly, he also critiques settler culture at times, linking sedentary cultures to sedentary lifestyles, and referring to the dacha as the feminized “longhouse.”) His manifestos link recovery of the male body—often with minute prescriptions for lifting and high-protein shakes, which will lead to a happy and virile life—to recovery of a golden age characterized by strong, virile male leadership. This mythology is always

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26 Stone Age Herbalist, “Broken Open: War Bands and the Woke in Modern Archaeology,” *Man's World*, no. 4 (Autumn 2021): 153–58.

about linking of individual practices of bodily health and strength to broader fascist understandings of the nation and national vitality.

This, however, is not just an image of the past but an aestheticized representation of a desired future with instructions for how to bring about a new golden age. Here Wodak's (2021) vague far-right retrotopia becomes a retrotopian desire expressed through remasculinization and the aesthetics of golden, muscular men who represent not sexual desire (they swear) but the desired recuperation of a past. These highly aestheticized, glamorously posed pictures of men, as in the cover image in figure 8, portray a sexualized male body—an object of desire. But they shape what that desire is meant to mean.



**Figure 8.** The cover of *Man's World*, issue 2 (May 2021).

This suspiciously sexy sailor, a reminder of “the great age of reconnaissance” and the “aristocrats of the sea,” is made to stand for the sea as a site for the performance of heroic ancient masculinity rather than as a site for suspect desire. He is an object to be possessed, not sexually but through imitation of “classical nautical style,” body training exercises, and instruction in far-right thought. He becomes the icon not of sexual desire but of a retrotopian desire.

Retrotopia is achieved personally and socially through remasculinization. Remasculinization, as Kelly (2017) explains in her analysis of post-9/11 America, is a response to the perceived hypermasculinity of Islamism and the supposed submissiveness of multicultural and left-wing elements within “white” societies. It is tied to the theories of the Great Replacement and the idea that because of the supposed internal weakness represented by egalitarianism, feminism, and gay rights, white Western populations are being outproduced and replaced by immigrants. This internal weakness must be fought by teaching white men to see through the lies of feminism, globalism, and antiracism so they can perceive the threat they face—beginning first by building their own manly musculature.

Developing manly musculature is referred to as “golden age bodybuilding” and is meant to invoke a golden age of masculinity and therefore of all of society. In *Man’s World*, there are a number of golden ages: early to mid-twentieth-century bodybuilding culture, 1960s French cinema, and prehistoric and ancient warrior cultures. The bodybuilders of the 1950s represent male strength and postwar Anglo-American affluence, as REN describes in his book *Three Lives of Golden Age Bodybuilders* (2020). These men are heroic figures aesthetically and personally. These do not exhaust the heroic figures represented in REN’s oeuvre but represent multiple images that can be combined in novel ways to create different masculinities. They also share a key element: each had a desirable aesthetic that represented an era defined by hierarchy, male strength, and domination.

These magazines represent a metapolitical fight over the indexicality of the beautiful, naked male body. We might see this as a shift from sexual hardness to a martial one. First, hardness no longer indexes a possibly gay desire to possess this ideal male body but a fight against a feminized and feminizing elite. The naked male body, often a symbol of vulnerability, is thus made into a symbol of invulnerability: of purity, virility, power, and heroism. It is the soft, weak man made hard. Similarly, male friendship is too closely associated with homosexual desire, with romantic love. *Man’s World* resignifies these into a warlike energy to reclaim the West for whiteness. This resignification makes the ideal white male body not an object of sexual desire but of retrotopian desire.

## Conclusion

In this analysis we showed how male beauty was grafted onto scientific registers and imagined as relying on minute practices: what to eat, how to lift, how to dress, which gum to chew. These indexical relationships were rhematized in the figure of the handsome nationalist, the “cultured thug” whose beauty is strength and whose strength is beauty. These practices link inner and outer masculinity, physical and personal, into different kinds of hardness—the moral flavor of fascist masculinity. In so doing it also shifts the indexicalities away from personal desire for beauty, or other’s beauty, toward a political ideal.

This contributes to the special issue’s overall focus on using new forms of sociocultural linguistic analysis to highlight the nexus of gender, sexuality, and (white) nationalism. It highlights underexplored aspects of gender, sexuality, and right-wing politics, exploring and problematizing discourses that are frequently considered normative forms of heterosexual masculinity. Our article shows how desire for male bodies was made politically and socially normative, and the discursive moves used to distance this from nonnormative forms of desire. Our work is in conversation with Burnett, Hiramoto, and Borba’s article in this special issue on the construction of a biologically essentialized version of masculinity in online “NoFap” groups, extending this discourse within a broader investigation of right-wing ideologies of the body, with their focus on muscle and testosterone. Our discussion of mythmaking and heroic *Männerbänder* is also in



dialogue with Schmidt's article on post-heroism, both its discussion of ludic heroics and of the simultaneous desire and disgust masculinity evokes on the far right.

This is not just an exploration of rhematization and iconicity to demonstrate our own mental fortitude but to understand how far-right "meanings" are constructed, what they do, and how they make bad politics into hot, hard, desirable ones. By recuperating lost masculinity, fighting the yeasty ones and his own beer gut, the reader transforms himself and his own desires. He becomes not just hot abs and big jaws but a personification of scientific truth, a vision of health and genetic fitness, a voice of mythological desire, and a harbinger of a recovered golden past. Ideal male beauty is proof of the rightness of far-right ideas. No less importantly, our analysis shows the limits of the still too common "left behind" or victimhood narratives of the far-right. As we have shown, far-right registers create highly desirable subject positions—at the top of the social hierarchy as hot hard men, embodying the cultural renewal of the West.

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## Hailing, Voicing, and Masturbation Abstention

### *NoFap's Role in Socializing Young Men into the Right-Wing Politics of Resentment*

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**Abstract:** *Digital ethnographic and linguistic anthropological analysis of the far right is an invaluable resource for explaining the gradual processes of socialization through which individuals are recruited into right-wing extremism. This article examines online masturbation abstention programs in three linguistic contexts (English, Japanese, and Brazilian Portuguese) as potential sites that mobilize gender and sexual norms to draw subjects into anti-feminist and racist sociopolitical visions. NoFap (known as nōfappu or onakin in Japan) is a fairly popular trend that is understood to help men regain the focus, vitality, and energy they have lost to pornography addiction. By analyzing the ways figures of personhood are constructed through the enregisterment of disparate semiotic materials in these very different contexts, we argue that the right-wing abstemious masculine subject is produced through tensions between neoliberal generalized competition and the imagined authority of a “tradition” associated with restrictive gender and sexual norms.*

**Keywords:** register, NoFap, masturbation, *onakin*, masculinism

Discourses of hate and exclusion have taken root around the world, capturing the imaginations of countless new adherents. What was unsayable in the post-World War II order may again be expressed without shame (Wodak 2021). There is, however, no consensus on what is driving the expansion of the *sayability* of oppressive and reactionary discourses (Baran and Tebaldi 2023). While (white) men's rage against deindustrialization and the erosion of job security in the developed world has found

its scapegoat in progressive politics (Kimmel 2017), many of those who swell the ranks of the far right are neither working-class nor experience economic or status frustration (Skoczylis and Andrews 2022). Their “cultural backlash” (Inglehart and Norris 2016) against progressive values has furthermore been turbocharged by the Internet, where extremist worldviews and practices proliferate in online and social media spaces (Cesarino 2020; Baeyer 2021). Media studies scholars have shown that rather than experiencing a “radicalizing” event online, people tend to shift further and further to the right through a gradual *process of socialization* (Marwick, Clancy, and Furl 2022; see also Burnett and Tebaldi, forthcoming). The process through which hateful ideas become sayable in online social settings is thus the focus of this article. Our aim is to show how, in three disparate contexts, right-wing subjectivity is molded through the creative use of *voice*—a key concept in anthropological and sociocultural approaches to discourse analysis. We demonstrate that close attention to voice helps explain why young men affiliate with increasingly extreme ideologies.

Our approach to analyzing far-right practices of voicing (which interacts with subject formation, or *hailing*, as we explain below) is to conduct digital ethnography of the language of online “ideological entrepreneurs” (Dardot and Laval 2017; Finlayson 2021) who adopt discursive strategies they believe will resonate with their audiences. In her analysis of one such entrepreneur, Janet McIntosh (2020, 2) argues that Donald Trump uses “language—from word choice to less obvious interactional oscillations—to enlist members of the public in his distortions, breeding new social dynamics.” We want to describe how this “enlistment” works. Linguists have shown how a shared vocabulary undergirds the spread of political affects through transnational networks, as for example in constructing “gender ideology” as a threat to society (Borba 2022). In this case, the words that are used to name and describe the threat, as well as nonverbal signs and practices, come to constitute a specific way of acting and speaking—a specific *register*, a notion closely related to voice—which may then be shared by members of a political collectivity. But which factors influence this uptake?

As we argue below, one factor is the *semiotic capital* of voice, which interacts with preexisting ideological substrata related to social status, such as class, race, gender, and sexuality. Adherents of white/male supremacist ideologies are largely though not exclusively (Tebaldi 2023, 2024) white, heterosexual, male, and middle-class (Davidson 2015). The ideological entrepreneurs who seek to enlist young men in far-right politics mobilize an “affect of besiegement” (Strick 2020, 211) that confers a special status on this (objectively privileged) group, constructing it as wronged by progressive forces in society. Their self-declared—and self-imposed—underdog status gives license to what Wendy Brown (2019, 177) calls a politics of *ressentiment*: “a permanent politics of revenge, of attacking those blamed for dethroned white maleness.” This politics typifies the “manosphere”—a constellation of anti-feminist online channels, blogs, and social media accounts that is associated with a range of novel and sometimes extreme masculine subject positions (Ging 2019). While primarily a site of exclusionary and hateful discourses, much of the manosphere is oriented toward neoliberal self-help and



personal development strategies that promise to empower men with the knowledge and skills they supposedly need to fight back against the progressive onslaught (Elley 2021; Strick 2020; Trancoso and Burnett, forthcoming).

One such strategy is NoFap, a masturbation abstinence program that promises practitioners greater self-efficacy and control over their lives (Burnett 2022b). NoFap is an excellent site for a digital ethnography of right-wing influence as it constitutes a paradigm case of the involvement of ideology and material practice with subject-formation as a “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988a; developed in Hartmann 2020). The subject hailed into being by NoFap is a composite model of speaking, acting, and reacting—a register with its own moral structures and values—that is connected to a specific *type* of person for young men to aspire to who want to be better, stronger, harder, happier, and manlier. It is through analysis of the interaction of voice and subject formation, we argue, that we can understand the gradual process of affiliation feeding into the contemporary far right.

We will proceed as follows. First, we offer some background on NoFap and on the three linguistic contexts we address: the (broadly Anglophone) manosphere, the Lusophone *machosfera*, and their Japanese-speaking equivalent. We then turn our attention to defining key concepts such as voice, register, and hailing. The analytical section that follows zooms in on the three linguistic domains in the first three parts, before teasing out some of the similarities and differences between masculine icons and their opposites in the fourth. In the final section, we argue that strategies for recruitment into masculinist and/or ethnonationalist thinking rely on mobilizing the semiotic capital associated with speech registers through acts of voicing that respond to the specific historical and political dynamics of national and/or linguistic communities.

### NoFap Goes Global

While NoFap is a relatively new phenomenon, masturbation has been the focus of censure and anxiety in many human cultures through the ages. Because ejaculation occasions the release of sexual tension, it has been thought of as a “loss” of energy. Galen of Pergamon, for example, claimed that after orgasm “all parts of the animal find themselves robbed of their vital breath” (Foucault 1988b, 109). The conservation of this energy for procreation makes masturbation abstinence a priority in religious and pronatalist cultures. And even in less restrictive contexts, the idea that men should always be “up for it,” so common in hegemonic constructions of masculinity (Terry 2012), makes the waning of sexual desire a common preoccupation (Farvid and Braun 2006). When male ejaculate is imagined as “vital breath” in patriarchal contexts, being a “real” man means saving it for important occasions.

The term “NoFap” originated in the Anglophone context. “Fap” is an onomatopoeic colloquialism for male masturbation popularized in North American English. “NoFap,” in turn, refers to abstinence from “fapping.” While the origins of NoFap are obscure, it is now most commonly associated with the NoFap brand, which comprises (among other



digital properties) the r/nofap subreddit, created in 2011 and with over one million members, and nofap.com, its official website. NoFap (the brand) ostensibly promotes periods of abstinence from masturbation as a tactic to fight addiction to pornography. Its marketing materials state that the symptoms of porn addiction include erectile dysfunction, lack of focus, low self-esteem, and brain fog. These problems may be solved by “rebooting” the brain through a regimen of abstinence from porn, masturbation, and orgasm (PMO), which helps to break the cycle of dependence. This treatment is said to help members have the strong erections, the attention and focus, and the confidence they need to engage in “primitive sex” with real women, as well as succeed in other aspects of their lives (“Porn Addiction,” n.d.).

While official NoFap materials are at pains to explain that the movement is secular, nonpartisan, and grounded in what is framed as “good science” (“What Is NoFap?,” n.d.), scholarship from a number of disciplines has noted the prevalence of misogynist, racist, and pseudoscientific claims in NoFap forums. A quantitative study of young men who had completed a NoFap “reboot” program found that the program potentially exacerbated, rather than treated, psychological and sexual problems while also exposing participants to high levels of misogyny and homophobia (Prause and Binnie 2023). Taylor and Jackson (2018) showed that NoFap’s opposition to pornography is largely due to its destabilization of the patriarchal order. Masturbation is constructed as emasculating, and winning back one’s masculinity something that can only be accomplished through “real” heterosex” (2018, 629). Hartmann’s (2020) analysis of the formation of NoFap subjectivity in canonical YouTube videos revealed how a continent, self-contained, rational (male) actor is constructed in opposition to femininity, understood as a degenerative force. She argued that NoFap advances the notion of “meritocratic heterosexuality” (2020, 16), where the reward for men’s abstinence is the sexual pleasure owed to them by women. Burnett (2022b), meanwhile, found extensive evidence of antisemitism in NoFap discourse on Twitter, where the pornography industry was constructed as part of a Jewish plot to enervate “Western” men so that they could be “replaced” globally by a miscegenated racial *mélange*. As recently observed by Beatty (2024), sexual anxieties permeate historical and contemporary antisemitism. Burnett’s (2022b) study found that NoFap adherents express discrete but overlapping social visions, which ranged from violent misogyny to subtler forms of sexism and racism. While not all NoFappers are committed to right-wing politics, the program provides a space of homosocial solidarity where everyday chauvinism might be cultivated into more extreme forms.

In contrast to the growing English-language literature on NoFap, to date only the equivalent phenomenon in China, *jiese*, has received scholarly attention (Zou, Zhang, and He 2023; Liang 2024). The interviews by Zou, Zhang and He (2023) with thirty-two *jieyou* (people who practice *jiese*) revealed that their motivations for participation involved patriotic and socially conservative ideologies, and that their legitimization strategies explicitly connected to traditional Chinese culture. The association between masturbation abstinence and right-wing ideology thus appears to hold across these

cases. There are, however, many linguistic and cultural contexts that have not been studied. Burnett's (2022b) analysis of a corpus of 200,285 unique tweets from 28,580 accounts using the term "NoFap" revealed that about 40 percent of tweets were in languages other than English, with the most common being French, German, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish. As three scholars of language, gender, and sexuality familiar with the linguistic norms and social dynamics of English-speaking (Burnett), Brazilian Portuguese-speaking (Borba),<sup>1</sup> and Japanese-speaking (Hiramoto) online spaces, the authors of this article are thus well placed to conduct multilingual and comparative analysis of transnational advocacy for masturbation abstinence in online spaces.

Online masculinity and anti-feminism have been documented in Japanese-speaking and Lusophone contexts, though relatively little is known about the local prevalence of trends such as NoFap. The Brazilian scholars Vilaça and d'Andréa (2021) identify the existence of a Portuguese-speaking manosphere—a *machosfera*—but do not report the practice of masturbation abstinence in this space. Brazilian engagement with the *machosfera* must in turn be understood against the backdrop of Bolsonarismo, an "ultraconservative worldview, which advocates the return of 'traditional values' through a nationalist and 'patriotic' rhetoric profoundly critical of anything that may be roughly associated with the left or with progressivism" (Freixo and Pinheiro-Machado 2019, 19). Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's president from 2019 to 2023, is known for having built his political persona from militaristic and other staunchly "masculine" elements. While the profile of his voters is complex, Kalil (2018) shows that men who articulate masculinist thinking, including nerds, gamers, and hackers, are prominent. And indeed, the multiplatform communities that constitute the *machosfera* have been identified as driving forces behind far-right politics in Brazil (Vilaça and d'Andréa 2021).

In Japanese-speaking contexts, masturbation abstinence goes by the name of *onakin* or *nōfappu*. Though *onakin* is discussed and promoted online, the existence of a Japanese "manosphere" has not yet been suggested by scholars. In his review of the twenty-first-century *bakkurashu* (backlash) against feminism in Japan, Kawasaka (2023) outlines how anti-feminism was able to dominate an online space that feminists were slow to see as a strategic place for discursive battle. And while the political dynamics of Japan are substantially different to those of Brazil, a similar overlap between anti-feminism, racism, and homophobia is instantiated in political formations such as the Action Conservative Movement (ACM), whose messaging spreads through the sharing of online videos and memes (Yamaguchi 2013, 2018). One of the key issues for the ACM and the broader *bakkurashu* is the defense of imperial Japanese honor against the claims of survivors of World War II-era sexual exploitation (so-called comfort women), as well as against the activism of Indigenous (e.g., Okinawan) and ethnic (e.g., Korean) minorities (Kawasaka 2023).

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1 There are roughly twenty times more speakers of Portuguese in Brazil than in Portugal, and speakers of Brazilian Portuguese account for over two-thirds of Portuguese first-language speakers worldwide.

It would be a mistake to treat these linguistic and political communities as hermetic. In an age of globalization, and particularly in online spaces, what is required is a “linguistics of xenoglossic becoming, of transidiomatic mixing, and communication recombination” (Jacquemet 2005). The global surge in far-right thinking does not have a single point of origin but rather emerges from transnational flows of meanings, where influence is diffuse and operates across national and linguistic boundaries. In bringing these three contexts into focus simultaneously, we are able to observe at least some of this flow and how global dynamics interact with local ones in forming far-right subjects. We will now lay out some of the key concepts required to study this process in detail.

### **Voice, Subjectivity, and Status**

Ways of speaking—much like styles of dress and other meaningful modes of human behavior—mark differences between people, such as social class or gender, ethnic or religious identity, or geographic origin. These outward signs are in turn connected with ideological formations that assign value, often hierarchically, to gender, class, or ethnic differences. Sociocultural linguistic approaches to the production of these differences focus both on the propositional content of language (and other forms of meaning making) and on the formal regularities, or patterns, in which such messages are packaged. For any language community there will be patterns of pronunciation, vocabulary, or styles of speaking that mark differences within it. In the well-known case of the “received pronunciation” (RP) of British English, for example, the language of a socially dominant group became accepted as the “standard” and correct way to speak the language, lending negative associations (such as being uneducated or unrefined) to other ways of speaking (Agha 2003). In Japanese, on the other hand, the “softness” of women’s language has been understood to reflect the delicacy and submissiveness of their expected role in a patriarchal gender order (Hiramoto 2021; Nakamura 2020; see Tebaldi 2024 for a case in American English).

Over the past two decades, sociocultural linguists have significantly refined the theoretical apparatus for understanding how these distinctions emerge and change over time, and what these developments mean in relation to social difference and value. While it is not possible to lay out all of these developments in detail here, the core idea is that power relations are (re)produced in social interactions where participants enact stances toward discourse topics and other actors through their use of voice. The notion of voice encompasses the “voicing” of other people or types of people, as well as the development of distinctive speech styles and registers. The essence of style is *difference* (Eckert 2016, 75), and individuals or groups may stylize their speech or other aspects of their self-presentation in ways that distinguish themselves from one group and identify themselves with another. These distinctions are often at the heart of societal struggles over what is valued, and what is not. When a particular style achieves broad recognition, it is termed a register (76). Registers are “distinctive sets of linguistic and other semiotic signs that get indexically associated with different types of person, group,

activity or situation” (Rampton 2021, 43). They function as “cultural modes of action that link diverse behavioral signs to enactable effects, including persona, interpersonal relationships and types of conduct” (Agha 2007, 145). The personae associated with a register are organized as “characterological figures” (Agha 2003, 243) that encapsulate various social, sensuous, and moral characteristics. Most participants in Western Anglophone culture, for example, will be able to distinguish the “Surfer Dude” from the “Posh Brit” (Eckert 2016, 76): the former is a laid-back, suntanned (i.e., probably white) male, with plenty of leisure time, while the latter is (similarly) white, tightly wound, refined, educated, and probably upper-class. Every member of a speech community does not have to understand the register in precisely the same way for it to function as a patterned regularity of putting semiotic material in its (ideological) place in daily interactions. And it is clear that these kinds of voices are not limited to the verbal but include an array of material, embodied, and semiotic modalities.

Registers—and the process of forming a register, termed *enregisterment*—have attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention as they pick out how hierarchies of value are produced and renewed. They offer a way of understanding the relation of everyday micro-level semiotic interactions to how a society is structured at the macro level. Our practices at the micro level, however, may include idiosyncratic, stylistic, parodic, and unsuccessful instances of voice, and so it can be helpful to take a step back from big-picture registers when analyzing social interaction. When speaking we may voice a particular (biographical) person or a general (social) persona in official, parodic, imitative, or ironic modes that might be knowing or sincere to varying degrees (Agha 2005; Gal 2016). To interact at all, humans require in their daily contacts a shared understanding at a cultural level of a variety of social types and personae. In these interactions, we conduct our performance of self by voicing elements of (broadly understood) registers or (more narrowly practiced) styles in order to achieve interactional and ideological goals.

The journey of a semiotic pattern from an individual voice to a style or register is a complex one. The linguistic anthropologist Sue Gal (2018, 2019) has proposed three distinct “moments” of enregisterment, which she calls clasping, relaying, and grafting (for an application, see Borba 2022). All three are metaphors of power. When a voice is “clasped” to an institutionally sanctioned register its recognition is facilitated by the power of that institution—as in the case of the dissemination of RP as standard English through the British Broadcasting Corporation. If we think of ways of speaking English as connected to competing ideological projects, this moment of media power determines which set of semiotic resources will come to stand for high status, and which not. In a moment of “relaying,” on the other hand, the power from an existing register moves like an electrical charge into a different one. A relay is in evidence when Big Tech positions its CEOs as pursuing knowledge and innovation in the interests of humanity. The characterological figure of the inventor, visionary, or even the nutty professor sparked in scholarly registers is relayed into the corporate setting, and the ruthless pursuit of profit given a noble, even likeable sheen. Grafting on the other hand

is a horticultural metaphor, where a cutting draws sap from and combines its genetic material with an existing plant. A paradigm case of grafting is Hindutva ideology, which has grafted itself onto the seemingly progressive and liberatory discourse of decolonial theory (Menon 2022). Though its exclusionary, Islamophobic, and Hindu-supremacist social vision is a simplistic reprise of colonial white supremacy, the “sap” of decolonial registers authorizes its adherents to position themselves as motivated not by hate but by liberation from “foreign” domination.

What moments of clasping, relaying, and grafting share is the notion that registers are repositories of power and status, and that these resources are drawn on in voicing events. In the analysis below, we follow Asif Agha (2005) in thinking of this power as semiotic capital. Using a register proves an actor’s ability “to perform an image of social personhood as one’s own image and to perform it in a register-dependent way” (2005, 55). The successful performance of legalese, for example, enables some to practice law, and others to convince interlocutors that they are knowledgeable enough about the law to be not worth messing with. While this capital is evident in interpersonal interactions, the performance of authoritative voices is not merely for the sake of others but ultimately constitutive of what we think of as the self. Subjectivities come into being as social actors construct personae from available biographical references and socially established characterological figures.

This insight is key to understanding how individuals are socialized into political projects, including far-right ones. Louis Althusser famously argued that ideology is only possible through the subject, and that it is the function of ideology to constitute “*concrete individuals as subjects*” (1971, 160, emphasis in original). We become subjects in the moment we recognize ourselves as being hailed (“Hey, you there!”) by an ideology (1971, 163). This moment of hailing is imagined not as a deliberative or reflective one but as a flash of recognition. What individuals respond to is a fragment of a larger whole, which may surpass their comprehension. What is relevant to our project here is the salience of *voice* to instances of *hailing*. Voices, including styles and registers in their multiple modalities, are not merely empirical objects but *ideological* ones (Johnstone 2016, 424). Instances of voicing constitute one’s own subjectivity while hailing others—and ideology is thus an intersubjective accomplishment.

While using the word “voice” to refer to a wide range of nonspoken texts and practices can make it “too thin to be usable” (Agha 2005, 39), we find the concept useful in theorizing online influence, which is always mediated, and where it is often futile to attempt to draw distinctions between whether a given ideological element is uttered in speech, shown in practice, or both. To spend time online is to expose oneself to billions of different voices, all vying for one’s attention. When this attention is invested in a particular platform or figure, ideology emerges intersubjectively.



## Giving Voice to Abstemious Masculinities

We will now analyze how NoFap influencers address their audiences in three distinct contexts, focusing on how the abstemious masculine subject is constructed. We identify two distinct but dialogically interrelated parts: the formation of an ideal characterological figure, and the construction of its antonymic other (Padgett 2020). We show how voicing enregisters specific practices into iconic masculine figures, where abstention is associated with masculine self-control and success, and masturbation to pornography with the abject and degenerate.

We selected paradigmatic cases of NoFap “manfluencers” (Burnett 2023)—one English-speaking and one Brazilian Portuguese-speaking—and an array of representative blogs, Twitter accounts, and YouTube channels in the Japanese context. For online influencers, establishing one’s authority and status with respect to a particular audience is intimately bound up with the stylization of one’s semiotic performance (Burnett 2022a) and the cultivation of a positive self-image (Burnett 2023). Attempts at online influence may be met with credulity, admiration, bemusement, or ridicule, which set the market value of the discourse of individuals competing in online attention economies. Voice is thus intimately tied to the authority to influence. We will now examine how these dynamics play out in each of the contexts under examination.

### *The Golden One: Marcus Follin’s World of Fascist Fantasy*

Marcus Follin is a Swedish nationalist, bodybuilder, gamer, and self-help guru who markets himself as “The Golden One” (Strick 2020; Trancoso and Burnett, forthcoming). With around 130,000 subscribers on YouTube,<sup>2</sup> and tens of thousands more across Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and elsewhere, he has carved out an online niche combining fitspiration, self-help, mystical neo-Nazism, paganism, and positive thinking, where the promotion of NoFap has been a recurring theme. His YouTube channel currently lists 736 videos,<sup>3</sup> all of which are in English, as are the bulk of comments on them. Follin’s free social media properties serve as marketing opportunities for various online businesses, which include personal training, fitness nutrition, Gyllene Kaffekompaniet coffee, and Legio Gloria athletic clothing. Follin regularly discusses these businesses on his channel. His articulation of a neofascist political vision that aligns with Guillaume Faye’s *Nouvelle Droite* (Maly 2021) is seamlessly interwoven with his persona as a fitness entrepreneur. Follin is an experienced bodybuilder, and

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2 See Follin’s YouTube channel (@TheGoldenOne) at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCN0-RRaxMgh86eOwndAklxw> (accessed January 4, 2025).

3 Data as of January 4, 2025. The first author has been monitoring this channel for about six years and notes that, in order to adapt to YouTube’s content moderation policies, Follin has deleted old videos with extremist content.



his “body fascism” (Gottlieb 2011) is not only a professed ideology but a lived one, the proof of which can be seen as he flexes, scantily clad, in classical poses (figure 1) or jiggles his pectoral muscles under a vest with neo-Nazi insignia (figure 2). While much of the manosphere cultivates negative affect, Follin “asks his audience to overcome the negative thinking and depression induced by feminism and multiculturalism” (Strick 2020, 225) and to focus on the positive: to stay motivated, to fill your heart with love for your family, nation, and fellow masculine nationalists, and to revel in the glory of “Western civilization.”



**Figure 1:** A typical pose adopted by The Golden One in his training videos (E1).<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2:** The Golden One wearing neo-Nazi clothing brand Thor Steinar, whose logo features a deconstructed swastika, along with the Thor’s Hammer pendant, another popular far-right symbol (E2).

The Golden One is a pastiche of digital role-playing game characters and the heroes of fantasy and historical fiction, volumes of which line the wall of the room that Follin occasionally uses as a YouTube studio. In character as The Golden One, Follin

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4 Sources identified by letter and number in parentheses are available under online primary sources in references.

adopts the elevated, adjective-rich repertoire typical of the fantasy genre, instructing his followers to listen to his “teachings” about NoFap in order to “honor this magnificent lion,” that is, himself (E2), while claiming that “the levels of wisdom and knowledge I harbor is [*sic*] truly remarkable” (E4). The hyperbole, wordiness, and intertextuality of white geek culture (Bucholtz 2001), combined with Follin’s particular performance of Swedishness, his muscular physique, and his long blond hair, has been characterized as “Nordic kitsch” (Strick 2020). Archaisms such as referring to a desired woman as a “fair maiden” (E5) contrast starkly with the violently misogynistic repertoire of other corners of the manosphere (Jane 2014). And yet the “maiden” in question is a passive figure, lacking agency or choice, and presented as the just reward for the “questing knight,” whose abstention from self-pleasure entitles him to her body.

Follin’s Swedishness is frequently made salient on his channel. He works out in a ruined building near a prominently displayed runestone; he discusses Swedish history; he uses a Swedish flag as the backdrop for some of his videos (see figure 2). He wears the Hammer of Thor around his neck and frequently refers to Norse gods, legends, and other Nordic semiotic materials in his videos. He shows some self-awareness of his exaggeratedly modulated pronunciation of English words. This voice is an ideologically rich choice. Blond-haired Vikings with beards and rippling muscles are a perennial fixation of the far right, for whom the northern territory of “Hyperborea” is imagined as the origin of the Aryan race (Habel 2011). While Nordic countries are thought of as whiteness’s ancestral home, they are also frequently constructed as being on the frontlines of the “invasion” of Europe by immigrants (Milani 2020). This is a theme Follin takes up to argue that there are attempts to “replace” the native population (E7).

While Swedishness is an important part of Follin’s performance, he targets a nonstandard British accent in certain words and phrases in his spoken English, for example by referring to his biceps as “fockin’ massive” (as opposed to “fucking”) and referring to his followers as “lads” or (in a clumsy and comical neologism) “laddingtons” (E10). “Laddishness” is associated with a particular form of hegemonic masculinity that affects ironic detachment while reproducing reactionary and anti-feminist discourses (Benwell 2004). Deviation from RP is often indexical of rugged, authentic masculinity (Beal 2009). Even fantasy genres replicate the social indices of regional varieties, as for example in the construction from the contemporary United Kingdom’s sociophonetic materials of a north/south ideological and characterological divide in the fantasy TV series *Game of Thrones* (Viollain and Chatellier 2020). A similar voicing practice is evident in the founder of the Proud Boys, Gavin McInnes, who while typically speaking fairly standard North American English, emphasizes his British roots through calling NoFap “NoWanks” and adopting nonstandard orthography in social media posts to make them “sound” vaguely working-class and British (Burnett 2022a). These speakers are arguably targeting the figure of the “hard man” (Lawson 2023, chap. 4) as represented in British crime dramas (e.g., the films of Guy Ritchie), where nonstandard British English acquires the “moral flavor” (Gal 2013) of masculine toughness, hyperviolence, working-classness, outsider status, and (heterosexual) homosociality.

Follin's extremely muscular physique, typically on some form of display on his YouTube channel, is often shown in action in workout videos set to a heavy metal soundtrack. His "toughness" is also on display in training scenes in forests and at historical sites. Many of Follin's most recent videos have been outside of his YouTube studio, walking through the Swedish countryside. In one, he claims to be in "Mirkwood in Middle Earth" (E8)—a reference to a forest in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* fantasy novels. In others, he talks about the changing seasons and the beauty of the land. He refers to pollution as "blasphemy" and "heresy against Mother Earth" (E6). In the version of blood-and-soil nationalism that Follin espouses, this combination of the warlike with the fantastical and the ecological completes the sketch of the figure of the land protector, whose connection to the soil of Sweden demands he fight against invading Others.

Follin's white nationalism is articulated with his obligation to his ancestors through the practice of NoFap. In "Your Ancestors Are Watching—The Meaning and Purpose of the Concept," he asks his followers to imagine a conversation with the "sailors, fishermen, soldiers, and farmers" who were Follin's forebears:

They would ask . . . "What's going on with Sweden?" I would say . . . "I'm doing my part to make it better." . . . They would say "we can see that a lot of other Swedish men aren't doing their part, they should be ashamed!" (E9)

He then shifts his focus from his forebears to an imagined conversation between his followers and their ancestors:

If they ask you, "What are you doing, we can see that the streets in Western Europe and America they are very unsafe, are you taking measures to make sure you can protect yourself?" Then you say to them, "Yeah I'm doing my deadlifts, I am training my boxing, I am training my firearms training." (E9)

This switch voices Follin's (ideal) followers. Though they may not be Swedish—but from the "streets of Western Europe and America"—they have conversations with their ancestors and explain to them how they are protecting their own homelands. In this way, they may borrow some of the status from their own imagined fierce, manly, and warlike ancestors, analogous to (though not necessarily identical with) historical Vikings. The ancestors are imagined in interrogatory mode, concerned chiefly to equate the strength of the country with the strength of its men. This dialogue with the ancestors is ultimately in service of taking them on as guides for one's everyday behavior, as Follin proceeds to explain:

If you still can't stop watching porn then imagine . . . your ancestors and me were watching down and looking with disgust if you are fapping to porn. . . . It's about living in a way that you can talk to

them, look them in the eye . . . and say, “Yes, I am making the most out of the wealth you have created, I’m making the most out of the life you have given me.” (E9)

In this conclusion, the voice of the ancestors has become their gaze, which they share with The Golden One, who is “watching down” on his followers as they masturbate to porn. The hailing in the second person has become even more graphic. Much like Foucault’s panopticon, the point is not that somebody is actually watching but that one takes the perspective of the watcher as a model for one’s own self-policing. The authoritative characterological figure of the ancestor is now combined with the fantastical one of The Golden One, and their disgust at masturbation confirms that in the “good old days” of heroic achievements, men were engaged in populating their homelands with offspring. They focused on various projects of ethnic supremacy and nation building, while the latter-day degenerate wastes his energy (and his sperm) on pornography. This advice to his followers is calculated to invoke self-disgust, and to install the voice of the imagined “ancestor” as a model of subjectivity for young men to adopt. In a typical mix of the fantastical and historical, the man that Follin hopes his followers will become is the “questing knight,” who must make a “vow” to quit “porn and [other] addictions” (E9).

### ***Living the AlphaLife with Dr. Love: Matheus Copini***

From a crowded field of Brazilian manfluencers in the *machosfera*, we chose to focus on one of the most successful and mainstream: Matheus Copini. At the time of writing, his YouTube channel has more than 862,000 subscribers and his Instagram page over 497,000 followers.<sup>5</sup> Started in 2018 (the year Bolsonaro won the presidential elections), his YouTube channel has around 671 videos, twenty-eight of which discuss NoFap. On Instagram, Copini presents himself as a “treinador” (trainer) for “adventure, art, personal growth, and stoicism.”<sup>6</sup> Much like Follin, his free YouTube videos are used as marketing tools for businesses: the Lover Academy,<sup>7</sup> where Copini serves as “Dr. Love,” and AlphaLife,<sup>8</sup> which claims thirty-three million alumni, a number the company uses to assert that it is “the biggest school of personal growth in the country.” Whereas Lover Academy features content typical of the “pick-up artist” (PUA) genre (Hambling-Jones and Merrison 2012), to which much of Copini’s YouTube channel is

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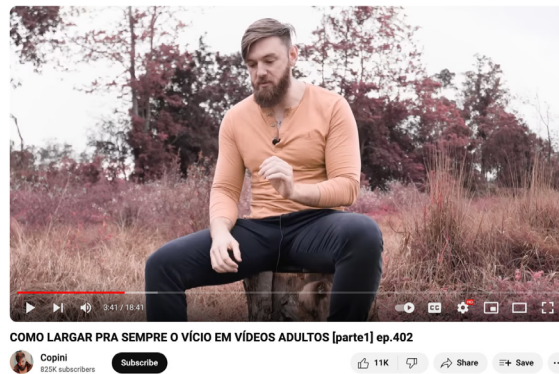
5 See Copini’s YouTube channel (@Copini) at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGPYMhoHjh3EyKUHuiNq0jA>, and his Instagram page (@copini\_alphalife) at [https://www.instagram.com/copini\\_alphalife/](https://www.instagram.com/copini_alphalife/), both last accessed January 4, 2025.

6 Translations from Brazilian Portuguese to English are by the second author.

7 See the Lover Academy website at <https://loveracademy.com.br/> (last accessed January 4, 2025).

8 See the AlphaLife website at <https://alphalifeplus.com/> (last accessed January 4, 2025).

oriented, AlphaLife offers, in addition to Copini, a plethora of trainers who specialize in topics such as finance, fitness, or relationships. Both Lover Academy and AlphaLife offer access to content through monthly or annual subscriptions, and a *plano infinite* for R\$997 (US\$193) per annum, which gives subscribers access to both services. Copini's free YouTube services, which direct customers to his paid sites, tend to consist of intimate and relaxed conversations with his audience, where he speaks from a position of expertise about how he has achieved success in life and love (figure 3). Like most YouTubers, the eye-level camera angle establishes relations of equality with the viewer (Leeuwen 2008, 139). In this shot, Copini's gaze is directed downward and his hand raised in a gesture of explanation, a typical pose for the thoughtful, deliberate, and pedagogical tone he sets in his videos.



**Figure 3.** Matheus Copini explains how to quit pornography addiction forever (BP5).

While Copini is Brazilian and not Swedish, his blond hair and full beard are also ideological choices that index the kind of Nordic masculinity popularized in television shows such as *Vikings* (2013–) or films such as *The Northman* (2022). Some of Copini's videos are shot in Western Europe, with careful attention paid to architecture and historical sites, semiotically linking him to the Old World rather than the New. These references are especially relevant in the Brazilian context, where proximity to whiteness is highly valued on the political right. Elements of Old Norse aesthetics are frequently cited by right-wing figures around the world for their ideological connection to Aryan imaginaries. The “QAnon Shaman,” Jacob Chansley, for example, donned animal horns and a fur cap reminiscent of a Viking helmet, combined with Native American and white settler symbols, while storming the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. While Copini is an altogether more subdued and hipster-ish version of Chansley, and far less involved in geek culture than Follin, he successfully combines distinct signs from the indexical field to build his own unique characterological figure of white masculinity. The clasp together of disparate elements (i.e., a traditionally cosmopolitan hipster-Viking) becomes central to the way he styles himself as a beacon of manliness and stoicism.



Like Follin, Copini frequently presents himself as close to nature. His connection with nature is, however, far less fantastical than The Golden One's references to "Mirkwood." Two of Copini's most popular NoFap videos feature him talking while walking through a misty, wet landscape on a trip he made to Ireland (figure 4). These chilly northern climes index the Hyperborean, Bronze Age imaginaries semiotically tied to notions of white ancestry and a glorious European past. In addition to these historical allusions, the performance of ruggedness and closeness to nature invokes the figure of the romantic hero, and bolsters Copini's assertion of the "naturalness" of his masculinity. The "truthiness" (Lakoff 2017; Milani 2020) of Copini's discourse is thus grounded in this connection, which backs up his claims of knowledge about what "natural" masculinity is.



**Figure 4.** Copini explains NoFap in his "natural" environment (BP1).

Copini's approach to masculine well-being can be characterized as "alt-health" (Baker 2022), which relies on mainstream scientific discourse only opportunistically and typically constructs academic institutions as captured by elites. Copini's opposition to pornography and masturbation is articulated using this "natural" scientific register. He states matter-of-factly that "science has already proven that pornography affects your brain the same way cocaine does" (a ciência já comprovou que a pornografia afeta nosso cérebro da mesma forma que a cocaína) (BP1). He explains that

research shows that masturbation does not prevent prostate cancer. However, ejaculating prevents it. . . . Men have to ejaculate. We cannot go without orgasm. This is the whole purpose of sex. (pesquisas mostram que a masturbação não previne câncer de próstata. . . . Homens precisam ejacular. Não conseguimos viver sem orgasmo. Esse é o objetivo do sexo.) (BP1)

This is, of course, a confusing statement if read purely as a claim of scientific fact: after all, if ejaculation prevents prostate cancer, why would not ejaculation through

masturbation? What makes sense of his claim is the appeal he is making to the *nature* of men: that they *naturally* need sex to achieve orgasm, and that the absence of “real heterosex” cancels the health benefits of ejaculation.

Copini’s use of this natural science voice also incorporates elements of social critique, where he asserts that what is natural is being denied by society. An example he gives is premature ejaculation, which, according to Copini,

is a myth created to make men feel inferior to women. Men’s time to climax is shorter than women’s. This is the natural order of things. Our body was made this way. But men feel vulnerable when they come before women. (é um mito inventado para fazer os homens se sentirem inferiores às mulheres. O tempo que o homem leva ao clímax é mais curto que o da mulher. Essa é a ordem natural das coisas. Nosso corpo foi feito assim. Mas os homens se sentem vulneráveis quando gozam antes da mulher.) (BP5)

In Copini’s telling, society is working to emasculate men for something outside of their control. This is not only unfair but actually contradicts nature: it is society that is unnatural and out of sync with the “science.” Copini’s alt-scientific diatribes reassert a primitive form of masculine knowledge of what our bodies were “made” for. His self-presentation as a kind of Nordic hipster in tune with rugged nature authorizes his frequent claim that “society is sick” (a sociedade está doente) (BP2)—as though he were standing outside of society, a hermit or sage in the great outdoors.

It is as part of this societal critique that the voice of Copini the pick-up artist emerges. Society is sick because of the (unnatural imposition of) women’s rights. According to him, “women only want to have sex with men who are able to exercise power over them” (mulheres só querem transar com homens que conseguem exercer poder sobre elas) (BP3). The promise of his training is that he will teach men how to achieve this power over women: a kind of unhinged, unapologetic masculinity to which women are imagined as responding positively. It is in this context that NoFap emerges as a key practice. When men turn to Internet pornography and masturbation instead of retaining their masculine energy in order to be able to overpower women and copulate with them, nature is denied. Because of their inability to access modern “empowered” women, men get even weaker as they sink deeper into the cycle of fapping to porn and emasculating themselves. The only way to break this vicious cycle is to eschew pornography and masturbation entirely.

While Copini’s voice is intimately linked with the natural, he also uses the language of online clickbait. NoFap is thus a “hack” to achieving a more powerful masculinity. The idea of “hacking” the body is a metaphor from computing, which makes the human a kind of machine that can be mechanistically tinkered with (Burnett 2022b). He also takes on elements of a philosophical register to establish his authority to advise young men not just on what is natural, but also on what is noble and right. In Copini’s view,

men's unbridled will to have sex is exemplary of their "metaphysical destiny" (destino metafísico) (BP4). The male sexual appetite thus epitomizes "Nietzsche's potency, Freud's libido, Schopenhauer's will" (a potência de Nietzsche, a libido de Freud, a vontade de Schopenhauer) (BP2). Needless to say, in the Alphalife Academy, clients can find courses on both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

These natural, (pseudo)scientific, and philosophical registers combine with entrepreneurial elements into a distinctive voice that is aimed at a general young male audience in the manner of an older brother giving his younger sibling advice about life, love, and success. In the mechanistic model of how the male libido works, spending seminal fluid through masturbation means losing masculine power. In neoliberal rationality, the individual is called on to be an entrepreneur of themselves in constant competition with others (Dardot and Laval 2017). Self-discipline is thus a key practice for "winning" (vencer) at life (BP1). According to Copini, not

masturbating or watching porn will help you transmute your energy for other things such as exercising, opening your business. It will take you to a path of self-improvement and you'll become the best possible version of yourself. (se masturbar ou assistir pornô vai ajudar você a transmutar sua energia para outras coisas como fazer exercícios, abrir seu próprio negócio. Vai te colocar num caminho de auto-aproveitamento and você vai se tornar a melhor versão de si.) (BP2)

Adhering to a neoliberal register of self-cultivation and self-fashioning, NoFap reanimates ancient discourses according to which men's livelihoods and strength depend on keeping the seminal fluids inside the body. In the NoFap register, this view is reactualized as a technique of the self through which NoFappers will become more competitive on the job and sexual markets.

### ***Onakin Supremacists: Beautification and Manly Decorum***

The term *onakin* is a clipping of two words, *onani*, which is a loanword from the biblical book of Genesis and means "masturbation," and *kin*, commonly used as a decree to prohibit something, especially in signage (as in *dokin*, "no shoes allowed"; *dekin*, "no entry"; or *chūkin*, "no parking"). It is hard to establish when *onakin* began spreading in Japan. According to one *onakin* blogger, the movement first appeared in 2000 in a popular forum for single men. Since then, it has become an online subculture. The term *nōfappu* (from English) has been used as a synonym for *onakin* since around 2018, while advocacy for *onakin* has been prevalent online since at least 2004. Advocates portray practitioners of *onakin* in a positive light, presenting them as embodying a distinct persona that typically emphasizes enhanced emotional and behavioral traits culturally associated with masculinity.

In line with the cases observed in Portuguese- and English-speaking contexts, a number of Japanese manfluencers who advocate for *onakin* also offer life coaching services. Tesuo, for example, styles himself “a professional masculinity developer” (otokomigaki no puro) on Twitter,<sup>9</sup> while Leon Moteki sells Kindle books in a series called “Power of Onakin.”<sup>10</sup> Riima’s YouTube channel is devoted to learning “abstinence” (kinyoku),<sup>11</sup> while Zin’s blog is entitled “The Blog of the Onakin Supremacist” (Onakin shijōshugisha no burogu).<sup>12</sup> These examples represent typical Japanese *onakin* manfluencers, and the data analyzed below are sourced from a wide range of sources to give a broader view of the *onakin* phenomenon than is possible through focused analysis on only one figure.

In Japanese-speaking contexts, the power of masturbation abstinence is constructed as originating in holistic mind-body-spirit relations, which are analogized through references to the ludic world of anime. And while the benefits of *nōfappu* promised by *onakin* influencers are organized around the achievement of real heterosex, in a similar fashion to the claims made in Follin’s and Copini’s videos, they are focused to a far greater extent on the beauty and courteousness of the men themselves. *Onakin* is said to make men more physically attractive than before, and not just because they are more confident or work out more. The “*onakin* supremacist” Zin, for example, lists “improved skin tone/texture” (J1) as a key benefit. “[*Onakin* men’s] skin became more beautiful” is listed as the first of five key benefits of *onakin* by Hideto Matsugasaki in the Volstanish online magazine (J2), while benefit number two is “[*onakin* men] became more manly.” The third benefit is “I was full of motivation.” Benefit number four is “[m]emory has improved,” and benefit five is “[i]t became easier to gain muscle.” Each benefit is illustrated with infographics. We illustrate the first two alleged benefits below (table 1).

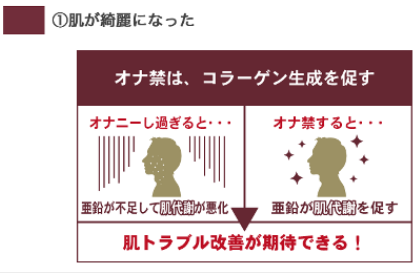
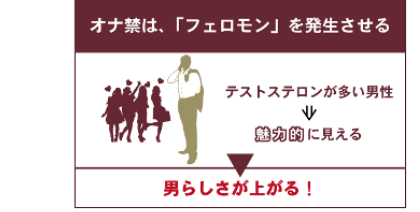
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9 See Tesuo’s Twitter feed (@kensukekintore) at <https://twitter.com/kensukekintore> (last accessed January 4, 2025).

10 The series can be viewed on Leon Moteki’s website: <https://www.leon-moteki.com> (last accessed January 4, 2025).

11 See Riima’s YouTube channel (@りーま禁欲チャンネル) at <https://www.youtube.com/@りーま禁欲チャンネル> (last accessed January 4, 2025).

12 Zin’s blog is available at <https://onakin-supremacist.com> (last accessed April 30, 2024).

Original	Translation	
<p>①肌が綺麗になった</p> 	<p>“[Onakin men’s] skin became beautiful” (Hada ga kirei ni natta)</p>	
	<p><b>“Onakin promotes collagen production” (Onakin wa korāgen seisei o unagasu)</b></p>	
	<p>“Excessive masturbation can lead to zinc deficiency and worsen skin metabolism” (Onanī shisugiruto aen ga fusoku shite hada taisha ga akka)</p>	<p>“When you refrain from masturbation . . . zinc promotes metabolism.” (Onakin suru to . . . en ga shinchintaisha o unagasu)</p>
<p><b>You can expect to improve your skin problems! (Hada toraburu kaizen ga kitai dekiru!)</b></p>		
<p>②男らしくなった</p> 	<p>“[Onakin men] became manly” (Otokorashiku natta)</p>	
	<p><b>“Onakin produces pheromones” (Onakin wa feromon o hassei saseru)</b></p>	
	<p>“Men with a lot of testosterone look more attractive” (Tesutosuteron ga ōi danse miryokuteki ni mieru)</p>	
<p><b>“Increases masculinity!” (Otokorashi-sa agaru!)</b></p>		

**Table 1.** The first two benefits of *onakin* (J2).

The voice adopted here by Matsugasaki is closely linked to that of cosmetic advertising. As is the case around the world, the Japanese cosmetics industry relies heavily on the deployment of language that *sounds* scientific, combined with the enforcement of strictly gendered beauty norms, to sell its products (Lestari 2020). The promise that men will be more handsome and masculine compared to their *pre-onakin* days is vividly illustrated in the first infographic: in the left-hand image, the skin is visibly pockmarked and threatening vertical lines seem to be raining down on the excessive masturbator, perhaps bringing down his zinc levels, whereas the *onakin* man on the right has skin so clear and bright it twinkles. This hyperbolic and binary world is another familiar indicator of cosmetics advertising. In the second infographic, it is noteworthy that “increases masculinity” is visually connected to a man with dark slacks and a white shirt, jacket slung over his shoulder. The figure of the “salaryman” indexed in this image has been a key characterological figure associated with hegemonic



masculinity in Japan (Hidaka 2010). The figures of the schoolgirl-like women in the background, whose attention is all focused on the salaryman, are unable to control their love for him (evidenced by the outpouring of heart symbols) as he is exuding a masculinity characterized by the biological terms “pheromones” and “testosterone.” Though the arrows in both infographics index simple cause-effect relationships between masturbation abstinence and increased attractiveness, these claims are not backed up by any scientific citations; they are mobilized simply for the semiotic capital of the scientific-sounding language.

Other *onakin* influencers claim that *nōfappu* results in hair growth and prevents balding while reducing facial and body hair and eliminating body odor. These appealing qualities are highly sought after in Japan, where men with smooth skin, no facial hair, a full head of glossy straight hair, and no body odor are considered ideal. These physical signs are imagined by practitioners of *onakin* as part of a broader suite of characteristics they develop through abstinence from masturbation. These include self-presentation as polite and decorous. Not only would it be impolite to consume porn and thus develop distorted (i.e., sexualized and objectified) notions about women, but abstainers such as this one, on the Go-Chan-Neru online forum, construct masturbation as unhygienic too:

Someone said that *onakin* is a real etiquette for women. Acting on real women without forbidding masturbation is the same as going to the proctologist with poop in your butthole, or going to the dentist without brushing your teeth and having them covered in plaque. (Dareka ga ittakedo, onaero-kin tte genjitsu no josei e no echikettoda yo na. Onaero kin sezu genjitsu no josei to tai suru no wa kōmon-ka iku no ni oshirinoana ni unchi tsuketa mama ittari, haisha-san iku no ni ha o migakazu, shikō-darake de ittari suru no to onaji kotoda.) (J3)

Having masturbated to porn is presented here as being something putrid—like fecal matter or dental plaque—knowledge of which should be profoundly embarrassing to a man who values his reputation in the eyes of women. Much in the same way that one would not inflict one’s feces on a proctologist or plaque on a dentist, one would not embarrass oneself by being a masturbator having sex with a real woman. There is a clear echo here of worries about body odor. While *onakin* discourse is not as explicitly connected to masculinist and right-wing ideology as in other contexts, some influencers position women as lacking agency and serving the sole purpose of satisfying male needs, which men become entitled to due to their *nōfappu* practice.

Similar to The Golden One’s voicing of characterological traits from gaming cultures, *onakin* uses the repertoire of digital gaming to transfer semiotic capital to masturbation abstinence. In repeated references to the Dragon Ball anime media franchise, experienced practitioners of *onakin* refer to the practice as turning them

into “Saiyan” warriors. This fictional “race” of warriors is valued for their love of battle and unique martial skills. In a post where he professes to have not masturbated for 124 days, Yukito claims to have achieved the “Super Saiyan effect” (J4). He explains that when practicing abstention, “the body is literally a Saiyan, but the mind is like a Bodhisattva” (*karada wa mojidōri Saiyajin, shikashi kokoro wa Bosatsu no yō ni nari*). The combination of physical strength and fierceness with an enlightened consciousness is illustrated by Yukito with an image that has been reproduced all over the Internet in various contexts from bodybuilding to Christian sites (figure 5). In the image, we see the naked torso of a young man who appears to both be filled with and surrounded by flames. At the focal point of his clenched fist, a process of physical disintegration evinces both the enormous power that is coming from within him and his ability to overcome the separation of mind and body.



**Figure 5.** “Super Saiyan” status as represented by Yukito (J4).

This mystical-fantastical image of the “superpowers” that are unlocked through NoFap is typical of the “role-player” myth motivating masturbation abstention (Burnett 2022b). What is distinctive in the Japanese-speaking context, however, is the extent to which the mind-body-spirit interaction is theorized using the scientific and esoteric traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism, including references to *ki* or *chi* (“energy” in Japanese or Chinese), chakras, and practices such as yoga. In his tweet (figure 6), for example, Tesuo states:

When the 1st to 7th chakras were activated, and the 8th chakra was activated, I was able to exert such power that was beyond human ability. (*Dai ichi ~ dai nana chakura ga kassei-ka shite, dai 8 chakura ga kassei-ka suruto mō hontōni ningendewa naku naru kurai no pawā o hakki dekita.*) (J5)



**Figure 6.** Activating all of the chakras (J5).

Tesuo's first-person testimony of the benefits of *nōfappu* is combined with drawings of the chakras and a still from *Dragon Ball* of a Saiyan warrior. In other *onakin* online spaces, a quote from the famous Hindu guru Sri Swami Sivananda is reproduced:

One drop of semen is made from forty drops of blood. The energy expended in one act of sexual intercourse is equivalent to the energy expended in 24 hours of intellectual work, and comparable to the energy expended in 3 days of physical labor. (Itteki no seieki wa yonjuttteki no ketsueki kara tsukura reru. Ikkai no seikō de tsuiyasu reru enerugī wa, nijūyōjikan no chiteki sagyō de tsuiyasu enerugī ni hitoshiku, mikkakan no nikutai rōdō de tsuiyasu enerugī ni hitteki suru.) (J6)

Meditation, yoga, and breathing techniques are all advocated as part of correct *onakin* practice. The status and authority of figures such as Sivananda, as well as the ancient scientific traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, are thus deployed to infuse the discourses of the *onakin* influencers with a guru-like power rooted in anatomy, medical science, and quantification. The precise equivalences between drops of semen and drops of blood speak to a precision of knowledge, and to what every masturbatory act actually costs. The voicing of the guru is however combined with the pop-cultural references of anime and manga, which establish the guru as a peer whose guidance may be trusted as coming from a “player” facing similar life challenges to other young men.

### Visions of Abjection: Monkeys, Castrati, and Beta Leftists

The figures of masculine personhood that NoFap and *onakin* influencers hail into being are *iconic signs* in that they do not merely point to the ideal man (as *indexical signs* do) but resemble or compose him (Gal 2016). The icons constructed by Follin, Copini, and the *onakin* influencers are similar but not identical; they also share similar and nonidentical *antonymic icons*. This is a class of signs whose “main semiotic force is to invoke iconic opposites” (Padgett 2020, 431) for moral and ideological projects, and thus for the elaboration and clarification of the desired icon. The abstemious man has what his opposite does not. In NoFap registers, men who masturbate are central and oppositional characterological figures. It is precisely masturbators’ weakness, their sickness, their addiction, their failure, and their moral abjection that position manfluencers as experts able to cultivate and channel their pure masculine power. An Althusserian flash of recognition in the construction of this figure is targeted. It is precisely because young men *fear* that they might be or become this abject figure that they pay attention to advocates of masturbation abstinence.

The world of The Golden One is built out of a stark contrast between the “questing knight,” who follows his teachings, and the “beta leftist,” who rejects them. The former is on “the glorious path,” while the latter follows the “path of infamy” (E3). In fapping to porn, he has placed himself “in the metaphysical position of a cuck” (E4). “Cuck” is a common term in the manosphere and refers to failure to prevent the (female) object of one’s desire from having sex with somebody else—and thus to masculine failure more broadly conceived.<sup>13</sup> The voicing of ancestors in implicit, and explicit instances of hailing invoke shame at being “beta” (a substandard man), “leftist” (not protecting the homeland), and a “cuck.” This combination of the manospheric lexicon with the language of fantasy role-playing games and historical fiction relies on the familiarity of the audience with these worlds, and their emotional investment in games and epic narratives. The charge from these fantasy and archaic registers and the register of the transgressive world of the manosphere is relayed into a mode of action that includes NoFap. Relays from these registers build Follin’s authority to speak about how the world looks to young men who spend a lot of their time behind their computer screens, and who long to have the muscled body and (apparently) stable and comfortable family life he has.

As Copini puts it, “masturbation and pornography transform you into the kind of man they want you to be: a castrated one” (BP2). In this typical gesture to a shady “they” working behind the scenes to undermine (Western) men, Copini invokes castration anxiety, attaching the practice of masturbation abstinence to a reclamation

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13 As Kosse (2022) explains, “cuck” is also a highly racialized term—the person being cucked is typically constructed as white, and the man having sex with the desired woman as Black.

of the phallus. As his voice is constructed almost entirely from elements that speak to masculine anxieties about success in life and love, this invoking of a conspiratorial register in constructing the antonymic icon of the eunuch offers an explanatory structure to his followers that confirms the figure of the “natural” scientist and Nordic hipster. Avoiding castration (by “them”) enables a reclamation of our “natural” masculinity. *Onakin* manfluencers, on the other hand, commonly criticize individuals who fail to practice *onakin* as *onazaru* (masturbating monkeys). Given the reliance on grafting *onakin* discourses onto cosmetic and decorous registers, the fear invoked here is clearly that of being the degenerate subhuman monkey, who has bad skin, body odor, poop in his buttock, and plaque on his teeth. These (all-too-human) failings speak to anxieties about the body not uncommon in young men. Moreover, the category of the *onazaru* is a proto-supremacist one in that it classifies men who do not practice *onakin* as occupying a less-than-human position on the status hierarchy.

What is clear in all three cases is that manfluencers mobilize the semiotic capital of existing registers in ways that establish their authority with their audiences, who believe they will help them address their masculine insecurities. The Golden One stands in the world of role-playing games and fantasy novels while flexing his impressive physique, instantiating the desired figure for geeky young men alienated from mainstream representations of masculinity. Copini walks or sits with his followers like an older brother, explaining to them that if they cannot have sex with the woman they desire, it is because of shady forces ranged against them. And *onakin* influencers focus on building the beautiful and decorous figure of the salaryman, fighting against feared degeneration in the figure of the *onazaru*.

## Conclusion

Gal (2021) argues that moments of enregisterment reveal the *authorization* of far-right discourses in everyday interactions. We suggest that such authorization relies on interlocutors’ shared cultural knowledge of the location of desired semiotic capital. While masculine insecurities about sex, relationships, and occupying hegemonic masculine roles can be taken for granted across many contexts, knowledge of the specific anxieties of role-playing fantasy geeks, young white Brazilians, or Japanese anime fans is required by online influencers to engage in the work of composing a desired figure of personhood and its antonymic other. This work of composition consists of the performance of *voices*—multimodal styles, registers, and biographical idiosyncrasies—that cohere into the opposite poles of desire and revulsion. It is in this starkly binary approach, and in the mobilization of affects of desire and disgust, that masturbation abstention is a particularly interesting and powerful practice.

In her online ethnography of chatrooms and forums where racist content (from memes to acts of terror) is shared and discussed, Melody Devries (2021, 239) argues that “participatory action—regardless of intent—leads to the construction of political identities that script further violent or racist action.” People may thus start out seeking



community or discussion, and through their participation construct identities far different from those they had previously. We would argue that NoFap is exemplary of participatory action (even if it is action to avoid masturbation), which involves young men who desire a muscular physique or sexual success, and whose anxieties about masculine failures evolve into a masculinist and/or racist subjectivity. This desire is made possible by the construction of figures of personhood by online manfluencers, and the gradual process of enlistment into far-right subjectivity that these figures enable forms the basis for the rapid expansion of the sayability of far-right discourses in the contemporary moment.

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## Online Primary Sources

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### *English Data*

Code	Platform & Influencer	Page Title	URL	Date
E1	YouTube (The Golden One)	Eternal Glory	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e86WvAX26dM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e86WvAX26dM</a>	Oct. 18, 2014
E2	YouTube (The Golden One)	The Pornography Question. The Solution—Easy Decisions vs Hard Decisions	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbnVlx0t1-Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbnVlx0t1-Y</a>	May 1, 2017
E3	YouTube (The Golden One)	Why I Hate Porn and Why You Should Stop Watching It	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guc9gUOlls">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guc9gUOlls</a>	June 14, 2017
E4	YouTube (The Golden One)	Big Man Tyrone and The Golden One Have An Important Message. No Porn	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpiZdjByWmo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpiZdjByWmo</a>	Aug. 29, 2018
E5	YouTube (The Golden One)	Incels: “I Don’t Look Good Enough To Get A Girlfriend”—It’s Not Primarily About Your Looks, Brahs	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Myg8G3QadgM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Myg8G3QadgM</a>	May 1, 2019
E6	YouTube (The Golden One)	I Cannot Endorse This Barbarism With My Silence—Heresy Against Mother Earth	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_qGqlHorIg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_qGqlHorIg</a>	Feb. 19, 2019
E7	YouTube (The Golden One)	Is Europe Lost? How Can Europe Be Saved?	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbPhMfNY6rY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbPhMfNY6rY</a>	Apr. 10, 2020
E8	YouTube (The Golden One)	Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter. Slave Morality and Self-Improvement	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsitSdRz1N0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsitSdRz1N0</a>	May 1, 2020
E9	YouTube (The Golden One)	Your Ancestors Are Watching—The Meaning and Purpose of the Concept	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNl8rtOU5p0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNl8rtOU5p0</a>	June 20, 2020

E10	YouTube (The Golden One)	No Drink December—Are You In? A Note on Alcohol and Drunkenness	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUA1vjZ8B30">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUA1vjZ8B30</a>	Dec. 1, 2020
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***Brazilian Portuguese Data***

Code	Platform & Influencer	Page Title	URL	Date
BP1	YouTube (Matheus Copini)	NoFap   The Greatest Energy Hack Ever Studied	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_Dhk6KfdXI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0_Dhk6KfdXI</a>	Apr. 4, 2019
BP2	YouTube (Matheus Copini)	NOFAP   Understand The REAL REASONS FOR THIS PRACTICE	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAtArwL0KR4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAtArwL0KR4</a>	July 4, 2019
BP3	YouTube (Matheus Copini)	ESSA IDEIA ESTÓICA MUDOU MINHA VIDA PRA SEMPRE   ep.370	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iK2gQtFivE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iK2gQtFivE</a>	Apr. 28, 2022
BP4	YouTube (Matheus Copini)	SEUS T3ST1CUL0S ENCOLHEM toda vez que tu faz isso . . .   ep.373	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s4PBzlSXRQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_s4PBzlSXRQ</a>	May 15, 2022
BP5	YouTube (Matheus Copini)	COMO LARGAR PRA SEMPRE O VÍCIO EM VÍDEOS ADULTOS (parte1) ep.402	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnZs1Z-_Q9o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnZs1Z-_Q9o</a>	Sep. 4, 2022

***Japanese Data***

Code	Platform & Influencer	Page Title	URL	Date
J1	Onakin Supremacist (blog)	Homepage	<a href="https://onakin-supremacist.com">https://onakin-supremacist.com</a>	—

J2	Volstanish (by Volstar brand)— Hideto Matsugasaki (online magazine)	Summary of benefits, methods, and tips for refraining from masturbation! Become a “popular man.”	<a href="https://volstar-official.jp/media/column/masturbation-prohibition-skill/">https://volstar-official.jp/media/column/masturbation-prohibition-skill/</a>	Jan. 1, 2020
J3	Go-Chan-Neru (discussion forum)	Let’s seriously investigate the effects of no masturbation in the summer of 2021	<a href="https://fate.5ch.net/test/read.cgi/keihatsu/1627137125/">https://fate.5ch.net/test/read.cgi/keihatsu/1627137125/</a>	Aug. 7, 2021
J4	Rabit-mask-On-akin—Yukito (blog)	[124th day of masturbation ban] Summary of what we currently know about the conditions for obtaining the Super Saiyan effect	<a href="https://rabitmask-onakin.hatenablog.com/entry/bonus-game">https://rabitmask-onakin.hatenablog.com/entry/bonus-game</a>	Dec. 12, 2017
J5	Twitter (@kensukekintore)	n/a	<a href="https://twitter.com/kensukekintore/status/1317691671677530112">https://twitter.com/kensukekintore/status/1317691671677530112</a>	Oct. 18, 2020
J6	NoFapJapan (blog)	In fact, the author, who has been using NoFap for 6 months, has summarized “What is NoFap?” using NoFap Power	<a href="https://onakinjapan.wordpress.com/ブログ/">https://onakinjapan.wordpress.com/ブログ/</a>	Feb. 25, 2018

## Limbless Warriors and Foaming Liberals

### *The Allure of Post-Heroism in Far-Right Memes*

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**Abstract:** *In light of the so-called Great Meme War, a meme-based propaganda campaign waged in favor of Donald Trump's 2016 candidacy, this article identifies a type of disembodied far-right "meme warrior" that ironically denies longings for heroism. This ambivalent stance toward heroic masculine ideals, which characterizes the meme warriors' (self-)portraits, stands in stark contrast to more serious traditional far-right heroic imaginaries. This phenomenon is discussed in relation to the notion of the post-heroic, a concept used in military studies to describe the shrinking willingness and (perceived) need to sacrifice one's life in combat. The second part of the article explores the construction of a ludic collective heroism in the alt-right's responses to Shia LaBeouf's "He Will Not Divide Us" (HWNDU) project, which was conceived as a participatory video work in public space inviting people to repeat those words while gazing into a camera. The article employs a psychoanalytic depth-hermeneutic method; it asks how "post-heroic" identities created collectively online by the far right might be found alluring on a wider scale.*

**Keywords:** meme war, meme warrior, alt-right, post-heroism, masculinity, far-right irony, Donald Trump

### **Introduction: A New Genre of (Ironic) Meme Warriors**

Nazi and neo-Nazi propaganda is commonly associated with an unambiguously serious approach to heroism that leaves no room for doubt about the fascist man's own steadfast heroic-masculine qualities. Femininity, and anything related to it, is perceived as an existential threat to the fantasy of a steely body and unyielding "soldierly masculinity," which Klaus Theweleit (2019) famously identified as the sexual and psychological prerequisite for Nazism. The feminine is, thus, warded off aggressively and projected onto others: Jews, homosexuals, trans- and gender-nonconforming people, and the Sinti and Romani, among others, who were—and still are—hatefully caricatured as "effeminate" by both online and offline strands of the far right. Drawing on Theweleit's work, Jacob Johanssen (2022) has argued that in the orbit of the manosphere the

invocation of fascism continues to be deeply intertwined with a yearning for the soldier's body. Further, by using denigrating battle cries such as "cuckservatives" (A'Lee Frost 2015) or "liberal crybabies and snowflakes" (McIntosh 2020), white nationalists and the alt-right have tried to claim a superior manliness as compared with their political opponents, whom they brand as weak and "unmanly."<sup>1</sup>

However, as I will show in this article, the contemporary far right does not solely conjure up the fantasy of an impermeable soldierly body, nor does it only ascribe heroic insufficiencies to others. Far-right "meme warriors" express a much more ambivalent relationship to their own soldierly and heroic (body) fantasies. As "fighters" in the so-called Great Meme War, a propaganda campaign in favor of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential candidacy, these users evinced a partly (self-)ironic relationship to their own (unfulfilled) longings for heroism. This may seem surprising because irony and humor, as Ulrich Bröckling (2020, 51) notes, are usually considered "poison for heroic emotionalism."<sup>2</sup> The meme warriors' (self-)portraits oscillate between an acknowledgement of (unsatisfied) heroic desires on the one hand and an ironic denial thereof on the other, often playfully exhibiting the contrast between deadly "real wars" and hazard-free disembodied "online warfare."

In this article, I conceptualize the ambivalent figure of the "meme warrior," which serves to contain longings for heroic excitement without requiring any bodily risk, as a cultural manifestation of a more general "post-heroic" sentiment. I extend my earlier reflections on this phenomenon (Schmidt 2021b, 2022) by shifting the focus to the meme warriors' often surprisingly emasculated, disembodied physical guise. The notion of the "post-heroic" was first used in military studies in order to describe the shrinking willingness to sacrifice one's own life (Ignatieff 2001, 177) or that of one's children (Luttwak 1995, 115) for the purposes of war in Western societies of the post-Cold War era. More recently it has been associated with automated war technologies such as "unmanned" drones (Enemark 2014, 20), which tend to render superfluous the sacrifice of the (male) warrior body, given that their operation does not entail any physical risk. In memetic warfare—which is considered a means of psychological warfare (Finkelstein 2011)—the image of the "warrior" moves even further away from the brutal reality of combat, touching it only on a representational level. Memes often half-jokingly appropriate references to historical or fictional wars (taken from films, TV series, video games, and so forth) in order to picturize virtual battles. Yet, rather than being mere illustrations of online warfare, those memes possess a dual character in that they are marked by an intrinsic tension between representational and self-referential qualities on the one hand, and their performative efficacy on the other, "serving both as a weapon and as the linguistic or pictorial vehicle for commentating on the warfare itself" (see

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1 For a critique of the term "alt-right," see Maureen Kosse's contribution to this issue.

2 All translations from German sources are by the author.



figure 1) (Peacock 2022, 85). In this, they speak to what Constantine Nakassis (2023, 5) has termed the “ontological politics of the image,” where memetic battle opens up the “heterogeneous possibilities of the image, a struggle about what an image is.”



**Figure 1.** These memetic portraits can be seen as both representations of agitators, warriors, and veterans of the Great Meme War, and as weapons in memetic warfare.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I will first describe the context from which the ambivalent figure of the meme warrior emerged, before briefly situating my work in the existing research landscape. I then introduce the two qualitative methods I use in this project—visual segment analysis (Breckner 2010) and depth-hermeneutics (Lorenzer 1968, 2016)—and present my reading of two relevant memes. Wearing accessories referencing the Vietnam War while sitting in front of his computer screens, the warrior (self-)portrait of the “War never changes” meme serves as a good starting point for further reflections on the post-heroic body fantasy. The second meme references Shia LaBeouf’s participatory video installation “He Will Not Divide Us,” which was hijacked repeatedly by trolls and neo-Nazis both on- and offline. This meme displays the geeky and ludic heroism of a collective of anons (anonymous users of 4chan) who set in motion the project of ridiculing the author of the work even as he was trying to stop the memetic capturing of his message.

### **A Meme for President: The Emergence of the “Meme Warrior” during the 2016 US Elections**

During the 2016 presidential election in the US, the political significance of internet meme culture became strikingly evident when users of online platforms associated with the alt-right, such as 4chan and Reddit,<sup>4</sup> instigated a massive meme-based campaign for Donald Trump (Woods and Hahner 2019, 2). The “anons” of these sites flooded the web with memes glorifying Trump or ridiculing Hillary Clinton and other

3 Sources for all memes in this article are available under the figure number in references.

4 A substantial part of this organizing happened on the subreddit *r/The\_Donald/* and the 4chan forum */pol/*.

liberal democratic figures and representatives of the political left (Merrin 2019, 208; Lamerichs et al. 2018, 185). This meme-based propaganda battle was referred to as “the Great Meme War” by internet-savvy supporters of the idiosyncratic Republican candidate. Participants identified themselves as “meme warriors” seeking to “meme Trump into office.”<sup>5</sup> Memes have been defined as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance . . . that were created *with awareness of each other* . . . [and] circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*” (Shifman 2014, 7–8, original emphasis). Interestingly enough, the self-declared digital army rallying for Trump produced not only memes about their preferred candidate or his political opponents, but also a significant number of memetic portrayals and merchandise products in honor of the “veterans” of these online “brigades” (Schmidt 2021b, 2; figure 2). One could say that the figure of the meme warrior became a meme in itself.



**Figure 2.** Two memes and a faux military badge, which half-ironically honor meme warriors/veterans and those that have “fallen” during the Great Meme War.

There was a distinctive character to the relationship between the decentralized horde of meme warriors on one side and Trump with his official campaign on the other side. As Merrin (2019, 207) stresses, there is evidence that the support Trump enjoyed on 4chan, where he was nicknamed “the Donald” and “God Emperor Trump” (figure 3), initially had an ironic undertone, resting on the trollish “idea of trying to get a joke candidate elected president.” When Trump—to the surprise of many—in fact made it into the White House, a significant number of his “loyal foot soldiers or cultural warriors” (Tuters 2019, 37) claimed to have contributed to his electoral success “through their skillful deployment of ‘meme magic,’” implying that their memes had transcended the online sphere and produced a real-world outcome (for “meme magic,” see Knowyourmeme 2020a).<sup>6</sup> As an omnipresent, eccentric media figure, Trump himself had morphed into

5 For an example of this often-used phrase, see the comment (from April 4, 2016) by one anon in this archived thread on the 4chan forum /pol/: <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/69950405/>.

6 Although memes might have played some role in the election, Trump’s success was surely based not only on the votes of 4chan users but also in large part on those of mostly older, white supporters

a meme by the time he ran for president, representing a kind of “grotesque postmodern simulacrum of himself” (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 113), given that it remained largely obscure what aspects of his appearance were authentic and which parodic. In other words, the anons on 4chan sensed something troll-like in him and his politics (Merrin 2019, 211)—something they could identify with. Nevertheless, Merrin (208) suggests that, while “it remains difficult to determine motivations in the hall-of-mirrors of troll-politics,” for the majority of meme warriors, the support for Trump’s politics did not seem to be entirely a joke. In fact, his rhetoric and policies were pretty much in accordance with the outsider culture, opposition to political correctness, misogyny, racism, and post-truth sentiment of “shitposters” on 4chan and Reddit (208). It is important to note that 4chan’s troll culture had already begun to shift toward the right in the years preceding the election. This transformation became manifest, firstly, with the establishment of the 4chan forum /pol/ (politically incorrect) in 2011, which served as a safe haven for white-supremacist, racist, antisemitic, misogynist, and transphobic content. And it was apparent, secondly, with Gamergate in 2014, which unleashed shocking and unironic antifeminist agitation and harassment directed against women in the gaming industry. By the time of the election, 4chan and the affiliated troll scene had attracted and merged with the online alt-right; regardless of their sometimes more, sometimes less serious political intent, they joined forces in order to achieve the goal of seeing Trump as president of the United States (Merrin 2019, 205–6). Trump’s official campaign, on the other hand, is considered the first “social media candidacy that fully adopted meme wars as a campaign messaging strategy” (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 21), with his staff keeping close ties to internet trolls like Charles Johnson, who served as a self-titled meme war “general” (Schreckinger 2017).



**Figure 3.** The meme “God Emperor Trump” references the “God-Emperor of Mankind” from the popular miniature wargame Warhammer 40K.

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(Pew Research Center 2018), the majority of whom were presumably completely unaware of the meme warriors’ activities.

## The Existing Research Landscape

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Besides more general studies on the Great Meme War (Woods and Hahner 2019; Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022) that give insight into the broader context, a number of scholars have examined how the presidential candidates were represented during this propaganda battle (Martynyuk and Meleshchenko 2022; Tran 2022; Way 2021; Denisova 2019; Moody-Ramirez and Church 2019; Lamerichs et al. 2018). What has been missing so far, however, is scholarship on memetic (self-)representations of far-right meme warriors—a gap that I seek to close with this article, building on my previous research on the matter (Schmidt 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

While a whole range of scholars have attended to fascist and misogynist masculinities in online spaces (Burnett 2022; Johanssen 2022; DeCook 2021, 2018; Kracher 2020; Krüger 2021; Vandiver 2020; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Blodgett and Salter 2018; Van Valkenburgh 2021; Ging 2017), as well as to the online far right's uses of irony (Dafaure 2020; McIntosh 2020; Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Greene 2019; Merrin 2019; Tutters 2019; Dogru 2021; Topinka 2018; Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018; Lamerichs et al. 2018; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Neiwert 2017), few have pointed to the intertwining of ironic stances and fantasies of masculinity within far-right meme culture. As indicated earlier, studies concerned with far-right masculine identities have shown how the alt-right paints its (male) enemies from across the spectrum—progressives, liberals, and moderate conservatives—as effeminate and infantile (McIntosh 2020; Nagle 2017). In contrast, the alt-right “presents itself . . . as a defender of a threatened western civilization and culture” (Dafaure 2020, 2). In fascist circles most prone to violence, this paranoid view savagely culminates in “calls for brave and heroic soldiers willing to fight and possibly to die for a greater purpose” (18). In other words, the invocation of soldierly masculinity (Theweleit 2019), which promises defense against anything female (including femininity within the men themselves) and has long been associated with fascism, is also at work in today's manosphere (Johanssen 2022, 42–44). However, Simon Strick identifies a new type of fascist whose performance of emotionalized masculinity does not seem to have much in common with the soldierly man's body armor. Strick references Christopher Cantwell, a white supremacist who came to be known as “the Crying Nazi” after publishing a video that showed him weep about his feeling of being “under attack as a racial group” (quoted in Strick 2021, 176–78). In this article, I shift the attention to another odd contemporary expression of fascist and proto-fascist masculinity: the self-ironizing, post-heroic meme warrior.

As mentioned above, ironic approaches to the far right's own masculine fantasies have rarely been addressed. Lamerichs et al. (2018, 185) describe glorifications of Trump in alt-right memes that reference fictional emperors as “exaggerated, almost comical,” while also adhering to an iconographic tradition worshipping strong male leaders. Nilan (2021) reads the post-ironic cult of Kek—where a Pepe-the-Frog-faced god who rules over “Kekistan” is worshipped (see also Neiwert 2017)—as a search for re-enchantment against the backdrop of more extreme far-right warrior fantasies.



And Dafaure (2020, 4–5) suggests that Crusades-themed memes, often captioned with *Deus Vult* (“God wills it” in Latin), are shared ironically “in the same way that ironic Nazism has become a trend in recent years.” An in-depth study examining the novel phenomenon of ironic approaches to ideals of soldierly/heroic masculinity from within the far-right online sphere is, however, still missing. I hope to contribute to the discussion of this curious connection by delineating what I consider to be the meme warriors’ semi-ironic, post-heroic body fantasy from a psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspective. As yet, psychoanalytic approaches are the exception rather than the rule in the study of far-right and misogynist masculinities (Johanssen 2022; DeCook 2021; Krüger 2021) and of far-right uses of ironic language and symbolism (Dogru 2020). With regard to the latter, scholars have mostly focused on the (strategic) role irony plays on a discursive level (e.g., in hiding earnest white supremacist ideology, in aggressively ridiculing others, in playful practices of trolling, and in the creation of privy ingroups and outgroups unfamiliar with the metatexts of their cryptic jokes). The conceptualization of a subconscious dimension of communication and the Freudian argument that, initially, human beings relate to the very same object with conflicting feelings such as love and hatred (Winter 2013, 355) can, in my opinion, be particularly instructive for a study of the (online) far right. Such a study would illuminate the conflictual core of ambivalent affective states such as disgust (Krüger 2021), “dis/inhibition” (Johanssen 2022), or—as in the case of the first meme example I present in this article—simultaneous feelings of heroic-masculine “inadequacy” and the ironic denial thereof. Dogru (2021, 31) has convincingly outlined one subconscious dimension of far-right humor, which he locates in the collective disinhibition that allows for an aggressive projective denigration of—often vulnerable—others, by means of which the “fragile” construct of masculinity might be stabilized in crooked ways. Yet, as I will expound in more detail in what follows, another stabilizing function seems to lie precisely in the meme warriors’ ironic approach to their own longings for heroic-masculine fantasies.

## **Methods**

### *Meme Sample and Example Cases*

Since 2018, I have collected around 430 memes that display the online far right’s multifarious relationship to heroism. They mostly derive from the context of the US-based meme wars, but also from spin-off European meme wars, as well as far-right meme responses to the 2021 storming of the US Capitol, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and to far-right terrorist attacks—such as those in Christchurch, New Zealand, and Halle, Germany—that horrifically bring to light the most literal and deadly interpretations of far-right “heroism.” I found some of the memes by searching relevant forums on 4chan and Reddit; once I had an idea of commonly used captions and motifs, I also used Google keyword and reverse image search. For the most part, I selected image macros (memes consisting of image-text combinations), but also a few



videos, photos of merchandise, and chat protocols. The two main themes defining the memes in my sample can be classified as, first, soldierly or heroic (self-)representations (including images of meme warriors, virtual battle scenes, and glorifications of far-right idols or, in the most extreme cases, far-right terrorists). The second group contains memes illustrating the “heroic” defeat of the far right’s enemies (such as feminists, CNN, Muslims, and liberal democracy). Wanting to move beyond the established wisdom that associates heroism with the far right, I was most interested in the countless seemingly half-ironic (self-)portrayals of meme warriors. Except for a few contrasting examples, the majority of the fourteen memes that I selected for an in-depth qualitative study belong to that category, providing insight into the meme warriors’ self-images, the ideals they “fight” for, and their relationship to women. The two cases that I present here reveal two different facets of what post-heroic identification has to offer.<sup>7</sup>

### *Visual Segment Analysis and Depth-Hermeneutics*

I conducted the analyses of the two meme examples with the help of Roswitha Breckner’s (2010) visual segment analysis as well as Alfred Lorenzer’s (1986, 2016) psychoanalytic social-psychological depth-hermeneutic method.<sup>8</sup> Together these approaches allow for an exploration not only of manifest but also latent levels of meaning that are communicated through cultural artifacts. Breckner’s (2010) method, which is inspired by interpretive sociology as well as art history, offers an analytic structure for reconstructing how individual segments of an image, in their semantic interplay, produce an overall composition and, in this way, bring forth specific thematizations. Lorenzer’s method allows me to uncover latent meanings that are suppressed in light of collectively shared norms, but which are still communicated subconsciously beyond the symbolic guise of the material (Lorenzer 1986, 26–29; König 2019, 29). In other words, whereas the manifest layer of meaning responds to life scripts that are socially accepted in a specific milieu and can be grasped discursively, we gain access to the latent level of meaning that is associated with life scripts that are deemed unacceptable according to a particular life practice but might nevertheless reappear “behind the back of consciousness” through “affective understanding” (König 2019, 31, 37).

In far-right meme culture, where the lines between ironic parody and serious political intention are often blurred (Nagle 2017, 9), a psychoanalytic perspective that destabilizes the very concept of intent in the face of the unconscious can prove valuable. It aids analysis of how specific discursive figurations enable the denial of conflictual experiences that are, thereby, kept unconscious (Winter 2013, 22). It is in this sense that depth-hermeneutics differs from the approaches that are most commonly used for

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7 As is characteristic of memes, following Shifman’s definition quoted above, both of the examples have inspired the creation of several modified/remixed versions.

8 For an English-language introduction, see Bereswill, Morgenroth, and Redman (2010).

the study of memes in media and communication studies, cultural studies, linguistics, and related disciplines. Scholars of those disciplines have identified recurring themes in large samples of memes through content analysis (e.g., Harvey et al. 2019; Ging and Garvey 2018). They have defined processes of discursive meaning-production with discourse analysis (e.g., Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara, and Sakki 2020; Al Zidjaly 2017). They have examined uses of signs and symbols in memes with the help of semiotics (e.g., Calimbo 2016; Cannizzaro 2016). Or they have inquired into visual aspects of memes by means of algorithm-based and/or qualitative visual analysis methods (e.g., Dondero 2019). Scholars employing depth-hermeneutics, by contrast, study a specific symbolic system, first by how it affects their own experience and then by trying to share any affects and fantasies the material provokes in them without censoring with regard to social desirability. The interpretation is conducted in groups, which allows for a reciprocal review of the—potentially contradictory—reactions and readings (Lorenzer 1986, 87). In order to avoid potential confusion with the concept of a focus group, it is important to emphasize that the participants' reflection on their own irritations, blind spots, and taboos during their discussion serves as an analytic tool for excavating latent meanings communicated through the material (König et al. 2019, 5).

### *Interpretation Group*

I conducted the depth-hermeneutic part of this study with the help of an interpretation group (IG) consisting of six (for meme 1) and seven (meme 2) early career researchers from the Else Frenkel-Brunswik Institute for Democracy Research in Saxony, who were trained in sociology, psychology, or politics, and acquainted with depth-hermeneutics to varying degrees. Though involved in studying authoritarianism in Germany, they did not have specific prior knowledge about far-right meme culture or the alt-right. For the IG discussion of the second meme, an external researcher joined the group, one who had studied far-right online culture before. In the case of this IG, I shared beforehand some contextual information about LaBeouf's project that seemed vital for an understanding of the meme's manifest level of meaning. I will now present very condensed summaries of both parts of the analyses of the two memes, "War never changes" and "He Will Not Divide Us," and link them with broader socio-theoretical perspectives.

### **Meme Analysis: War Never Changes**

#### *Segment Analysis*

The meme (figure 4) shows "Pepe the Frog"—a memetic character that had not been political before being appropriated by the online far right, as well as by Trump himself, thus becoming an icon of right-wing politics from around 2015 (Nowotny and Reidy 2022, 140–41). In this version, Pepe is wearing a helmet with the phrase "BORN TO MEME," a variation on "BORN TO KILL," a slogan that became widely associated with

the Vietnam War after it appeared as an inscription on the helmet of Private “Joker” in Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 war drama *Full Metal Jacket*. The ace of spades playing card was attached to their helmets by US troops in Vietnam as a means of psychological warfare, as it was thought to be a symbol of death for the Viet Cong (Brown 2023). Wearing black warpaint on his face, Pepe is smiling smugly—a version known as “smug Pepe” (Knowyourmeme 2018)—gazing at the viewer backward over his shoulder. While the interior’s ochre-brown color scheme can be associated with design conventions of the 1970s, the six computer flatscreens on the desk in front of Pepe locate him in the digital present. Some of the screens show Pepe figures wearing Trump’s signature hairstyle, memes that were circulating around the time of Trump’s campaign, and reference his far-right policies. The top right screen shows his official Facebook page, and the one below is 4chan.



**Figure 4.** The “War never changes” meme.

In spite of the ever-evolving technologies of warfare—from ancient war chariots and medieval lances to guns, bombs, and armed drones—the meme’s caption, which derives from the postapocalyptic role-playing video game series “Fallout” (Knowyourmeme 2020b), states that “[w]ar never changes.” Its pathos is ironically twisted in view of the meme’s imagery, which shows a scene that contradicts the horrific visuals usually associated with war. We see Pepe in the role of a meme warrior sitting in front of his screens, safe and sound. The meme plays with the continuities between physical wars and disembodied online wars like the Great Meme War by referencing historical means of psychological warfare, such as the abovementioned ace of spades and war paint. The meme thereby hints at aspects of “traditional” war that persist in memetic warfare, itself considered a type of psychological warfare (Finkelstein 2011). At the same time, the viewer’s attention is directed to the discontinuities between conventional and digital warfare as the portrayed “warrior” is cosplaying a Vietnam soldier while involving himself in memetic operations via the internet and not risking his life in combat.

What strikes me is that none of Pepe's limbs are visible—neither his arms nor legs, nor in fact his keyboard or computer mouse. Realistically speaking, he would not be able to produce memes like this, regardless of the fact that the memes on his screens are opened in Microsoft Paint. Since no other parts of his body are visible except for his head, it almost looks as if his office chair could be replacing his body, and the fact that the chair lacks wheels adds to the impression that Pepe is not particularly agile in his seat. Thus, to my mind, the image transmits a sense of physical impairment, amputation, and immobility, and, consequently, of a lack of agency, while at the same time conveying the impression of bizarre, nonhuman limblessness or even disembodiment on the part of the meme warrior Pepe. Rather than as a physical hero, he seems to (self-ironically) portray himself as an intellectual hero, mainly consisting of an enormous frog's brain. I define self-irony (*Selbstironie*) here as a humorous, distanced approach toward oneself and one's own actions, which does not necessarily or exclusively rest on deprecation. Disembodiment is further referenced through the boundlessly reproducible digital bodies of Pepe-as-Trump or Trump-as-Pepe in the screens. I find it revealing that both the meme warrior and the Trump-as-Pepes are depicted as belonging to the same "species." Their sameness could suggest that either the maker of this (self-)portrayal identifies with Trump in admiration or, alternatively, he could narcissistically project his own image onto Trump, suggesting that Trump only served as a front man who was created and steered by a horde of meme warriors. The obscure nature of this connection stands in contrast to the impression (or illusion?) of transparency transmitted in the image: the fact that Pepe is depicted slightly from above adds to the feeling that the viewer is able to observe all his online activities. Yet, as his body is not visible, something opaque about him remains. This mode of playfully blurring the fine line between overtly exposed and opaque features, which renders superfluous the need to conceal at all any questionable aspects of oneself, is evocative of the abovementioned "simulacrum" figure of Trump (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 113), who as a billionaire pretended to be close to the man-in-the-street. Trump's meme-like qualities are what appealed to trolls on 4chan.

### *Depth-Hermeneutics*

In their first affective responses to the meme, the participants of the IG oscillated mainly between a sense of uneasiness caused by the meme-warrior's smug grin, which many participants perceived as being aggressive, and the notion that his existence is pathetic. The former impression, that there seems to be something "malicious" and "scary" about Pepe, even evoked an annihilation fantasy in one participant, who suggested that it would be "great if [Pepe] could set his place on fire with his cigarette butt right now." Another participant ascribed supernatural powers to Pepe, who she imagined was able to "direct streams of images straight from his brain into the screens" and "replicate them ad infinitum." The latter, more sympathetic impression came up in another participant's fantasy about the pictured meme warrior, which he imagined as a "dressed up, disabled

boy, who wants to be strong but is taken for a ride as part of the electoral campaign, doing unpaid labor for a power politician while being told ‘you are a soldier, a real, strong soldier.’” Moreover, Pepe’s office chair evoked fecal associations in some participants, who playfully referred to it as the “poop chair” or “shit chair.”<sup>9</sup> Emotional responses ranging from disgust and pity to uneasiness and awe reveal a perceived contradiction between the “idiotic/cringy/self-ironic” (self-)portrayal of the meme warrior as a “poor little sausage” (as some participants called him, using a German idiom meaning “poor wretch”) and the uncanny potential of memes as impalpable yet powerful propaganda tools.

The latter reading kept the IG occupied for some time. One part of the group, reading the meme warrior as a self-portrait or at least a figure the meme’s author identifies with, tried to understand why he might voluntarily take on what they interpreted as to some degree a condescending view of himself by depicting the figure as a “little sausage.” One (male) participant construed Pepe’s “casual warrior-like disguise” as an indication of a self-ironic perspective on the meme maker’s own masculinity. He imagined him to be aware of the fact that, in contrast to “real” soldiers, the meme warrior does not put his body at risk. Hence the soldierly costume would serve the purpose of connecting him, and the scene he seems to address, with an—otherwise lost—male tradition, helping such meme warriors come to terms with the “pettiness of their own existence.” On a related note, another participant assumed that the meme’s author might be making fun of his own delusions of grandeur in the depicted scene. Emphasizing what they perceived as Pepe’s smug/mad/self-elevating gaze, however, three other participants brought their less sympathetic reading into play again: “Pepe might let you look over his shoulders only to then show his true colors—‘actually we *are* dangerous soldiers, not little nerds.’”

I interpret the two conflicting readings that surfaced in the IG—a reading that ascribed to the meme warrior conviction about the seriousness of his soldiership, and a reading that attributed to him consciousness of his rather unheroic existence—as an indication of the ironic *denial* of the longing for a form of heroism that remains bound to the suffering and sacrifice of “real” bodies. Sigmund Freud sees denial as a form of defense by means of which the recognition of a reality that is experienced as traumatizing is disavowed (Laplanche and Pontalis 2019, 595–98). He uses the term primarily in connection with fetishism, which he associates with the simultaneous recognition and denial of woman’s penislessness (596). In other words: the fetishist denies a physical lack (Decker 2019, 6). Drawing on the concept of denial, I understand the fact that in this meme—as well as in many others I have studied from the Great Meme War (Schmidt 2021b, forthcoming)—the authors’ own longing for the heroic seems to be exhibited but at the same time denied by means of irony, as a defense against latent

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9 Interestingly, this association seems to resonate with Krüger’s (2021, 244) account of the obsession with “dirt and excrement in online male subcultures.”



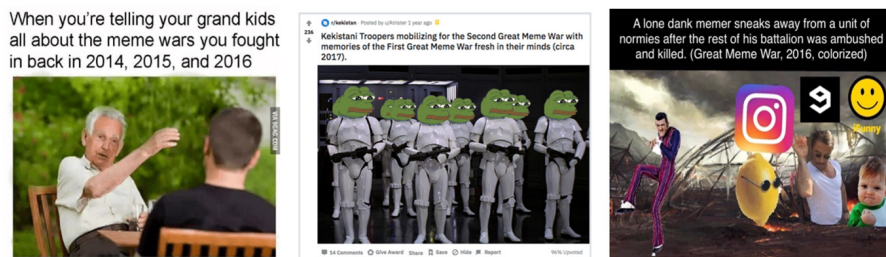
feelings of insecurity, narcissistic injury, and powerlessness caused by the loss, in post-heroic societies, of meaning derived from traditional body-bound heroisms. Against this backdrop, I read the creation of the figure of the meme warrior—who ironically references the aesthetics of the war hero (the depicted Pepe is still wearing soldierly gear such as a combat helmet), but whose body remains unscathed in virtual battles—as an expression of the desire to immunize the *image* of the (male) warrior body against its feared superfluity and powerlessness in times of increasingly automated warfare. In the online sphere, the image of the (meme) warrior circulates in abundance, appearing virtually immortal: as a meme, it could be infinitely reproduced and modified. As Strick (2021, 200, original emphasis) aptly points out in contrast to Theweleit, “the body politics of reflexive fascism [focus] also and always on a *digital* and *late capitalist* body that seeks its salvation in other *embodiments* (the network, avatar, meme, anonymity, dissimulation, shitpost, disruptive action) [rather] than in soldierly armor.” In my view, the figure of the far-right meme warrior outlined here demonstrates how “soldierly armor” is both abolished and preserved *pictorially* in such new “embodiments.” Ironically denied is the fact that the need for physical sacrifices in the struggle for higher ideals, “lost” in the context of the meme war, renders redundant a core meaning traditionally ascribed to the heroic (Münkler 2006, 310).

In the meme example, the meme warrior’s figure is reduced to his head, that is, he is depicted without arms and legs, and the office chair seems to replace his body entirely. I read this as a form of preemptive self-amputation or castration. Rather than conforming to the ideal of a physically strong warrior, the meme-warrior Pepe appears to be identified with his intellectual prowess—a feature Kendall (2011) has associated with “geek masculinity.” I interpret this voluntary identification with a nerdy and flabby or even bodiless “little sausage” that nevertheless overtly exposes its unfulfilled desire to be a “real” soldier as an attempt to preserve a degree of control (or at least the illusion of control) over the meme warrior’s own image. Instead of having to fear that the desire for an unbroken heroic ideal of masculinity is curtailed by others (for example by feminists, who are experienced as a threat) or called into doubt by automated war technologies, the (presumably male) producer of the meme might subconsciously have attempted preemptively to contain any feelings of inadequacy regarding his heroic potency. By presenting himself, ahead of any external evaluation with respect to his heroic qualities, in an ironic relation to them, the meme warrior at the very least remains the master of his own likeness.

I believe this thesis about the meme warriors’ ironic denial of the longing for a body-bound form of heroism and the wish to remain master of the (semi-ironic) image of the heroic soldier in the post-heroic online sphere holds true for many of the memes of the Great Meme War, which portray the figure of the meme warrior by referencing “real” wars and soldiers. Yet, with regard to the “War never changes” meme, I wonder to what extent this analysis itself rests on a reverse form of denial. Overall, our IG gave more space to the discussion of the meme warrior’s overtly displayed, unfulfilled longing to be a “real” soldier, as well as to his “disgusting” and “impotent” (self-)depiction, than

to the actual threat his activities might pose to democracy. Even though it took place after the IG session, one might think that the 2021 US Capitol insurrection was at least indirectly influenced by the online subculture that brought forth the figure of the meme warrior. The fact that we paid more attention to the confusing display of the meme-warrior's self-ironic yet nostalgic soldierly cosplay could be due to a defense on our side against the scary implications of the far-right meme warrior's disembodied potency—the efficacy of memes as they are used as weapons in psychological warfare that can have real-world consequences. Thus, the question remains open as to how far meme-warrior Pepe's smug smile rests on a delusion of grandeur of this “poor little sausage.” Or is he, knowingly, one step ahead of us in coming to terms with—and strategically appropriating—the detachment of heroic fantasies from the material basis of the mortal human body? In either case, the figure of the far-right meme warrior seems to add yet another, more unsettling dimension to the debate on the controversial notion of the post-heroic. In Bröckling's view (2020, 11):

The decrease and intensification of heroic energies march in parallel. Traditional fields of trial fade, while new heroes romp about in formerly hero-free zones. The appellative power of heroic narratives may be diminishing, but their entertainment value seems unimpaired. What we can no longer tolerate as a binding role model, we seek all the more passionately in the spheres of the imagination.



**Figure 5.** Other examples of partly ironic (self-)portrayals of meme warriors.

I interpret the changing guises of heroic fantasies and symbolizations in the Great Meme War as a historically specific response to what Rolf Pohl (2019) calls the male “dependency-autonomy-dilemma”—a dilemma he locates at the heart of any constructs of masculinity in male-dominated societies (Pohl 2010, 17, 21). Pohl is highly skeptical of rushed and all-too-time-based diagnoses of a “crisis of masculinity,” arguing that in societies that are based on hierarchical gender relations, the culturally and psychosocially produced construct of a dominant, autonomous masculinity constitutes a state of crisis in and of itself on a structural level. The fact that the male demand for autonomy is perceived to be threatened by women and femininity (and by female sexuality in particular) leads to the development of a paranoid (and often violent) defense against

everything associated with femininity, which, on an unconscious level, is marked by the coexistence of anxiety, lust, and hatred (18). In “times of outer and inner crises,” the “fragile” construct of masculinity has to be “repaired or recreated over and over again” (Pohl 2019, 427). Traditionally, the military and war itself served as “institutions for the ‘fabrication of masculinity.’” Thus, rather than interpreting the creation of the figure of the ambivalent meme warrior as an expression of a narrowly conceived temporary crisis of a lost, threatened, “dispossessed” white masculinity (Rosenthal 2020; Kimmel 2017; Hochschild 2016), I understand the stabilizing function it offers by immunizing the image of a male warrior body as a “solution” to the abiding dependency-autonomy dilemma. Rather than merely expressing either the “wishful identification with or strategic disavowal of the alpha male ideal” (Ging 2017, 16) on the level of (“hybrid”) hegemonic-male discourse, the meme warrior’s ironic denial of heroic-masculine ideals also serves the psychological purpose of rendering subconscious anxieties rooted in the “dilemma of masculinity” (Pohl 2019, 19).

### **He Will Not Divide Us (HWNDU): The Appeal of an Impish Collective Geek-Heroism**

As I have argued, the context of the meme war offers self-identified meme warriors a post-heroic playground for (self-ironically) imagining themselves as part of a larger far-right project based on online heroism, while not requiring them to take physical risks—an identification that primarily provoked puzzlement and discomfort in our depth-hermeneutic study group. Of all the memes we discussed, our depth-hermeneutic IG was most positively disposed toward a meme that illustrates the far-right’s geeky and persistent disruption of a work of art entitled “He Will Not Divide Us,” created by an artistic trio made up of Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Rönkkö, and Luke Turner (Knowyourmeme 2020c). As part of their project, the artists installed a camera outside of the Museum of the Moving Image in New York underneath the statement “He Will Not Divide Us” (figure 6). They invited the public to position themselves in front of the camera to take a stand against Trump by repeating the mantra “He Will Not Divide Us” (Völzke 2018). The participatory online performance, which could either be witnessed on site or as a livestream, was initiated in 2017 as a response to Trump’s election and was supposed to run for the duration of his presidency. It did not take long, however, before anons from /pol/, MAGA (Make America Great Again) influencers, and “celebrities” from various factions of the far right began to use the platform to provoke their liberal opponents with far-right slurs and to share their ironic in-jokes from the time of the Great Meme War (Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg 2022, 174–75). On January 26, 2017, one of the artists, the famous Hollywood actor Shia LaBeouf, who had “lost control by day three” (176) of the project, supposedly attacked in front of the museum a man who had insulted him on the livestream, and was arrested by the police on the basis of a formal complaint (179). As a result, the museum ended the collaboration with the artists. The work was initially reinstalled outside the El Rey Theatre in Albuquerque, but after gun

shots were heard on the livestream it was stopped again—this time by the artists. On March 8, 2017, the livestream was moved to an “unknown location,” where a flag with the words “He Will Not Divide Us” (figure 7) was displayed (Knowyourmeme 2020c).



**Figure 6.** Shia LaBeouf in front of his video installation at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City.



**Figure 7.** The HWNDU-flag installed in an “unknown location” as documented on the livestream.

According to a /pol/-friendly YouTuber, it only took thirty-eight hours for /pol/ users to locate the flag in Greenville, Tennessee, via a geeky collective undertaking that made use of light conditions, plane contrails and noises, a mathematical triangulation method, and astronomical navigation. The meme below (figure 8) portrays the anon(s) who stole the flag and replaced it with a MAGA-cap and T-shirt (Internet Historian 2017). As a consequence of this intervention the artistic trio transferred their work to Liverpool, in the United Kingdom, but removed it again after a masked man appeared on the roof of a house in the livestream (Knowyourmeme 2020c). Given that the video was interrupted shortly afterward, users of 4chan and 8chan speculated that this man, too, would have stolen the flag. After a short stopover in Lodz, Poland, the project was finally installed in the cultural center Le Lieu Unique in Nantes, France, where it stayed until the project officially ended in January 2021 (HEWILLNOTDIVIDE.US 2021).



**Figure 8.** Meme referencing the capture of the “HWNDU” flag

### *Segment Analysis*

The meme shows three Pepe-the-Frog figures in a remote nocturnal landscape, one of which is carrying the abovementioned “He Will Not Divide Us” flag, and they seem to be running away from another popular meme figure with a raised fist, the angry “Crying Wojak” (Knowyourmeme 2022). The latter represents Shia LaBeouf—the outfit of the figure is in line with photographs of clothes the artist was wearing at one of his appearances at the site of the video installation in New York. LaBeouf’s raised fist could be read as an expression of fury, or as a leftist salute symbolizing resistance and group solidarity (Political Symbols 2021). The “Crying Wojak” face is “driven to tears and clenching his teeth” (Knowyourmeme 2022) to express frustration and sadness; on 4chan, it often appears in combination with the line “IT’S NOT FAAAAIIIIIR.” Initially, the Crying Wojak mostly appeared in conjunction with “Smug Pepe” in so-called “Pepe x Wojak” memes that depicted hostile encounters between the two memetic characters in which Wojak would usually be defeated by Smug Pepe (Knowyourmeme 2022). In this meme, accordingly, three Peperes are sprinting away from LaBeouf-Wojak, who stands no chance of catching them. Two of them are crying tears of spiteful joy. In the purple night sky above them, we see a constellation in the shape of a Smug Pepe and the words “Praise Kek.” This ironic online cult was based on the veneration of the ancient Egyptian god of darkness, Kek, which, in its male form, was depicted with a frog’s head. On 4chan, Pepe the Frog is regarded as a “modern avatar of the deity, who uses ancient Egyptian meme magic to influence the world” (Knowyourmeme 2020d).

The meme illustrates the successful culmination, in capturing the flag, of the anons’ endeavor to capture the artists’ work. Given that there are three Peperes stealing the flag, the single Wojak figure does not seem to stand any chance of recapturing it. He seems to have lost control over the message that is printed on it. As mentioned above, the phrase “He Will Not Divide Us” refers to Trump’s presidency and evokes the (ancient) strategy of “divide and rule,” which implies the creation or strengthening of divisions among subjects as a means for expanding or maintaining power. Emphasizing the



importance of unity in resistance to divisive policies, the words on the flag stand in contrast to the illustrated scene, which is defined by the obvious disunity between the triumphant Pepes and the pranked, outraged, inferior Wojak. Yet, since one of the Pepes is holding the “He Will Not Divide Us” flag, the meaning of the sentence shifts and it can also be read to mean that Shia LaBeouf is, in fact, dividing them and they are in heroic resistance against a form of tyranny (i.e., the “establishment”) that he stands for in their eyes.

The spectator’s seeming closeness to one of the Pepes makes them appear not only winning but also more approachable in comparison with the small figure of LaBeouf running after them in the background. This imbalance is further underlined by the smug smile of the Pepe constellation in the sky, which seems to charge the environment with a far-right blessing, perhaps representing “meme magic.” Even the stars, which provided the anons with helpful hints in their search for the “unknown location” of the flag, seem to have formed an alliance with the Pepes. This religious association also appears in the triangular composition of the three Pepes, with the one in the middle carrying the flag in a manner evocative of religious parades in which a holy object is ritually carried by an altar boy. This might add to the impression that this object is very important to them, perhaps as a kind of relic or trophy. I do, however, assume that the Pepes’ mischievous pleasure is related more to Shia LaBeouf’s fury than the actual possession of the flag. In other words, their relationship to the flag and its message seems to be mediated through their opponent, who gives the impression of being extremely invested in the values the flag stands for.

### *Depth-Hermeneutic Interpretation*

Interestingly, the participants of the IG were initially polarized about the figures depicted in the meme: while half of them identified with LaBeouf/Wojak, felt sorry for him, and perceived the mercilessness of the trolls as “cruel,” the other half of the group identified with the rebellious-triumphant schadenfreude of the three Pepe figures. The Pepes evoked associations with naughty schoolboys, scouts, and fraternity fellows, but also with antifa activists who stole German flags from gardens during the 2014 soccer World Cup.<sup>10</sup> Based on his outfit, LaBeouf/Wojak was believed to signify a vanilla hipster, a leftist intellectual, or a “Berkeley student.” Among those sympathetic to LaBeouf/Wojak, one participant shared her fantasy that he was like a helpless elderly man, humiliated by “adolescent potheads that piss or puke in his front yard.” In the unsympathetic group, the scene reminded one participant of a game of capture-the-flag she’d recently played, and the joyful rush of adrenalin she had felt. In the participant’s

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10 During the 2014 World Cup in Germany, when the German team won, many Germans displayed German flags as a symbol of renewed national pride, placing them on their cars or in their allotment gardens. This was met with opposition by antifascists, who took the flags down (see Kapitelmann 2016).

words: “it was so wicked to steal this flag!” Another participant highlighted how LaBeouf’s furious reactions to the trolls and his repeated attempts to bring the project to safe places invited mockery of the “pretentiousness” of the artist, who embodied a self-important liberal elite with institutional power. He had initiated a large-scale performance in public space only to make a “huge scene” when it did not work out according to his plans.

While the initial identifications were split, most participants’ affective attachments shifted a couple of times in the course of the discussion. This was especially marked among those who initially felt sorry for LaBeouf/Wojak but came to relate to the schadenfreude of the Pepes. All participants rated LaBeouf’s angry reactions to the anons’ interference as a complete failure. Inviting the public to be part of a participatory performance directed against the far right during a culture war without anticipating that trolls or Nazis might join in seemed utterly naive to everyone. The sense of powerlessness and the fragility of the artist caused vicarious embarrassment, regret, and anger among participants, which prompted some of them to suggest ways LaBeouf could have handled the situation better. One participant proposed that he could have stopped the livestream and stated publicly that there seemed to be no space for the HWNDU flag in the contemporary US. Another suggested that Trump’s opponents could have reproduced the flag and set it up everywhere in the country, rendering capture impossible. The group suspected that LaBeouf had been too invested in controlling the message he had authored and, as a part of an “elitist art bubble,” too out of touch with society and therefore unable to originate a broader movement beyond the infrastructure of large institutions. Some participants did, however, feel moved to protect LaBeouf from the group’s harsh criticism by emphasizing his Jewish family background as a possible explanation for his thin-skinned reaction to Nazi slurs. They also suggested that it is generally harder to produce the “right” kind of art in times of political polarization, which might drive artists to become more explicit and less multilayered in their works.

Finally, the group attended to the “He Will Not Divide Us” message itself, raising the question of who is actually included in “us”: Did it address the part of US society that had not voted for Trump as a kind of “internal call for perseverance”? Did it presume a fictional liberal “we” that had supposedly only recently been divided by hate and harassment, rather than by the deeper tensions of an already antagonistic society? The IG observed that the phrase is formulated negatively, in response to, and hence in some way dependent on, Trump, without suggesting any direction of its own. One participant shared the feeling that the image seemed completely “nailed shut” (i.e., closed) to him, as he could not relate to the hatred of either side. As a communist, he claimed he was able to identify with the three Pepes’ rebellious impulse against the liberal establishment and their culture wars, which he, too, regards as elitist. “Running with LaBeouf/Wojak” seemed like a complete “waste of energy” to him, but he would not want to take the others’ side either. He tried to think of alternative ways of “entering the image,” for instance by stealing the flag from the Pepes while running diagonally through the picture, or by running across with a different (perhaps a red) flag—but neither of these

alternatives were particularly satisfying to him as they seemed somewhat detached from the existing conflict captured in the image.

### *The “Wound” of Liberal Democracy*

I believe the fact that the geeky anons’ disruption of Shia LaBeouf’s work attracted relatively high levels of sympathy in our group of leftist scholars points to an aspect of far-right meme culture that seems to have broader appeal, and which should not be underestimated: sometimes, right-wing memes lay bare the inner contradictions and sore points of the liberal status quo. The unfulfilled promise of equality, and the spiritless, corny language this is cloaked in, invite ridicule from people across the political spectrum. In the case of “He Will Not Divide Us,” it seemed to be the very invocation of an undivided American people (“us”) allegedly rent asunder by an external entity (“him”/Trump), as articulated by an artistic elite, that antagonized not only an amorphous and anonymous horde of trolls but also part of our group of left-leaning researchers. Inspired by Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995, 212), one might argue that the claim or hope expressed in “He Will Not Divide Us” points directly to the weak spot of modern democracies, “where the civic community unites extremes of social inequality and conflicting interests” and, hence, “the ‘common good’ shared by citizens must be a much more tenuously abstract notion.” As she demonstrates, the Founding Fathers of the United States defined “the people” as a “disaggregated collection of private individuals whose public aspect was represented by a distant central state” (219), rather than as an active citizen community whose rule would have had social implications ensuring the “balance of power between the rich and the poor” (204). Capitalism has furthered this reduction of democracy to liberalism (234): in capitalist democracy, political equality not only exists in juxtaposition to socioeconomic inequality but “leaves it fundamentally intact” (213). Against this backdrop, the appeal in “He Will Not Divide Us” to an overarching but at the same time empty and conflict-free “us”—a unity that is supposed to be sustained in the face of an external threat—appears to be completely blind to the divergent class interests within.

Considering the ideological roots of the US democratic system might help explain why our IG of left-leaning scholars was, to some extent, sympathetic to the anons’ ludically heroic interference with LaBeouf’s work. What resonated with them was the fact that the anons seemed to question the liberal self-understanding of an overarching, yet empty, “democratic civic community,” one which appears to externalize antagonistic forces rather than recognizing them as an immanent structure and blind spot of liberal-capitalist democracy. For the anons’ part, however, I read their acts of trolling as an instance of “libertarian authoritarianism,” as Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022) conceptualize it, rather than as a *conscious* critique of the contradictions inherent in liberal-capitalist democracy. They understand the aggressive demonstration of the individual’s independence as a symptom of late modern individualization as much as a protest against it (181). While individuals are, more than ever, addressed as self-

determined subjects, they are not in control of the societal conditions on the grounds of which they are supposed to develop competitive autonomy (174). Hence, whenever society does not fulfil the wished-for promise of unrestrained self-expression, it causes a wound in the subject (182). In my opinion, the anons' stubborn attempts to expose the limits of the artists' invitation to the public to participate in the work—or, in more general terms, their attempts to “defend” free speech by transgressing its socially acceptable boundaries—can be understood precisely in this way: as a rebellion “against late modern society but *in the name of* its core norms: self-determination and self-realization” (174, original emphasis). Curiously enough, the limbless Pepe warrior from the first meme, which appeared to be glued to his office chair, “doing unpaid labor for a power politician while being told ‘you are a soldier, a real, strong soldier,’” did not give the impression of being particularly autonomous and free.

## **Conclusion**

With reference to these two memes from the Great Meme War, I have tried to shed light on two different (post-)heroic identification offers, which, in my view, help us better understand the appeal far-right memetic warfare holds to both an “ingroup” of meme warriors and sympathizers (“War never changes”) and to a more general audience, an “outgroup” that does not share this political orientation from the start (“He Will Not Divide Us”). This is achieved, firstly, through offering an indestructible disembodied type of post-heroic hero, who does not need to take any physical risks and ironically denies his longing for heroism while immunizing heroic fantasies against the shrinking relevance of the male warrior body. And, secondly, it is achieved through the malicious and playful collective geek-heroism that finds its target in the well-intentioned but naive liberal hope for a unity that ignores diverging class interests. It was my intention to critically reflect on the affective allure of the identification offers and ironic stances inherent in those memes, especially in light of the sociopolitical and technological/material conditions that structure today's Western societies.

In view of the first meme discussed, I interpreted the psychic functions of ironic representations of far-right heroism as an attempt to ward off heroism's perceived loss of meaning—at a time when increasingly automated warfare diminishes the relevance of the (male) warrior body—and the narcissistic mortification that accompanies this loss. In this context, I understand the overt identification with unheroic qualities (like flabbiness, limblessness, a nerdy couch-potato lifestyle, etc.) as an attempt to ironically express feelings of heroic inadequacy ahead of time, as a kind of preemptive self-castration, in order to gain some control over them. The question remains how far we ought to fear the disembodied potency the meme warriors might, in fact, possess beyond their nostalgic-ironic soldierly cosplay. This post-heroic identification offer seemed rather repellent and/or frightening to the participants of the left-leaning depth-hermeneutic interpretation group and would perhaps be more alluring to self-identified meme warriors. The second part of this article, however, sought to demonstrate the

potential of far-right meme culture to attract people from other political backgrounds too. In light of the meme that provoked the most positive reactions in our interpretation group, a memetic illustration of the anons' ludically heroic, collective capture of the work "He Will Not Divide Us," I argued that these reactions revealed the "wounds" of liberal society. What aroused sympathy in parts of our left-leaning IG was the troll's malicious flaying of liberal self-understanding, which appeared to be implied in the slogan "He Will Not Divide Us." I tried to get to the root of the participants' identification with the trolls' disruptive impulse by drawing on Meiksins Wood's (1995) Marxist analysis of the inclusive but socially barren concept of "the people" inherent in the liberal-capitalist democratic system of the United States. However, rather than as a conscious critique of liberal-capitalist democracy, I read the actions of the libertarian and fascist pranksters that disrupted LaBeouf's work as a symptom of late modern individualization, with recourse to Amlinger and Nachtwey's (2022) concept of "offended freedom."

In this article, I have brought together literature from Anglophone and German-speaking discourses on constructs of (far-right) online and offline masculinities. Pohl's work (2019, 2010), in particular, inspired me to conceptualize the genesis of the ambivalent figure of the far-right meme warrior as a context-specific response to the "state of crisis" that lies at the core of "all constructs of masculinity in male dominated societies," rather than associating this figure with a temporary crisis of angry white men "dispossessed" by the financial crisis, globalization, or the rise of feminism (Rosenthal 2020; Kimmel 2017; Hochschild 2016). I have tried to demonstrate that a psychoanalytic social-psychological perspective (Lorenzer 1986, 2016) can be enriching for the study of the (online) far right's ideals of masculinity and uses of memetic irony: it offers a deeper understanding not only of the cultural artifacts as objects of study but also of the material and psycho-social structures they emerge from—structures at work in both the subjects whose symbolic interactions we study and in us as we affectively respond to them. The close study of the different reactions of members of our depth-hermeneutic interpretation group to the two memes led me to interpret those artifacts as responses to two narcissistic injuries that touch on the "fragile" construct of a potent and autonomous—and thus dependency-fearing (Pohl 2010, 2019)—masculinity. The first wound is caused by the growing superfluousness of the heroic sacrifice tied to the male warrior's body. The second relates to the false promises of capitalism, which invoke fantasies of self-determination while, in fact, obstructing subjects from being in control of the societal conditions on the grounds of which they are to perform competitive autonomy. In this connection, the use of memetic (self-)irony might serve as a sort of "filling/plug" the way Fritz Morgenthauer (1974, 1081–82) described it—as a creative way of "prosthetically" and "perversely" patching the void caused by those narcissistic wounds—rather than enabling a more profound (and potentially emancipatory) exploration of what caused them.



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## Mememes

Figure 1	"Pepe wants you to make and upload more memes." Posted by jooseppi49, October 2, 2016. <a href="https://9gag.com/gag/a9Y0zr6">https://9gag.com/gag/a9Y0zr6</a> (accessed March 20, 2024).
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Figure 1 (contd.)	“I fought in the Great Meme War. I did my service.” Posted by Joshua Roberts, July 2, 2017. <a href="https://www.flickr.com/photos/96891670@N00/35499181062/">https://www.flickr.com/photos/96891670@N00/35499181062/</a> (accessed August 13, 2023).
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Figure 3	“God Emperor Trump.” Knowyourmeme (website). <a href="https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1020360-god-emperor-trump">https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1020360-god-emperor-trump</a> (accessed August 13, 2023).
Figure 4	“War—War never changes.” Knowyourmeme (website). <a href="https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1191391-meme-wars">https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1191391-meme-wars</a> (accessed November 19, 2022).
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Figure 6	Photograph: Shia LaBeouf in front of his video work. “Am Ende bleibt nur die kaputte Flagge.” <i>Deutschlandfunk Kultur</i> , November 3, 2020. <a href="https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kunstprojekt-he-will-not-divide-us-am-ende-bleibt-nur-die-100.html">https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kunstprojekt-he-will-not-divide-us-am-ende-bleibt-nur-die-100.html</a> (accessed August 13, 2023).
Figure 7	Livestream still: HWNDU flag in an “unknown location.” <a href="https://i.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/022/068/hwnduaa.jpg">https://i.kym-cdn.com/entries/icons/original/000/022/068/hwnduaa.jpg</a> (accessed August 13, 2023).
Figure 8	“He Will Not Divide Us.” Knowyourmeme (website). <a href="https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/he-will-not-divide-us">https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/he-will-not-divide-us</a> (accessed November 19, 2022).

## Family Politics in Contemporary Fascist Propaganda

### *Multimodal Entanglements of National Socialist Ideals, Populist Rhetoric, and Image Bank Semiotics*

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**Abstract:** *This article delves into a recurring dilemma facing contemporary fascist movements: how to communicate ideological purity to its hardcore base and at the same time appeal to imagined new voters and recruits? By analyzing how the most prominent fascist movement in Sweden, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), publicly communicates its ideas about family issues and the role of women, we shed light on the semiotic work done by the far right to merge common social conservative tropes with an extremist discourse. Using the tools of social semiotics and multimodal critical discourse studies, the article shows how the NRM uses a range of semiotic resources as it interweaves mainstream conservative discourses about the nature of women and men, recognizable to a broader public (not least to supporters of the Swedish right-wing populist party, the Sweden Democrats), with Nazi keywords appealing to ideological in-groups. The analysis also reveals how the NRM uses image bank semiotics, which connote values associated with commercial lifestyle media and genres, as they communicate their views on family issues. In its use of such imagery, the NRM simultaneously draws on the fascist myth of palingenesis. Using gender and family politics as an empirical focal point, the article illustrates that linguistic and semiotic methods provide powerful tools to scrutinize the efforts of contemporary fascist movements to present themselves as ideologically pure and at the same time speak to a broader audience of potential voters and recruits.*

**Keywords:** Right-wing extremism, fascism, family politics, multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotics, recontextualization, stock images

In recent years, radical nationalist movements in Europe and the Global North have become increasingly influential. Sweden is no exception (Westberg 2021; Westberg and Årman 2019; Expo 2023). Extremist right-wing groups continue to make their

presence known by carrying out violent acts and protests in public spaces. In tandem with these developments on the far right, the more mainstream right-wing populist party Sverigedemokraterna (the Sweden Democrats, SD), with its historical roots in fascism and neo-Nazi movements from the 1990s (Ekman and Poohl 2010), gained significant electoral success in the 2022 national election, winning 20.54 percent of the vote share.

In political science, researchers have traditionally characterized the difference between radical nationalist groups in Europe by categorizing them as either “extreme right” or “radical right” (e.g., Mudde 2000). The first category signifies groups that work outside the democratic system, while the second category is reserved for those political groups that try to gain political influence by running in public elections. However, one distinct trend in Sweden is that the gap between these types of political actors is closing (Expo 2023). Strengthened by its electoral success, the right-wing populist party SD has sharpened its rhetoric, making it more similar to extremist groups. On the other side of the spectrum, extremist groups like Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen (the Nordic Resistance Movement, NRM) have attempted to reach a broader audience with their propaganda; the NRM in fact contested the 2022 election, and they strategically targeted those regions in Sweden where the electoral support for SD is significant.

This trend creates new dynamics between groups in the (radical) nationalist environment but also new tensions within such organizations. As will be described in more detail below, the decision to run in the election caused internal fragmentation in the NRM as some supporters found the new strategy to be too much of a departure from the group’s revolutionary agenda. This demonstrates that changes in strategy and rhetoric create a dilemma for extreme right organizations that are seeking to reach a broader audience of potential voters and future supporters. As highlighted by Billig (1978), such groups need to find a way to appeal to both ideological insiders and a broader public that is not (yet) invested in National Socialist ideology. Using Richardson’s (2017) terms, NRM rhetoric needs to balance *esoteric* appeals targeting the radical cadres within the organization with *exoteric* appeals aimed at building a mass movement. This dilemma, and the way the NRM semiotically manages it, is the focus of this article.<sup>1</sup>

Using the NRM as a case study, the article aims to explore the semiotic work that contemporary extreme right groups do when communicating ideological purity while simultaneously striving to appeal to new voters and recruits. The article explores how such semiotic work entangles National Socialist rhetoric with populist rhetoric, as well as with mainstream lifestyle-oriented communication, through analyzing the coarticulation in extremist propaganda of National Socialist discourse, common social

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conservative tropes on gender roles, and neoliberal aesthetics. The empirical focus of our analysis is the NRM's thematization of the family. This is partly motivated by the fact that this is a key site in which esoteric and exoteric appeals overlap. This empirical focus is also an attempt to enter into dialog with research that uses gender as a lens to study contemporary fascist discourse (Burnett and Richardson 2022).

In the scholarly literature, radical nationalism and fascism are repeatedly characterized in terms of hypermasculinity, misogyny, and male bravery. Such characterizations are associated with the self-image of fascist movements, which portray themselves as among the heroic few destined to save their nation from decay, despair, and humiliation, and as defenders of the nation as a racially demarcated community. This idea unifies contemporary radical nationalism across the globe (Miller-Idriss 2017; Richardson 2017; Kølvråa 2019; Westberg 2021; Burnett 2022) but is also consistent with the imaginaries of historical Nazism (Theweleit 1987, 1989) and propagandistic images of fascist leaders as an incarnation of manliness and heroic courage (see Kershaw 1987).

However, as researchers have pointed out (e.g., Burnett and Richardson 2022; Blee 1996; Miller-Idriss and Pilkington 2019), issues of gender in fascist discourse are not confined to images of hypermasculinity. Burnett and Richardson (2022) argue that sex, sexuality, femininity, and fecundity are equally central to historical and contemporary fascist discourse and that such themes are fruitful entry points in the study of continuities and discontinuities in the articulation of fascist ideology. Along the same vein, Miller-Idriss and Pilkington (2019) call for research that nuances our understanding of the role that gender and femininity play in contemporary fascist movements. In her seminal work on the role of women and notions of femininity in the Third Reich, Koonz (1988) demonstrates that women did not merely survive in silence but actively carved out a feminine *Lebensraum* that contributed to the stability of Hitler's regime. In a similar vein, Gottlieb (2002) demonstrates that women engaged in the British Union of Fascists during the 1930s conceived of their political engagement as empowering and emancipating. Building on such insights, this article continues the exploration of fascism as a gendered ideology. The empirical focus of the article allows us to study how the NRM drew on gendered ideals beyond hypermasculinity as it thematized family issues in texts that were distributed in connection with the Swedish general election in 2022. More specifically, the analysis will show how the NRM reinvents family issues as way of practicing fascism by weaving three intertextual threads together: historical National Socialist ideas about the white race; far-right populist ideas about gender; and finally, contemporary lifestyle ideals that are associated with the commodification of family relations. Such an analysis enables us to highlight how historical fascist tropes—such as the myth of *palingenesis*, the idea that a new fascist civilization will rise from the ashes of contemporary society—find new expressions in contemporary National Socialist discourse. *Palingenesis* means “rebirth from the ashes” (Richardson 2017, 28) and comes with a perceived need for a revolutionary overthrow of the social order.

In addition to the empirical aim of this article, we also set out to demonstrate how a careful analysis of multimodal texts provides a sound basis for critical knowledge of



the discursive production of extremist ideology (Forchtner 2023). To this end, we will demonstrate how a restricted set of powerful tools and methods from social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Van Leeuwen 2005) and multimodal critical discourse studies (Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2016) can be applied to conducting careful and detailed analyses. Most notably, we apply the concept of *recontextualization* (Wodak and Fairclough 2010) to highlight the intertextual facets of meaning making. Before we go about this, we outline the context of the NRM in the first section. In connection with this, we also give a more thorough introduction to the dataset. We then introduce the theoretical foundations, concepts, and methods we use to conduct our multimodal analysis, which is presented in the subsequent sections. Lastly, we reflect on the article's empirical and methodological contributions.

### **Fascism, a Mass Base, and the Role of the Family: The Case of the NRM**

The NRM is the most prominent radical nationalist movement in Sweden and the Nordic countries (Vergara 2018). It was founded through a merger of three neo-Nazi and fascist organizations in the 1990s, namely Vitt Ariskt Motstånd (White Aryan Resistance), the journal *Folktribunalen* (The People's Tribunal), and Nationell Ungdom (National Youth) (Löow 2015; Mattsson 2018). The organization has branches in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland, and the Swedish branch operates as the organization's leading node. Although fascist parties have never dominated elected governments in the Nordic countries, fascist organizations have played an active part in the political history of the region. The NRM exemplifies the success of inter-Nordic collaboration between fascist movements, a strategy aimed at revitalizing fascism in the postwar era (Karcher and Lundström 2022). The NRM explicitly regards Hitler as its ideological inspiration and puts antisemitism at the core of its ideological beliefs. Its overall political aim is to bring down the democracies of the Nordic countries and replace them with a single National Socialist state comprising all the Nordic countries. Along with being explicitly antisemitic, the NRM identifies capitalism, feminism, communism, LGBTQ communities, and multiculturalism as its ideological enemies. Like other fascist movements (see Richardson 2017; Griffin 1993), it strongly believes that its ideological enemies and the current societal order need to be combated with violence. Tellingly, the movement proudly reports on its website the acts of violence that are perpetrated by its members against the NRM's ideological enemies, as well as on the ensuing legal processes. All in all, the NRM's agenda is to crush democracy and build a new, utopian fascist-led state on the ruins of the current societal order. This phoenix-like ideological vision makes the NRM consistent with the definition of fascism as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism" (Griffin 1993, 24).

The NRM strives to attract a broader mass of supporters. To become a popular movement or *folkrörelse* (see Griffin 1993; Mosse 1980), it ran in the Swedish general elections in 2018 and again in 2022. This tactic caused internal fragmentation. Several

prominent members (including the former leader) perceived this as a departure from the movement's radical nationalist and revolutionary agenda, and they have consequently organized a breakaway faction aiming to stay true to the ideals of fanatical violence and revolution, rather than striving to become a mass-based popular movement (Expo 2019).

In connection with the Swedish general election in 2022, the NRM employed a new strategy to achieve electoral success: it campaigned in Swedish regions in which support for the SD is particularly strong.<sup>2</sup> The SD, for its part, packages its politics as value-conservative but ethno-pluralist and is thus not nearly as openly extreme as the NRM (Lodenius 2022; Mulinari 2016; Ekman and Poohl 2010). On the NRM's official website ([motstandsrörelsen.se](http://motstandsrörelsen.se)), its leader commented on this strategy as follows:

What we can accomplish in the Sweden Democrats' strongest region in the entire country, Örkelljunga, will also be really interesting to witness. You would think that some people would be tired of its [SD's] tameness and accommodation by now. (Vad vi kan åstadkomma i Sverigedemokraternas starkaste ort i hela landet, Örkelljunga, ska också blir riktigt intressant att skåda. Några stycken tänker man ju sig borde vara trötta på deras tamhet och anpassning vid detta laget.) (Lindberg 2022)<sup>3</sup>

The strategy to recruit voters and sympathies in regions in which the SD has gained electoral success puts the NRM in a communications dilemma, namely, "the conflict between ideological purity and the desire for a mass basis" (Billig 1978, 124). This is also explicitly addressed in the NRM's party program:

The result is a very thoroughly prepared party program in which literally every word has been scrutinized. . . . Throughout the process, we have set several goals that we have been working toward. One of these goals is to make the program easy to understand, explaining much of what we want to achieve but doing so in a concise and pithy way. *Our aim has been that each sentence should be understood by all, but at the same time to have a deeper meaning that reveals an underlying vision.* (Resultatet är ett mycket grundligt utarbetat partiprogram där bokstavligen talat varje ord i det har synats. . . . Under processens gång har vi satt upp ett antal mål som vi strävat mot. Ett av dessa mål är att göra programmet lättfattligt där vi förklarar mycket av det vi vill åstadkomma men ändå gör det på ett koncist och kärnfullt sätt.

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2 This strategy was clearly not an effective one, as their votes declined from 2,016 in 2016 to 947 in 2022 (Expo 2022).

3 All translations from Swedish into English are by the authors.

*Vi har strävat efter att varje mening ska förstås av alla men samtidigt ha en djupare innebörd som avslöjar en bakomliggande vision.*) (Vejdeland 2020, emphasis added)

In the excerpt, the NRM addresses its need to show hard-line insiders that it is staying true to its revolutionary Nazi ideals while also using a more mainstream rhetoric that appeals to potential recruits and voters who are not already invested in National Socialist ideology. Billig (1978, 24) has described how this can be managed by political organizations through “the partial concealment of the ideology and the specific creation of propaganda designed for mass circulation, which may not accurately reflect the demands of the ideology’s inner logic.” This concealment of ideology and the reinvention of symbols and visual expressions is particularly important in contexts in which National Socialist organizations are banned. For example, Miller-Idriss (2017) has shown how neo-Nazis in Germany, where it is illegal to be a member of a National Socialist organization and display its symbols, invent new symbols to convey their political standpoints and to “say the unsayable” (see Wodak 2015, 98–110). Recent studies on antisemitic content online show that these expressions are not coded to avoid legal repercussions but rather to circumvent the algorithms designed to prevent the spread of hate speech in various social media (Amadeu Antonio Foundation et al. 2021; Becker and Troschke 2022; Hübscher and Von Mering 2022). Tellingly, on social media without content management algorithms, antisemitism thrives and is expressed in more open and less coded ways

In Sweden, National Socialist organizations and symbols have not been banned. The NRM’s main symbol, for example, the Tyr rune, which was historically used by the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) and the paramilitary Sturmabteilung (Stormtroopers, SA) in Nazi Germany, is legal. The need for the NRM to code or cipher its political propaganda might thus seem to be less urgent. The organization does indeed straightforwardly and publicly describe its National Socialist ideology. At the same time, the NRM also makes use of expressions in its propaganda that are not necessarily interpreted as signifiers of National Socialism. For those readers with core-ideological knowledge, however, these can play the role of insider identification. The basic dilemma highlighted by Billig (1978) is still highly relevant for the NRM’s attempts to build a broader base and is also explicitly echoed by the metadiscourse in the party program, which is crafted with a wider audience in mind while simultaneously communicating the movement’s ideological depth and purity.

The coexistence of a hard-line National Socialist discourse with more populist tropes and mainstream aesthetics becomes particularly salient when the NRM communicates its family politics. However, this article’s focus on family politics is not simply empirically motivated. As mentioned above, there is a need for more scholarly work that focuses on the gendered discourse of the extreme right and that goes beyond a focus on masculinity. Writing on the NRM, Askanius (2021, 14) argues for a “close-up

and sustained qualitative inquiry which allows us to address the complexities involved in the intricate relationship between gender and right-wing extremism.”

Research on both historical and contemporary fascism reveals that family issues are ideologically associated with ideas about the survival of the white race, and that the role of women is primarily confined to being responsible for bearing “pure-bred” children (Durham 1998). This image is both confirmed and problematized in research focusing on what women who engage in radical nationalist movements actually do. For example, Askanius (2021) reveals that female members of the NRM are ascribed a position that is defined by men and confined by arguments claiming that women are biologically destined to engage in childcare and homemaking. In addition to this, Askanius (2021, 5) observes that “the discourses produced by these women—as social media influencers, podcast hosts, and lifestyle columnists—are saturated by ideas of female empowerment, sisterhood, the importance of women in the reproduction of the ‘white race’ and the emancipative powers of being part of the movement on a personal level for women.” The position of a female NRM member is thus shaped by a mixture of internalized misogyny and female empowerment (see Gottlieb 2002; Koonz 1988). In this vein, we argue that it is insufficient to merely confirm that misogynist and gender-conservative discourses underpin the way family issues are represented in the NRM’s public propaganda. Rooted in the objective of multimodal critical discourse studies, we argue it is crucial to pay close attention to *how* ideas regarding family issues are semiotically manifested in propaganda because it permits a heightened understanding of how gendered issues are negotiated in the processes of reinventing fascism as a contemporary ideology (see Richardson 2017; Westberg 2021).

In terms of data, we investigate through analysis of a two-part corpus how the NRM merges different semiotic resources to speak both to ideological insiders and to a broader audience. Firstly, we analyze how family issues are presented in the NRM’s 2017 party program *Vår väg: ny politik för en ny tid* (Our way: New politics for a new time).<sup>4</sup> The choice to use the party program as data is motivated by the NRM’s recurring use of the text in different campaigns and online communication during the election period. For the NRM, its website serves as the main channel of public communication. During the election campaign, the party program was referenced as a clickable link whenever the NRM published online texts on its political vision, including family matters. Additionally, when visiting the permanent tab “Ideology and Politics” on the website, one finds that the party program is consistently referred to as the source document, along with a link for viewers who want to read more. Accordingly, the party program can be characterized as a discourse-formative text that shapes NRM’s overall public communication (see Reisigl and Wodak 2016 on criteria for choosing relevant data for critical discourse analysis).

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4 See *Vår väg: ny politik för en ny tid* (Grängesberg, Sweden: Nordfront Förlag, 2017), <https://xn--motstndsrrelsen-llb70a.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/V%C3%A5r-v%C3%A4g2017-03.pdf>.







**Figure 2.** An example of the NRM's online propaganda. Source: note 5.

### **Theoretical Vantage Points and Methodological Tools: Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Recontextualization**

As stated above, one of the aims of this article is to illustrate how the perspectives and tools found in social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Van Leeuwen 2005) and multimodal critical discourse studies (Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2016) can be useful for analyzing gender in contemporary far-right discourse. A basic tenet of social semiotics is that meaning making is multimodal, which means that meaning is produced at the intersection of different semiotic forms such as image, language, color, and sound. Multimodal critical discourse studies build on these insights. Whereas previous discourse analysis often focused on written or spoken discourse in isolation, multimodal critical discourse studies acknowledges that text and talk are always embedded in a larger nexus of meaning-making practices. This interplay between different modes of meaning making, along with the ideological work they perform, is what a multimodal critical discourse study seeks to capture.

Another core assumption is that meaning is not an inherent trait in communicative acts, texts, or parts thereof. Instead, the resources that constitute different communicative acts must be studied in terms of how they are involved in producing or contesting social relations, societal issues, and political problems (Van Leeuwen 2005). This implies that communication must always be studied as a situated practice, with a focus both on how particular *semiotic resources*—the actions and artefacts we use to communicate—are used in specific social and historical contexts, and on how the deployment of these resources relates intertextually to both historical and present semiotic practices. Multimodal critical discourse analysis assumes that meaning making is always intertextually accomplished, and, in the present study, we use this vantage point to launch a semiotic enquiry into how—that is, using which semiotic resources—the NRM articulates its family politics in its propaganda. To investigate this, we work with *recontextualization* as our main methodological tool, which will be applied using a three-pronged social semiotic methodology (see Machin and Van Leeuwen 2016).

Recontextualization refers to the spatial and temporal reappearance of past and present texts and the semiotic resources that constitute them, such as arguments,

style figures, tropes, imagery, genre features, designs, particular words, expressions, and myths (Wodak and Fairclough 2010; Richardson and Wodak 2009; Wodak and Richardson 2013). We apply the concept to reveal how, in its propaganda, the NRM recontextualizes semiotic resources with different spatial and temporal origins that speak to both ideological insiders and imagined potential recruits.

The first stage of recontextualization analysis focuses on which semiotic resources are used in the communication. In analyzing how the NRM coarticulates fragments of texts stemming from different historical and contemporary origins, we begin by describing the readable and visible evidence that the texts provide. We do so by focusing only on the semiotic resources used to thematize the family. This means that the analysis pays particular attention to how the NRM recontextualizes *discourse keywords*, *legitimizing strategies*, and *photographic representations*, concepts that will be elaborated as the analysis unfolds. The goal of this inventory is not to provide thorough descriptions of all semiotic resources and their distinctive features in the dataset, but to provide a sound empirical basis for the next stage of the recontextualization analysis.

The second stage of recontextualization analysis addresses the meaning potentials of the recontextualized elements identified in the first stage. More precisely, we investigate the *provenance* of the recontextualized resources, which refers to the contextual origin of the recontextualized semiotic resources and, importantly, the connotative meaning potentials that these origins carry (Westberg and Årman 2019; Van Leeuwen 2022, 202). By tracing the provenance of the semiotic resources that the NRM employs in its party program and in the propaganda texts, we can interpret how esoteric and exoteric appeals are coarticulated through the recontextualization of resources from different domains to signify family issues via association with these other domains. To identify these domains, we conduct *intertextual cross-readings* (see Westberg and Årman 2019) of historical Nazi and fascist rhetoric, the political rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats, whose supporters the NRM wants to attract, and the semiotic conventions that characterize photographic representations in image banks. Thus, the concept of recontextualization allows us to explore the diverse trajectories of contemporary fascist discourse (see Billig 1978; Wodak and Richardson 2013). We will argue that the very same resource can carry different connotations related to its provenance, and thus can function as an ambiguous sign.

The third stage of recontextualization analysis focuses on the wider significance and social force of the NRM's multimodal discourse, and here we seek to increase the understanding of what Billig (1978, 97) has referred to as "ambiguities in contemporary fascist ideology." At this stage, we discuss how the NRM's multimodal recontextualization of family matters is underpinned by ideological ambiguity and dissension. We conclude the article by arguing that this ambiguity and dissension is key to understanding the attractiveness of contemporary fascism as a gendered ideology, and also to explaining how multimodal propaganda works to attract potential recruits who are not (yet) initiated into National Socialist ideology.

## Entanglements of Nazi Ideology and Exoteric Appeals to the Masses

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This section presents our analysis of the two-part corpus. First, we turn to the party program and focus on how explicit expressions of National Socialist ideals are entangled with value-conservative and right-wing populist rhetoric. We then turn to the NRM's online propaganda and focus on how esoteric appeals to Nazi ideology are coarticulated with neoliberal lifestyle ideals, primarily through the recontextualization of photographic representations drawn from image banks.

### *Family Matters in the Party Program: Entanglements of Nazi Ideology with Value-Conservative and Right-Wing Populist Ideals*

In the party program section “Family politics and the role of women,” the NRM presents its view on gender roles and the family. We present in-depth analysis of the first two paragraphs of this section (pp. 40–41) below. We focus on how esoteric and exoteric appeals are entangled through the recontextualization of *discourse keywords* with a distinct provenance in the language of historical Nazism, along with articulations of “truths” about women and the nature of the sexes that can be found in more mainstream political discourse of the conservative and populist right. Discourse keywords are semantically salient lexical units that play a key role in a specific discourse by being closely associated with important themes, tropes, and myths in a particular ideology (Mautner 2005; Fairclough 2000). We also pay attention to what kind of *rationalizing truths*, with reference to the nature of the sexes, are recontextualized to provide legitimizing answers to why women and men ought to engage in certain practices (Van Leeuwen 2008, 116). In the extract below, we italicize the resources we pay close attention to.

Contemporary liberal democracy propagates a career mindset in which both men and women sacrifice much that is important. In the case of women, it means renouncing children and family. Many women who want to stay at home with their children are forced into the labor market too early. Other women have no children at all because they feel that they must choose between family and career. (Dagens liberala demokrati propagerar för ett karriärstänk där såväl män som kvinnor gör avkall på mycket som är viktigt. I kvinnornas fall handlar det om att göra avkall på barn och familj. Många kvinnor som vill vara hemma med sina barn tvingas in i arbetslivet för tidigt. Andra skaffar inga barn alls eftersom de känner att de måste välja mellan familj och karriär.)

Of course, we do not want to fetter women to the stove, nor are we part of some so-called patriarchal structure in which women are conceived of as a threat to men. Nothing could be further from the

truth because we are as opposed to this kind of chauvinism as we are to feminism. Feminism does the same thing as chauvinism in that it puts man and woman against each other instead of as *nature created them*, as a *complement to each other*. Both these strains of thought not only pose a threat to the *people's community* but have also resulted in mental illness in women being higher than ever before. (Självklart vill vi inte kedja fast kvinnor vid spisen och vi ingår inte heller i någon så kallad patriarkalisk struktur där kvinnan ses som ett hot mot mannen. Inget kunde vara längre från sanningen eftersom vi är lika stora motståndare till denna typ av mansschauvinism som vi är till feminism. Feminismen gör samma sak som mansschauvinismen, det vill säga ställer mannen och kvinnan mot varandra—istället för som *naturen* skapade dem, *som ett komplement till varandra*. Båda dessa idéströmningar utgör inte bara ett hot mot *folkgemenskapen* utan har även resulterat i att den psykiska ohälsan bland våra kvinnor är högre än någonsin.)

On the descriptive level, we observe that the party program criticizes how, in liberal democracy, feminism and chauvinism force women to act and make choices that contradict an allegedly natural order. Women are represented as victims of “contemporary liberal democracy,” “feminism,” and “chauvinism,” all of which are said to force women to sacrifice children and family and thus deny the complementarity of the sexes. Nature is evoked as a foundation upon which “truths” about men, women, and the current social order can be articulated. This kind of ideological argumentation is not unique to the NRM or fascist movements. Rather, it taps into a pattern of legitimizing practices observable elsewhere in the political landscape. Notably, we find similar rhetoric with reference to biological determinism among value-conservative parties that legitimize ideas about the social role and function that men and women ought to fulfill. In the Swedish political landscape, this idea is most prominently represented by the SD. As an example, we cite the section on “The Sweden Democrats, the family, and equality” (p. 15) from the SD’s *Principprogram* (Program of principles), published in 2019. Again, we italicize the language of interest to us.

As previously mentioned, it is the conviction of the Sweden Democrats that *there are inherent differences between most men and women that go beyond what can be observed with bare eyes*. We also believe that *male and female qualities in many cases complement each other* and therefore partially believe that all children have the right to have both a maternal and a paternal figure in their lives. (Som tidigare nämnts är det Sverigedemokraternas uppfattning att *det existerar medfödda skillnader mellan de flesta män och de flesta kvinnor som går bortom det som kan observeras med blotta ögat*. Vi är också av

den uppfattningen att de *manliga och kvinnliga egenskaperna i många fall kompletterar varandra* och av bland annat den orsaken anser vi att alla barn bör ha rätt till både en moders- och en fadersgestalt i sina liv.)<sup>6</sup>

Through a cross-reading between the NRM's party program and the SD's program, it becomes evident that the NRM and the SD recontextualize the same legitimizing strategy. In the NRM's and the SD's programs, their respective strategies explain and legitimize the role of men and women with reference to a presumed inherent—that is, natural and eternal—binary and complementary constitution of the sexes. The analysis confirms Burnett and Richardson's (2022) observation that the gender ideology of the far right should not be seen as isolated but as intertwined with the traditional values of conservative and populist movements. However, in the NRM's party program, the legitimizing truth about nature and the sexes is coarticulated with words and phrases that function as discourse keywords that also link the text intertextually to historical National Socialism. We will focus on the lexical items “nature” and “people's community,” which have provenance in historical National Socialist rhetoric.

*Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) was a key concept in the propaganda of the Third Reich. As Victor Klemperer (2006) observed, *Volks-* (people's) was an extremely frequent prefix in the language of the Third Reich. It was the Nazis' most important social concept; it channeled the Nazi Party's view of the German nation as a community demarcated by race, in which individuals were subordinated to the interest of the nation (Welch 2004; Steber and Gotto 2014). While “nature” is a key resource to legitimize ideas about gender in value-conservative politics, it also carries connotations that derive from the ideological role that it plays in historical Nazism. As noted by Klemperer (2006, 218–19), the language of the Third Reich consistently connected National Socialism to the laws of nature to associate it with eternal values. The trope of nature further becomes ideologically powerful in Nazi discourse as a *structural opposition* (Machin and Mayr 2012, 39–40). In the NRM's adaptation of Nazi ideology, nature is one half of the opposing concepts of “natural” versus “unnatural” and “superficial” (Westberg and Årman 2019). Although the latter half—the unnatural and superficial—is not spelled out explicitly here, it still performs crucial ideological work. In Nazi ideology, the natural order is equivalent to the National Socialist order of the world, and in such a worldview, unnatural and superficial signify the “Jewish” and “parasitical” ways of organizing social life (Klemperer 2006, 174; Musolff 2010, 23ff.). In fascist ideology, family politics and the role of women are considered key in the struggle for racial purity and domination (Burnett and Richardson 2022). And as we can see, by legitimizing its view on family issues by invoking discourse keywords recontextualized from Third Reich propaganda,

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6 See *Principprogram: Sverigedemokraternas Principprogram 2019* (n.p.), <https://sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-principprogram-2019.pdf>.



the NRM not only draws on widespread value-conservative ideals about the sexes but also articulates a worldview in which family politics and gender are inseparable from issues of race, ideas of racial hierarchy, and perceived threats to the racial purity of Swedes.

Although “nature” and “people’s community” have a clear provenance in historical Nazi ideology, “the people” is also a key concept in the politics and rhetoric of the SD. At the core of the SD’s politics is the right-wing populist trope that Swedish people are a culturally demarcated community whose values, ideals, welfare, and interests are threatened by “others” from abroad (e.g., immigrants, particularly Muslims). At the same time, the people are also being betrayed and let down by the elite “up there” (e.g., politicians, authorities, researchers, and journalists) (see Wodak 2015). In fact, the introduction (p. 2, emphasis added) to the SD’s program explains, “We are committed to law and order, community-building traditions, society-bearing institutions, and proven *natural communities such as the family and the nation*” (Vi bejaktar lag och ordning, gemensamhetsskapande traditioner, samhällsbärande institutioner och bevisat välfungerande *naturliga gemenskaper i form av familjen och nationen*). It can thus be argued that when the NRM speaks of the people’s community, it taps into both a historical use of the National Socialist idea of *Volksgemeinschaft*, and into contemporary political discourses of Sweden as a “natural community” demarcated by the national identity of the Swedish people.

To sum up the first part of our analysis: when the NRM thematizes family matters in its party program, linguistic resources with different and partly ambiguous provenance are recontextualized. Returning to the dilemma for contemporary fascist groups identified by Billig (1978), we see how, through this process of recontextualization, ideals shared with populism and value-conservatism are entangled with radical Nazi tropes about the natural differences and hierarchies between the sexes and races. Thus, the NRM combines esoteric with exoteric discourses that signal ideological purity and at the same time tap into mainstream tropes. Through the rise and momentum of far-right populism, value-conservative views on men and women have become increasingly salient in contemporary political discourse (Norocel and Pettersson 2022; Mulinari 2016), and this provides the NRM with fertile ground to—as Aldous Huxley (1936) puts it—give “force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire as they attempt to speak to potential recruits and voters.” In line with Welch’s observation that effective propaganda preaches to the partially converted and is “about confirming rather than converting public opinion” (Welch 2004, 214), the ideological work conducted by the NRM’s party program is not so much to convert supporters as to appeal to voters by confirming mainstream ideals surrounding family politics and gender roles. The next section continues this line of argumentation by exploring how esoteric and exoteric appeals are entangled visually in the NRM’s online propaganda.

### *Family Matters in Online Propaganda: Entanglements of Lifestyle Semiotics and Nazi Myths*

This section moves on from the party program to the NRM's online propaganda. This means that we shift our analytical attention from written to multimodal communication. Overall, we pursue the analytical argument that the NRM's multimodal propaganda on family matters is underpinned by connotative ambiguity. That is, by analyzing the visual and linguistic resources recontextualized in the online propaganda, we argue that these resources derive from a *canon of use* (Ledin and Machin 2018) with provenance in image bank photography, as for example those managed by *Getty Images*, *iStockphoto*, *Shutterstock*, or *Pixabay*. As will be demonstrated in the analysis below, this provenance carries mainstream connotations of lifestyle identities, attitudes, and values associated with the global and neoliberal economy, while the motifs in the recontextualized images simultaneously convey appeals to the fascist myth of palingenesis.

Following our social semiotic methodology, we start by describing the visual resources that are employed in the online propaganda that thematizes family matters. To illustrate the results and analytical work, we pay close attention to the four texts in figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Four NRM online propaganda texts. Source: note 5.

Texts 1–4 share a similar multimodal design. By considering the denotative layer of the visual representations in figure 3 (i.e., what we see), we can observe that they all include visual representations of participants that metonymically index meanings related to “family” as a semantic category. In text 1, two arms embracing a pregnant stomach metonymically represent a “mother” and “pregnancy.” In text 2, a father and child are represented as silhouettes on a shore. In text 3, a small child’s hand holds the left forefinger of an adult’s hand, together indexing a child and its parent. In text 4, a smiling girl peeks out from behind a tree. In addition to the visual representations, all the texts include written messages. In texts 1 and 2, the written elements are artfully laid out as bundles of words that are visually integrated with the images, whereas the written elements in texts 3 and 4 are laid out as banners on top of the images. All the texts also include links to the websites of the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish branches

of the NRM, as well as the NRM's logo (except for text 1). The dominant language used is English (texts 1, 3, and 4), whereas the bundle of words in text 2 includes English, Swedish, German, Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.

The visual resources recontextualized in the NRM's online propaganda have their provenance in stock photography. More specifically, the images in texts 1–4 draw on a semiotic repertoire that has developed over time to make it possible to recontextualize images over and over again to express desirable identities, lifestyles, and ideals in diverse commercial contexts. To analyze what connotative meaning potentials this provenance carries (i.e., the wider cultural associations of what we see), we draw on Machin's (2004) inventory of the semiotic characteristics of stock photography. Complementing this, we also conduct an intertextual "scan" of how the images in the NRM's online propaganda are recontextualized in other online contexts. We then discuss how these resources convey ambiguous meanings when used in this specific strand of fascist discourse, and the implications of this.

In terms of semiotic resources, we can observe that the images in the online propaganda to a lesser or greater extent are *decontextualized*, meaning that the people represented in the images are depicted in a contextual void (Machin 2004, 320). In texts 1, 3, and 4, the background is black. In text 2, the background is a shore, water, mountains, and sky, with the sun breaking through the clouds, but it is out of focus and filtered through a lens of green misty light. As an effect of the images being decontextualized, the participants (men, women, and children) are represented as *generic* types or typical examples instead of as particular individuals situated in time and place (324–25), even when an individualizing face is represented (text 4). This representational pattern invites the reader to interpret the persons represented as typical examples of a heterosexual family, in other words, as "mother," "father," "son," and "daughter."

Text 2 represents a background, but it is represented as a *generic* setting (Machin 2004, 320). We see a shoreline, a sea, and mountains on the horizon, but there are no visual cues that allow us to determine exactly what shore, sea, or mountain this is. Similarly, the people depicted are *generically* represented. This is most striking in text 2, in which the individualizing traits of the man and child are totally eliminated by being represented as black silhouettes. The same can be said for the pregnant stomach in text 1 and the hands in text 3; there are no traits that allow us to determine the individuals to whom the stomach and hands belong. Rather, they are generic representations of "a pregnant woman" and "a father and child." Similarly, in text 4 the use of low contrast smothers the individualizing traits of the child, whereby she is represented as a generic (white) "blond and blue-eyed child." The girl's blue eyes are also salient in the otherwise black-and-white image.

Together, the decontextualization and representation of generic settings and persons in texts 1–4 afford connotative meaning potentials and make low denotative claims of representing the world as we see it with our bare eyes (Machin 2004, 326–27). In a study of silhouettes, Hariman (2022, 10) also argues that the kind of semiotic work we see in texts 1–4 "evokes a more active spectatorship, an invitation to enter into the

image.” However, as Machin argues, the kind of meaning potentials realized through image bank semiotics is rather restricted, and the scope for “active spectatorship” is ideologically framed by its provenance in the global and neoliberal economy. The “image bank is an ideologically pre-structured world. The categories that are available are restricted in terms of all the clichés and marketing categories” (Machin 2004, 334–35).

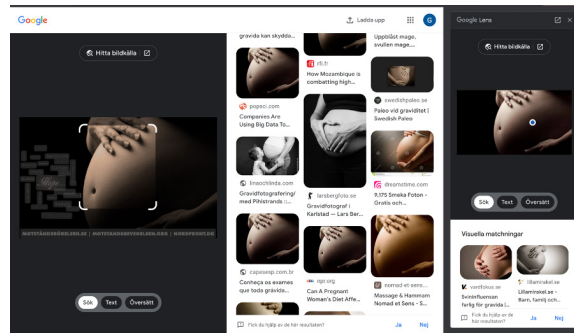
To provide empirical understanding of how the recontextualization of image bank semiotics carries connotative clichés and marketing categories, we have analyzed how the images in texts 1–4 are recontextualized in other consumerist and lifestyle-oriented online contexts. To conduct this intertextual analysis, we used the Image Search Function (ISF) provided by Google, which allows users to trace the reappearance of online images. This is an explorative and novel way to use the affordances provided by search engines such as Google as a part of a recontextualization analysis. Since we use a tool provided by Google, it is imperative to mention that our analysis, in part, is in the hands of the algorithms that generate the search results. This means that the technical procedure of tracing the recontextualizations is black-boxed to us. Accordingly, the reliability of using ISF is not absolutely solid; if the algorithm were changed, there is a chance other results would be returned. However, we believe the benefits of using ISF outweigh this caveat.

Image Search Function helps us pinpoint how similar or identical images to those in figure 3 are recontextualized to convey meanings in other contexts. By pinpointing this, we can provide empirical support for the investigation of how the NRM reinvents fascism in semiotically ambiguous ways in its attempt to broaden its audience. By using ISF, we can trace both the provenance in certain image banks as well as the provenance in how the images are used in online settings. By tracing the exact image banks from which the images derive (as we do for text 2), we can further investigate what meaning potentials the image banks themselves ascribe to the images and thereby how these meaning potentials become part of fascist propaganda when the NRM recontextualizes the images. Such findings are crucial for sensitizing our understanding of how connotative meaning making is accomplished empirically.

As an illustrative example of how ISF was used, we account below for the image search procedure regarding texts 1 and 2. Using ISF, we inserted the current propaganda texts and cropped the images by only marking the stomach and right hand from text 1 and the silhouettes of the man and child from text 2 (see figures 4 and 5).

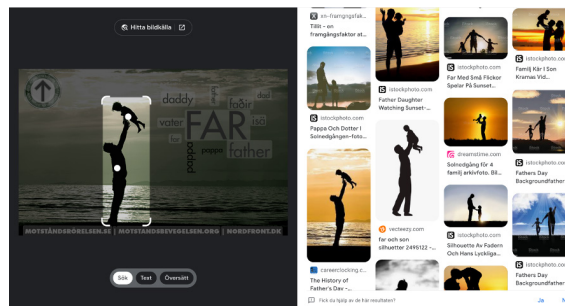
Figure 4 presents the search results for text 1. Although we were not able to trace the exact image bank from which the image originated, the ISF showed that identical and nearly identical images are used online in a variety of commercial and lifestyle contexts. Figure 4 shows how the results of the ISF search are presented as clickable links in the center interface and in the right “Google Lens” interface. The clickable results primarily lead to companies for whom mothers are the main target group, marketing lifestyle services such as diets, photographic services, and massage and spa treatments. In the postmodern and neoliberal age, parenting in general and motherhood in particular have developed into a social practice that, like other lifestyle projects, manifests in

different types of self-reflective choices: being a good, legitimate mother in our time is very much about making informed and conscious consumer choices (Westberg 2016; Krzyżanowska 2020). Thus, when the NRM recontextualizes the current image, it carries connotations that appeal to a mass audience familiar with how these kinds of images are used in a neoliberal marketing context in which motherhood is conceptualized as a lifestyle project. This idea, in turn, is afflicted with a neoliberal idea that society and its social relations are best developed on the basis of economic-transactional relationships.



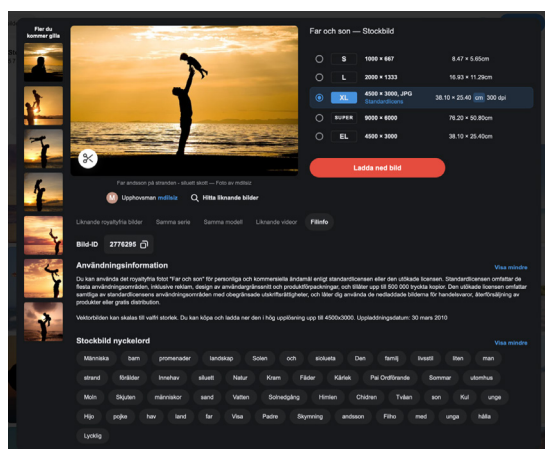
**Figure 4.** Image Search Function result for text 1. Source: authors' photo.

Figure 5 presents the ISF results for text 2. In this case, we narrowed the visual search by cropping the image to only include the silhouettes and left the elements apparently added by the NRM outside the search. Again, we were able to trace how the same image, or almost identical images, are used in a variety of consumerist and lifestyle contexts, but also the specific provenance of the image.



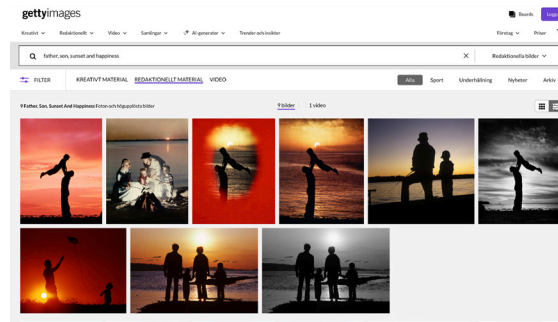
**Figure 5.** Image Search Function result for text 2. Source: authors' photo.



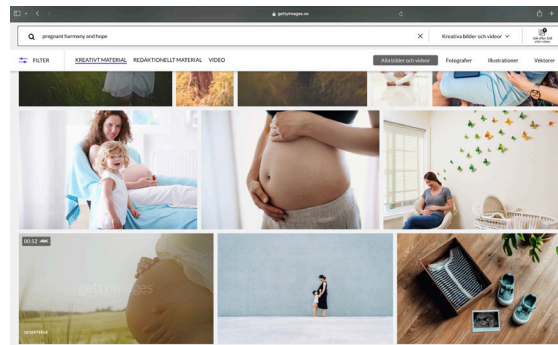


**Figure 6.** Search tags for text 2. Source: authors' photo.

The image used in text 2 originates from the depositphoto.se image bank. However, the original image was not filtered through a green misty light but is in a warm, saturated, and sunset-yellow color. When visiting the image bank and looking at the meta-info of the image, we see it is annotated with tags such as “child,” “sun,” “family,” “lifestyle,” “parents,” “hug,” “love,” “sunset,” “boy,” “father,” and “happy” (figure 6). These are the meaning potentials ascribed by the image bank to the image (see Machin 2004, 328). This observation motivates us to expand the intertextual analysis of the market-based conventions and clichés of image banks, because the way in which depositphoto.se has tagged the current image taps into a larger pattern regarding the way image banks ascribe meaning potentials to desired identities, values, and ideals. To provide further evidence for this argument, we visited one of the world’s largest image banks, Getty Images, and searched for images using “father,” “son,” “sunset,” and “happiness” as search words. The search rendered images that clearly resonate with the image in text 2 (see figure 7). We conducted a similar search using “pregnant,” “harmony,” and “hope,” which resulted in images that are more or less identical to the image in text 1 (see figure 8). Thus, when the NRM recontextualizes image bank semiotics in its online propaganda, the images carry connotations of ideals and identities in diverse lifestyle contexts characterized by economic-transactional relationships.



**Figure 7.** Image Search on Getty Images using “father,” “son,” “sunset,” and “happiness” as search words. Source: authors’ photo.



**Figure 8.** Image Search on Getty Images using “pregnant,” “harmony,” and “hope” as search words. Source: authors’ photo.

This connotation of consumerist and lifestyle identity is augmented by the bundles of words in texts 1 and 2. The layout of these bundles of words has its provenance in what we call *linguistic decoration*, recognizable from home-styling genres such as decorative posters and painting words of wisdom on interior walls (e.g., *carpe diem*). Taking a close look at the words constituting the bundle in text 1, we see how these words cluster in two separate semantic domains that point to different ideological origins. Firstly, we find a cluster of words—hope, youth, culture, family, faith, spirit, children—that points to a provenance in a mainstream and lifestyle-oriented discourse on family issues and motherhood. In fact, these kinds of words could be used as search words on Getty Images to return the kinds of images used in texts 1 and 2. Yet, the other cluster of words—race, civilization, strength, discipline, morals, tradition, heritage, and blood—points to the trope of “blood and soil,” with its provenance in racist and radical nationalist discourse. Here, we can see how the values connoting neoliberal ideals are entangled with and set up a dialogue with ideals rooted in fascist ideology.

The use of different languages is also worth noting since it contributes to the entanglement of neoliberal and fascist ideals. In text 2, the bundle of words contains lexical units that signify a male parent in Swedish (*far, pappa*), Danish and Norwegian

(*far*), English (*father, dad, daddy*), German (*vater*), Finnish (*isä*), and Icelandic and Old Norse (*faðir*). Together, these lexical units allude to the kinship between Nordic and northwestern European countries and (with the exception of Finland) their common Germanic heritage, thereby appealing to ideological insiders who are familiar with ideas about the alleged ethnic origins of the Aryan/Nordic race. The use of English, which is the dominant language choice in texts 1, 3, and 4, also points to a different transnational community and kinship, one not demarcated in terms of blood and race. Rather, English is the lingua franca for transforming artefacts, lifestyles, and values into globally mobile commodities (Jaworski 2015; Archer and Westberg 2020). In tandem with image bank semiotics, the use of English augments an appeal to a mainstream idea about how to practice parenthood as a consumption-based lifestyle project (Westberg 2016). As Androutsopoulos (2012) points out, the use of English should not only be analyzed on the level of lexical meaning. The textual position of English is also worth noting. In the propaganda texts, English is placed “on top” (Androutsopoulos 2012) of the other languages, which enhances its function of framing and legitimizing the messages communicated in other languages or modes. In texts 1–4, this use as English on top pushes to the foreground the intertextual links to modern day lifestylization and the commodification of family life.

The semiotic ambiguity of the propaganda is furthered by some of the words and concepts that have a more ambiguous provenance, that is, they are similar to the ideological workings of lexical units in the party program. For example, the use of “hope” in connection with family issues and children is not unique to fascism or radical nationalism. Rather, using children to symbolize hope is a conventional rhetoric trope, not least within politics (Sherr 1999). Burnett and Richardson (2022, 353) further note that children in fascist discourse are repeatedly used to represent “purity, beauty and innocence.” In the specific context we are analyzing, children carry connotations of hope, purity, and innocence that derive from their provenance in the myth of palingenesis. Once the social order has been overthrown, it is believed that a new nation and generation will be reborn from the ashes (Griffin 1993). In a previous study, Westberg (2021) reveals that the NRM’s recruitment propaganda uses this myth as a structural axis, not least to make potential recruits feel hopeful in relation to the future and to the violent fulfillment of the myth of palingenesis. In light of this, we argue that the children represented in texts 1–4 symbolize a mythical new dawn, a future where the current social order and the ideological opponents of the NRM have been reduced to ashes, from which it is imagined a new, pure, and innocent generation will rise. Accordingly, the myth of palingenesis anchors the meaning potentials of the visual aspects of the propaganda texts. Based on this, we argue that the visual representations of children and the heterosexual family in texts 1–4 are ambiguous. This ambiguity is the result of how the images convey meanings through a conflation of diverse and seemingly contradictory connotative provenances: the use of image bank semiotics connotes a lifestyle identity rooted in consumerism and neoliberal market rationality, whereas the generic participants that are represented through this semiotic canon carry

connotations that derive from the myth of palingenesis. In the propaganda, children are used as a mythological reference to futurity (see Burnett and Richardson 2022).

The appeal to the myth of palingenesis is further signaled in the written banners in texts 3 and 4. In text 3, the bolded lexical unit **“Some things are worth fighting for!”** refers to children. To the ideological insiders it is the rebirth of society that “is worth fighting for.” In the NRM’s adaptation of the myth of palingenesis, this fight is conceived of as a violent elimination of “the Jewish system,” feminism, capitalism, and liberal democracy (Westberg 2021). The ideological enemies of the NRM are also implicitly referred to in text 4 by *structural oppositions* (Machin and Mayr 2012, 39–42). In the “humorous” banner, teeth are metaphorically used as a source domain to signify the target domain of Nordic children: “Nordic children should be like teeth—white, straight and strong!” Here, *white* is a reference to the Nordic/Aryan race (Heller 2000, 66–67), and its structural opposition are those groups of people who do not belong to this imagined category. Secondly, *straight* refers to heterosexuality, thus disqualifying other kinds of sexuality from the community of the nation. Finally, *strong* praises strength, of course, whereby those who are conceived of as being weak are disqualified from the imaged community of the Nordic/Aryan race. In the context of the image of the child the structural opposition of strong/weak should not be understood in terms of mere physics. As shown elsewhere (Westberg 2021), strength or weakness in NRM propaganda are personal traits, where a *strong* person is someone who lives an honest, upright life of struggle against the decadence of contemporary society. On the other hand, *weakness* in Swedish men and women is explicitly blamed for perceived societal decay (Westberg 2021, 222). Taken together as structural oppositions, these lexical units in combination with the visual representation of the child imply that if the revolutionary overthrow of the current society is not fulfilled, a “hopeless,” non-white, non-straight, and weak generation will be fostered.

Thus, when the NRM recontextualizes family issues in its online propaganda, it coarticulates visual and linguistic resources, whose provenance carries ambiguous connotations. On the one hand, the propaganda uses image bank semiotics, which have evolved within the logic of neoliberalism and global capitalism to make images as profitable as possible. On the other hand, the motifs depicted alongside these image bank semiotics in the bundles of words carry connotations of the myth of palingenesis and an urge to combat the current social order—including global capitalism and commercial lifestyle ideals—with violence, and to replace it with a Nazi utopia.

In short, the analysis points to the ambiguity of the NRM’s multimodal propaganda. At the level of representation, we can observe that the NRM uses image bank semiotics as a canvas on which it projects its ideological message and revolutionary beliefs. At the same time, the canvas used (the image bank semiotics) is not completely devoid of content but in itself carries connotations of a logic of neoliberal commodification and the lifestylization of family issues. Does this imply that supporters of the NRM are stuck inside a hegemonic neoliberal subjectivity? We believe not. Rather, we argue that the NRM strategically uses mainstream semiotics when appealing to political insiders

and potential new recruits precisely in relation to family issues. This is an empirical finding that is reinforced by the fact that the NRM uses other conventions elsewhere in its multimodal communication. As we saw in figure 1, the cover of the party program recontextualizes the iconography of historic fascist propaganda, whereas digital propaganda texts on topics other than family matters draw in turn on yet other semiotic conventions. For instance, virtues of masculinity are propagated using folkloric drawings of Vikings recognizable from fantasy fiction, whereas propagandistic representations of the NRM's ideological opponents are done in collage-like texts that resemble the do-it-yourself-techniques recognizable from subversive contexts such as fanzines and punk culture. This allows us to conclude that for the NRM, the use of image bank semiotics is a socially motivated choice that they make to convey meaning in relation to specific themes and target groups.

## Conclusion

In Sweden, the gap between extremist organizations such as the Nordic Resistance Movement and right-wing populist parties such as the Sweden Democrats is closing (Expo 2023). Considering this, the current article investigated in detail how the NRM recontextualizes linguistic and visual resources that have different provenances, producing propaganda texts that intertextually connect to historical National Socialism, right-wing populism, and contemporary mainstream neoliberal conceptualizations of family life. The results show the recontextualization and coarticulation of discourses that, in part, come across as ambiguous or even contradictory. By weaving different threads together, family life is articulated by the NRM as a pivotal arena in the attempt to create a life that is in accordance with National Socialist ideals. In the NRM's propaganda, children and heterosexual families symbolize hope of a new dawn in the fascist myth of palingenesis. At the same time, National Socialist family politics are communicated using a visual genre intimately associated with global marketing and the commercialization of family life. According to the NRM, global capitalism and the "unnatural" and "Jewish" commodification of human relations lie at the very core of the contemporary social order, which the NRM is attempting to violently overthrow. Yet, as the analysis shows, the visual genres of global capitalism can also be utilized to frame the National Socialist discourse on family politics in a way that is more recognizable and relatable to a broader public.

The narrowing gap between extremist and populist rhetoric has created a discursive space in which extremist organizations can draw on tropes that have been made more mainstream by the advancement of populist parties. As we have shown above, the NRM's rhetoric about the people's community and the notion that women in liberal and capitalist societies are forced to renounce having children or sacrifice time with family do indeed resonate with mainstream value-conservative nationalist ideas about the natural community of the Swedish nation and the inherent differences between the sexes.



Following Burnett and Richardson (2022), we argue that an analysis that engages with the gendered facets of the fascist imaginary beyond hypermasculinity can shed new light on continuities and discontinuities within fascist discourse. As shown in the analysis, far-right tropes are entangled with mainstream notions of gender in how contemporary fascist groups use a range of linguistic and visual resources to speak both to ideological insiders as well as possible recruits. We would further argue that the analytical toolbox of social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Van Leeuwen 2005) and multimodal critical discourse studies (Machin and Mayr 2012; Machin 2016) is useful to grapple with gender in fascist discourse. Different modes of communication convey ideological work on gender in different ways, and discourse on family matters finds its meaning in relation to historical and contemporary discursive formations. Hence, a multimodal perspective and a focus on the intertextual facets of meaning making and recontextualization of semiotic resources enables an analysis that both historicizes contemporary fascism and highlights the shifting ways it expresses itself in the present day.

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## The Discursive Construction of “Truth” in the Email Newsletter of an Anti-Genderist Polish NGO

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**Abstract:** *Since at least 2012, right-wing politicians, media, and the Catholic Church have been demonizing the LGBTQ+ community as promoters of the “LGBT ideology,” a substitute term for “gender ideology” in Poland. The vitriolic anti-LGBTQ+ discourse has become a central resource in the right-wing construction of Polish patriotism and national identity. This discourse is adopted by many mainstream conservative public figures and is part of the global anti-genderism register that has been taken up by transnationally linked actors and institutions. In this article, I adopt Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, and the Discourse Historical Approach to examine how anti-genderist actors in Poland discursively construct “truth” through what looks like logical argumentation and appeals to assumed “common sense” knowledge, and how such constructions are used to support appeals to emotion and Catholic faith while also co-opting and redefining progressive terms and concepts in service of right-wing agendas. This strategy departs from the anti-intellectual rhetoric typical of right-wing populism. The article is based on an analysis of 216 emails sent in an email newsletter by the ultraconservative Catholic NGO Centrum Życia i Rodziny (Center for Life and Family) between September 2020 and July 2023.*

**Keywords:** Discourse Historical Approach, Critical Discourse Analysis, LGBTQ+, gender, sexuality, language, Poland

Since “the outbreak of the ‘war on gender’ in the Polish context” in 2012 (Korolczuk and Graff 2018, 800), right-wing politicians, media, and the Catholic Church have been demonizing the LGBTQ+ community as promoters of “LGBT ideology,” a substitute term for “gender ideology” in Poland (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Baran 2023). The vitriolic anti-LGBTQ+ discourse has become a central resource in the right-wing construction of Polish patriotism and national identity (Baran 2023; cf. Tebaldi and Baran 2023). This discourse, adopted in Poland not just by the far-right fringe but by mainstream conservative public figures, is not isolated: it is part of the global anti-genderism register (Borba 2022) that has been taken up by locally situated but transnationally linked actors and institutions in places as diverse as Bulgaria (Darakchi 2019), Latvia and Lithuania (Chojnicka 2015), France and Italy (Russell 2019), India

(Graff, Kapur, and Walters 2019), Brazil and Hungary—as evidenced in the rhetoric of Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán—and elsewhere across Europe, the Americas, and Asia (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Kováts and Põim 2015). In recent years, similar anti-LGBTQ+ discourse has also made it into mainstream right-wing politics in the United States, informing the rhetoric of Republican politicians (Swenson and Colvin 2023). Right-wing groups such as Moms for Liberty, right-wing media, and Republican state legislatures have invoked what Butler (2019, 957) calls the “phantasm” of “gender ideology” to mobilize public support for their queerphobic agendas: removing LGBTQ+-inclusive books from school libraries, banning discussion of any LGBTQ+ topics in school, and restricting access to gender-affirming healthcare (Peele 2023). This embrace of queerphobia by the American mainstream right is significant—and alarming—because of the continued status of the United States as a powerful global player politically, financially, and militarily, and because of its self-proclaimed role as a purported beacon of democracy.

The globally enacted moral panic around “gender ideology” has become a disturbingly fruitful resource in the so-called Global Right’s (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018) project for what Grzebalska and Pető (2018) call an “illiberal transformation,” which includes the maintenance and expansion of the cisheteropatriarchal model of the family and the nation (Wodak 2021; Tebaldi 2023a). Graff and Korolczuk (2022) describe this phenomenon as “opportunistic synergy,” whereby various right-wing actors, including religious and political institutions, have found a way to collaboratively advance their agendas by focusing on the “dangers” of “gender ideology,” oftentimes in relation to children. As others have discussed (e.g., Borba 2022; Butler 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), the notion of “gender ideology” as a purported threat to children, the family, morality, and the nation brings together loosely related right-wing causes and allows them to appear unified in what looks like a common fight. These include, on one hand, opposition to reproductive rights and healthcare, to marriage equality and LGBTQ+ rights, to comprehensive sex education, and to many forms of gender equality; and on the other hand, advancement of populist nationalisms, of white supremacism, of religious intolerance dressed up as “religious freedom,” and even of such seemingly unrelated agendas as climate change denial—where climate science is framed as challenging the God-given “natural” relations between humans and the earth (Baran, 2024).

Crucially, these right-wing campaigns are fought discursively, through and within language. The very term “gender ideology,” which right-wing actors repeatedly use to mean an ideology promoting “unnatural” notions about gender and sexuality, is an appropriation and redefinition of the feminist concept of gender ideologies as sets of beliefs about socially constructed gender and sexual norms. Borba (2022, 60) points out this appropriation in his analysis of the rise and circulation of what he describes as the anti-genderism register, where a register is “a conventionalized aggregate of co-occurring expressive forms.” In this register, the use of “gender ideology” is an example of conservative “parodying [of] feminist and queer discourses while resignifying them along the way” (60). Significantly, the interdiscursive circulation of this register

across local, national, and transnational institutions is both opportunistic, as Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue, and supported and funded by coordinated campaigns. For example, the redefinition of “gender ideology” as a threat to the natural order was first articulated by conservative Catholics in the United States in the 1990s, at the encouragement of the Vatican (Borba 2022), which provides important context for its recent reemergence in discourses of the Christian and mainstream US right. Moreover, this interdiscursive strategic co-option of progressive concepts and language by right-wing actors is a well-attested and widespread practice in the conservative playbook. For example, Tebaldi (2021) demonstrates how alt-right digital communities promote the causes of white supremacy and gender essentialism by borrowing the language of critical pedagogy and antifascism. Her discussion shows how these groups redefine and reframe such terms and concepts as multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusivity, as well as ideas based in academic and scientific discourse, to promote and elevate whiteness and white supremacist agendas.

Sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological approaches offer theoretical and methodological tools for analyzing these processes of appropriation and resignification through which right-wing actors construct anti-genderist and white supremacist narratives about feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and religious and national belonging. In these narratives, comprehensive sex education becomes “the sexualization of children,” promotion of LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion becomes “grooming,” providing safe spaces for trans, nonbinary, and gender-fluid youth becomes “violation of parental rights,” while at the same time the nation is defined as cisheteropatriarchal, white, and Christian—at least in Europe and North America (see Tebaldi 2021, 2023a). Sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological frameworks and methodologies such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), or the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) help to deepen analyses of the circulation of right-wing discourses. The tools they provide allow researchers to locate and describe the discursive strategies and linguistic means or moves (Wodak and Boukala 2015) that enact these appropriations and reframings. In this way, they help to expose and, hopefully, counter the interdiscursive “web of rightist resources for indoctrination” (Tebaldi 2021, 222) that links redefinition of “gender ideology” with reframings of inclusivity, alternative schooling, healthy living (Tebaldi 2023b), or religious freedom.

In this article, I adopt the analytical tools of DHA (Wodak 2021; Reisigl and Wodak 2016; Wodak and Boukala 2015), as well as CDA and MCDA methods and tools, to examine how anti-genderist actors in Poland construct the opposition between “us”—the true Poles who are loyal to the imagined notion of Poland as inherently and unquestionably Catholic—and “them,” the anti-Polish supporters of LGBT and “gender ideology.” I analyze how these anti-genderists discursively construct “truth” through what looks like logical argumentation and presumed “common sense” knowledge (Fairclough 2001), and how such constructions are used to support appeals to emotion and the Catholic faith. This strategy departs from the anti-intellectual rhetoric typical of populist right-wing discourses as described by Wodak (2021), and it is also not

unique to the Polish context but part of the interdiscursively linked web of resources employed by right-wing activists and communities, as discussed by Tebaldi (2021). The alt-right digital communities that Tebaldi examines likewise employ language that not only co-opts and redefines progressive concepts but uses them to cast progressive ideas as illogical, inflexible, and oppressive, while representing right-wing stances as scientifically grounded and rational. In arguing for the preservation of “white culture” or the common-sense nature of gender essentialism, these groups invoke the language of what looks like fact-based science. In doing so, they define and regiment what counts as truth while also “debunking” what they construct as liberal lies and propaganda.

My focus in this article is the email newsletter sent out to subscribers, on average twice per week, by the ultraconservative Polish NGO Centrum Życia i Rodziny (Center for Life and Family). My data consists of 216 emails dating from September 2020 to July 2023. The Center’s explicit goals are promoting an anti-reproductive rights, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ+ agenda. The authors of the emails adopt numerous linguistic techniques to construct “truth” through what looks like logical and scientifically grounded reasoning. These include techniques designed to appeal to a sense of shared understanding and values, and, crucially, pseudolinguistic analysis that attempts to unmask the “real” meaning behind liberal discourse. The use of “data” provided by conservative academics, selective and misleading depiction of current and historical events, and the use of inclusive pronouns (first-person plural “we,” second-person plural “you”) to invoke presumed shared meanings, and other similar techniques, allow these anti-genderist texts to masquerade as arguments rooted in “true” knowledge. As such, the texts can appeal to conservative and religious people who identify with the Center’s purported values of protecting life, families, and children, but who are educated and consider themselves intelligent critical thinkers. When used in tandem with discursive strategies designed to elicit emotions—for example, outrage at the “LGBT lobby” or passionate love for the nation—these techniques anchor such emotional responses in the constructed “true” reality, making them appear rational and logically justifiable. This interplay between emotion and “logic” echoes the alt-right strategies that Tebaldi (2021, 219) describes as “play[ing] with the boundaries between facts and feelings, truth, and interpretations.”

### **Anti-Genderism and the Construction of “True” Polishness**

In previous work (Baran 2023), I examined the discursive processes through which opposition to “genderism” is positioned by Polish right-wing politicians, religious figures, media, and activists as the patriotic duty of “true Poles” through the construction of historicized narratives of nationhood that see Poland as inherently and inevitably Catholic, and as the God-chosen defender of European Christianity. In these narratives European Christianity is represented as the only true and superior civilization and way of life. The right-wing argument for the fight against “LGBT ideology” is anchored in several elements of Polish history. It relies on the centuries-old representation

of Poland as the bulwark of Christianity, located at the edges of Christian Europe, where, according to nationalist interpretations, it successfully defended Europe from numerous non-Christian invaders such as pre-Christian peoples, the Ottoman Empire, and, in 1920, the Soviet Union. It also appeals to more recent events within the living memory of many Poles: the Polish anticommunist struggle in the 1980s, which was centered around and supported by the Catholic Church and tied to the figure of the Polish pope, John Paul II, who was not only a vocal opponent of communism but also a militant anti-genderist whose pontificate significantly expanded the Catholic Church's opposition to reproductive rights and feminist ideas. Anti-genderist appeals to this historical context reinforce the discursive enmeshing of three ideas: what Grzymała-Busse (2015) describes as the historically rooted construct of the fused Polish-Catholic identity; the notion of Poland's unique mission to defend Europe from external and internal anti-Christian enemies (Baran 2023); and the anti-genderism register's insistence that "genderism" is "cultural Marxism." This enmeshing, in turn, facilitates the creation and promotion of narratives that depict any progressive stance around LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, or women's rights as fundamentally and inherently anti-Polish. Within the broader European context, these narratives also rely on another element of the global anti-genderism register: the co-option of anticolonial discourse whereby "gender ideology" is imposed on "us," the true Poles, by "them"—the supposedly Marxist and godless elites represented by the European Union and related transnational institutions (Gal 2019; Borba 2022; Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Here, again, Poland is depicted as being called to defend Christianity against godlessness.

As I explain in Baran (2023), these anti-genderist narratives utilize the appeal to emotionally charged themes that resonate with collective constructions of Polishness via recognizable cultural referents, such as revered historical figures, events, and myths. But as part of this discourse, not unlike in right-wing evangelical discourses in North America, the existence and inevitable truth of the Judeo-Christian God is set up as an a priori fact rather than a set of beliefs. As I will show in this article, the adoption of this a priori assumption is partly what allows Catholic-aligned right-wing actors in Poland to develop their anti-genderist arguments in ways that mimic logical and fact-based reasoning. Furthermore, faith-based assumptions are often represented as scientific by implicitly equating "God-given" with "natural." In this way, a socioculturally constructed reality is reframed as universally and objectively true—and, simultaneously, "natural" is reframed as "inherently good" rather than simply naturally occurring, as same-sex sexual behavior in nature in fact frequently does (see Gómez, González-Megías, and Verdú 2023).

### **Analytical Framework: Concepts and Tools**

Discourse analysts who study the way language can be manipulated to produce multiple layers of meaning have developed extensive sets of analytical tools that I draw on in this article. Specifically, I rely on the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) developed



by Wodak (see Wodak 2021; Reisigl and Wodak 2016; Wodak and Boukala 2015), as well as on methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), discussed in detail by Machin and Mayr (2012).

The central feature of DHA is that it considers historical context as crucial to interpreting texts and discourses because this opens the way to mapping how they are recontextualized across time and space (Reisigl and Wodak 2016, 32). Wodak also emphasizes that DHA methodology is based on triangulation between three dimensions of discourse analysis: “*the contents or topics of specific discourses; discursive strategies; and the linguistic means that are drawn upon to realize both topics and strategies*” (Wodak and Boukala 2015, 93, original emphasis). This approach “allows relating the macro- and meso-level of contextualization to the micro-level analysis of texts” (Wodak 2021:73). In other words, DHA explores how discourses emerge from and make sense in specific historically shaped contexts, and how they are constructed and recontextualized through the use of broad discursive strategies and, on a micro-level, concrete linguistic tools.

To examine the discursive strategies and linguistic means through which discourses are constructed and reproduced, the DHA framework builds on the analytical tools of Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA. Originally developed by Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001), CDA takes the theoretical perspective that the social world is constituted by discourse, which is a social practice that is in dialogic, mutually constitutive relationships with other social practices or dimensions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 61). Discursive practices thus reflect, as well as create and reproduce, social inequalities, hierarchies, and power relations (62). Critical discourse analysts set out to identify and describe the linguistic processes that produce these discursive practices. Wodak’s DHA model refers to these practices as “discursive strategies” that are enacted through particular linguistic means, tools, or resources—for example lexical and pragmatic choices, connotations, grammatical structures, hyperbole and emphasis, quotation, or punctuation.

Critical Discourse Analysis tends to be concerned “with the ‘hidden agenda’ of discourse” (Cameron 2001, 123)—in other words, with exposing, uncovering, or unmasking the “hidden meaning” behind texts, whether written, spoken, visual, or multimodal. The notion of “hidden” meanings suggests intentionality, whereby texts are purposely constructed to mislead or confuse and thus “cover up” unpopular or even harmful agendas of their authors. This is frequently the case with political and other institutional discourses that both mask and reproduce social inequalities, which is why CDA is especially interested in them. The Center for Life and Family, the Polish NGO discussed in this article, uses this type of intentional construction of texts to promote a queerphobic, anti-genderist agenda. But it is important to note that all discourse is in a dialogic relationship with social reality, both produced by it and reproducing it—and sometimes challenging and reconstituting it—whether intentionally or not.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, or MCDA, emphasizes that the visual aspects of messages are as important to pay attention to as their content. The size, shape, and color of the font used, the placement of words on the page, videos and images that accompany the text, and other visual features, all work to frame and contextualize the

message in the text and “are amenable to—and require—analysis beyond the literal and linguistic” (Mooney and Price 2022, 678). MCDA thus builds on CDA to outline tools for identifying and examining visual choices made by the creators of a particular text (Van Leeuwen 2000; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Machin and Mayr 2012).

Below I outline the discursive strategies and linguistic means or resources used in my analysis of the written texts that follow, drawing and building on Machin and Mayr (2012), Wodak (2021), Reisigl and Wodak (2016), and Wodak and Boukala (2015).

*Relational tactics, establishing familiarity and connection with the audience*

- The use of inclusive or exclusive pronouns (we/they/you)
- Direct appeal to the audience, constructing the illusion of conversation
- Speaking in the first person, as if confiding in a friend
- Appeal to presumed shared values and meanings

*Suppression and lexical absence*

- Strategic deletion of facts and contexts
- Selective and strategic use of quotes, facts, and statistics

*Appeal to what looks like rational reasoning and scientific discourse*

- Appeal to authoritative sources
- Invoking scientific language and the language of rational argument

*Erasure of the agent or the subject of the action*

- Use of passive voice with no subject
- Nominalization, e.g., “attacks on our values” without specifying the “attacker”
- Aggregation, or making one example appear part of a larger phenomenon

*Manipulating emphasis through grammatical resources*

- Word order choice, e.g., foregrounding specific points, actions, or objects
- Lexical choice, e.g., neutral quoting verbs (“say,” “report”) or ones with meaning potentials (“claim,” “refute”)

*Presupposition, whereby assumptions are presented as agreed-upon facts*

- Assumptions about the meaning of events

- Assumptions about the meaning of words and concepts, including the implicit redefinition of words and concepts
- Assumptions about shared judgments and values
- Appeal to things being self-evident by using phrases such as “of course,” “as we know,” “in reality,” etc.
- Assumptions about “true facts,” presenting opinions as facts (e.g., true Poles are Catholic, gender is binary, etc.)

*Structural oppositions such as good/bad, young/old, etc.*

- Using terms that imply qualities opposite to those presumed as desirable, e.g., “illegal immigrant” implies the opposite of law-abiding citizen

*Appeal to emotions*

- Hyperbole and the use of exclamation marks for emphasis
- Using emotive language (“upset,” “hurt”)

*Use of metalanguage*

- “Deconstructing” the language of liberal / left-wing actors and media
- Explicitly redefining terms and concepts

*Trivialization and delegitimization of liberal / left-wing terms and concepts*

- Ironic use of quotation marks (e.g., same-sex “marriage”)
- Use of sarcasm to ridicule liberal / left-wing terms and concepts

While the above list is intended to describe and organize various discursive strategies and linguistic means for the purpose of systematic examination of texts, discourse analysis is not an exact science. When faced with specific texts one may notice that the same linguistic means may be used for different effects, and discursive tactics may overlap and intersect. For example, the use of sarcasm can simultaneously delegitimize the opposite side’s stance, and work as a relational tactic by establishing a sense of shared understanding around the idea that “they are ridiculous.” Consequently, in this article I will discuss the above strategies and resources as they apply to the Center for Life and Family, but not necessarily in the order presented above.

## The Center for Life and Family: Background and Significance

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The NGO Centrum Życia i Rodziny (Center for Life and Family) is part of a network of anti-genderist, ultraconservative organizations in Poland and globally that support each other and collaborate by promoting and participating in each other's events and initiatives, featuring each other's prominent members as guest speakers or event sponsors, and benefiting from shared financial resources. While tracing funding streams is a huge undertaking beyond the scope of this article, Graff and Korolczuk (2022) suggest such financial connections in their discussion of transnational anti-gender right-wing networks. In Poland, groups linked with the Center for Life and Family include, among others, Fundacja Życie i Rodzina (Foundation for Life and Family), which in 2021 drew up a bill titled "Stop LGBT" aimed at censoring Pride parades, and the Ordo Iuris Institute, an ultraconservative think tank providing legal advice to right-wing politicians and groups in Poland and Europe since 2013. Ordo Iuris was formed and is funded by the Father Piotr Skarga Association for Christian Culture, a Polish NGO that itself was established by the right-wing Catholic organization Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP). Meanwhile, TFP has been sponsoring and funding far-right agendas around the world since its founding in Brazil in 1960 (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). The websites of Ordo Iuris and the Skarga Association have long featured articles promoting the Center for Life and Family and its activities, as does the Skarga Association-sponsored right-wing news outlet *Polonia Christiana*. More recently, the Center for Life and Family has openly joined forces with Ordo Iuris in its various campaigns. At the same time, the right-wing Law and Justice party, which was in power from 2015 until its election loss in October 2023, placed numerous Ordo Iuris allies in high-level government posts (Mierzyńska 2020), while its politicians regularly attended events such as the annual March for Life and Family—anti-choice rallies celebrating cisheteronormativity, ultraconservative Catholicism, and nationalism—organized by the Center for Life and Family. While this article focuses on the Center's email newsletter, it is crucial to emphasize that the Center is not an isolated or fringe group but rather one part of a mutually supportive network of institutions promoting queerphobia, misogyny, and the cisheteropatriarchal social order in Poland and beyond.

The Center for Life and Family has for years been active in organizing anti-choice, anti-LGBTQ+ events such as the March for Life and Family. The Center's longtime president, Paweł Ozdoba (replaced in February 2024 by Marcin Perłowski), has maintained a close relationship with the Polish Catholic Church as well as with right-wing political figures and media. In May 2021, the Center set up a now defunct online news outlet linked with its website, called *Marsz.info* after the "life and family" marches. According to one of Ozdoba's emails, *Marsz.info* received over 50,000 visits each month. As of November 9, 2023, the Center's Facebook page had 45,000 followers, its X (formerly Twitter) account had 4,500, and its YouTube channel had 8,650 subscribers. For comparison, the LGBTQ+-allied organization *Kampania Przeciw Homofobii* (Campaign Against Homophobia) had 111,000 Facebook followers, 25,100

X followers, and 7,002 YouTube subscribers. While I have not conducted any reliable investigation into the size and demographic of the audience that the Center for Life and Family and its affiliate Marsz.info reach, the numbers above suggest a significant impact, especially since the Center and other anti-genderist groups work closely and publicly with influential figures in the Catholic Church and in right-wing politics and media.

An example of the type of messaging that the Center disseminates is illustrated in its Twitter post published on May 17, 2022 (figure 1).<sup>1</sup> In this post, we immediately notice how the Center defines “family” in the emoji to the right of the group’s name, which shows a simple graphic of a man, a woman, and two children. The Center’s logo appears to be two intertwined wedding bands, linked so that they are inseparable, thus emphasizing the Center’s often-stated commitment to the sacramental permanence of Catholic cisheterosexual marriage. This point seems further highlighted by the difference in the bands’ sizes, as might be expected of a man’s and a woman’s ring. Furthermore, the larger ring—the man’s ring—is on top, and the smaller one dangles from it, as if to represent the hierarchical structure of Catholic marriage, with the man as the head of the family and the woman as his dependent.

The post itself is intended as a “celebration” of the “International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia,” as can be seen in the hashtags and as stated in the bottom left-hand corner of the image included in the post. Just above, and below the Center’s wedding-band logo, the larger capitalized text informs the reader that the Center “is joining the international coalition supporting persons wishing to overcome unwanted homosexual attraction,”<sup>2</sup> emphasized with an exclamation mark. The second part of this text, starting with “persons,” is set apart in yellow, and the word *niechciany* (unwanted) is also underlined in red, producing additional emphasis. The text is placed on a dark blue background and takes up the left half of the image, while on the right half the background fades into an illustration: a rainbow-colored sea, indexing the LGBTQ+ rainbow flag (Baran 2022; Baran, forthcoming), underneath a partly cloudy sky, with a large hand in the foreground that appears to jut out of the water with fingers spread apart. The hand is positioned with its palm facing the viewer, with the English word “help” written on the palm in red letters. It appears as if the hand belongs to someone reaching out to be saved from drowning in rainbow-colored waters, implying they are being killed by “gender ideology.” To the right of the jutting-out hand we see the words *TAK! dla pomocy* (YES! to help) and to the left *NIE! dla nienawiści* (NO! to hate). The “yes” and “no” are written in large capital letters, in green and red respectively, and emphasized with exclamation marks. Finally, the text of the post itself, found above the image, reads: “We are joining the International Foundation for Therapeutic and

1 Twitter was renamed X on July 23, 2023; thus, the name Twitter will be used for posts prior to that date.

2 All translations from Polish are the author’s.



Counselling Choice! The Center for Life and Family supports persons struggling with unwanted sexual attraction toward people of the same sex!” The final exclamation mark is in red, followed again by the “NO to hate!” and “YES to help!” slogans.



**Figure 1.** Twitter post by the Center for Life and Family on May 17, 2022, the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia.<sup>3</sup>

Crucially, the International Foundation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice (IFTCC), cited in the post in figure 1, is a pro-conversion therapy organization. According to its website, it is devoted to “empowering” and “advocating” for LGBTQ+ people “within the Judeo-Christian context,” couching its agenda in terms of freedom of “choice.”<sup>4</sup> IFTCC chose Poland to hold its ninth annual conference in October 2023, under the seemingly neutral title “Turning the Tide: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches to Sexuality and Gender.” The conference featured talks by right-wing anti-genderist academics, therapists, and medical doctors, as well as by Christian religious leaders. Its program, available in full on IFTCC’s website, framed non-heterosexual orientations and non-cisgender identities as disorders that can and should be corrected. The conference was thus structured around two of the discursive strategies discussed above: on one hand, it presumed that the tenets of Christian religion are established fact, in particular by including Christian services and sessions such as “Free to Pray: Integrating

3 Centrum Życia i Rodziny (@CentrumZycia), Twitter, May 17, 2022, 7:09 a.m., [https://twitter.com/CentrumZycia/status/1526520302469013504?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1526520302469013504%7Ctwgr%5E2fc1e34eda0ff859c61cd97772940f7f7b0a871a%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmarsz.info%2Fsrodowisko-lgbt-obchodzi-dzisiaj-miedzynarodowy-dzien-walki-z-homofobia-transfobia-interfobia-i-bifobia%2F](https://twitter.com/CentrumZycia/status/1526520302469013504?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1526520302469013504%7Ctwgr%5E2fc1e34eda0ff859c61cd97772940f7f7b0a871a%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmarsz.info%2Fsrodowisko-lgbt-obchodzi-dzisiaj-miedzynarodowy-dzien-walki-z-homofobia-transfobia-interfobia-i-bifobia%2F).

4 See the IFTCC’s home page: <https://iftcc.org/> (accessed January 8, 2025).

Biblical Truth” in its program; and on the other hand, it utilized the academic register and appeal to ostensibly scientific research and rational argumentation to support its queerphobic agenda.

In its May 17, 2022, Twitter post in figure 1, the Center for Life and Family invokes the appeal to reason and scientific authority by aligning itself with IFTCC and, implicitly, with the latter’s pseudoscientific arguments. This appeal to reason is complemented by the appeal to emotion, as shown in the image of the drowning person’s hand, reaching out to be saved from “gender ideology.” This juxtaposition of emotional despair and “scientific” reasoning reinforces each strategy: the post can be read as saying something like, “How can you let people suffer when science shows how to save them?” In the process, the Center’s post appropriates and redefines—in semiotic terms, resignifies—key terms taken from progressive and LGBTQ+ discourse: homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are redefined as referring to discrimination *by* the LGBTQ+ community *against* people who wish to be “cured” from their non-heterosexual orientations and non-cisgender identities.

This strategy aligns well with IFTCC’s redefinition of “cross-disciplinary approaches to sexuality and gender” (part of its conference’s title) as inclusive of widely discredited views of heterosexuality as the only healthy form of sexuality, and of gender as biologically inherent and binary. It also aligns with how IFTCC’s very name—Foundation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice—co-opts pro-choice language. Meanwhile, the post’s claim of supporting those with “unwanted homosexual attraction” borrows from the language of community-building and supporting oppressed groups. Similarly, the progressive language of anti-discrimination and anti-hate is appropriated and twisted into a near caricature, illustrating what Borba (2022, 60) describes as the “parodying” of progressive discourses, both in the Center’s aligning itself with the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, and in its use of the “NO to hate!” slogan. This strategy serves also to delegitimize progressive ideas by turning them on their head, and simultaneously mobilizing them in service of conservative agendas (Tebaldi 2021). Finally, this example illustrates the transnational connections between anti-genderist, ultraconservative actors and how they are reinforced and reproduced intertextually and interdiscursively across the domains of academia, religion, politics, and media.

### **Constructing “Truth” in the Email Newsletter: Data and Analysis**

The Center for Life and Family sends out an email newsletter to subscribers on average twice a week. In the early days of my exploratory research into anti-LGBTQ+ discourses and Polish right-wing nationalism, I subscribed to the newsletter without much thought. Since then, I have reflected on the ethical questions raised by such a subscription, which I would examine in more depth if I were to consider subscribing today. I have maintained the subscription because the emails do not contain ads nor do they require a monetary donation, and they provide access to a very clearly defined

set of texts sustained over time. This article draws on a corpus of 216 of these emails, inclusive of all the emails I received between September 2020 and July 2023. Many of these came from Paweł Ozdoba's email address and are composed as if written by him personally: they use first-person singular masculine grammatical forms and are signed by him with his photo attached (Ozdoba was the Center's president at the time). Others are sent from the address Marsz.info and are structured more as previews of the news outlet's current articles. All of the emails utilize multiple discursive and linguistic resources for constructing and reinforcing the notion of "truth" in their communication with the Center's intended audience: devout Catholics who oppose abortion and do not question gender essentialism, as evidenced by the a priori assumption underlying all these texts that Christian belief is tantamount to indisputable fact. There is no element of genuine debate with the other side in the emails. They do, however, define "truth" through interweaving appeals to emotion and reason in ways that may prove persuasive to educated and intellectually curious readers, who nonetheless identify strongly with the values professed by the Catholic Church. I analyzed the emails by coding them for specific discursive and linguistic strategies in the qualitative analysis tool Dedoose.

### *"I Realize that Such Words Upset You": Setting Up Interpersonal Relationship and Shared Meaning*

Relational strategies that focus on establishing a sense of an interpersonal relationship between readers and Ozdoba himself or the Center's and Marsz.info's activists are ubiquitous in the email newsletter. One of the linguistic resources utilized to this end is the direct appeal to the reader: the use of first-person forms to refer to the author(s) and second-person plural forms to refer to the audience, and the construction of connection and similarity or sharedness of feelings and experience between the author(s) and the reader(s), as shown in the two examples in figures 2 and 3.

<b>Context:</b> Email reacting to claims that Pope John Paul II was responsible for the cover-up of pedophilia in the Catholic Church.			
<b>Polish text:</b> <i>Tak, piszę tego maila wzburzony, ale myślę, że Państwa również dotykają takie ataki.</i>			
<b>Gloss:</b> Yes, I am upset while writing this email, but I believe that you are also hurt by such attacks.			
<b>Analysis:</b>			
1	<i>Tak, piszę</i>	<i>tego maila wzburzony</i>	<i>ale myślę</i>
1	Yes, I am writing	this email upset	but I believe
	[1 <sup>st</sup> person singular]	[masculine singular]	[1 <sup>st</sup> person singular]
2	<i>ze Państwa</i>	<i>również dotykają</i>	<i>takie ataki</i>
2	that you	also hurt	such attacks
	[plural formal "you," Accusative]	[3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural]	[Nominative]
	Direct Object	Action Verb	Subject

**Figure 2.** Example 1, from an email sent by Ozdoba on November 20, 2020. Source: author's possession.

In example 1 (figure 2), I first cite the Polish text and its most appropriate English gloss, followed by a detailed breakdown of the literal structure of the Polish sentence, which is important given the particular affordances of Polish morphology and syntax. As can be noticed immediately, the author—in this case Ozdoba—uses the first-person singular forms in ways that position him as a real person with human feelings that the reader can relate to. In line 1, he uses first-person singular verbs *piszę* (I am writing) and *myszę* (I believe), as well as the singular masculine adjective *wzburzony* (upset), to describe his state of mind. In line 2, he speaks directly to his audience by addressing them with the formal—friendly but respectful—Polish plural “you,” *Państwa*, while also assuming that they share his own upset feelings: “I believe that you are also hurt by such attacks,” further underscored by the adverb “also.” Ozdoba’s vulnerable humanity is emphasized in the way he opens this sentence (line 1): “Yes, I am upset while writing this email.” The initial “yes” functions to highlight his admitting to having strong feelings, which he then portrays as justified because they are—he presumes—shared by his readers. These linguistic maneuvers construct a sense that Ozdoba and his audience are familiar with and understand each other.

However, other tactics are being employed here as well. While the English gloss appears in the passive voice, in Polish the verb is active, and the subject or agent of the action is *takie ataki* (such attacks). The plural you, *Państwa*, is in the accusative case and is the direct object of the verb *dotykają* (hurt—literally: touch in a painful way). In this way, the readers are constructed as passive recipients of a hurtful action, but the action’s actual performer remains obscured through the linguistic tactics of nominalization and aggregation. We do not find out who is doing the attacking; rather, the attacks themselves are positioned as an agent (nominalization), and the plural adjective *takie* (such) portrays specific events described elsewhere in the email as part of a larger, nonspecific phenomenon of “such attacks” (aggregation). Finally, placing a word or phrase in sentence-final or clause-final position often has an emphasizing effect, and here this is achieved in two places. First, the adjective *wzburzony* (upset) appears at the end of the first clause (line 1), which I translated in the gloss as “I am upset while writing this email” for the sake of clarity in English. But in Polish, the clause is constructed as “I am writing this email upset,” where “upset,” in its singular masculine form, clearly refers back to the subject of the verb “write”—the email’s author—and thus can be placed clause-finally without creating confusion. By comparison, English adjectives and nouns do not exhibit grammatical gender. In the second clause (line 2), the subject and agent of the sentence, “such attacks,” is also placed at the end, drawing attention to the aggression and violence implied in the noun “attacks.” To maintain the sentence-final position of “such attacks,” I translated this clause in the passive voice in English. But in Polish, while the default or unmarked word order is subject-verb-object (SVO), it is possible to change this around because case marking (nominative, accusative, etc.) clearly shows which noun is the subject or object of the verb. Accordingly, in line 2, the word order is object-verb-subject: “you (direct object) also hurt (third-person plural active-voice verb) such attacks (subject).” In this way, Polish morphosyntax allows the

email’s author to simultaneously emphasize the aggregated noun “such attacks” through sentence-final placement, and to represent “you” as a passive victim—the direct object—of the attacks’ hurtful actions. This construction of victimization further solidifies the sense of familiarity and shared understanding between the presumed author (Ozdoba) and his audience.

Example 2 (figure 3) is similar. Here we also see the first-person singular verb and pronoun use that make the email appear to be written by Ozdoba himself, as well as the direct appeal to the plural “you” and an assumption of shared (upset and hurt) emotions.

<b>Context:</b> Email reacting to a leftwing Polish MP who openly and harshly criticized the total abortion ban in Poland.			
<b>Polish text:</b> <i>Zdaję sobie sprawę, że, podobnie jak mnie, takie słowa Państwa wzbudzają.</i>			
<b>Gloss:</b> I realize that, just like me, you are upset by such words.			
<b>Analysis:</b>			
1	<i>Zdaję</i>	<i>sobie</i>	<i>sprawę</i>
1	I realize	that	similarly as me
	[1 <sup>st</sup> person singular]		[1 <sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun, Accusative]
			Direct Object
2	<i>takie słowa</i>	<i>Państwa</i>	<i>wzbudzają</i>
2	such words	you	upset
	[Nominative]	[plural formal “you,” Accusative]	[3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural]
	Subject	Direct Object	Action Verb

**Figure 3.** Example 2, from an email sent by Ozdoba on February 5, 2021. Source: author’s possession.

In addition to the first-person singular verb phrase *zdaję sobie sprawę* (I realize—more literally: I am aware of the matter), the first-person pronoun *mnie* (me), and the direct address to the audience as *Państwa* (the plural “you”), the affordances of Polish morphosyntax are again utilized in example 2 for emphasis and connection-building. The first-person pronoun *mnie* (me) appears in the accusative case, as the direct object of the verb *wzbudzają* (upset), in parallel to the accusative case of *Państwa* (you). The sentence is in the active voice, unlike the English gloss, so that the presumed author, Ozdoba, and his readers are connected as passive victims of the upsetting action performed by the subject, *takie słowa* (such words). Again, as in example 1, the actual agent of the action—the person(s) producing the upsetting words—is erased through the tactic of nominalization, even though in reality the speaker is identifiable: it is the left-wing MP who criticized the abortion ban. But erasing the speaker through nominalization in this sentence allows the additional employment of the tactic of aggregation, so that this particular MP’s specific comments are repositioned as part of a larger, nonspecific set of upsetting behaviors (“such words”). The effect is that instead of denouncing one statement made by one person, the audience is encouraged to join the author in feeling upset at a large set of other similar—but imagined—statements or comments, presumably made by other progressive politicians and entities. The overt case marking, meanwhile, permits the default SVO word order to be rearranged as subject-object-



verb (SOV), so that the third-person plural verb *wzburzają* (upset) appears at the end and is thus emphasized. In this way, the author suggests that he and the audience share the same emotion, which is inflicted on them by the aggregate “such words,” and the audience’s attention is further drawn to the nature of this emotion—being upset—as it closes the sentence.

### *Metalinguage*

The same email from February 5, 2021, also utilizes the discursive strategy of attempting to explicitly “deconstruct” liberal discourse through what resembles metalinguistic commentary. The email quotes the MP, or more accurately member of the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish national legislature), Joanna Senyszyn, also identifying her by name before using the nominalization aggregation strategies to shift agency from her to “such words.” Senyszyn is a longtime professor of economics at the University of Gdańsk, and a political and social activist. For the past two decades, she has been active as a representative to the Sejm from leftist parties and coalitions. Senyszyn’s comments, quoted in Ozdoba’s email (figure 4), constitute a rather blunt and perhaps darkly sarcastic critique of the most recent (October 2020) iteration of Polish anti-abortion law, which bans abortion even in the case of severe fetal abnormality or incurable illness that will not allow the baby to live much past birth, if at all.<sup>5</sup> This drastic expansion of the abortion ban triggered mass protests in Poland—“black protests,” so called after the black outfits worn by participants—with tens of thousands of women and men taking to the streets. Many of the protests were organized by the feminist group All-Poland Women’s Strike (Chałupnik and Brookes 2022). The specific comments by Representative Senyszyn quoted in the email, followed by Ozdoba’s response, are presented in Polish and English translation in figure 4.

Senyszyn’s statement, reported in many Polish media outlets, was immediately decried in right-wing media and represented as a serious proposal to euthanize infants. Articles criticizing Senyszyn bore titles like “Joanna Senyszyn Supports the Murder of Sick Children,”<sup>6</sup> or “Abortion Is No Longer Enough for the Left. They Also Want to Kill Children Who Are Born.”<sup>7</sup>

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5 “Poland: Abortion Witch Hunt Targets Women, Doctors,” *Human Rights Watch*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/14/poland-abortion-witch-hunt-targets-women-doctors#:~:text=Polish%20law%20now%20permits%20abortion,pregnant%20women%20refused%20terminations%20demonstrate>.

6 “Senyszyn popiera mordowanie chorych dzieci,” *Narodowcy.net*, February 4, 2021, <https://narodowcy.net/senyszyn-popiera-mordowanie-chorych-dzieci/>, accessed November 11, 2023.

7 “Zaczęło się. Aborcja już Lewicy nie wystarczy. Chcą jeszcze zabijać dzieci urodzone,” *Fronda.pl*, February 1, 2021, <https://www.fronda.pl/a/zaczelo-sie-aborcja-juz-lewicy-nie-wystarczy-chca-jeszcze-zabijac-dzieci-urodzone-1,156585.html>.

The same misleading reframing is used in Ozdoba’s email, which additionally attempts to deconstruct Senyszyn’s words as linguistic manipulation. Ozdoba repositions infants born with abnormalities so severe that they have no path to survival as “people fighting for their own lives,” in this way appealing to the readers’ empathy. At the same time he criticizes Senyszyn for using what he describes as this very tactic: emotional appeal through “powerful negative images—torture, seizures, pain” (even though her words, while emotionally evocative, describe reality). Furthermore, Ozdoba prefaces this attempt at deconstruction of Senyszyn’s words with a metalinguistic commentary, printed in bold, in which he also generalizes or aggregates the MP’s specific words as typical of liberals as a collective: “Representative Senyszyn’s statement ideally illustrates the tactic of people with leftist, pro-abortion views.” This strategy of metalinguistically identifying leftist “tactics” works to position—and redefine—the concepts and ideas espoused by liberals and the left as overly emotional exaggerations, and to contrast them with what Ozdoba constructs as the logical reasoning of right-wing arguments. He builds on this strategy in the next paragraph (not cited here), in which he cites statistics of how rare anencephaly in children is.

**1. Senyszyn’s comments cited in the email**

**Polish text:**  
*Rodzą się dzieci z bezmózgowiem, bezczaszkowiem. Jeśli takie dzieci będą się teraz rodzić, to wielka szkoda, że nie ma prawa o eutanazji, bo lepiej byłoby takie dziecko za pomocą zastrzyku pozbawić życia, niż pozwolić, żeby w męczarniach konało, w konwulsjach i bólu.*

**Gloss/translation:**  
 Children are being born with anencephaly, missing brain and skull. If such children will now be born, it is too bad that there is no legal euthanasia, because it would be better to take the life of such a child with an injection than to let them slowly die in torture, in seizures and pain.

**2. Ozdoba’s response**

**Polish text:**  
*Wypowiedź posłanki Senyszyn idealnie ilustruje taktykę osób o lewicowych, pro-aborcyjnych poglądach. Myślę tu o przypisywaniu mocnych negatywnych obrazów – męczarni, konwulsji, bólu – ludziom walczącym o własne życie. A tym, którzy chcą to życie skrócić – czystych intencji, bo przecież chcą oszczędzić cierpienia.*

**Gloss/translation:**  
**Representative Senyszyn’s statement ideally illustrates the tactic of people with leftist, pro-abortion views.** I am thinking here of assigning powerful negative images – torture, seizures, pain – to people fighting for their own lives. And to those, who want to shorten these lives – pure intentions, because after all they want to spare them suffering.

**Figure 4.** Example 3, from an email sent by Ozdoba on February 5, 2021. Source: author’s possession.

### *“This Simple Fact” and “Killing of Children”: Presupposition and Structural Oppositions*

The next example (figure 5) utilizes multiple discursive strategies and linguistic tactics. As in examples 1 and 2 above, it relies on the relational tactic of establishing a sense of interpersonal connection, familiarity, and shared beliefs and experiences. But it also uses presupposition: it appeals to “common sense” by claiming that certain things are self-evident, and it presents opinion and belief as established fact. It also employs structural oppositions, as will be discussed below.

**Context:** Email with a misleading report on a survey asking scientists about the start of human life.

**Polish text:**  
*Wiemy, że dla Was ta sprawa jest oczywista i niepodważalna – życie ludzkie zaczyna się od momentu poczęcia. Nie wszyscy chcą jednak przyjąć do wiadomości ten prosty fakt... Jesteśmy przekonani, że każdemu z Was przyszło w swoim życiu zmierzyć się ze zwolennikami zabijania dzieci. Także i my wielokrotnie stawaliśmy się stroną w słownych utarczkach, kiedy w rzeczywistości zaczyna się ludzkie życie.*

**Gloss/translation:**  
 We know that for you [plural, informal] this matter is obvious and indisputable – human life begins from the moment of conception. Not everyone, however, wants to acknowledge this simple fact... We are convinced that each of you [plural, informal] has had to, in their life, confront proponents of killing children. We also have numerous times become a party to verbal arguments about when in reality human life begins.

**Figure 5.** Example 4, from an email sent by Marsz.info on September 20, 2022. Source: author's possession.

Starting with relational tactics, we notice the use of first-person verb forms and pronouns by the authors—this time these are plural, since the email is sent by the team of Marsz.info rather than Ozdoba—paralleled by the informal second-person plural pronoun *Was* (you), which constructs the authors and the audience as an intimate in-group. In the second instance, the audience is addressed simultaneously as a group and as individuals in the phrase *każdemu z Was* (each of you), which can be argued to reinforce the message that each reader is seen both as a separate human being to whom the message is directly addressed, and as sharing in the in-group's common experience.

The verbs *wiemy* (we know) and *jesteśmy przekonani* (we are convinced) imply that the authors understand the beliefs and experiences of their audience, establishing familiarity and connection. But, crucially, the sentences that these verbs open presuppose the content of what the audience thinks, and reinforce this assumption by presenting these thoughts not as opinions but as facts that one would be foolish to refute. Thus, we read “We know that for you this matter is obvious and indisputable—human life begins from the moment of conception,” which is further described as “this simple fact.” Structural opposition is used when advocates for reproductive rights are referred to as “proponents of killing children”: since killing is universally perceived as a fundamentally immoral act, the use of this phrase also activates its opposite—the presumed correct and moral position of the audience, defined as knowing without a doubt “when in reality human life begins.” Finally, the claim that they—the authors and the audience, or the in-group—have often “become a party to verbal arguments” with reproductive rights supporters (“proponents of killing children”) constructs the anti-choice anti-genderists as not only morally superior but also reasonable and ready to argue rationally in defense of the “obvious” and “simple” facts.

***“Grammatically Correct Language Forms”: Suppression and Misrepresentation of Facts***

The final example discussed in this article (figure 6) comes from the email sent by Marsz.info on September 13, 2022, in which the writers report the story of the Irish school teacher Enoch Burke, who spent eleven days in prison in the aftermath of his refusal to address a transgender student with the pronoun “they.” According to *The Guardian* newspaper, Burke refused to honor the student’s and their parents’ wishes on the grounds of his religious beliefs, and subsequently “confronted the principal at a public event and questioned her in a ‘heated’ manner” (Carroll 2022). The school placed Burke on administrative leave, but when he ignored it, it obtained a court order to keep him away from campus. Burke was jailed for contempt of court when he continued to show up at the school.

Accessing this story in international media requires knowledge of English, which is presumably not universal among the Center for Life and Family’s Polish audience, and we can further guess that even English speakers among this audience would not necessarily fact-check Marsz.info’s version by turning to a liberal publication like *The Guardian*. Meanwhile, Marsz.info’s email represents Burke’s story—in Polish—completely differently through a series of linguistic tactics.

Harmful ideologies promoted by leftist-liberal circles ceaselessly destroy not only social and community life, but also the lives of ordinary, individual citizens...

**This happened to a teacher, who addressed a boy using grammatically correct language forms, and did not – according to the demands of the naughty youngster – refer to him with the pronoun “they.”**

The teacher admits that his faith, conscience, and beliefs do not allow him to incorrectly name the child’s gender. Meanwhile the boy, who imagined himself to be a “transgender person,” demanded that his “difference” be acknowledged and that he be referred to in the plural. Although most of the teaching staff succumbed to the young man’s emotional blackmail, in light of opposition on part of the above-mentioned teacher, the matter became widely known. First, he clashed with the director of the institution, and subsequently with the court, which forbade him from working in his position as a teacher. And that is despite the fact that opposition to the alleged “transgenderism” was the teacher’s only *offense*.

**Luckily, the brave educator ignored the court’s scandalous ban and continued to teach children. Unfortunately, the court, in order to make this impossible, locked him in jail until such time as he gives up his religion, beliefs, and faithfulness to his conscience, and apologizes to the boy for calling him a boy.**

**Figure 6.** Example 5, from an email sent by Marsz.info on September 13, 2022. The emphasis (bold and italics) is in the original email. Source: author’s possession.

Figure 6 shows an excerpt from Marsz.info’s email, in the interest of space in English translation only. The Polish-language article that the email linked to was formerly found on the (now defunct) Marsz.info website, although that text differed somewhat from the email. The email purports to report on a news story, in this way utilizing the tactic of appealing to authoritative sources (i.e., real events) and to logical argumentation, since it does indeed seem unreasonable that a person would be jailed for refusing to honor a student’s pronouns. But when we compare the story as represented in the email in figure 6 to the way it is reported in *The Guardian*, inaccuracies and suppression or

misrepresentation of facts become apparent. The email claims that Burke “clashed with the director of the institution” and then “with the court,” but the way this is framed in the relevant paragraph suggests that the “clash” was a disagreement over Burke’s right to follow his religious conscience—and not, as was the case, the result of his problematic interaction with the principal at a public event. The email reframes the court’s order barring Burke from the school’s grounds as “for[bidding] him from working in his position as a teacher,” which constructs the court’s decision as unjust. Burke is depicted as a devoted teacher who simply wants to keep doing his job, while the court insists on denying him this wish. The use of a neutral, factual tone in this sentence works to present the court’s actions as objectively irrational. In the next sentence, the email’s authors inaccurately claim that Burke’s only “*offense*”—emphasized or perhaps parodied through the use of italics—was his opposition to the use of the “they” pronoun. The last paragraph of the excerpt uses some emotive language, such as describing the court’s order as “scandalous.” But the final sentence is again written in a neutral tone: reading it, one might imagine that the court literally stated that Burke would be jailed until he gave up “his religion, beliefs, and faithfulness to his conscience, and apologize[d] to the boy for calling him a boy.” If this statement were accurate, the court would appear objectively unreasonable—and this is the effect that the email’s wording produces for its readers. But, crucially, the claim is not accurate at all, and is instead an interpretation by Marsz.info writers in which anti-genderist opinions are presented as facts.

The suppression and misrepresentation of facts in this example is also enacted through mistranslation. The email translates the English pronoun “they” as *oni*, which in Polish is specifically the third-person plural masculine pronoun used to refer to human males or mixed-gender groups, and which does not have a long history as a gender-neutral third-person pronoun referring to individuals like the English “they.” While recently some Polish non-cis people do use *oni* as their pronoun, others use the feminine/neuter plural form *one*, while still others opt for innovations that bypass the strictly gendered Polish grammatical structures, including *onu*, *ony*, and *vono*.<sup>8</sup> As such, the pragmatic uses of “they” and *oni* do not directly correspond to each other.

In addition to the suppression and misrepresentation of events and the use of seemingly neutral and rational reporting and argumentation, this email also utilizes presupposition whereby transgender identity is represented as an agreed-upon impossibility. This strategy can be observed in phrases such as “his faith, conscience, and belief do not allow him to incorrectly name the child’s gender,” where the student’s experienced gender identity is framed as “incorrect;” or “the boy, who imagined himself to be a ‘transgender person,’” where the verb “imagined” invalidates and denies the

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8 See, for example, “Sugerowane formy niebinarne i neutralne,” Zaimki [Pronouns], accessed April 9, 2024, <https://zaimki.pl/zaimki>; or Klaudia Bobela, “Zaimki.pl: Powstała strona ułatwiająca dostosowanie języka polskiego osobom niebinarnym,” *Queer.pl*, updated July 30, 2020, <https://queer.pl/artykul/204685/zaimkipl-strona-jezyk-polski-niebinarnosc>.



student's experience on the assumption that they are, undeniably, a boy. The student is further described as "naughty," which is not supported by any evidence but works to trivialize their requests to be addressed as "they" as unreasonable acting out.

Finally, a linguistic device utilized in this example that is afforded specifically by the written medium of the email is the use of quotation marks when mentioning LGBTQ+ terms and concepts: "transgender person," "difference" (presumably referring to non-cisgender identity), and "transgenderism" all appear in quotes. This use of quotation marks works to delegitimize and trivialize LGBTQ+ terms, concepts, and issues, and is frequently encountered in the Center's emails. Other examples from emails not discussed in this article include "same-sex 'marriages'" (August 5, 2022), "attempts at legalizing 'partnerships'" (meaning civil unions, August 5, 2022), or "the left invents toilets for the 'nonbinary'" (June 9, 2022).

## Conclusion

The above analysis of emails sent out by the Center for Life and Family illustrates how the right uses language to reframe and redefine reality, and to manipulate and persuade its audiences through multiple discursive strategies. It also shows how discourse analytic methods such as the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) can contribute to a detailed and productive examination of right-wing language. While the observation that language can be manipulated for political or ideological ends is not new, theoretical and methodological tools like DHA and CDA allow us to not just observe such manipulations but to identify, describe, quantify, and demystify them through systematic analysis. As a result, we can also trace the interdiscursive circulation of linguistic strategies employed by various right-wing actors, exposing how they support, learn from, and connect with one another in both local and, crucially, global contexts. The similarity of tactics used by the Polish Center for Life and Family and the International Foundation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice (IFTCC), which the Center references in its Twitter post, on one hand, and by the alt-right digital groups analyzed by Tebaldi (2021), on the other, illustrates these interdiscursive links and circulations.

Furthermore, systematic analyses of right-wing language expose how right-wing discourses borrow from, co-opt, redefine, and repurpose progressive terms, concepts, and ideas in service of right-wing agendas, while simultaneously delegitimizing their use by progressives. This process is reinforced through the tactics of anchoring religious and patriotic feelings in what appears like rational argumentation, including drawing on scientific and academic discourse, as in the case of the Center's emails. By appealing to logic, purported scientific "facts," and presupposition about what is "common sense" and self-evident, these texts construct cisheteropatriarchal and queerphobic beliefs as indisputable "truths" and the only correct interpretations of reality, while at the same time constructing progressive stances on gender and sexuality as illogical and absurd.

Crucially, the delegitimization of progressive discourses is also enacted through explicit metalinguistic “deconstructions” of progressive meanings, as I have shown in this article. Such deconstructions, whereby right-wing actors claim to identify and “unmask” linguistic “tactics” used by progressives, highlight the extent to which right-wing discursive strategies are intentional and well informed. They appear, in fact, not dissimilar to linguists’ own methods of discourse analysis, such as CDA, perhaps because the right surely has its own linguists. Recognizing the building blocks of these right-wing discourses is an important step, but it is also a call to action. The next step, perhaps, is utilizing the tools of discourse analysis to construct effective public messaging that reaches beyond academia, and that could help to demystify and expose right-wing discursive tactics for those who encounter them in politics and the media every day.

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## Referentialism and Discursive Parallels between US “Alt-Right” and “Gender-Critical” Conspiracism

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the role of language ideology in the argumentation of both “alt-right” and “gender-critical” discourses about gender. While positioning themselves on different sides of the left-right political spectrum, both groups make use of referentialist language ideologies to establish themselves as authorities over language. Referentialism is a type of tautological reasoning that posits language and dictionary-style definitions as the final arbiter of reality (e.g., “A woman is an adult human female; if it is an adult human female, it must be a woman”). This article contributes to a broader understanding of how language ideology functions as a powerful rhetorical tool in the fight against anti-gender movements.*

**Keywords:** transphobia, referentialism, language ideologies, conspiracy theory, gender critical, TERF, anti-gender

This article explores trans-exclusionary and alt-right discursive alignments, with particular focus on the weaponization of *referentialist* language ideologies as a means to establish authority over the meaning of “gender.” For the purposes of this article, I define referentialism as a logical-positivist assertion that meaning in language does/should lie in what an expression denotes, and that the material world does/should conform to denotative practice. Stated simply, referentialism is a tautological belief that the world is already presorted into natural categories that are picked out by language, and that linguistic boundaries denote essential and unalienable differences between entities in the world (see Hyslop-Margison and Naseem 2007). In this article, I argue that anti-trans and alt-right/far-right actors weaponize referentialism both to mediate anxieties about racial and gender ambiguities and to assert epistemic authority through appeals to commonly held prescriptive language ideologies. The data collection and analysis for this article are drawn from (*digital*) *discourse analysis*, a flexible approach that draws attention to *texts* (collections of language that have internal coherence and perform social actions), *contexts* (the conditions in which texts are produced and perceived), *practices* (recognizable sequences of actions), and *power/ideology* (the use of texts to assert or deny social power, and to “create certain ‘versions of reality’” (Jones, Chik, and Hafner 2017). In section 2, I describe terminologies and anxieties within anti-trans



and alt-right communities, as well as their histories; section 3 discusses referentialism in connection to political psychological studies of cognitive closure; section 4 forms the discussion and conclusion.

### **A Brief Overview of “Gender-Critical” and “Alt-Right” Terminology and History**

In this article, I use terms including “anti-trans,” “gender-critical,” and “alt-right,” which are all politically laden and contested expressions. I have chosen to use “anti-trans” as a catchall for TERF (“trans-exclusionary radical feminist”) and “gender-critical” actors. Similarly, I use “far right” to refer to broader trends of radical conservative politics, and “alt-right” to refer to the specific online subculture defined below. There is scholarly debate about the legitimizing function of using in-group terms (cf. Heller and McElhinny 2017), but “gender-critical” and “alt-right” index a level of ideologies and practices that cannot be attributed to broader “anti-trans” or far-right movements. In this section, I outline brief histories of these movements.

The term TERF, or “trans-exclusionary radical feminist,” was coined by pro-trans radical feminists. It is credited to Viv Smythe, a cisgender heterosexual radical feminist blogger (though Smythe herself credits trans-inclusion advocate Lisa Harney). Smythe used TERF to distance her radical feminist politics from self-described radical feminists who “marginalise trans women at actual risk from regularly documented abuse/violence in favour of protecting hypothetical cis women from purely hypothetical abuse/violence from trans women,” which she found “horribly unethical as well as repellently callous” (Smythe 2008, 2018). The expression spread from Smythe’s blog to other feminist blogs and platforms where it has both been embraced as a self-identification and used as an insult. Indeed, “TERF” has been labeled a slur, or derogatory, by numerous press outlets and style guides (M. Goldberg 2014; Vasquez 2016; Ring 2023). Over time, “gender-critical” or “gender-critical feminism” have become the preferred monikers for this group. In her mapping of this linguistic shift, scholar Claire Thurlow argues that “TERF” better represents trans-exclusionary views in radical feminist politics of the 1970s and 1980s, while “gender-critical” represents a contemporary “pro-woman” reframing of trans exclusion (Thurlow 2024). It is critical to note here that gender-criticals also present themselves publicly as left-leaning political actors (and, in fact, as better leftists than trans-inclusion activists) (Wheeler 2024). The term “gender-critical,” suggesting a level of nuanced critique around gender, lends a veneer of leftist sensibility to what is otherwise a directed hate campaign toward transgender people (and most egregiously toward transgender women). Many transgender writers and cisgender allies have noted the alliances between transphobic “feminist” and misogynist far-right groups (Evang 2022; Klee 2021; LeMaster 2023; Lewis and Seresin 2022; Libby 2022; Lofton 2022; Wang 2019a, 2019b).

“Alt-right” is an umbrella term for numerous overlapping online communities that endorse radical right-wing politics. Described by scholars as “atomized, amorphous, predominantly online, and mostly anonymous” (Hawley 2017, 3), the alt-right follows

decades of white supremacist organizing in the United States and western Europe. While the movement overlaps with and has garnered support from similar movements across the globe, the alt-right is predominantly US-oriented and is notorious for its anonymity. Emerging from 4chan troll culture, the alt-right rose to prominence during the 2016 US presidential election, reached its height, and lost prominence as its positions and tactics integrated into pro-Trump Republican practices (Thompson and Hawley 2021). Alt-right discourses promote pseudoscientific racist talking points such as “race/sex realism,” a perspective that one’s racial and sex assignment suits one to specific complementary social roles (Saini 2019). This is also the basis of far-right opposition to the existence of queer and transgender people—those who are viewed as consciously rejecting the far-right moral imperative of heterosexual reproduction (Burnett and Richardson 2021). Alt-right subgroups may differ in terms of specific foci or goals but share white identity as a core interest. The less radical factions of the alt-right call for an end to “politically correct” language and immigration as well as acceptance for white identity politics in the mainstream. The more radical factions, which include neo-Nazis, advocate for global race war and the establishment of a whites-only nation. There is considerable debate across all factions regarding the terminology that should be used for self-identification.

Similarly to “TERF” and “gender-critical”, the term “alt-right” is not a neutral descriptor and should be used with caution. In the article “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” Breitbart writers Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos argue that the alt-right is merely acting out youthful rebellion against the politically correct norms of yesteryear:

Just as the kids of the 60s shocked their parents with promiscuity, long hair and rock’n’roll, so too do the alt-right’s young meme brigades shock older generations with outrageous caricatures, from the Jewish “Shlomo Shekelburg” to “Remove Kebab,” an internet in-joke about the Bosnian genocide. . . . Are they actually bigots? No more than death metal devotees in the 80s were actually Satanists. For them, it’s simply a means to fluster their grandparents. (Bokhari and Yiannopoulos 2016)

In this view, the “alt-right” is framed as transgressive, fun, and edgy; racism and genocide are reduced to tools in a humorous repertoire, rather than examples of human cruelty. In response, journalists and scholars have argued that using this term minimizes and legitimizes far-right positions while obscuring their white supremacist, antisemitic, and misogynist politics as mere “humor.” In this view, uncritical circulation of their preferred terminology unintentionally endorses their legitimacy as a group (Stead 2016; Heller and McElhinny 2017). I agree with this, especially when it comes to media coverage of such groups. It is crucial to highlight the intrinsically violent politics of white supremacy in discussing the alt-right, as they present a real threat to public safety.

At the same time, my interest in the alt-right is due to its particular role in online political discourse and the practices that distinguish it from other far-right and white supremacist movements, namely, its weaponization of anonymous internet spaces and use of memes to spread white supremacist ideas. I use “alt-right” in this article because I consider the movement a specific articulation (or set of articulations) of a broader far-right movement. Their politics and end goals align, but the alt-right has had a distinct influence on US right-wing self-stylization in the era of Donald Trump (Thompson and Hawley, 2021). As with “gender-critical,” I have used quotation marks around “alt-right” in this section to indicate that it was an in-group identifier at the time of my data collection, and to visually mark it as a contested expression. I use “far-right” to index the broader movements of conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian politics globally.

### *Histories*

The intellectual history of transphobia within US- and UK-based feminist movements traces back to 1970s radical feminist circles, who argued that it is the very nature of “maleness” (essentialized to people who have penises) to oppress and exploit “female-sexed bodies” (people who have vulvae/uteri). Sheila Jeffreys (2022, 13) calls this theory “penile imperialism,” defined as “a regime in which men are assumed to have a ‘sex right’ of access to the bodies of women and girls which is delineated by sexologists, protected by governments and the law, and reproduced in culture.” This viewpoint explicitly “conflate[s] bodies with gender so that the penis [becomes] a symbol of patriarchy, male socialization, and unwanted heterosexuality” (Earles 2019). Transgender women and transfeminine people, rather than allies in rejecting maleness, are figured as emblems of patriarchal desire to take over female bodies (Raymond 1979), while transgender men and transmasculine people are presented as naive victims of “gender ideology” (Shrier 2020; Borba 2022; Baran 2023; Tebaldi and Baran 2023).

In recent years, trans-exclusionary feminisms have relabeled themselves as “gender-critical” movements to signal opposition to this “ideology” while seeking to reify sex as the primary axis of women’s oppression. Although these groups present themselves as feminists and as generally aligned with progressive social movements, their open participation in misogynist and homophobic political projects suggests that the “feminist” title is merely a rhetorical strategy to gain cultural cachet and legitimacy as defenders of women (Alexander 2023; Billard 2023; LeMaster 2023). In a more nuanced perspective, Thurlow (2024) sees the discursive shift from “TERF” to “gender-critical” as a response to changing theory and understanding of the world. From the 1970s to the present day there has been a boom of scholarship challenging the notion of what a woman “is.” Thurlow (2024, 968–69) writes that notions of social “gender” and biological “sex” have been challenged by both critical theory and advances in biological science: “research on the interplay between sex and gender, the biological and the social, the suggested discursive nature of both, poses questions about the tenability of maintaining a stark separation between the concepts of gender and sex.” The “gender-critical” rebrand

was formed in the wake of this shift, discursively downplaying the anti-trans nature of their politics in favor of a “pro-woman” position. Thurlow (2024, 967) argues that this shift has given the gender critical movement a veneer of “reasonableness,” despite their refusal to deeply engage with non-essentialist theories of sex and gender. One superficially reasonable position claimed by the gender-critical movement is the rebrand of sex essentialism as “gender realism”—a perspective that assumes that all women/females share a characteristic/feature/experience that fundamentally and irrevocably differentiate them from men/males (Mikkola, 2024). The framing of “realism” parallels the “race/sex realism” (i.e., belief in the innate biological inferiority of women and nonwhites) pushed by white supremacist movements such as the alt-right, forecasting their inevitable political alliance.

### *The Gender-Critical and Far-Right Anti-Trans Alliance*

Despite self-descriptors of feminism and antiracism, the gender-critical movement has shown itself to be comfortable aligning with the far right in a shared effort to eliminate transgender existence. In *The Transsexual Empire*, Janice Raymond (1979, 178) stated that “transsexualism itself is a deeply moral question rather than a medical-technical answer. I contend that the problem of transsexualism would best be served by morally mandating it out of existence.” In 2014, in response to feminist criticism comparing her writing to genocidal rhetoric, Raymond argued on her personal blog that she did not advocate for the physical eradication of transgender people but instead the elimination of “the medical and social systems that support transsexualism and the reasons why in a gender-defined society, persons find it necessary to change their bodies” (Raymond 2014). Although Raymond forwards an argument in favor of a society structured outside the confines of gender, her reasoning is still genocidal: there is no functional difference between eliminating trans people and eliminating the conditions that make transgender existence possible. Furthermore, given high rates of self-harm and suicide among transgender people unable to access medical care (Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz 2006; Green et al. 2022; Progovac et al. 2021), Raymond’s amended argument still meets the United Nations criteria for genocide: causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group, and deliberately inflicting on it conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part (United Nations Convention).

Raymond’s moral mandate aligns with that of the US far right; not only has she personally contributed to right-wing administrations, but her writings have been taken up by anti-LGBTQ Christian groups to provide a putatively “feminist” face to religious bigotry (Michaelson 2016; Parke 2016; Vasquez 2016). Since 2015, the ACLU and Trans Legislation Tracker have noted that attacks on LGBTQ people (and transgender people specifically) have escalated dramatically. As of summer 2024, there were 339 anti-trans bills actively being proposed throughout the US (Branstetter 2023; Trans Legislation Tracker 2024). Gender-critical figureheads have been instrumental in this process, which has been documented extensively by transgender and trans-allied

journalists and bloggers. Burns (2019) for instance describes the alliance between the US-based gender-critical group Women's Liberation Front (WoLF) and the first Trump administration. In recent years, WoLF has advocated for "sex-based" dress codes and for banning trans women from women's homeless shelters. In an amicus brief for the US Supreme Court case *R. G. & G. R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC and Aimee Stevens*, WoLF submitted the following:

Legally redefining "female" as anyone who claims to be female results in the erasure of female people as a class. If, as a matter of law, anyone can be a woman, then no one is a woman, and sex-based protections in the law have no meaning whatsoever. (R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes v. EEOC 2019, 2)

The power of an allegiance between the gender-criticals and the alt-right is also known in far-right circles. In an article titled "The TERFS to Dissident Right Pipeline," posted to the alt-right journal *Radix*, author Kat S. (2020) explicitly states that TERF understandings of sex and gender form a "natural" pathway to white supremacist "race realism":

Once these dangers [of physical, sexual, and economic exploitation of women] were somewhat mitigated in the West, we see a shift from a genuine women's liberation movement into the mid-to-late 20th-century Jewish-led feminist theory. . . . Male violence is of unique interest when arguing the risks involved in allowing men into spaces where women are vulnerable, and one of the first steps in accepting the reality of male violence is actually viewing the statistics regarding male-on-female violence. Viewing the publicly available data with a critical eye reveals a truth known to anyone on the dissident right. It doesn't take any thinking woman long to see exactly which men are committing violent crime and the majority of partner violence, and race realism is a natural next step.

In this excerpt, Kat S. employs a common right-wing narrative concerning women's rights—that "genuine" (white) women's liberation was the fight for suffrage and the right to work, and that the dawn of critical poststructuralist theory ("Jewish-led feminist theory") has destroyed conceptual boundaries protecting women from men. This argument, which pejoratively calls critical theory "cultural Marxism," posits a conspiracy among the Jewish intellectual elite to use academia and media to spread progressive ideals, with the end goal of undermining white Christian influence in the West (R. Goldberg 2001; Finlayson 2021). The author argues here that the antidote to this brainwashing is to emphasize the "truth" of gendered violence—that it is statistically (and thus "naturally") inevitable that men will always harm and oppress women. The author continues to suggest that if TERFs accept this logic, then "race realism" is the



logical next step. Central to this narrative is an assumption that statistics directly reflect “reality” without the need for historical or sociological context.

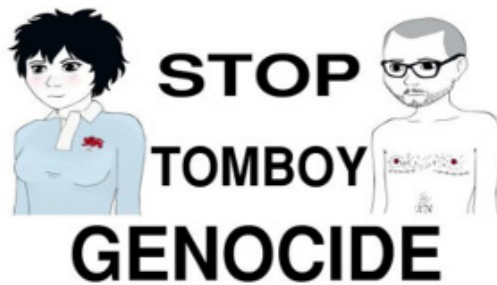
With these “natural” parallels, combined with a refusal to engage with any nonessentialist explanatory theories of gender, both gender-critical and alt-right groups have turned to antisemitic conspiracism for answers. Thus far, little attention has been paid to the circulation of conspiracy theories within anti-gender movements, including TERF and gender-critical groups; yet, like the alt-right and broader far right, anti-gender movements exhibit a strong strain of eliminationist anxieties and significant conceptual overlap with white genocide conspiracies. Most relevant to this discussion are the “New World Order” and “white genocide” conspiracy theories. New World Order conspiracies posit that there exists a secretive global elite, most frequently presented as Jews, that seeks to replace existing nation-states with a totalitarian one-world government. White supremacists also use the acronym ZOG, or “Zionist Occupied Government,” reflecting the belief that Jews control the government, financial sectors, and entertainment industries in the United States (Anti-Defamation League 2023). Interrelated with this conspiracy is “white genocide,” which claims that this omnipotent global cabal indirectly seeks to exterminate the white race by promoting nonwhite immigration, racial miscegenation, abortion, and progressive social movements for civil rights (Barkun 2003; Berlet and Lyons 2000; R. Goldberg 2001; Kelly 2017; Perry 2004; Wilson 2018). The white genocide conspiracy was popularized by David Lane, a neo-Nazi who coined two versions of the now infamous white nationalist slogan “The 14 Words” (Michael 2009):

- 1) We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,
- 2) Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth.

While the core of alt-right politics tends to underscore race, alt-righters have long circulated the idea that transgender existence, in and of itself, represents another arm of white genocide.

An example of these shared anxieties can be found in the “tomboy extinction” meme, which posits that masculine heterosexual girls (“tomboys”) are being coerced into gender transition. Prominent gender-critical and anti-transgender activists have claimed that the existence of transness will lead to the demise of cisgender women. For instance, the LGB Alliance, a British anti-transgender group, has claimed that lesbians are facing “extinction” by pressure to identify as trans men (Thompson 2022; Tominey 2020). Anxieties about “tomboy genocide” also appeared on the now defunct subreddit /r/fightfemaleerasure (figure 1). Lynne Stahl, a researcher of tomboyism and a lesbian, describes the prevalence of “extinction phobia” in anti-trans circles. She writes:

Extinction anxieties have long fueled nationalist, fascist and white-supremacist movements and often beget eugenicist agendas. Indeed, tomboyism as we know it arose in concert with eugenics. Fears about potential White extinction in the United States proliferated in the second half of the 19th century amid emancipation and waves of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as Eastern Asia, as scholar Michelle Abate observes. Child-rearing manuals began advocating for exercise and comfortable clothing, instead of the restrictive and harmful corsets then common, as means of making White girls fit to produce healthy White offspring. The degree to which some girls embraced these empowering options, however, prompted a backlash associating tomboyism and homosexuality. (Stahl 2021)



**Figure 1.** Stop Tomboy Genocide.<sup>1</sup>

Schotten (2022, 335), following Stahl, characterizes extinction phobia as “existential beleaguerment narratives that cast political opponents as threats to survival, describing these opponents in objectified and dehumanizing terms that characterize them as innately threatening, evil, or ‘savage.’” Schotten calls this line of thought “predation TERFism” and identifies it as a strain of reactionary politics.

Extinction phobias are reactionary because they are ideological: they obscure the actual functioning of power by reversing hierarchy’s material realities. In other words, rather than recognize their own power or position of superiority in relation to the political enemy they identify, exponents of extinction phobias instead insist on their own marginalization and victimization, instrumentalizing claims of oppression in order to wield them against their actually marginalized

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<sup>1</sup> Originally posted to Reddit on July 9, 2021, by user “carnalhag.” See [https://www.reddit.com/r/FightFemaleErasure/comments/ogu18u/tomboy\\_genocide/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FightFemaleErasure/comments/ogu18u/tomboy_genocide/). The thread is defunct but is accessible at <https://archive.is/lxRpN> (accessed January 13, 2025).

political opponents, whom they objectify and dehumanize as innately threatening. (2022, 335)

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In one of the more incendiary claims made in *The Transsexual Empire*, Raymond (1979) links transgender health care to the medical atrocities perpetrated by Nazi doctors against Jewish prisoners. In this section, she writes that medical services for trans people (i.e., “the transsexual empire”) are “science at the service of a patriarchal ideology of sex-role conformity in the same way that breeding for blond hair and blue eyes become a so-called science of Nordic racial conformity” (149). Raymond also argues that trans health care represents a form of eugenics perpetuated not through care for transgender individuals but through scientists’ immoral desire for knowledge. In this view, trans health care is “unnecessary surgery, performed in part because of the ‘objective’ knowledge that it offers to researchers and technicians on a subject that is not knowable from other sources” (150). This claim, in which transgender people are framed as emotionally and financially exploited by scientists and pharmaceutical corporations, has also been taken up by anti-trans, pro-QAnon conspiracists such as the far-right US politician Marjorie Taylor-Green (Gill-Peterson 2021; Levesque 2021).

Another example of the “tomboy extinction” theme, pictured below, was retrieved from 8chan in July 2020. The image, which has been shared widely across social media platforms, depicts a girl in a straitjacket labelled “Gen Z Tomboys.” She has a device attached to her head labeled “Tomboy Indoctrination Machine” and is drawn drooling with spiral eyes, indicating that she is under hypnosis. She says, “I understand I’m not a cute girl, I’m gay or FTM [female-to-male].” Meanwhile, a hooded figure with a cube for a head labeled “Global Homo” (a reference to New World Order conspiracies) holds her shoulder with a lizard-like clawed hand.<sup>2</sup> A man labeled “Tomboy Respecters” stands on the other side of a glass viewing panel and cries as the object of his affection is brainwashed into queerness or transness (figure 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Conspiracy theorist David Icke famously argues that the world is run by a cabal of shapeshifting reptilian aliens, propelling humanity toward a fascist New World Order. This conspiracy often overlaps with white nationalist notions of “Zionist Occupied Government” and beliefs about the inability of Ashkenazi Jewish people to “pass” as white (Daniels 2016).



**Figure 2.** Tomboy Indoctrination Machine comic.<sup>3</sup>

While the comic was initially observed on 8chan, I found that it had been circulated into more mainstream platforms, including Newgrounds and Instagram—an illustration of how alt-right discourses fluidly relay from group-internal platforms into public “normie” discourse (Gal 2019). Commenters from these other platforms, which have no direct connection to 8chan or the alt-right, expressed anger and violence regarding the “indoctrination” of tomboys. The comments, of which a small unedited selection is shown in examples 1–6 below, illustrate the mixture of serious discourse and memeified language typical of alt-right communities. Commenters from Newgrounds imply positive affiliation with Nazism (1–2), lament supposed predation of tomboys by LGBTQ groups (3), and reference the desire to punish or commit acts of violence against the “perpetrators” of “tomboy genocide” (4–6, figure 3).

- 1) The villains won WW2
- 2) The west made a mistake with the side it chose to be on
- 3) Yeah.. it’s really sad to see so many good quality turn into these monsters when stuff like lgbt etc comes to their lives.
- 4) Anyone who tries to create more gays should be deemed a terrorist.
- 5) who must I kill to stop this from happening
- 6) Tomboy Genocide Tomboy Genocide

<sup>3</sup> Originally posted by anonymous to 8chan on July 12, 2020. The archived post is available at: <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/267601317/#267625239>, (accessed January 13, 2025).



**Figure 3.** Are you a bad enough dude to rescue the tomboys?<sup>4</sup>

The image and the text in figure 3 illustrate “memeification.” The “Are you a bad enough dude” meme is based on the 1988 video game *Bad Dudes*, which follows two street-fighting “bad dudes” as they attempt to rescue the US president from kidnapping (Knowyourmeme 2009). The meme typically presents a problem, and then asks the reader, “Are you a bad enough dude to [resolve X problem]?” I provide this example to highlight how memes are a vector for violent discourse—the implication is that the reader will fight transgender people and “liberals” to rescue victimized tomboys—while mitigating the message through humor (see Billig 2001, 2005; see Kosse 2022 for discussion of the functions of humor in white supremacist spaces). Although the meme is presented semi-humorously, it also serves as a vector to spread violent sentiment in a plausibly deniable format. The memeified framing of this comic, and the responses to it, are typical of what is found on other platforms.

On an Instagram account where the comic was posted, commenters in this exchange explicitly link “tomboy extinction” to Jews (and thus to New World Order exterminationist conspiracies):

A: The tomboy to lesbian revolution and it’s [*sic*] consequences have been a disaster for the human race

B: Birth control created lesbians

A: the creator of birth control was an Austrian Jew. So logically the allied victory in World War 2 is responsible to [*sic*] the tomboy extinction

<sup>4</sup> Knowyourmeme (website), accessed January 13, 2025, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/are-you-a-bad-enough-dude/photos>.



This interaction begins with another instance of memeification, which shifts into a sincere interchange referencing New World Order / ZOG / white genocide conspiracies (Askanius 2021). In line 1, interlocutor A remixes the first line of ecoterrorist Ted Kaczynski's Unabomber manifesto: "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." Kaczynski's writings are popular in alt-right circles, and several white nationalist terrorists have referenced his work in their own manifestos as justification for violent murder (Christ 2021; Farrell-Molloy and Macklin 2022).

Like the Newgrounds commenters, the Instagram commenters explicitly tie "tomboy extinction" to allied victory in World War II and implicitly to white genocide—suggesting that Jews invented birth control and queerness as part of a larger attempt to undermine white populations. Claims of Jewish conspiracy also abound in "transhumanism" discourse among the far right and among gender-critical groups; transhumanism typically refers to a position promoting the use of technology to improve (and transcend) human capacities. Prominent US-based conspiracy theorist Alex Jones has claimed repeatedly that the push to advance technology is a front for the New World Order to establish a global government:

It's all global government—accept nanotech. Accept wirehead. Accept interfaces, everything's fine. . . . All of our modern technologies—created by eugenicists. Or farmed out by scientists owned by scientists owned by eugenicists robber barons. The entire society, the whole technotronic plan; robotics, future not needing us, phasing out humanity, all of this, a hellish future, while they've been poisoning us and dumbing us down, so we can't resist their takeover, and then saying we deserve it because all we want to do is watch *Dancing with the Stars*. (quoted in Istvan 2014)

Here, Jones emphatically argues that a putative all-powerful group of people seeks to control average Americans by deliberately "poisoning" and "dumbing [them] down," tricking them into blindly serving the group's agenda.

Anti-trans figures have pushed a similar argument, claiming that the emergence of transgender identities is the direct result of transhumanist (Jewish) engineering for the purpose of social control. For instance, gender-critical activist Jennifer Bilek wrote a 2018 article for the online conservative magazine *The Federalist*, claiming that transness is a Big Pharma plot, a "manufactured medical issue with a civil rights frame" engineered by billionaire transhumanists attempting to hook children into "a never-ending saga of body-related consumerism" (Bilek 2018). Helen Joyce, an Irish journalist and a prominent voice of the online gender-critical community, made the same claim in her 2021 book, *Trans: When Ideology Meets Reality*, which contains a passage accusing three billionaires (of whom two were Jewish, including conspiratorial favorite George Soros) of funding "transactivism." She also uses antisemitic dog-whistles such as "global

agenda.” She has publicly expressed explicitly eugenic and genocidal attitudes toward trans people. In a recorded discussion with Helen Staniland (another gender-critical figure), Joyce stated that “decision-makers” must “limit harm” by

reducing or keeping down the number of people who transition. That’s for two reasons: one of them is that every one of those people is a person who’s been damaged. But the second one is every one of those people is basically, you know, a huge problem to a sane world. (cited in Kelleher 2022)

To fight this perceived existential threat, both far-right and gender-critical movements have identified language as a vector of social control. In the following section, I discuss how far-right anxieties about gender and social change integrate in the ideological realm of *referentialism*.

### **Cognitive Closure and Referentialism**

Historians, sociologists, and psychologists have documented that conservative ideologies, regardless of self-labeling, consistently involve fear and resistance to change, hierarchical worldviews, adherence to social norms, punishment of deviants, and a broad desire for order and stability (Michaelson and Reimer 2022). Decades of social and political psychology research note that, across time and across cultural contexts, conservatism highly correlates with a need for *cognitive closure* (Amodio et al. 2007; Carney et al. 2008; Cristofaro et al. 2019; Eidelman et al. 2012; Jost et al. 2003; Sterling, Jost, and Bonneau 2020). Cognitive closure refers to the motivation to quickly formulate and maintain a clear opinion on an issue, rather than accepting confusion and ambiguity (Kruglanski et al. 2010).

Hall (2014), drawing from Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of *liquid modernity*, observes that the current period of globalization has given rise to *hypersubjectivity*—an intensification of self-awareness and anxiety around self-presentation and perception by others. Bauman (2000, 2) uses the properties of liquids to characterize the contemporary era:

What all these features of fluids amount to, in simple language, is that liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but “for a moment.” In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids,

one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.

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Cognitive closure demands conceptual solidity, but liquidity (by its nature) evades closure. If we are in a state of fluidity, as Bauman suggests, then no closure can be promised; if this is so, what semiotic resources are available to discursively *produce* closure? I argue that one possibility is to focus on language as an arbiter of reality. Research has found connections between linguistic forms and cognitive closure, both on the level of language production and in the form of increased metalinguistic discourse concerning the role of language in defining reality. Scholars of political psychology have noted that conservative and reactionary politicians tend to favor nouns and nominal constructions over verbs and verbal constructions. This follows other research indicating that conservatives are prone to understanding the world through simple entities (represented by nouns) rather than complex and dynamic processes; nouns elicit clearer and more definite perceptions of reality compared to other lexical classes (Bures 2021; Carnaghi et al. 2008; Cichočka et al. 2016; Graf et al. 2013). With this in mind, it is not shocking that gender-critical and far-right discourses converge on nouns (e.g., *woman*) and emphasize that linguistic boundaries (e.g., *male*, *female*, *woman*, *man*) must directly index some immutable Platonic essence that substantiates “true” reality. Nor is it surprising that they oppose social constructivist theories that highlight the contextualized and performative nature of human identity and interaction. While positioning themselves against social constructivism, alt-righters nonetheless show a keen interest in how to manipulate public discourse—how can we discursively seal the liquidity of gender into a linguistic jar, so that it can never shift again?

One goal of alt-right organizing is to push racist, sexist, and antisemitic discourse into “acceptable” public discourse, often weaponizing notions of free speech and “viewpoint diversity” to do so.<sup>5</sup> In my own data, alt-righters frequently discuss the importance of shifting the Overton window and the role of language in self-presentation. The Overton window, named for American policy analyst Joseph Overton, refers to the range of policies acceptable to the political mainstream at a given time (Mackinac Center, n.d.). This concept has been extended by alt-righters to include not just which policies but which ideas are permissible to express in front of “normies.”

In the same way, gender-criticals construct transgender people and allies as trying to change semantics to fit their worldview. Progressives are accused of “mangl[ing] language to the point of meaninglessness” (see the “adult human chicken” example below). Trying to gain epistemic authority regarding a definitional account of “woman”

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5 See Owen Jones (@owenjonessjourno), Twitter, June 3, 2022, 4:45 a.m., <https://twitter.com/OwenJones84/status/1532659649606045696>.

(and a weaponized referentialist perspective on language) becomes a convenient point of access to the culture war. In this section, I have suggested a psychosocial model to explain why and how alt-righters and gender-criticals have centered language in anti-trans organizing. There is a broad correlation between reactionary political ideologies and a desire for conceptual simplicity, which is reflected in the social psychology research as a tendency to prefer conceptually stable linguistic forms (nouns) over more fluid and dynamic linguistic constructions. It is not surprising, then, to note that a major component of anti-trans discourse concerns the definitional boundaries of words like “woman” or “man.”

### **Behold—An “Adult Human Chicken”: Referentialism Weaponized**

*Referentialism* is the philosophical position that the meaning of a word must be explained in terms of what it stands for, that is, its referent. The mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell famously wrote:

A term is, in fact, possessed of all the properties commonly assigned to substances or substantives. Every term, to begin with, is a logical subject: it is, for example, the subject of the proposition that itself is one. Again every term is immutable and indestructible. What a term is, it is, and no change can be conceived in it which would not destroy its identity and make it another term. (Russell 1903)

The most straightforward form of referentialism simply identifies the meaning of a term with the object denoted (Schroeder 2006). The tendency to conflate real-world dynamic entities with feature-based definitional accounts is, quite literally, ancient. Contemporary struggles over language and meaning call to mind this riposte by the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes the Cynic to Plato:

Plato had defined Man as an animal, biped and featherless, and was applauded. Diogenes plucked a fowl and brought it into the lecture-room with the words, “Here is Plato’s man.” In consequence of which there was added to the definition [by Plato], “having broad nails.” (Diogenes 1972, 40)

Throughout written history, people have debated the relationship between linguistic representations and meaning. Plato famously articulated his Theory of Ideas (also called Platonic realism), which suggests that any given object or quality has a mode of being (a higher-order essence called the Idea) that is more “real” and “true” than its real-world instantiations, forming the essential basis of reality. Ideas are constructed as perfect and unchanging representations; in this view, “reality” is not the summation of observable phenomena but an imperfect reflection of the universal Ideas knowable only through language. Concepts or terms seem to point to this immutable essence, just as they name

the many lower-order instances in our world that fall under the Idea (Plato 1997). Platonic realism lives on in folk theories of language in the form of referentialism, which extends into contemporary discussions about gender.

Both gender-critical and far-right actors have rallied around the question, “What is a woman?” While this line of inquiry has interested scholars of gender for decades, this superficially innocent question attempts to consolidate the expansive phenomenon of gender under a universal and essentializing definition: an “adult human female.” The expression “adult human female” was popularized by Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, also known as “Posie Parker,” a prominent anti-transgender activist based in the UK who designed a dictionary-inspired graphic stating as much (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** A large poster stating anti-transgender activists’ essentializing definition of “woman.”<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation, Keen-Minshull claimed that she erected the poster in Liverpool in response to the mayor’s voicing support for transgender communities. She said she wanted to “start a conversation about women’s rights,” expressing concern that the word “woman” was “being appropriated to mean anything” (BBC News 2018). Keen-Minshull’s “Let Women Speak” website states on its front page:

We are a global constituency of women. We focus specifically on the word “woman,” and other female language that clearly defines us, and our rights. The purpose of our campaign is to raise funds in order to promote the fight back against this global assault of women.

Throughout the legal framework of women’s sex based rights and protections we use the word “woman.” It is essential that this word is retained to mean “adult human female” only. Without this word all

6 “Woman Billboard Removed after Transphobia Row,” *BBC*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-45650462>.



of our rights and protections are lost. Our rights were never created for our “gender” but our sex.<sup>7</sup>

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Likewise, self-described “theocratic fascist” and far-right social media personality Matt Walsh made the question the central theme of a documentary, creatively titled *What Is a Woman?* The documentary, criticized by LGBTQ activists and medical scientists alike as scientifically inaccurate and propagandistic, features Walsh asking interviewees the titular question. While Walsh includes interviews with pro-transgender subjects, their relatively complex answers around gender are framed as ridiculous in comparison with the simple, essentialist definition “adult human female” (Eckert and Gorski 2022; Rook 2022). The rhetorical simplicity of the question is reflected in an oft-memed tweet posted by a TERF-aligned Twitter account in October 2021, wherein the user defines “hen” (the poultry animal) as an “adult human chicken”:

The word “Woman” means adult human female. Like “hen” means adult human chicken. You may want to mangle language to the point of meaninglessness, the rest of us aren’t playing.<sup>8</sup>

Here, the poster, “TracyTerfirapter,” attempts to appeal to a Keen-Minshull definition of “woman” as “adult human female.” She contrasts her “meaningful” feature-based semantics (+ adult, +human, +female) with the “meaningless” language games she attributes to her pro-trans interlocutors, using a similar pattern to describe a hen; while she means to write “adult chicken female,” she writes “adult human chicken” instead. The absurd image of an adult human chicken, combined with the authoritative tone around language, makes for an amusing conceptual fumble. While certainly unintentional, it reveals how referentialist worldviews provide safety at the cost of understanding.

As with other belief systems that posit a universal truth that sits outside the realm of human understanding, referentialism is tautological: referentialist arguments state that a word reflects its referent, and that a referent “exists” because there is a term for it. By attempting to claim ownership of words like *man* or *woman*, fully insisting that these expressions only have one meaning (“biological sex”), gender-critical and far-right collaborators rhetorically preclude transness from any sort of real instantiation: anyone whose body transgresses the Platonic and predestined norms of “sex” is understood as a degenerate aberration from “nature” rather than reflecting biological and social diversity. Among those who advance this view, linguistic norms that legitimate transgender identities (using someone’s preferred name and pronouns, for example) are coercive gateways to the erasure of “gender normals” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). In an essay

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7 Quoted from the home page of Let Women Speak, available at: <https://www.letwomenspeak.org> (accessed January 10, 2025).

8 TracyTerfirapter (@didoreth), Twitter, October 20, 2021, 21:52, <https://twitter.com/didoreth/status/1450927815298277383> (accessed July 15, 2024).

originally posted on the gender-critical online hub Mumsnet and circulated throughout online gender-critical circles, the author compares the use of gender-appropriate pronouns to Rohypnol, a sedative often used by date rapists:

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I refuse to use female pronouns for anyone male. Because pronouns are like Rohypnol. One of the biggest obstacles to halting the stampede over women's rights is pronoun and preferred name "courtesy." People severely underestimate the psychological impact to themselves, and to others, of compliance. . . . [Pronouns] dull your defences. They change your inhibitions. They're meant to. You've had a lifetime's experience learning to be alert to "him" and relax to "her." For good reason. This instinctive response keeps you safe. It's not even a conscious thing. It's like your hairs standing on end. Your subconscious brain is helping you not get eaten by the sabre tooth tiger that your eyes haven't noticed yet. . . . I want to be alert. I want others to be alert. I want people to see the real picture, and I want those instinctive reactions that we feel when something is wrong, to be un-blunted, un-dulled by this cheap but effective psychological trick. I feel like I owe this to myself, and I absolutely owe it to other women. (Kerr 2019)

By framing pronoun use as similar to being deceived into ingesting date rape drugs, the author underscores the role of language in the recognition of (or refusal to recognize) the legitimacy of a person's gender identity.

Another semiotic strategy involves orthographic conventions, where the presence or absence of a space between trans and (wo)man is interpreted as significant. When we parse written information, "trans(gender) woman" and "transwoman" read as structurally different linguistic forms. In English writing, a space indicates a phrasal boundary; in the case of "trans woman," *trans* acts as a modifier for the word *woman*, and we know this because there is a space between the two words. When *trans* or *transgender* is used as a modifier in this way, it marks out a subcategory within the category of "woman" (e.g., black woman, disabled woman, bisexual woman, etc.). When written without a space, "trans" and "woman" are linguistically constituted as a single category, "transwoman," often constructed in a binary against the unmarked word "woman" by both alt-righters and gender-criticals. The basic premise of anti-transgender attitudes is that trans people occupy a separate, counterfeit gendered space from "biological" men and women. In alt-right and gender-critical discourses, trans people do not actually "exist"—they are framed as members of one of two nature-ordained gender categories by necessity. These categories are presumed to lay the foundation for one's disposition and role in the natural-social hierarchy. Consequently, people who believe they are transgender either 1) need to accept being a gender-nonconforming male/female (the stance taken up by gender-criticals, who often position themselves as leftists or left-leaning moderates);

or 2) need to be forcibly corrected to their natural gender/sex role (the stance taken up by alt-righters and Christofascists like Matt Walsh). These stances are not mutually exclusive, as they share the same end goal: undermining the conceptual legitimacy of transgender people in order to legally erase their ability to exist safely and authentically.

### **Discussion: Why Referentialism Is Effective, and Why Referentialism Fails**

While clearly a powerful rhetorical tool, referentialism simply fails to encapsulate observable reality, and it mischaracterizes how human minds process language and meaning. Appeals to referentialism provide both epistemic authority and epistemic security. By appealing to dictionary definitions as though they reflect empirical reality, actors position themselves as having knowledge of and control over language (Gal 2019, 2021); because it is circular by nature, much like essentialist accounts of social life, referentialism reaffirms its own authoritative condition in a self-justifying, binarist, and hierarchical worldview. Yet, to scholars of language and the social world, it is clear that the semiotic mode of language can never encapsulate reality. An attempt to police definitional boundaries around “manhood” or “womanhood” does not change the fact that trans people can and do present felicitous gender performances. It is simply a fact that there are trans people who uncontroversially “pass” (Garfinkel 1967). While there are certainly contexts in which an individual’s genitalia are relevant—as in medical contexts—the status of one’s genitalia are generally irrelevant to the day-to-day activities of most people. Furthermore, human perception of gender simply does not operate in the essentialist manner forwarded by alt-right and gender-critical figures. As decades of research into language and gender has shown, we perceive the *effects* of gender but not the *cause* (Butler 1990). We presume someone to have certain genitalia because we perceive a felicitous cisgender gender performance (Kitzinger 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009). Gender is also contextualized and localized in manifold ways, across various axes of identity and experience. There is no one way to “be” a gendered subject in the global context (Calder 2021; Calder and King 2022; Eckert 1989, 2019; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007).

As with alt-right and white supremacist groups, gender-critical understandings of gender are grounded in whiteness, particularly the notion that cisgender white women exemplify the qualities of “true” womanhood, and that they are uniquely valuable and must be protected from predatory men (especially nonwhite men) (Alexander 2023; Aniagolu 2010; Armstrong 2021; Hamad 2020; Kosse 2022; LeMaster 2023; Schuller 2021). This victim narrative around white women is best highlighted by exterminationist discourses. On the putatively “liberal” end of this narrative spectrum, espoused by public figures like author J. K. Rowling, the discourse around transness is framed in relation to homophobia—society is homophobic, therefore gay people prefer to transition their gender in order to be heterosexual.

On the far-right, conspiracist end, pro-transgender discourse presents a global conspiracy to eliminate or replace cisgender women (and therefore indirectly contribute

to lower white birth rates). Fighting threats to cisgender white women and protecting their ability to produce white children forms the moral mandate encapsulated by the neo-Nazi “14 Words,” a set of slogans that have motivated countless acts of violence. Here I want to draw attention to the second set of 14 Words:

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- 1) We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children,
- 2) **Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth.**

Protection of white womanhood depends on strict delineation and maintenance of human difference, a reasoning that runs counter to the current scientific consensus regarding genetics, sex, gender, race, and ethnicity (Serano 2022). Referentialist framings of language, then, allow actors to confuse linguistic representations for lived realities; they are a discursive misrecognition that appears intellectual in nature and compensates for a lack of factual support for essentialist claims about sex and gender (Barrett and Hall 2024). Regardless of any belief one may hold, it is evident that debates about linguistic boundaries around sex and gender constitute an attempt to find an authoritative, socially acceptable way to deny trans people legitimacy and the right to self-determination. Gender-critical and alt-right notions of “sex realism” are insubstantial and unsound without larger claims to metaphysical higher orders, whether that be theological notions or Platonic ideas of nature. Sex realism is based purely on the idea that possession of penises is akin to the “one drop rule,” analogous to white supremacist ideas about racial essentialism, where penises are the cause and weapon of male dominance rather than male dominance being the elaboration of the historical subordination and exploitation of women. If such claims were true, and power, fame, acceptance, and opportunity were granted to everyone born with a penis, we would expect to see widespread societal benefits for trans women. These benefits have not materialized, and instead we see political oppression and scapegoating. We see the Pope condemning “faggotry” in the Vatican during a transnational reactionary wave espousing “anti-gender ideology” (Borba 2022; Baran 2023; Factora 2024). We see limited and conditional acceptance from a minority of the population—acceptance that alt-right and gender-critical groups seek to eliminate at all costs. If feminist academics are to address the escalating rhetorical and physical violence toward transgender populations, we must consider how language ideologies like referentialism are weaponized as part of this process.

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## From Pajama Boy to Pepe the Frog

### *Power, Essentialism, and the Nation-State in the Manosphere*

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Critical watchers of the manosphere—that digital space devoted to “men’s issues”—have observed its evolution with alarm. Over the last couple of decades, it has morphed from an array of online forums promoting (for instance) father’s rights and gross pick-up techniques, to sites touting a far more aggressive and sometimes downright fascistic stance (Ribeiro et al. 2021). The toxic shift has accompanied the growing alienation of US men, especially White men, as their education outcomes, health, and longevity have plummeted.<sup>1</sup> It has also coincided with the rise of Tea Party politics, Donald Trump, and the normalization of the radical right in halls of power.

As the articles in this special issue attest, the manosphere has established itself as a global force through a semi-ingenuous array of semiotic techniques that often yoke ideal manhood to misogyny and White supremacy. In their introductory remarks, Cat Tebaldi and Scott Burnett summarize a key part of the cultural logic as follows: “They [men] yearn to be main characters: they could be heroes.” Piggybacking on and stoking anxieties about racial replacement is indeed a rewarding way to make (White) masculinity, connected to White reproductive prospects, seem existentially critical and heroic. The calculus is filled out by retrotopian dreams that reach into a mythic past—populated by Vikings, Celts, and other tough guys—for inspiration.<sup>2</sup> I recognize that

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1 Ben Rich and Eva Bujalka, “The Draw of the ‘Manosphere’: Understanding Andrew Tate’s Appeal to Lost Men,” *The Conversation*, February 12, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/the-draw-of-the-manosphere-understanding-andrew-tates-appeal-to-lost-men-199179#:~:text=The%20manosphere%20appeals%20to%20its,dim%20vision%20of%20the%20future>.

2 I cannot resist mentioning too the recent internet trend of (mostly White) women asking their male partners, “How often do you think about the Roman Empire?” The question began to circulate in 2022 through a Swedish influencer, and rapidly went global. The joke is that many men, including liberal men, think about the Roman Empire surprisingly often—presumably because it inspires fantasies of masculine strength, order, and martial power. This trend has an affectionate cast, but it also stimulated the suggestion that the concept of the Roman Empire taps into a collective male unconscious that longs for power and badassery. See, for instance, “How Often Do You Think about the Roman Empire?,” Knowyo-

the manosphere's politics are a product, in part, of feeling shamed and marginalized (however unreasonably: see, for instance, Kimmel 2013; Rosenthal et al. 2023; Schafer 2020). But its misogyny, queer phobia, and racism have deadly potential.

Reading this collection of essays on the semiotics of fascistic digital masculinity gave me a strange cluster of contrasting feelings. Some of the images and statements the authors analyze are so over the top they brought me to laughter, yet I recoil at the cruelties they imply. The pairing of entertainment with menace is no accident, of course. The drama, puffery, and wit on these websites are part of the appeal, just as they have been part of Donald Trump's arsenal of semiotic techniques (Goldstein, Hall, and Ingram 2020; McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton 2020). Besides, as Tebaldi and Burnett further explain in their introduction, heroic masculinity is what makes being a White supremacist fun.

The authors in this collection draw on a wide array of tools from semiotic and language studies to make their case. Several offer keen readings of the way language parses the social world or borrows rhetorical moves from other domains for authority. Maureen Kosse, for instance, offers an incisive take on the "referentialist ideology" shared by the alt-right and trans-exclusionary radical feminists, as they presume a neat mapping between lexemes ("man" and "woman") and categories in the natural world. Such appeals to "some immutable Platonic essence," Kosse suggests, offer satisfying cognitive closure while treating deviations from a binary model as "counterfeit." Dominika Baran examines the "anti-genderism register" of an ultraconservative Polish NGO, scrutinizing how it manipulates lexical and grammatical details (such as using quotation marks to trivialize LGBTQ+-preferred terms) and spins terms to impugn progressive policies and practices: "comprehensive sex education" becomes "the sexualization of children," for instance, while "promotion of LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion" becomes "grooming." And Scott Burnett, Rodrigo Borba, and Mie Hiramoto's piece on the global digital sphere of "NoFappers"—men who vow to abstain from masturbation—lays bare the assumptions within their "self-fashioning" talk. One of their rhetorical moves is to borrow from scientific and philosophical registers for credibility, building their case that abstaining will reboot their brains and bodies while revivifying their primal masculinity.

Some of the other articles analyze both language and visual semiotics. Gustav Westberg and Henning Årman, for instance, offer a tantalizing close reading of imagery and rhetoric from the Swedish "Nordic Resistance Movement." They observe a sly recruiting tactic: the movement takes seemingly benign images (a woman's pregnant belly, a man holding a young child aloft), and surrounds them with affectively charged word clusters that evoke fascist aspirations. The pregnant belly that might simply imply

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urmeme (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/how-often-do-you-think-about-the-roman-empire>. A comical elaboration on these themes is the Saturday Night Live skit "Rome Song," November 19, 2023, YouTube video, 3:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2nWIXlcO5I>.

“family friendly” in one context becomes an ominous gesture when flanked by words like “ancestors” and “blood,” terms that gesture toward notions of racial purity. As a whole, the combination of such images and words further implies women’s role as reproductive handmaids for a racial cause. Westberg and Årman’s work reminds us of a tenet of semiotic analysis, namely that studying words in isolation ignores the role context plays in the meaning of any given sign. Cultural insiders in the manosphere are always taking meaning from words and images as they are *situated* within force fields of ideology and other surrounding signs, and so, too, should those of us studying them.

Rich discussion of images and language can be found in Cat Tebaldi and Scott Burnett’s perusal of the archconservative *Man’s World* online magazine. The authors explore the enregisterment of the “hot hard hero,” a figure who proudly represents the “superiority of the Aryan race” as he preps for fascist violence. Their analysis draws attention to “rhematization,” a semiotic process in which the qualities of a sign are thought to (iconically) resemble the thing it stands for. Thus, for instance, the “hard” exercise the man does, the “hard” gum he chews, and the hard-to-eat foods such as dried beef liver that he chokes down are taken as iconic of (resembling, and thus bound up ontologically with) his broader qualities of physical strength, toughness of character, and even intellectual fortitude. Meanwhile, rather like the NoFappers’ scientific register, *Man’s World* magazine relies on scientific imagery to display how “genetic wealth”—associated with both masculine strength and White racial purpose—can be maximally expressed. The magazine’s pseudoscience further argues that eating soft, decadent foods (especially soy-based ones) causes muscles and bodies to “degenerate,” thus weakening men and imperiling the competency of their leadership.

While much of the manosphere fixates on embodied physical potency, Joanna Maj Schmidt offers a fascinating, psychodynamically informed analysis of memes produced by alt-righters who align themselves with the physically puny Pepe the Frog, and in so doing, adopt an “ironic approach to their own . . . heroic-masculine fantasies.” I will return to that theme at the end, for it points to a whole other tool kit for archconservative manhood, one that eschews the warrior model but leans into transgression, irony, and trolling as techniques of one-upmanship.

### **Typing, Essentializing, and White Manhood**

Reading these articles together inspires me to pull a few issues to the foreground. One is the thread of compulsive “typing” and essentializing traceable in much manosphere discourse and thought. Although an essentialist model of human difference is a readily available cognitive strategy for our species, conservative political orders tend to encourage and play it up (McIntosh 1998). Typing and essentializing also seem linked to dehumanization and rage, as I will explain. The second issue is a comparison of two distinct archconservative models of manhood circulating in the USA in the past decade. I wish to unpack another example of warrior-masculinity in the USA, one tightly linked to party politics, and then to extend Johanna Maj Schmidt’s compelling arguments



about the Pepe the Frog memes. These examples let me think a little further about these two models of manhood, one physically robust and martial, the other unprepossessing and nihilistic, and how they relate to the right-wing's increasingly complex articulation with the conventional nation-state.

As I have written elsewhere, essentialist ideas are “ontologically deeper than stereotyping, reaching toward the idea that deep, hidden, and fixed qualities make certain things what they are” (McIntosh 2018, 1). Several of the right-wing movements and spheres the authors describe in this collection appear obsessed with pseudoscientific parsing and contrasting of supposed human kinds: male versus female, White versus Other, even distinctive types of men and women. These categories are sometimes framed as if essentially distinct and intrinsically rankable from superior to inferior, while racial and gender essentialisms seem to operate in mutual reinforcement across domains. In several movements analyzed in this issue, for instance, a heteronormative gender binary is taken as God-given bedrock, and twinned with the idea of a Great (racial) Chain of Being. Westberg and Årman, for instance, describe Swedish fascists' assumption that women are biologically destined for breeding, while White women should aspire to breed racially pure children. These essentialisms are linked to Nazi-era “eternal values,” evoked by naturalizing terms like “blood” and reinforced with allusions to “tradition” and “heritage” that imply both a retrotopia and a hermetic sealing of their own kind. In Kosse's work, too, we see how essentialist presumptions about racial difference and wholly natural and oppositional “male” and “female” bodies go together.

Even the NoFappers entertain a kind of essentialism—in their case, a quasi-scientific construal of semen as a carrier of masculine power that must be either retained or deployed in the masculinizing act of “ramming a woman,” rather than squandered through masturbation. To this anxiety about their male essence, NoFappers add a racist terror of being cuckolded by supposedly racially inferior men—e.g., “ultraphallic Black men,” who momentarily dominate the cuckolded White man, or Jews who are conspiring to “enervate” and thus replace White men (Burnett 2022; see also Beatty 2024). Such narratives stoke the notion of an intrinsically polluting essence in marginalized social groups, while setting up racial masculinity as a zero-sum game.

All these typings and essentialisms seem ideologically yoked to a nostalgic notion of a mythic past in which all the types were in their place, with White men on top. Where social change and progressivism have changed the equation, the manosphere makes elaborate efforts to restore what it construes as the natural order of things. But the manosphere's recognition of social change also suggests an odd contradiction in their essentialist ideologies. On the one hand, participants take it as axiomatic that White men are intrinsically socially superior, but on the other, they go to strenuous lengths to try to reestablish this order precisely because it does not seem so natural or inevitable after all. Such logical tensions, however, do not appear to weaken anyone's convictions.

## Emasculation and Feminization

Now, to explore some articulations between the manosphere and national politics in the USA, I want to examine a moment in meme history from about a decade ago, a moment that ultimately linked “types” of men to pseudo-biological hierarchies while illuminating the articulation between warrior masculinity and the contemporary Republican party. The meme phenomenon, which the manosphere shorthanded as “Pajama Boy,” centered on a 2013 ad designed to encourage young people to enroll in health insurance under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Signed into law in 2010, the ACA required adults to get insurance or pay a penalty, forced insurers to accept applicants no matter their preexisting conditions, and offered federal subsidies to insure America’s poorest families. Republicans quickly named the act “Obamacare,” which sounded derisive coming out of the mouths of those who already hated President Obama. The shorthand stuck, though, and came to be used by people all over the political spectrum. Obama himself posted the ad in question to his Twitter account on December 17, 2013 (see figure 1).

The ad features a young man with pale skin, dark curly hair, and black-rimmed glasses, wearing red and black buffalo-checked pajamas that look like a one-piece with a zipper up the front. He sits on a sofa holding a mug with two hands, glancing to his left with a slight smile. He is ethnically ambiguous, his look plausibly Semitic, though twinkling lights in the background evoke a potential “Christmas decoration” vibe.<sup>3</sup> The ad copy reads: “Wear pajamas. Drink hot chocolate. Talk about getting health insurance. #GetTalking barackobama.com/talk.” The figure seems cozy and cheerful as he contemplates what is presumably his first health insurance policy as a young adult; apparently the ad was intended to appeal to twenty-somethings at a transitional life stage.



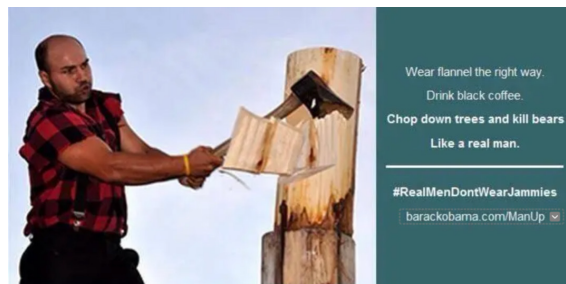
**Figure 1.** The “Pajama Boy” ad posted by President Obama.<sup>4</sup>

3 Pajama Boy’s vaguely ethnic (even Jewish?) appearance may have triggered some of the right-wing scorn. See Jay Michaelson, “Obamacare ‘Pajama Boy’ Controversy Wrapped in Anti-Semitism,” *Forward*, December 28, 2013, <https://forward.com/opinion/190011/obamacare-pajama-boy-controversy-wrapped-in-anti-s/>. On aspects of antisemitism in the manosphere, see Burnett 2022.

4 Barack Obama (@BarackObama), Twitter, December 17, 2013, 5:45 p.m., <https://twitter.com/BarackObama/status/413079861922508800>.

Shortly after Obama posted this ad to his Twitter account, the American right wing erupted in rage and scorn toward Pajama Boy. To be sure, the right had scapegoated the ACA from the start. They objected to the higher insurance premiums, deductibles, and taxes necessary to pull it off, and they resented the plan's collectivist spirit, including the subsidies offered to low-income families. Obamacare was "socialist," orchestrating a "government takeover" of the health care system, and of peoples' bodies and lives, no less. (Maybe people would have to be "microchipped" as part of their compliance, or the government would cut costs by sponsoring "death panels" to decide which seniors would have to die on the plan?) And obviously this was another case of "entitlement spending" that gave "handouts" to lazy, unworthy hangers-on. But there was something else about Pajama Boy that encapsulated the right's view of what was going wrong, not only with Obamacare but also with the left more generally.

To begin with, right-wing meme-makers repeatedly set Pajama Boy into binary contrast with appropriately masculine and conservative men. One meme (figure 2) mirrors the format of the original ad, but features an axe-wielding, muscle-bound White man in a similar buffalo-checked flannel shirt, flanked by injunctions to "Wear Flannel the right way. Drink black coffee. Chop down trees and kill bears. Like a real man. #RealMenDontWearJammies barackobama.com/ManUp." As in Tebaldi and Burnett's analysis, "manning up" in the manosphere apparently stems from doing hard, unpleasant, and violent (bear-killing) things.



**Figure 2.** A lumberjack meme parodying the Pajama Boy ad.<sup>5</sup>

The right wing's scorn, though, was not just about soft versus hard men. Through a kind of semiotic creep, Pajama Boy came to stand in for the weak contingent of the body politic and hence the entire nation's problematic manhood. As Tebaldi and Burnett point out, fascism has a history of asking men's bodies to carry immense semiotic weight by "conflating youth, health, and physical strength with the renewal of the nation" (on this kind of bodily synecdoche, see also Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

5 Carole Quattro Levine, "[Meme Mash] Lovin' that Onsie: Obamacare Pajama Boy," *Flyover Culture*, December 19, 2013, <https://flyoverculture.com/2013/12/19/meme-mash-lovin-that-onesie-obamacare-pajama-boy/>.

This scaling up of Pajama Boy’s representational power was achieved verbally and visually. The meme in figure 3, for instance, features Pajama Boy articulating a liberal talking point: “Guns . . . are for insecure people.” With this brief allusion, the meme frames Pajama Boy as standing in for one side of a national political debate about gun control. At the same time, the meme heaps scorn on his perspective by voicing him in a young and possibly feminine teenage register, indexed by the interjection “Eww!” and the statement, “My mommy has always had my back.” Pajama Boy is hopelessly childish, dependent, and naive to imagine his mother could protect him from real harm.



**Figure 3.** Pajama Boy as a helpless mommy’s boy.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Pajama Boy’s reliance on a “mommy” has a wider meaning, for just as Pajama Boy stands in for the nation’s problematic manhood, “mommy” may also represent a broader authority. According to George Lakoff (1996), conceptual imaginings of the nation-state are often structured around an image of a family authority figure. Conservatives tend to favor a “strict father” model of the state, whereas liberals favor a “nurturing parent” model—a formula that has played out in the USA and Europe (for examples from Romania and Sweden, see Norocel 2010a, 2010b). Some American conservatives have reached for the derogatory British phrase “nanny state” to capture the idea that liberals are turning the nation into a nursery, with the government imagined as a cosseting and overbearing woman clucking over her charges.<sup>7</sup> For Republicans, then, Obamacare risked infantilizing and creating dependency among the citizenry, failing to allow boys to grow into men who know how to take care of and defend themselves.

Other chatter surrounding Pajama Boy enhanced associations like these. Consider the derision from Rich Lowrie, editor of the conservative monthly *National Review*, who deemed Pajama Boy “nerdy” and an “insufferable man-child . . . probably reading

<sup>6</sup> Posted by anonymous circa 2016, accessed January 10, 2025, <https://imgflip.com/i/zy164>.

<sup>7</sup> See Alannis Jáquez, “The Nanny State: A Conservative Concern or a Misogynistic Myth?,” *Columbia Political Review*, April 11, 2022, <http://www.cpreview.org/blog/2022/4/the-nanny-state-a-conservative-concern-or-a-misogynistic-myth>.

*The Bell Jar* and looking forward to a hearty Christmas meal of stuffed tofurkey.” These specifics do potent indexical work. Sylvia Plath, author of *The Bell Jar*, has been a heroine to young feminists; Pajama Boy is emasculated by association. Lowrie’s allusion to “tofu” is a masculinist dog-whistle; as we saw in Tebaldi and Burnett’s contribution, all those soft foods, the ones that do not bleed, supposedly change men’s very biology, rendering them less manly. Lowrie’s prose sidles into grudges against liberal demographics as he goes on—Pajama Boy could “guest-host on an unwatched MSNBC show,” and “If [Pajama Boy] has anything to say about it, Obamacare enrollments will spike in the next few weeks in Williamsburg and Ann Arbor.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, Lowrie castigates Pajama Boy’s apparent immaturity, which renders him “an ideal consumer of government,” including its “infantilizing” Affordable Care Act. If men are to harden themselves by doing hard things, perhaps in Lowrie’s reasoning it would be more grown-up and masculine to deal with cancer without medical insurance.

Within just a few weeks of the “Pajama Boy” ad’s release, spin-off memes were copious. They likened him to queer or feminine figures in popular culture (Rachel Maddow, My Little Pony), alluded to his “full diaper,” and implied he lives with his parents and cannot do his own laundry. Pajama Boy’s girlfriend was framed as make-believe; apparently he’s not man enough to have actual (or heterosexual) sex.<sup>9</sup> Other memes mapped these denigrating qualities onto liberals and progressives by suggesting Pajama Boy “went to Oberlin,” or aligning him visually with President Obama and then–Vice President Joe Biden.<sup>10</sup> Pajama Boy stood in for a liberal “type” that in the right-wing imagination is not only annoying but also a pernicious threat, representing the specter of trust in and dependence on “big government,” in conjunction with the Democrats’ perilous feminizing of the nation. After all, as Tebaldi and Burnett put it in “The Science of Desire” in this issue, “Women are the soft places in the nation where enemies can get in.”

### Degeneration and Decline

Still other Pajama Boy memes and discourse suggested a Great Chain of Masculine Being. The manosphere is full of classifications; consider, for instance, taxonomies circulating among self-identified “incels” that distinguish between such masculine types as “Chads,” viewed as ideal alpha males, and “cucks,” seen as subordinate men who are likely to be cuckolded (Lawson 2023; see also Kosse 2022). While some in

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8 Rich Lowry, “Pajama Boy: An Insufferable Man-Child,” *Politico*, December 18, 2013, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2013/12/opinion-rich-lowry-obamacare-affordable-care-act-pajama-boy-an-insufferable-man-child-101304/>.

9 Levine, “[Meme Mash] Lovin’ that Onsie.”

10 “Pajama Boy,” *National Review*, December 18, 2013, <https://www.nationalreview.com/photos/pajama-boy/>.



the proto-fascist manosphere celebrate the potential for a triumphant return to an idealized past, where superior masculine types would dominate the weak, Pajama Boy discourse laments an ongoing biological and political degeneration, characterized by a withering of both men and nation. Consider, for instance, a 2017 article on a website about strength training that opens with this statement about evolutionary decline: “The route from *Beowulf* to Pajama Boy has been a very long downhill slide.” The writer complains that Pajama Boy is “the current archetype of a new style of male that is “fragile, in more than a physical sense.” By contrast, “our man” (the man who values strength training and frequents the website, presumably) cares about “rational analysis” and “strength,” which amounts to “the ability to act.”<sup>11</sup> And again, the strength-training website disdains Pajama Boy for being not only “popular-culture-validated” but also “government-approved.”

Several Pajama Boy memes set him in opposition to a military masculine foil, with pseudo-evolutionary implications. The pattern resonates with other typifications described in these articles. One meme (figure 4) contrasts two images of the “Iconic American Male”: 2013’s Pajama Boy, and a 1943 representative of the US Army Air Forces. The Air Force man clearly hails from a halcyon mid-twentieth-century era, as he proves his mettle in the Second World War. Pictured like a giant amid clouds and fighter planes, he casts an awed glance upward, as if inspired by the heavens or looking for new foes to conquer. He also clutches his signature instrument: a large aerial bomb of the kind Allied powers dropped on their enemies. By contrast, Pajama Boy could not seem any lowlier, enswathed in his onesie and warming his hands on a mug of comforting cocoa. How can such a figure possibly protect the nation from enemies? Pajama Boy’s domestic comfort seems to imperil national security. The devolutionary theme from ideal mid-century military man to Pajama Boy continues in several other memes, such as the one in figure 5 that features a 1944 *Life* magazine cover featuring a rifle-bearing soldier. The caption reads, “American symbols of manhood: From G.I. Joe to Pajama Boy in just a few generations.”

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11 Mark Rippetoe, “Pajama Boy Redux: The Male in Modern Society,” *Starting Strength*, May 26, 2017, <https://startingstrength.com/article/pajama-boy-redux-the-male-in-modern-society>.



Figure 4. Picturing the decline of the “Iconic American Male.”<sup>12</sup>



Figure 5. From heroic World War II soldier to Pajama Boy.<sup>13</sup>

### Warrior Masculinity

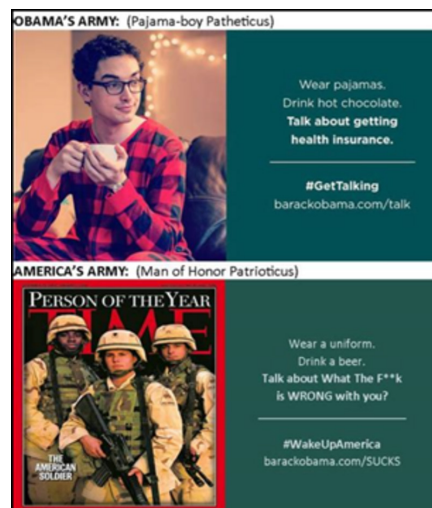
The relationship of each symbolic type of man to the state presents something of a puzzle. Pajama Boy has been typed by the right as feminine and infantile, with his implied “nurturing parent” ambiguously suspended between his mother and the big (socialist) government on which he depends. Yet the military men contrasted with Pajama Boy are also in close relationship with the government, since the armed forces operate under the authority of the state. In fact, looked at one way, service members are in a condition of remarkable compliance and dependence, expected to venerate their superior officers and obey orders without question while enjoying astounding levels of governmental support (including school tuition, health care, retirement benefits, reduced-cost housing, paid vacation, and more). But right-wing portrayals present service members’ relationship with the state as appropriately masculine. They

12 Levine, “[Meme Mash] Lovin’ that Onsie.”

13 Political Humor (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://www.political-humor.org/american-symbols-of-manhood-from-gi-joe-to-pajama-boy-in-just-a-few-generations/>.

are depicted as outward-facing protectors, unlike the domesticated Pajama Boy. Their physical strength, weaponry, and power to destroy enemy lives combine to convey an image of independence and agency that belies their role as cogs in the state's military machine.

Other memes develop a further contrast between Pajama Boy and military men by way of a coeval and quasi-biological contrast between varieties of masculinity. Consider the following meme (figure 6), which gives each “type” of man a “Latin” name as if each were a scientifically recognized species: “Pajama-boy Patheticus” versus “Man of Honor Patrioticus,” illustrated by the American soldiers featured as Time Magazine’s 2003 “Person of the Year.” As in the other military Pajama Boy memes, the soldiers hold weapons as indexes of masculine power, expressing their frustration with Pajama Boy and liberal politicians in a hypermasculine, profane register—“What the F\*\*k is WRONG with you? Barackobama.com/SUCKS.”



**Figure 6.** Pajama Boy as a lower kind of man.<sup>14</sup>

To be clear, I am not suggesting these meme makers believe in a literal species-like difference between types of men. However, the “as if” quality of their essentialist rhetoric implies a firm line between an in-group and a morally deplorable, somewhat dehumanized political out-group. This ineluctable distinction erases common ground and curtails empathy for the out-group while arguably enhancing the potential for violence against it, as most othering and dehumanizing rhetoric does. There is no room

<sup>14</sup> Memes Monkey (website), accessed January 12, 2025, <https://www.memesmonkey.com/topic/pajama+boy>.

to construe a spectrum of difference in this binary—only a gulf between types. Political antipathy reinforces the manosphere’s impulse to essentialize, and vice versa.<sup>15</sup>

The imagery contrasting Pajama Boy with warrior masculinity informed Sebastian Gorka’s December 2016 appearance on Fox News as he slammed what he described as President Obama’s soft approach to ISIS. “He drew the red line again and again,” complained Gorka. He went on to celebrate the change augured by Trump’s election:

The fact is, this is all going to end on January the 21st [when Trump is sworn in as President]. Our foreign policy has been a disaster. . . . We’ve emboldened our enemies. The message I have, it’s a very simple one. . . . The era of the Pajama Boy is over January 20th, and the alpha males are back.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, when Trump was elected, supporters leaned into the idea that he was an emblem of heroic warrior masculinity, despite his considerable girth and draft-dodging past. Their online and commercial effusions repeatedly grafted Trump into military imagery, as on the flag in figure 7, where he is pictured perched on a tank, wearing his signature suit and red tie while gripping an assault rifle. The magnitude of his patriotism is reflected by the magnitude of the American flag flapping behind him.



**Figure 7.** Donald Trump as an alpha male military leader.<sup>17</sup>

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15 There may be some corresponding typing and essentializing in rhetoric from the left, but essentialist models of the social world seem especially friendly to conservative thinking. A thorough comparative exploration of essentialisms across the political spectrum would of course require a different study.

16 John Hayward, “Gorka: ‘The Era of the Pajama Boy Is Over January 20th, and the Alpha Males Are Back,’” *Breitbart*, December 18, 2016, <https://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2016/12/18/gorka-era-pajama-boy-january-20th-alpha-males-back/>.

17 “Trump Tank American Flag—Donald Trump Flag,” product description, DP Company, accessed January 10, 2025, [acchttps://www.dpciwholesale.com/3-x-5-trump-tank-american-flag-donald-trump-flag-70683.html](https://www.dpciwholesale.com/3-x-5-trump-tank-american-flag-donald-trump-flag-70683.html).

Now, military men have long appealed to traditional conservatives, being rugged and willing to inflict violence or lay down their lives for the nation, but as I have implied, they could also pose something of a dilemma for some members of today's radical right. Looked at one way, soldiers seem a bit overly *governable*, as they capitulate to the state's orders, and as we have seen in several of the articles in this issue, recent decades have seen not just conservative hesitancy about "big government" but the outright disintegration of state allegiance among many on the radical right. Consider that, to *Man's World* aficionados, as Tebaldi and Burnett make clear, developing one's own body is semiotically bound up with seizing autonomy and evading state control, favoring instead the "tribe." The popularity of Donald Trump, with his disdain for democratic institutions and his predilection for rallying supporters to flout law and order, is a symptom of this antipathy toward politics as usual. Accordingly, some Trump enthusiasts on the alt-right, such as followers of QAnon, have expressed open preference for the death of our current democracy in favor of a White supremacist totalitarian state in the hypothetical future (exactly how much agency they would retain is unclear, but they do not seem troubled by this; see McIntosh 2022b). Alt-right militias, some working in tandem with the QAnon movement, saw their numbers rise in the run-up to the Trump-encouraged insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. This is the new American "patriot," who not only despises most of what we associate with "the government" but also might be willing to violently dispatch the current nation-state to improve on it.

### **Antiheroic Masculinity**

The far-right hallmark of professed ungovernability seems to be stoking new developments in archconservative masculinity. As an alternative to the earnest warrior masculinity described in many of these articles, we have seen the rise of a bitter, sardonic, antiheroic masculine option. Incels, for one, who regard themselves as hopeless cases in the genetic lottery of physical masculinity, resign themselves to a nihilistic and destructive existence from a locus of undesirability. In a related vein, some right-wing radicals began circulating the antiheroic figure known as Pepe the Frog around 2015, in tandem with Trump's rise (Jones 2020). This bug-eyed, scrawny-limbed cartoon amphibian began as a benign slacker-stoner in artist Matt Furie's comic strip about a harmless "boy's club," but it was adopted by the alt-right as an infinitely meme-able mascot who became a canvas for White supremacist and other radical-right attitudes and aspirations. While Pepe images have been posted by people across the gender spectrum (Jones 2020), Pepe himself is clearly gendered as masculine, and he became popular on transgressive male-dominant web forums such as 4chan.

As Johanna Maj Schmidt discusses in this issue, Pepe stands in contrast to the self-serious masculine heroes other contributors here describe. His body has no apparent strength, and his statements about, for instance, fighting in the "Great Meme War" can only be what Schmidt calls "partly (self-)ironic" given his unprepossessing physique. In fact, some Pepe the Frog memers freely admit that they are unemployed and (quite



literally) live in their parents' basement (Jones 2020), but they celebrate this refusal of what they disparagingly call “normie” life. Pepe thus offers a weak-bodied yet ungovernable alternative to conventional warrior masculinity.

Some Pepe memes lean into the pattern of contrastive typologizing we have seen in other parts of the manosphere. The meme in figure 8, for instance, celebrates the Pepe wielders who have checked out of the middle-class grind. Two contrasting worlds are signified by the division of the image into two colors: a dull beige-brown on the left, and a golden yellow on the right. In that golden space, we see a slightly elevated, almost floating Pepe, draped in a monk-like version of a blanket (the appearance of this blanket in “comfy Pepe” memes is discussed below). He is reaching out a hand to a downtrodden, exhausted-looking man in the left-hand brown area, a man whose ragged clothing and apparent body odor suggest his impoverishment. Visually, Pepe comes across as a vaguely religious figure of salvation—but this implication is surely ironic, given how many Pepe supporters opt out of conventional moral notions of piety or conscience.



**Figure 8.** An enlightened Pepe the Frog in contrast to the slaves of “normie” life.<sup>18</sup>

The word clusters in this meme clarify some of Pepe’s value system. On the golden, desirable side of Pepe, for instance, we have “NEETS,” an acronym for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training,” which broadcasts the memers’ self-deprecating pride in evading the world of institutions, paychecks, and bosses. Their “freedom” (another key term) spares them the perils of the capitalist grind listed on the brown and undesirable side, including “income tax,” “materialism,” and the metaphorical “slavery” that presumably comes with opting into the workplace. On the same side, we also find the word “Wagecucks,” a mocking term that in alt-right slang refers to those who work dead-end jobs for a meager wage (as mentioned, “cuck,” short for cuckold, is a popular

18 Katie Notopoulos and Ryan Broderick, “A Glossary of Far-Right Terms and Memes,” *Buzzfeed News*, March 3, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/katienotopoulos/a-normal-persons-guide-to-how-far-right-trolls-talk-to-each>.

alt-right term to denigrate a man's power; see Kosse 2022, as well as her article in this issue). The meme also draws a contrast between the kinds of sexual access available to each male type. On Pepe's side, we see the word "waifus": internet slang for a fantasized online girlfriend, often from anime or manga. Such virtual girlfriends do not offer the fleshy sex available to warrior men, but at least Pepe is not a "cuck" and can dissociate himself from the "roasties" available on the brown side. Roasties are nominally impure, used-up women who have had sex with multiple men, and Pepe, isolated in his basement, is untouched by such contamination.

But beyond their performance of disdain for conventional education and employment, Pepe memers enact several kinds of strength. For one thing, they have relished their power to sway the electorate from their laptops, as when they whipped up enthusiasm for Trump before the 2016 election (Jones 2020). For another, they display a kind of fortitude—masculine power from the neck up, as it were—with their ostentatiously casual stance toward human suffering. Sometimes, for instance, Pepe appears in Hitler guise or smiles at graphic violence against racial or ethnic minorities. "Breaking the rules and making it fun" has become part of the enticement for the radical right (McIntosh 2022a).

In a related vein, consider the "comfy/coze Pepe" images in figures 9 and 10, featuring Pepe wrapped in a blanket, looking comfortable and (in figure 9) a little smug. Regarded in isolation, Pepe's cozy garb and doughy body might conjure similarities with Pajama Boy or other "soyboys" hated by the right. But again, context makes all the difference to the meaning of the signifier. For if the right portrays Pajama Boy as a naive simp, comfy/cozy Pepe delivers a sinister vibe when his image appears as a sardonic onlooker in contexts of suffering. During the first wave of protests after George Floyd's murder, a 4chan user posted an image of comfy Pepe flanked by the gleeful statement "Everything is burning! :D," as if Pepe were enjoying watching the destruction unfold. And at the start of pandemic lockdowns in 2020, when so many Americans were anxiously rushing around to stockpile and look for masks, comfy Pepe appeared with the caption "This will be quite the show" (Keen, Crawford, and Suarez-Tangil 2020, 17). Pepe's cozy cool in the face of others' chaos and pain is one of his power moves, coming across as sociopathic and thus menacing.



**Figure 9.** A smug “comfy/cozy Pepe.”<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 10.** A reclining “comfy/cozy Pepe,” wrapped in a blanket.<sup>20</sup>

Thinking in terms of participation frameworks (Goffman 1981), Pepe’s intended audience is not only fellow right-wing radicals but also the digital sphere of aghast leftists. Upsetting them, twisting the knife in “the wounds of liberal society,” as Schmidt puts it, is part of the point. Such performances seem part of this political group’s mockery of leftist moralizing and general refusal to be shamed (Shaefer 2020; see also McIntosh 2022a on the related “Let’s Go Brandon” phenomenon).

Finally, it must be said that Pepe’s sheer irony is also part of his power. I do not disagree with Schmidt, who suggests Pepe’s “ironic denial” of bodily heroism engages in some self-“immunization” against male insecurity about the “shrinking relevance of the male warrior body” in times of automated warfare. But I also think that, beyond these psychodynamics, Pepe’s irony envisions, in part, a liberal audience, and furnishes a semiotic means of enacting power before them. The goofy memes sometimes elude

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19 “Pepe the Frog—Pepe comfy and smug,” Knowyourmeme (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2139877-pepe-the-frog>.

20 “Pepe Cozy Sticker,” Tenor (website), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://tenor.com/view/pepe-cozy-gif-26320870>.

clear interpretation.<sup>21</sup> Do NEETS *really* not care about conventional social rewards? Do Pepe memers really have murderous fantasies or are they sometimes just posting for “lulz” (kicks)?<sup>22</sup> A final meaning is elusive, and the winks and nudges madden the critics, broadcasting a “can’t catch me” vibe before the memer slithers away. Surely it feels like comeuppance for those liberal elites with their know-it-all attitude (McIntosh 2020). Pepe is both post-heroic *and* a new kind of hateful hero.

The radical-right warrior man is earnest and mighty, gnawing on red meat to build up his strength. The Pepe memer refuses both sincerity and muscle tone but says: I am nobody’s fool. The first type of man offers an invitation to a martial form of masculinity, while the second is too unfit and ungovernable to entertain enlisting. Between them, they offer two primary entry points to radical right-wing politics, for both delightedly parse the world into in-groups and debased, dehumanized out-groups. It is unnerving to see a proliferation of such invitations, but no doubt more options await in the seething future of the manosphere.

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21 In the world of internet analysis, the inability to tell whether someone is joking because of the widespread use of deliberate ambiguity has been dubbed “Poe’s Law.” See Emma Grey Ellis, “Can’t Take a Joke? That’s Just Poe’s Law, 2017’s Most Important Internet Phenomenon,” *Wired*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/06/poses-law-troll-cultures-central-rule/>.

22 Jordan Hoffman, “Duo behind Pepe the Frog Film Warns against Writing Off Goofy Hate Propaganda,” *Times of Israel*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/duo-behind-pepe-the-frog-film-warn-against-writing-off-goofy-hate-propaganda/>.

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## Why Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist and Why We Should Study Language to Understand It

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In this commentary, I want to take up the topic of heroes and hard truths. Gender, sexuality, and the sociolinguistics of the far right are the starting point from which to make two interconnected discursive moves: first, I want to revisit Félix Guattari's statement that "everybody wants to be a fascist"; and, second, I put particular emphasis on why we should study language in order to investigate and understand such a *desire* for fascism. While the articles in this special issue do not overtly draw on the work of Guattari or the joint publications with his intellectual partner, Gilles Deleuze, I believe that their theorization of what they call "microfascism" can be useful to bring to the fore some of the main arguments advanced in this special issue. For this purpose, I have been inspired by Michalinos Zembylas's (2021) rereading of Deleuze and Guattari's theories, and their relevance for the "(un)making of microfascism in school and classrooms." Unlike Zembylas, my goal here is not motivated by equitable pedagogic practices. And this is not because I do not believe in socially just education. Rather, because of my expertise in the mainstreaming of right-wing ideologies in the media (see, e.g., Milani 2020) and the empirical focus of this special issue on a variety of media outputs (memes, magazines, YouTube videos, websites, etc.), I am more interested in teasing out how Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual apparatus can help us appreciate the role of different semiotic resources (language, visuals, music, etc.) in the mediatization of visceral attachments to fascism.

Mediatization should be understood here in its political economic meaning as the process through which analog and digital media, and the social actors involved in them, are *invested*—quite literally—in using meaning-making resources for the production of social *value*: they valorize certain identities and desires, and thus encourage particular attachments to them, while devaluing others (see in particular Del Percio, Flubacher, and Duchêne 2017; Del Percio and Dlaske 2022). Needless to say, it is not within the remit of this commentary to provide an in-depth exegesis of Deleuze and Guattari's monumental oeuvre (see, however, Pietikäinen 2015 for an excellent précis that is accessible to discourse-oriented scholars, and Pietikäinen 2024 for a full-fledged operationalization of this theoretical framework). Rather, I employ some of their key concepts—*desire*, *rhizome*, *assemblage of enunciation*—to shed a different light on

some of the main points made by the contributors to this special issue, stressing how the articles here contribute to better understanding the political workings of fascism at a microscopic level, which, as Deleuze and Guattari note, is the most perfidious aspect of fascism. In their words, “What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power” (1987, 215) because it is fueled by “a thousand little monomanias, self-evident truths, and clarities that gush from every black hole and no longer form a system, but are only rumble and buzz, blinding lights giving any and everybody the mission of self-appointed judge, dispenser of justice, policeman, neighborhood SS man” (228). And, in their view, (micro)fascism is less the result of ignorance or ideology than of desire. As they vehemently state in *Anti-Oedipus*, “[N]o, the masses were not innocent dupes, at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 29). It is to such desire that I will now turn.

### **Desire and (Micro)Fascism**

To begin with, it is important to clarify that Deleuze and Guattari’s intellectual project grew out of a dissatisfaction with psychoanalytic interpretations of desire as developing from a preexisting lack. For such an obsession with lack, they would say in a mocking tone, inevitably leads to “a reduction to the One . . . it all leads back to daddy” (cited in Cameron and Kulick 2003). Against this backdrop, it will come as no surprise that Deleuze and Guattari were also deeply skeptical of the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, with its heavy reliance on hydraulic metaphors to describe how sexual drives operate through arousals, flows, and discharges. Instead, they view desire as a much broader and all-encompassing phenomenon than sexual libido alone. For example, in his previous work with Claire Parnet, Deleuze had observed, “Walking is desire. Listening to music, or making music, or writing, are desires. A spring, a winter, are desires. Old age is also desire. Even death” (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 95). Of course, one could ask: If everything is desire, does not this concept lose all its heuristic purchase? Not necessarily if we take into account that, couched under an often sarcastic and provocative style, Deleuze and Guattari’s main aim was to resignify desire from lack and repression to “an active and positive reality, an affirmative vital force” (Gao 2013, 406). Linguistically, they did so by replacing the Freudian language of fluid mechanics with a plethora of suggestive terminology taken from botany (e.g., rhizomes) and geography (e.g., maps). As Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003, 111) observe, such a semantic shift has important analytical implications: rather than trying to dig out and reawaken a repressed past buried somewhere in the unconscious, analysts are instead tasked with “mapping the ways desire is made possible and charting the ways it moves, acts and forms connections. . . . Thus, attention can focus on whether and how different kinds of relations emit desire, fabricate it and/or block it, exhaust it.” And I would add that it is precisely by focusing on language and other forms of signification

that we can document more accurately how such emissions, fabrications, or blockages take place at a molecular level.

For example, in their analysis in this issue of the far-right magazine *Man's World*, Cat Tebaldi and Scott Burnett paint a compelling picture of how a particular form of “ontological desire” (Whitehead 2002; Kiesling 2011)—in this case, the desire to be a specific type of man (muscled, symmetrical, right-wing, hard)—is skillfully crafted via certain linguistic and visual choices. Here, images of white men with square jaws interpellate (Althusser 1971) potential viewers/readers, and they do so *affectively*.<sup>1</sup> While in his original formulation of interpellation Althusser dismissed affect as not entirely relevant to theorizing subjectivation, Tebaldi and Burnett demonstrate how powerful feelings such as desire are pivotal in processes of subject formation: the men in the magazine *Man's World* interpellate male audiences to desire to be *like* them at the same time as the magazine's text and images actively need to counter the dreaded specter of homosexuality, keeping at bay the risk that the very same audiences might feel sexually attracted to these muscular figures. From a perspective germane to that of Deleuze and Guattari, it does not matter how much we seek to resist such homosocial aesthetics; *Man's World* exudes desire, and in doing so, it interpellates us affectively.

By the same token, Gustav Westberg and Henning Årman's investigation of a Swedish fascist party's propaganda shows how certain linguistic and visual choices generate forms of attachment to, or desires for, a particular type of nuclear family, one that is Aryan and reproductive. Unlike the bulging muscles and perfect six-packs of the corn-fed white men in the images in *Man's World*, interpellation here is activated by pictures of pregnant white bellies, and silhouettes of fathers and children on a shore. As Westberg and Årman correctly point out, such images of white familial bliss are uncannily ordinary; they bear no resemblance to the fascist aesthetics of *Man's World*, but their political implications nonetheless arouse the desire for racist reproductive futurity among those more mainstream voters who might not immediately identify with overtly fascist politics (see also Dominika Baran's insightful analysis in this issue of the discursive construction of family values by a homophobic Polish NGO). These more subdued visual choices notwithstanding, other images are more direct in (re) generating a Nazi wish for an Aryan world. The picture of a smiling blonde girl behind the slogan “Nordic children should be like teeth—white, straight and strong” emits an unashamedly racist, homophobic, and ableist desire for a future Scandinavia.

In sum, these two articles demonstrate how linguistically oriented frameworks—linguistic anthropology and (multimodal) critical discourse analysis—can work like optical instruments that magnify how incitements to desire (to be a fascist) momentarily *crystallize* semiotically with the help of particular meaning-making resources in different media outlets (a magazine and a website). What remains to be demonstrated is how desire “is continually being dis/re/assembled” (Cameron and Kulick 2003, 111) through

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1 For Althusser, ideologies “hail” or “call out” (from the French *interpeller*) to individuals, offering specific identities and constructing them as subjects.

movement across different discursive sites. It is at this juncture that the notion of the rhizome can describe such complex formations of desire in relation to microfascism.

### The Rhizomatic Shapes of Microfascism

Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as a “subterranean stem . . . [that] assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). This botanical imagery allows them to highlight several principles that have analytical relevance when applying the concept of the rhizome to a set of data. The first is the infinite possibility of *connection* between any two points of a rhizome, leading to heterogeneous “connections between semiotic chains, . . . [which] are not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 8). The second is *multiplicity*, which indicates how a rhizome consists of a network structure of lines with different degrees of intensity (e.g., a thinner ramification versus a thicker tuber). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 10) explain multiplicity: “There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines.” The third is the possibility of *rupture*, following which “a rhizome may be broken, shatter at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10). The fourth is its representability as a *map*, which, as they say, “is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 10).

I believe that these properties of a rhizome are especially helpful because they give us a language through which to grasp 1) the *capillarity* of fascism—ramifications, intensifications, occasional ruptures, and regrowth; and 2) its *semiotic complexity* as a discursive, bodily/material, and affective phenomenon. In this respect, Dominika Baran’s investigation of an anti-gender Polish NGO, the article on global NoFap discourses by Scott Burnett, Rodrigo Borba, and Mie Hiramoto, and Maureen Kosse’s analysis of unexpected alliances between feminist transphobic and misogynist far-right groups lend themselves well to illustrating the rhizomatic shape of fascism. Not everyone would agree that the three phenomena under investigation in these articles can be easily labeled as “fascism” tout court. Indeed, Itamar Manoff (2024, 495) points out that “there is much disagreement in the scholarship on fascism with respect to the definition, nature or even the main distinguishing features of fascism.” These differences notwithstanding, Manoff goes on to suggest that “there seems to be broad consensus that nationalism plays a central role in the ideology and political mobilization of historical fascism” (495). There is little doubt that nationalism fuels highly problematic discursive constructions such as those of the “true Poles” (Baran) and of trans people imagined as causing the extinction of white women (Kosse). A gendered facet of nationalism is also on display in the mediatized performances of “real manhood” enacted by the Swedish beefcake Marcus Follin. But nationalism is hardly perceptible in the no less supremacist

shapes of masculinity performed by the Brazilian Matheus Copini, and the Japanese *onakin* practitioners (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto). However, Guattari warns us that “what fascism set in motion yesterday continues to proliferate in *other forms*, within the complex of contemporary social space” (Guattari 2009, 163, my emphasis). Thus, nationalism might have become somewhat of a red herring in our assessment of what counts as fascist today and what does not. Instead, it might be more helpful to draw on David Renton’s (2000, 77) broader view that fascism was based “on a radical elitism, that is on the notion that certain human beings were intrinsically, genetically better than others, who consequently could be treated as if they did not have the right to exist.” With this broader perspective in mind, it is fairly obvious that even the data that does not overtly thematize nationalism in the articles by Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto, and by Kosse, can also be classified as fascist.

Definitional issues aside, the point I want to make here is that “true Poles,” “real men,” and the alliances between misogynists and “feminist” transphobes can be reread with the help of Deleuze and Guattari as stems in an intricate microfascist rhizome. For example, Baran’s incisive critical discourse analysis of an email newsletter of a Polish NGO illustrates how anti-LGBTQ+ pronouncements are like rhizomatic knots in which discourses of disparate provenances get entangled with each other in the creation of what is presented as a God-given and hence natural and truthful opposition between heterosexual Catholic “true Poles” on the one hand, and LGBTQ+ people as devils incarnate that threaten religious and national unity on the other. Disentangling this problematic knot requires an appreciation of its different threads, which include but are not limited to 1) the important role of the Polish Catholic Church in the political struggle against communism, and subsequently of Catholicism as a central ingredient of Polish nationalism; and 2) an opposition between Poland and the “West,” which is perceived as too sexually liberal. These rhizomatic entanglements take discursive shape through linguistic choices that, as Baran puts it, “borrow from, co-opt, redefine, and repurpose progressive terms, concepts, and ideas in service of right-wing agendas, while simultaneously delegitimizing their use by progressives.” Most crucially, she observes that these linguistic choices are woven together into a purportedly logical fabric that portrays religio-nationalist beliefs about gender as commonsense truths “while at the same time constructing progressive stances on gender and sexuality as illogical and absurd.”

Shifting the analytical gaze from argumentation to mediatized performances of masculine voices, Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto unveil another aspect of the rhizomatic shape of microfascism: this time it is the thickening and thinning of fascist fantasies about being a “real man” today, which take different embodied shapes across geopolitical contexts, from the hypermuscular physique of Follin to the less brawny Copini to the allegedly more spiritual Japanese *onakin* enthusiasts. Difference in embodiment notwithstanding, these examples are like dots in a global network. They might not be connected through conscious and direct intertextualities—Follin does not quote Copini, the *onakins* do not refer to Follin—but they are nonetheless related to



each other; they are different growths in the same fascist rhizome, one that draws its nourishment from the misogynist belief that women are inferior and their function is simply to serve men's needs—sexual and otherwise. Once again, desire is at play here, semiotically materialized in the “performance of *voices*—multimodal styles, registers, and biographical idiosyncrasies” (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto). Through such semiotic choices young men are not only interpellated to aspire to “a muscular physique or sexual success,” but they are also perniciously roped into “a masculinist and/or racist subjectivity” (Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto).

A rhizomatic formation can also be traced in the rather bewildering alliances between feminist transphobic and misogynist far-right groups. Here rather opposite stems—feminism and misogyny—are unexpectedly conjoined by a shared ideological opposition to trans people. Such a belief is built on the view that the meaning of a word does not emerge from its use, as Wittgenstein and current sociolinguistic research would posit, but is a stable and objective reflection of a preexisting social reality. Also known as referentialism, this ideology of language is weaponized, Kosse argues, by anti-trans feminists and misogynist far-right groups, who resort to dictionary definitions of lexical and grammatical items, such as the word “woman” or personal pronouns (he/she), as the “natural” proofs of a biological gender order, in which there is only space for he=penis=male and she=vagina=female, while everybody who does not fit into this binary division should be eliminated at all costs. As Michael Billig reminds us, one of the fundamental traits of fascism is the advancement of a set of ideological commitments that “pose a direct threat to democracy and to personal freedom” (1978, 7). Such a characteristic has often been interpreted in the rather narrow party-political sense that “fascists do not simply oppose Marxism, or left-wing politics more generally, they actively try to stamp them out—denying rights of political association, banning parties, and (ultimately) killing opponents” (Richardson 2016, 449). While this is still the case in many undemocratic contexts, Kosse's analysis of the alliances between feminist transphobic and misogynist far-right groups points to a much broader but no less violent and capillary fascist curbing of freedom, this time not targeting political rivals but trans individuals' right to exist.

Read together, the articles by Baran, Kosse, and Burnett, Borba, and Hiramoto present us with illuminating cases that point to the ways semiotic resources and beliefs about language are essential in the formation of a poisonous microfascist rhizome consisting of different stems that grow parallel to each other, get entwined, break off somewhere, and (re)grow somewhere else.

### **Toward an Assemblage of Enunciation: Unearthing “the Fascist inside You”**

If everything is connected through rhizomatic formations, and desire (to be fascist) flows through innumerable stems to the point that it is impossible to pinpoint a beginning or an end, but only trace connections, what is the agency of individual speaking subjects in this stream of affective forces? And can we account for individual responsibility and

culpability for specific utterances, writings, and images? Deleuze and Guattari's work is heavily influenced by Baruch Spinoza's idea that entities (human and nonhuman) in the world are deeply enmeshed with each other; they affect and are affected by each other. With such a focus on immanence, it is inevitable then that, when a subject speaks, they do so from a position of being entangled in a preexisting "assemblage of enunciation." Deleuze and Guattari describe such a position of the subject entering the domain of the discursive as follows:

I always depend on a molecular assemblage of enunciation that is not given in my conscious mind, any more than it depends solely on my apparent social determinations, which combine many heterogeneous regimes of signs. Speaking in tongues. To write is perhaps to bring this assemblage of the unconscious to the light of day, to select the whispering voices, to gather the tribes and secret idioms from which I extract something I call my Self. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 84)

In a manner analogous to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986, 89) idea that "our speech . . . is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-own-ness,'" Deleuze and Guattari remind us that the speaking subject is inevitably situated within discourses that precede them. While such a view of language could be interpreted as inherently absolving individual speakers/writers of any responsibility for the content and effect of whatever they say—"I was just repeating what someone else said before me"—I would argue that Deleuze and Guattari's view is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's (1963) reflections on individual culpability in her writings about Adolf Eichmann's well-known trial in Jerusalem.

Needless to say, Arendt was not a trained linguist, and neither were Deleuze and Guattari. However, they share a similar conviction that speaking subjects find themselves at the crossroads of 1) processes of entextualizations into recognizable discursive forms such as political speeches, narratives, and fables; and 2) the decontextualization and recontextualization of specific elements from such forms. It is through such rather banal discursive processes, Arendt would say, that individuals do not necessarily actively decide to be good or bad but simply act "normally" as interpellated across a variety of discursive genres to the point that they might not apprehend the moral implications of their individual conduct. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 215) would go a step further by pointing their fingers at the ambivalences within the speaking subject, warning that "[i]t's too easy to be antifascist on the molar [that is, macro-societal] level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective."

A fascinating example of the "fascist inside you" is provided by Johanna Maj Schmidt's investigation of how a small group of leftist social scientists working at a democracy research institute interpreted two far-right memes. While the psychoanalytic framework employed by Schmidt is inherently at loggerheads with Deleuze and

Guattari's anti-psychoanalytic theorization of microfascism, the article shows how *even* well-educated scholars who identify with the political left can express mixed feelings for right-wing messages. In this instance, they feel ambivalent about the content of a meme representing three Pepe the Frog characters who seem to be running away after having stolen a flag with the slogan "He Will Not Divide Us." Here, the motto refers to the title of an anti-Trump online installation created by Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Rönkkö, and Luke Turner, which faced several disruptions by trolls since its inception. In the meme, LaBeouf is portrayed as an enraged "Crying Wojak" figure with a raised fist. What is particularly relevant for the point I want to make here is how the leftist academics in Schmidt's study express affective stances that fluctuate from feeling sorry for LaBeouf/Wojak to empathizing with the *schadenfreude* of the three far-right Pepees. These ambivalences aside, everyone in the study seemed to agree that LaBeouf's angry response was a failure.

Granted, leftist scholars' negative reactions to anger might not be completely remarkable because, as I have pointed out elsewhere, anger is generally perceived as "a 'dirty' feeling—a pathology even—if we are to believe the innumerable available courses in 'anger management'" (Milani 2021, 441). Linguistically, a certain discomfort with this emotion can also be detected in the preference accorded by scholarship on affect (see Wetherell, Smith, and Campbell 2018) to that cognate of anger, "righteous indignation," which, in my view, "sanitizes anger's murky waters, while covering them with an unpolluted moral surface" (Milani and Richardson 2023, 468). Whether due to a response to the particular instance of LaBeouf's rage in the meme or to a more general discomfort with anger altogether, the leftist scholars in Schmidt's study concur that the main problems with LaBeouf's irate reactions were his attempt to control the message he had created and his belonging to an "elitist art bubble" disconnected from society at large, which had prevented him from taking into account diverging class interests within the body politic.

The most important conclusion drawn in Schmidt's article is how the affective alignments expressed by leftist scholars to the far-right message of the meme point "to an aspect of far-right meme culture that seems to have broader appeal, and which should not be underestimated: sometimes right-wing memes lay bare the inner contradictions and sore points of the liberal status quo." And language once again plays an important role in the production of such emotional attachments: "The unfulfilled promise of equality, and the spiritless, corny language this is cloaked in, invite ridicule from people across the political spectrum" (Schmidt). What is particularly terrifying, though, is how even those leftist academics who felt compelled to shield LaBeouf from the severe criticism of their peers fell into the antisemitic trope of "emphasizing his Jewish family background as a possible explanation for his *thin-skinned* reaction to Nazi slurs" (Schmidt, my emphasis).

Overall, I believe that the data in Schmidt's article give us empirical proof of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the "fascist inside you" and of Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil." They show how leftist academics who might be antifascist at the molar level

might, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, harbor fascist sympathies at the molecular level. They might not even be aware of it, though they are no less culpable for it, when they situate themselves in discourse by reacting to specific interpellations in the present

### **Instead of a Conclusion**

Read from cover to cover, this special issue provides much needed empirical evidence of a theoretical point made by Michel Foucault in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Foucault wrote that

the major enemy . . . is fascism. . . . And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini—which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively—but also the *fascism in us all*, in our heads, and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. (Foucault 1983, xiii, my emphasis)

More specifically, the articles illustrate different facets of microfascism and its different crystallizations via semiotic resources. Very often throughout my career I have met peers in the humanities and social sciences who have felt frustrated or even put off by the level of linguistic/semiotic precision exemplified by the articles in this special issue, which, in their view, is simply too detailed and is therefore inadequate to advance “big” arguments about larger social arrangements. I would counterargue that critical discourse analysts, linguistic anthropologists, and sociolinguists are like microbiologists, putting forms of semiosis under a microscope. Such attention to the minuscular level of language, however, is not an esoteric exercise of navel-gazing but is geared to better understand the production, circulation, and unfolding of broader social processes and phenomena. And, as the COVID pandemic taught us, large public health studies would not have been possible without microscopic analyses of how the COVID virus behaves. In a similar way, I believe that critical discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, and sociolinguistics can be particularly valuable analytical frameworks for investigating why everyone wants to be a fascist, as they offer us a toolkit with which to scrutinize how attachments to fascism (i.e., identities and desires) accrue social values at the molecular level, without losing sight of their connections to the molar level. As someone who strongly identifies with such a tradition of textual analysis, I hope that this special issue will open an avenue for scholars interested in critical investigations of the far right to engage more substantially with linguistically/semiotically oriented scholarship. It is through attention to the nitty-gritty of mediatized semiotic outputs (memes, webpages, newsletters, magazines, etc.) that we can unveil more precisely how “new forms of molecular fascism are developing: a slow burning fascism in familialism, in school, in racism, in every kind of ghetto, which advantageously makes up for the crematory ovens” (Guattari 2009, 171).

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