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Authors

Tebaldi, Catherine
Burnett, Scott

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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

The Pennsylvania State University

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.”¹ 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

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,² 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

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.³ 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

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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