

A right-wing extremist community and online discourse framing:

How collective cultural rhetoric operates on Gab

By

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the May 2022 massacre in Buffalo, where an 18-year old white man named Payton Gendron gunned down 10 Black people in a grocery store, news coverage focused on the shooter's white supremacist ideology. Payton, in a manifesto that he published online, stated, "I am simply a White man seeking to protect and serve my community, my people, my culture, and my race." Payton argued in his manifesto that the "white race," is being subjected to racial replacement as part of an international conspiracy to dilute white liberty and culture.

Payton is not alone. Over the course of the last decade, as noted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2021), right-wing extremism in the U.S. has been on the rise. "Right-wing extremist", according to Greven (2016), refers to a demographic of people that subscribe to ideologies that uphold ideals of "racial purity, and gender and cultural traditionalism" (4). Arguments about racial purity are a key feature of white nationalism. The rise of groups that advocate for a "white ethnostate," such as the Proud Boys, are an example of contemporary right-wing extremism, as I discuss it in this paper (Stern 2019).

The rise of such right-wing extremism is in part aided by social media platforms. According to Seth Jones (2018), "The threat of right wing violence in the U.S. –and Europe– appears to be rising. Of particular concern are white supremacists and anti-government extremists, such as militia groups and so-called sovereign citizens interested in plotting attacks against government, racial, religious, and political targets in the United States." A recent study by UNESCO (2017) notes a link between the rise in individuals' political association with right-wing extremism and social media use. Angela Nagle's (2017) *Kill All Normies* describes the link

between right-wing extremist, and far-right¹, discourse and community participation on forum-based social media website 4chan (Puecker 2022). Nagle (2017) identified that participation in 4chan's right-wing digital community required adherence to the discourse rules of said community, and in that process, enabled indoctrination into an ideology of right-wing extremism.

In the years that have followed since Nagle's publication, right-wing extremist discourse has been identified on more major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok (Dobkiewicz 2019, Fuchs 2018, Boucher 2022, Munger & Phillips 2022). However, more recently a new form of extremist right-wing social media has developed, what Greta Jasser (2021) refers to as the "alt-tech" space. Alt-tech is a term used to refer to social media, such as TruthSocial, Gab, and Parler, that frame their social media as free-speech absolutist in the face of an "increasingly censored...mainstream tech space" (Jasser et. al. 2021).

In this paper, I unpack the rhetorical patterns in right-wing discourse on one of the new alt-tech spaces, Gab. This paper argues that right-wing extremist discourse is primarily articulated through a sense of persecution by users of Gab, who blame what they perceive as the decline of American values, economic power, and white dominant culture on gender liberation, multiculturalism, and advances in racial equality. Prevalent within the discourse is the idea that the U.S. used to be an equal opportunity society that has now been corrupted by civil rights and feminist movements. I demonstrate that the rhetoric of persecution on Gab is defined primarily by two themes: **diminishing whiteness** and **the 'death' of traditional gender**. By mobilizing these themes, right wing extremist rhetoric reinforces an idealized white patriarchal America, as not only good and natural, but as under attack in ways that require its militarized defense.

¹ For distinction between far-right and right wing extremist see notes on terminology section

Ultimately, I argue that the rhetoric serves to misdirect from critiques of the capitalist system of power in this subset of the white working class, while at the same time asserting a return to traditional values of patriarchy and white supremacy.

Theoretical Framework and Political Context

The genealogy of right-wing extremism in its contemporary form can be traced to a rhetorical strategy developed by the conservative political establishment under the Reagan-era of politics, what George Lipsitz (2018) refers to as “New Patriotism”. Lipsitz (2018) identifies new patriotism as a rhetorical strategy that attempts to idealize neoliberal America as an equal opportunity society, where any perceived faults or material economic failings are placed on external Others. New patriotism, although not solely confined to the dialogue of politicians, allows presidential candidates such as Reagan, Bush, and Trump to hegemonize U.S. neoliberalism as an ideal only being negatively affected by ‘externalities’. Neoliberalism, as Lipsitz (2018) describes it, is fundamentally economic policies characterized by “capital flight and...irresponsible tax cuts for the wealthy coupled with disinvestment in education and infrastructure” (57). Ricky Allen (2001) similarly notes that for neoliberal proponents in the U.S. the problems created by disinvestment in education and infrastructure, such as increased rates of household debt or increasing gun violence, are externalized from neoliberal policies onto external ‘threats’, such as immigrants or vulnerable racialized communities (Lipsitz 2018, Murji & Solomos 2005). As Lipsitz (2018) notes further, this rhetoric still persists in the contemporary age of neoliberalism as the election of Donald Trump represents a continuation of this externalization onto anti-oppressive movements that threaten the power structures of the system, such as feminist movements, decolonial struggles, and the labor movement, to name a few.

To better understand the rhetoric on Gab it should be noted that the conservative midwest of America, commonly referred to as the Rust Belt, has seen a period of significant economic decline in the last few decades at the hands of neoliberal policies. The most common cause attributed to this decline by economists is outsourcing for labor by industrial manufacturers to developing countries where labor costs are much lower than in America (French 2006, Loomis 2016). This can be reductive however, since the decline of the middle class in America can be most dramatically pointed out by noting that household debt increased dramatically after Reagan's election in 1980. Reagan made a vast array of policy changes that transformed America from the largest creditor to the largest debtor nation in the world, while in the same span, more than doubling the GDP share of the capitalist class (i.e. owners and shareholders). Reagan was also a devout enemy of organized labor, known by his compatriots and critics for increasing 'productivity of the workforce' while maintaining stagnant wages; Reagan disempowered labor unions across America in the name of profit. Much of this process has been identified as the economic advent of neoliberalism and has been discussed by American economists and policy experts such as Isabella Weber (2020) and Jack Rasmus (2020).

This is not isolated simply to the Rust Belt, since neoliberal policies have affected everyone subject to the global capitalist hegemony, but the Rust Belt serves as a good way to begin to understand the demographic on Gab, because as an alt-tech space, it reflects the political background of the majority white working class and conservative demographic in the Rust Belt (TJJ Lears 1985; Phillips-Fein 2011, Jasser et. al. 2021). There were many who suffered at the hands of Reagan's anti-labor, pro-corporate policies, but continued to steadfastly support him, and the Republican party (Phillips-Fein 2011). This is where George Lipsitz' (2018)

identification of new patriotism comes into play, because the rhetoric of new patriotism by neoliberals reflects a concerted effort to shift blame away from Reagan's neoliberal policies, and onto anything Other. This historical context can help us understand how some white working class people are swept into a rhetoric that supports exploitative structures of power that maintain their own, and others, oppression. Essentially, the problem of decline for the new patriot rhetoric is not with the ideal conservative neoliberal America, but rather it is with those that are attempting to tarnish said America: the Other wants to tarnish an idyllic American fairness for their own power. This rhetorical framework serves to misdirect working class individuals' anger away from those in power, and towards other exploited people(s).

Fundamentally for Lipsitz (2018), the new patriot rhetoric undertakes a process of Othering that idealizes a chauvinistic neoliberal order, free from Others. The white working class individual, a victim of American neoliberal policies, is targeted by a rhetoric that seeks to absolve said U.S. power structure of blame, by placing that blame on marginalized groups, either real or imagined. For neoliberals wielding a new patriot rhetoric, economic decline in the U.S. is associated with the erosion of the traditional values that made the U.S. a global capitalist power, such as patriarchy and white supremacy. In other words, new patriotism defends the negative effects of neoliberal policies by framing them as the result of externalities, such as minority non-white groups or proponents of feminism, while asserting an idealistic and chauvinistic image of white supremacist patriarchy. In this paper, I position Lipsitz's theorization of new patriot rhetoric as both a precursor to and an underlying structure of right-wing extremist rhetoric in alt-tech spaces.

Literature Review

In the last decade, scholars have been interested in how online communities shape individuals' political views and affect their participation in democratic processes. Studies in this realm are important because they speak to the assumed link between the rise of political violence and the high rates of social media use among Canadians and Americans. In this review, I am particularly attentive to scholarship that seeks to understand how online communities craft counter-cultural subjectivities and to what political effect.

Online spaces are complex. As Munger and Phillips (2020) argue in "Right-Wing YouTube," online spaces should be considered only one formative factor among many others to avoid a reductionist approach to technology that downplays individuals' agency in ideological development. Relationally, online spaces are both culturally and authoritatively constructed. On one hand there is a concerted authoritative effort to influence the discourse online by a segment of the ownership class (Kotch 2018, Munger 2020, Roose 2019). Conservative think-tanks that fund online social media pundits, such as Ben Shapiro, and agencies, such as Breitbart News, are funded by media conglomerate owners such as Charles Koch and Robert Mercer, and as such they complicate the 'pure cultural interpretation' of social media as simply a mirror of what already exists in reality (Kotch 2018). On the other hand, online discourse is an extension of commercial social media as a result of how the internet is structured to prioritize 'ideological community building' – people are drawn to discourse that they already agree with (Bannerman 2020, Munger 2020, Siapera 2021, Whistleblower Aid 2021). Individuals may seek online communities as a result of alienation and only act in accordance with the community to become

accepted as a member, but they may also be seeking validation for views they developed outside of these spaces, or it could be a mix of both motivations (Reveley 2013, Primack et. al. 2017).

Whitney Phillips's (2015) case study about 4chan's forum-based /b/ community highlights the complex balance between authority and culture that shapes these spaces. She argues the main practice 4chan members use to form community and derive amusement is to upset another individual online through the act of 'trolling'. Phillips notes that a cultural romanticization of dominance and victory guided the perceived pleasure derived from trolling in /b/, wherein participating in trolling was also key to being considered part of the community – trolling quickly expanded beyond /b/ to become an activity open to all on the internet. Phillips (2015) and Debbie Ging (2019) in "Alphas, Betas, and Incels," note however, that most of the individuals who participate in these 'toxic spaces' are young men who present feelings of alienation and disempowerment; trolling became an outlet for these feelings (Munshi 1979). Notably, targets of these young males' trolling antics are almost always marginalized individuals. This targeting perhaps explains what Angela Nagle (2017) identifies in "Kill All Normies" as trolling communities' quick turn to a pro-Trump rhetoric during and after his presidential candidacy. Trolling culture, underpinned by misogynist dynamics, met bold white nationalist rhetoric with fervor.

As George Lipsitz (2018) highlights, Trump invoked a rhetoric of new patriotism in his candidacy, developed primarily as a rhetorical strategy in 1980 by Ronald Reagan. This rhetoric played on racist and misogynist perceptions to frame the material decline of American industry. Instead of focusing on corporate outsourcing to the Third World, new patriots framed the rise of

anti-oppressive movements such as ‘civil rights’, ‘feminism’, ‘the anti-war crowd’, ‘hippies’, as the cause of American decline. New patriotism also characterizes the rhetoric of a growing number of community spaces on the internet, generally identified as ‘**right wing extremism**’, or ‘**the far-right**’, in a variety of categories on a variety of online communities (Boehme et. al. 2020, Nagle 2017, Phillips 2015, Munger 2020, Zuckerberg 2018, Post 2015, Peucker & Fisher 2022). As Boehme and Scott (2020) argue, the far-right in our contemporary digital culture has adopted a “victim ideology” that insinuates that the disparaging of traditional gender roles and ‘whiteness’ has led to the decline of America, in both economic and cultural ways. However, escaping generalizability and diving into the specificity of how this rhetoric operates in digital ‘enclaves’, or communities, is necessary to developing strategies to combat it effectively.

Understanding how group norms form is an important aspect in unpacking the rise of these online communities. As recent research has suggested, a large majority of online community spaces form primarily through the sharing of memes, what some social theorists describe as a process of ‘mimetic modeling’ (Butler 1990, Girard 1961, Shifman 2014). Mimetic modeling describes the process through which we, the subjective ‘I’, emulate behavior from ‘others’, specifically because we perceive that those others are able to obtain something we desire through that behavior (Girard 1961). Kane Faucher’s *Social Capital* (2018) alternatively describes how individuals adhere to the discourse rules of the community in order to be accepted; as such, members tend to embody the ideal persona of the group in order to accumulate social capital within the community (Bourdieu 1992). These groups also form through the discursive representation of ‘out groups’, or ‘others’, which mirrors the foundational logic of new patriotism that idealizes the ‘in-group’, American neoliberalism, through a co-current

persecution of ‘out-groups’ (Jakubowicz 2017, Lipsitz 2018). The most prominent medium through which discourse setting, a process of defining what can or cannot be said in a community, happens is via memes, artifacts that are repeated in a variety of formats while encapsulating a foundational message (Shifman 2014, Adrienne 2017, Post 2015, Phillips 2015, Nagle 2017). As highlighted by Weng, Menczer, and Ahn (2014), memes are pervasive to internet use, and are crucial to framing and guiding the cultural discourse in a community. Memes can present as text-based jokes, pictures, GIFs, or videos – as highlighted by Ahmad Al-Rawi’s (2020) analysis of the ‘meme wars of 2016’, which saw political communities form on social media around insulting memes of Hillary Clinton. This process of community formation through meme discourse is exemplified on a variety of online communities such as Reddit, as highlighted by Adrienne Massanari (2017) in “#Gamergate and the Fapping”, and on Facebook and Twitter, similarly exemplified by Abdalla, Ally, and Jabri-Markwell (2021) in “Dehumanisation of ‘Outgroups’ on Facebook and Twitter.” The studies identify how memes can operate as a complex rhetorical medium that also contains ideological influences in line with right-wing extremism, such as in fig. 1. Here, comedy is used to insinuate the hypocrisy and ignorance of Muslim women, while indoctrinating a viewer of this meme into a framework of racism towards Muslims.



Fig. 1 Meme posted to Gab.

The act of memeing is not solely a bottom-up cultural formation, however. Communities can form around social media personalities, and the rules of the community can be manipulated, although not entirely controlled, by the personality in question (Munger 2020, Ribeiro et. al. 2020, Reyes 2020). Several studies highlight how a ‘right wing networked community’ formed on Youtube, across multiple channels, through suggestive algorithms (Ribeiro et. al. 2020, Munger et. al. 2020, Ledwich et. al. 2019). Notably, community spaces defined by parasocial relationships, wherein viewers perceive the presence of an intimate relationship where one may not exist, are reliant on the pundit being perceived as trustworthy by the user because of shared commonalities, suggesting some user agency in selecting which pundits to follow (Horton & Wohl 1956, Munger 2020, Burgess et. al. 2018).

Antonio Reyes (2020) argues that creating an online cult of personality, that spanned multiple social media platforms and their communities, is what Donald Trump was attempting to do on a large scale with investments in digital campaign-ing. For Reyes, the rise of these pundits, and their right-wing financial backers such as the Heritage Foundation or Turning Point USA, are indicative of a neo-fascist agenda on part of the capitalist class to combat solidarity building. By manufacturing discourse in line with new patriotism, the working class become advocates for maintenance of status quo relations, at their own expense. Without entirely discounting individual agency, Reyes (2020) demonstrates how the exponential rise of such rhetoric was an intentional effort on part of those in power. Pundits paid by think tanks mentioned above sow discord, with no clear indication of whether such discourse is made genuinely. As a result, the rhetorical framing inseminates itself within the community-audience. Drawing on the insights from these scholars, this paper explores how these rhetorical dynamics play out within the digital communities on Gab.

Research question and method

My research is designed around the following questions: What rhetorical patterns or devices are commonly featured in right-wing community discourse? How do far-right pundits, and their respective communities, rhetorically construct their political position in relation to discourses of marginalization? My research builds on the existing literature on right wing communities but explores these dynamics in a new platform: Gab. As mentioned earlier, Gab is a ‘right-wing dominated’ platform, because of its position as an ‘alt-tech’ space, wherein alt-tech refers to the attempts to create a ‘safe space’ from government oversight on the internet (Jasser et. al 2021). Gab is a platform modeled off of Twitter, and as Jasser (2021) points out in

“#WelcometoGabFam”, an analysis on the appeal of far-right culture on Gab, people flocked to it because it presented as a space free from persecution. The idea of persecution is tied heavily to right-wing contemporary discourses, and is foundational to the analysis in this paper. My work will seek to better understand how indoctrination into a right-wing extremist view occurs on Gab by applying a critical discourse analysis lens to a framework deconstruction of posts from various accounts on Gab; said posts all feature rhetoric that constructs ‘out groups’ as external issues that threaten the ideal of traditional American culture and its neoliberal policies (Van Dijk 1993).

Framing analysis

The framing analysis combines theories from David Tewksbury & Dietram Scheufele (2007) and William Gamson & Andre Modigliani (1989). Tewksbury and Scheufele highlight how discourses, or primary frameworks, may bring in pre-established societal understandings of events to ‘frame’ the narrative of a new event in society. Gamson & Modigliani use framing packages to unpack how primary frameworks are directly applied to new events, in order to shape how the narrative is ‘framed’. This kind of framing analysis can be applied to any discourse, to unpack the layers of context that may shape the perspective provided in a certain narrative. A framing analysis of this kind will allow me to look at the truth claims made by a specific post, and contextualize those claims within a historical framework (refer to fig. 1).

Unpacking the framing package of posts on Gab, from a critical rhetorical perspective, allows me to identify what frameworks the posts draw from (Lipsitz 2018, Gamson et. al. 1987, Tewksbury et. al. 2009). Framing as I interpret it here is drawn from the definition outlined by Robert Entman (1996) in *Framing*, where he understands the act of framing as “...to select some aspects

of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” Entman’s (1996) theory establishes that rhetorical framing is not endemic to traditional analysis of mass media, but can also be used to unpack isolated and private discourses. Entman’s (1996) main point at issue for this paper’s analytical strategy is that frames always contain a “problem” being presented in a certain way.

Understanding what the problem being presented in any framework may be is the key to deconstructing any rhetorical framing (Entman 1996). Entman’s understanding is especially helpful for interpreting frameworks that are externalizing problems, such as the rhetoric of persecution that is the subject of this paper. Entman further outlines a framing analysis method that is reflexive, following a similar discursive analytical method as that of Critical Discourse Analysis, as it is outlined by Van Dijk (1993). Asking how ‘problems of America’ are framed as caused by marginal groups instead of the systems of capitalism itself is essential to analyzing the rhetoric in the posts featured in this essay.

Unpacking the framing of posts, and identifying patterns, was the main function of this research. The research process was a mixture of critical discourse analysis, and attempting to deconstruct the frameworks of posts through a process of cultural contextualization, to understand the genealogy of the rhetoric itself (refer to fig. 2). The use of CDA, as drawn from Van Dijk (1993), was intended to help me consistently rethink my interpretations of certain texts as I progressed through the research, identifying different ways to sort the information with different definitions as I became more knowledgeable about the community on Gab, as well as always aiming to contextualize the details of the cultural norms of the digital community that

these posts exist within, during both analysis and writing. The intention of this paper was to highlight how such rhetoric is wielded and thus to think through how it might indoctrinate viewers into a worldview that blames the problems that U.S. neoliberalism creates on scapegoats rather than structural conditions.

As an example of the reflexive process, let's turn to Andrew Torba, the founder of Gab, describing his platform in the following post (See fig. 2). Torba utilizes the ambiguous, seemingly neutral frame of "American Freedom," to assert that Gab functions in line with that generalized value, while aligning it with white supremacist and patriarchal memes. The framework here is his pairing of the frame of 'idealized American freedom' with various events such as 'suppression of Wuhan Lab Origin Theory', and 'anti-white CRT'², to position Gab as able to address those concerns. His comment that people will have to stomach 'edgy and offensive' language refers to right-wing critique of multicultural and anti-oppressive language as soft, weak, or "snowflake" culture. It harkens to Whitney Phillips' (2015) link between 'trolling culture', a form of digital community participation based on amusement from offensive humor, and the 'alt-right', which managed to establish themselves in communities of trolling through 'edgy memes'. In turn, following along the lines of Lipsitz (2018), the discourse can be interpreted as new patriot rhetoric because of the implicit association between 'freedom of speech' and the American Constitution, a symbol of American cultural idealism, as well as its assessment of Critical Race Discourse (CRT), a moniker used to generalize critiques of American constructions of race and the oppression that those categories enable, as "hateful, and anti-

² CRT stands for Critical Race Theory. It has been a topic of controversy in conservative media circles, and some states are using this controversy as a way to justify a ban on critical race discourse in schools.

white”. This anti-white persecution is an important part of this study, which we will return to in a later section.

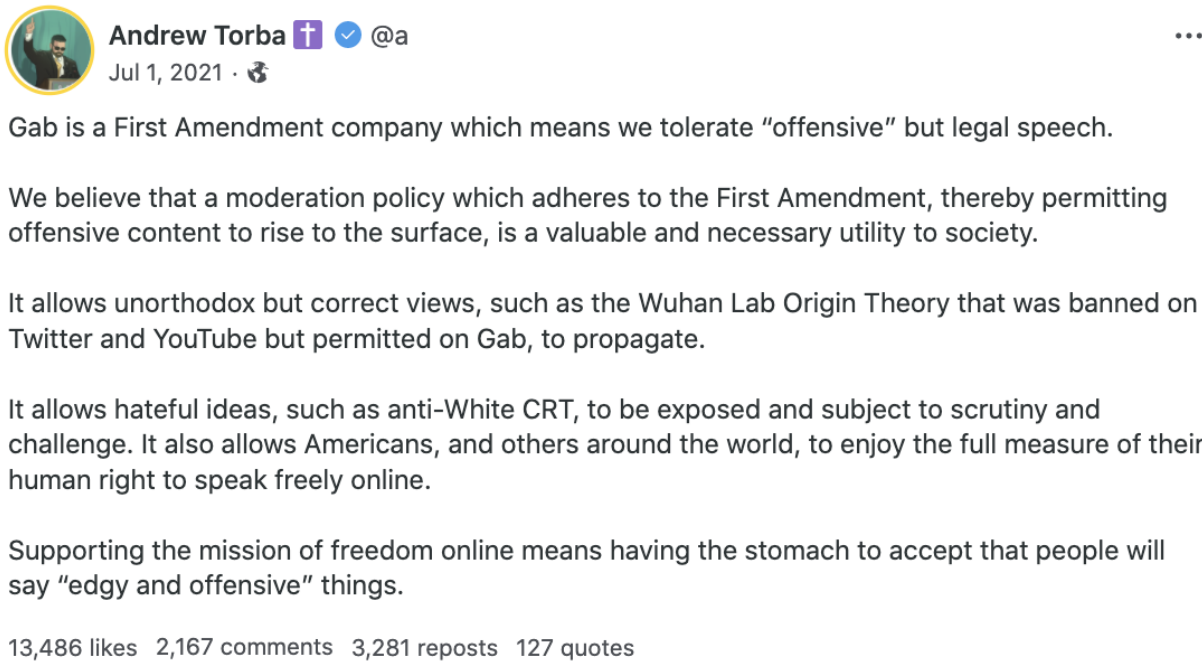


Fig. 2

Research collection

In terms of research collection, my process focused on 10 different ‘pundits’, which I defined as users who have a large following (3,000 minimum followers) on Gab. In terms of data collection I collected 136 posts from 14 different users meeting the 3,000 minimum on Gab. The posts were all collected over a three-month period to ensure the results were not defined by a certain political context or timeframe. To better understand the rhetoric of persecution, I asked the following questions of each post: What is this post angry about? Who is the anger directed toward? Who benefits from the anger? A key element that recurs throughout this sense of

persecution is anger toward Others for the perceived decline of American power. This paper identifies and argues that the persecution featured in this rhetoric on Gab is framed through two primary themes: a **diminishment of whiteness** and the **death of traditional gender**. These two themes of persecution ultimately serve to reinforce traditional notions of white supremacy and patriarchy as the U.S. sees a growing number of anti-oppressive movements against those ideologies of power.

A note about conspiracy theories and terminology

Most of the rhetoric featured in this paper has an overarching framework that asserts that the power structures in the U.S., both government and corporate, are becoming compromised by ‘the left’. Unpacking the larger conspiracy theories about how the left is taking over politics is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that this kind of conspiratorial thinking is endemic to all the rhetoric featured in this paper and serves as the background cause for this sense of persecution as highlighted in the following section.

I have chosen to characterize the discourse on Gab as “right wing extremist” rather than “far right,” in line with the distinctions set out by Puecker (2022). Puecker, drawing on Mudde (2005) argues that right wing extremism is characterized by nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and anti-democratic sentiments. The rhetoric exhibited in this paper falls in line with this definition, and thus right-wing extremist is used. Although, there could be an argument made that not all the rhetoric is “anti-democratic”, and thus more in line with Puecker’s (2022) definition of "far-right" as a mix of both supporters of democratic principles and those considerably “anti-democratic”. However the definition of “anti-democratic” is itself murky, so I take “anti-

democratic" to mean fascistic and oppressive, typifying the foundation of this persecuted white supremacist patriarchal rhetoric.

Understanding Persecution

Within Gab posts, I have identified what I refer to as a 'felt sense of persecution' which serves as the foundational rhetorical framing for the themes of **diminishing whiteness**, and **death of traditional gender**. The rhetorical theme of persecution operates on different levels, but ultimately the discourse featured in each of these posts serves the same function: An entry point into a perceived counter-cultural community, operating against an encroaching liberal left multicultural moral order. This counter-cultural community functionally presents evidence categorized by the two themes of **diminishing whiteness** and **the 'death' of traditional gender** as definitive of this anti-conservative moral order. Understanding how the white working class is framed as persecuted by the rhetoric on Gab, while simultaneously identifying their 'in-group' as 'right-wing' or 'conservative', is the primary goal of this section.

The following examples demonstrate how Gab rhetoric attempts to present itself as representative of a counter-cultural working class body, one that stands against power rather than in line with it. Consider the following few posts, the first from the owner of Gab, Andrew Torba (fig. 4).



Fig. 4

Here, Torba offers consolation to someone who identifies themselves as an ‘outcast’ because of “what they’ve learned on Gab,” which is positioned as Truth, with a capital T. The counter cultural identity is manufactured and imposed by Torba, who states “I’d rather be an outcast and know the Truth,” then “be accepted for believing[...a lie.” The implication, or imposition rather, is that Gab provides the “truth”, and if you are an outcast because of your reception of this “truth”, then that is simply part of being in the know. Torba also states “You aren’t an outcast here!”, which pairs the provision of community and the provision of truth into a singular reductive assertion about Gab being the giver of both. Consequently, the Gab community is being positioned by Torba as it is outlined by Jasser (2021), a space where individuals may escape the limiting features of mainstream tech, and exercise freedom of speech. Torba’s framing here positions these spaces, specifically Gab, as a place free from internet censorship, placating the idealized dreams of the alt-tech idealists as a space in line with ‘freedom of speech’, and by extension, “the truth”. ‘Freedom of speech’ is a key concept that aggrandizes American idealism, a tenet of what Jan-Werner Müller (2006) identifies as “constitutional patriotism”: The patriotic

nationalist upholding of an ‘idealized constitutional document’ despite the lack of such ideals being realized in practice. Torba digs into this ideal, identifies that the ideal hasn’t been realized, and frames Gab as a digital space that can and will uphold said ideal, as a place of counter-cultural resistance. This sense of operating outside of the ‘mainstream’ is the basic foundation for the rhetoric on Gab, and summative of the appeal it presents as an alt-tech space.

Another example of how the ‘counter cultural position’ is created is evident in a post by Ashley Rae, user ‘Communism_Kills’ (fig. 5).

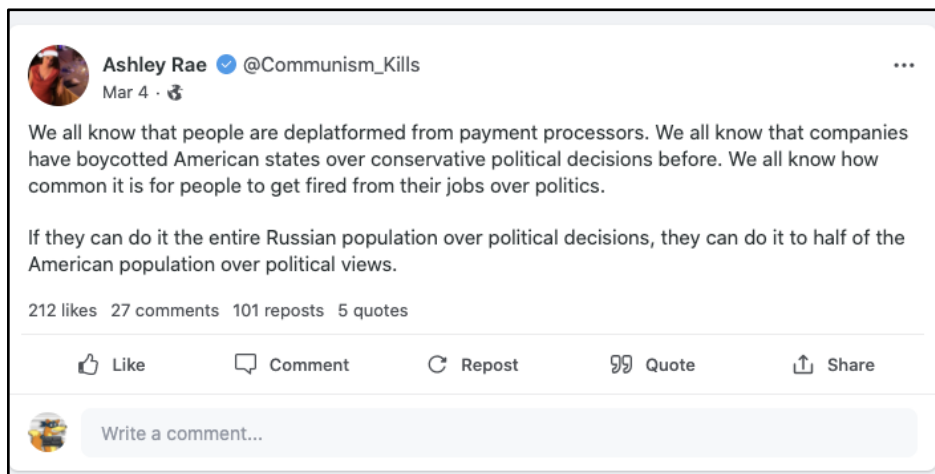


Fig. 5

Communism_Kills is adopting a similar framing as Torba, implying that there is a “they” who can do “censorship” to “half of the American population”. This idea of a “they” feeds into a key rhetorical dynamic at play in this framework of persecution: conservative politics is ‘outside’ the interests of those in power, in fact antagonistic to them. Key are her examples of “deplatformed from payment processors.. companies boycotting states...how common it is for people to get fired from their jobs over [conservative] politics”, paired with the affirmative “we all know” at

the beginning of each sentence to affirm the in-group association with conservative values. The rhetoric works to inculcate an ideological worldview in a viewer that absolves the U.S. system of power of its economic and cultural issues by creating a sense of persecution by a political mainstream against individualist, patriarchal, and white dominant values. Noticeably, Ashley and Torba both construct a figure of cultural decline, and that those who try to resist the decline face persecution. This positionality of persecution is a developed rhetoric, one exercised by American politicians quite effectively. With that in mind, I turn to a post by Republican Congressman Paul Gosar (fig. 6).



Fig. 6

Gosar, who is a public political associate and supporter of Donald Trump, asserts firstly that there is a “far left tyrannical regime in power” that is “trying to impose Orwellian regulations”. Although Torba (fig. 4) and Ashley (fig. 5) did not explicitly state “the left” in the posts highlighted above, they operate within the same framework as Gosar in terms of positioning conservatism as under attack by an antagonistic culture. However, Gosar makes it clear who the out-group is by reductively grouping “Biden”, “Ministry of Truth”³ and “far-left regime” into one imposing force. Consequently, Gosar also manages to assert the need for Gab

³ Ministry of Truth is a conservative online term to refer to Biden’s Disinformation Board, assigned to counter the spread of ‘misinformation’ online

and the space for “freedom of speech” it provides, in the context of “Orwellian regulations” by “the far-left”. Indeed, conservatism, and its constituents, are also reductively highlighted as a persecuted group. In the political landscape of the United States this rhetoric on part of Gosar is what Lipsitz (2018) identified in the new patriot discourse of neoliberal conservative Presidents such as Trump and Reagan. Reagan’s attacks on the supposed ‘political left’, ‘corrupt unions’, ‘illegal aliens’, and ‘criminals’, in the 1980s served to guarantee him a two-term service in the White House, all the while enabling the largest upwards transfer of wealth from the working class to wealthy capitalists in modern history; similarly Trump demonized the ‘far left’, ‘illegal aliens’, made claims of ‘making America great again’ in similar ways to Reagan, and won the White House through a rigorous campaign that framed him as a counter-cultural candidate. Gosar (fig. 6) extends his rhetoric from a framework of ‘counter cultural persecuted conservative’ — the ‘far left’ is constructed as in power and in turn positioned as being able to censor views through the implementation of the “Orwellian regulations” via the “Ministry of Truth.” Ultimately, Gosar asserts himself as an outsider to power while maintaining a position within the political establishment, seemingly indicative of the paradoxical nature of the rhetoric featured in this paper.

In the next example, I wanted to turn towards images, specifically memes, and how text is formatted on memes to spread a certain message. Memes are important digital artifacts to their communities, and use of them can convey ‘in-group status’ (Phillips 2015). Tracing memes in various contexts helps understand their meaning (Weng et. al. 2014, Al-Rawi 2020, Phillips 2015, Nagle 2017). Consider the post by user CriticalMemeTheory (fig. 7), which perhaps

contains a slightly different interpretation of the idea of persecution than what has been presented thus far.



Fig. 7

This image contains two fundamental subcultural characters. On the left is Wojak, a crying stick figure face, commonly used to express negative emotions, such as anger, sadness, despair, loneliness, and jealousy (Karel Němeček 2020). Karel Němeček (2020) highlights how the Wojak caricature appeals to persecuted, alienated subjectivity active on Gab, both because of his ‘generalized look’ and frustrated expressions. In the common meme format, Wojak’s anger is caused by their own helplessness and inferiority, which is relatable to many who exist in an alienating capitalist society (fig. 8) (PJ Rey 2012). Wojak is also used in a derogatory sense, to make fun of an idea or type of person as inferior, usually from a masculine perspective although

not exclusively (fig. 9) (Phillips 2015). Fig. 9 also features an offshoot of the second caricature featured in the meme above: Chad.

Chad is a representation of a cultural obsession in the West with superiority, stoicism, masculinity, and white supremacy. As Whitney Phillips (2015) noted about the /b/ community on 4chan, there was a strong rhetoric of victimization and emasculation amongst that community that made it susceptible to bigoted ideologies. Over time, the /b/ forum turned into a breeding ground for bad faith actors looking to spread discourse that benefitted them, especially misogynist and white supremacist rhetoricians (Phillips 2015, Nagle 2017). The basic conception behind the belief system of Chad, and the community described by Phillips (2015) and Nagle (2017), is that there are winners, and there are losers, and you can only be one or the other. Chad is the ideal type of person, he is always right, and his position is affirmed because of the inferiority of his counterpart(s) in the memes in question. For those who believe ‘winning’ and ‘losing’ is a fundamental aspect of life, Chad as a meme is relatable. For those who are tired of the emotions expressed by Wojak, those of ‘inferiority’, Chad can present as a ‘model’ to guide them to escape said inferiority (Butler 1990, Girard 1996). In the case of user CriticalMemeTheory in fig. 7, Chad is used in a way to imply superiority to the sources on the right, namely Gab, InfoWars, Daily Veracity, Valiant News, and one more unidentifiable source. Wojak is used in fig. 7 to insinuate inferiority to those who get their news from the sources on the left, namely Twitter, Facebook, CNN, TheWashingtonPost, and the New York Times.

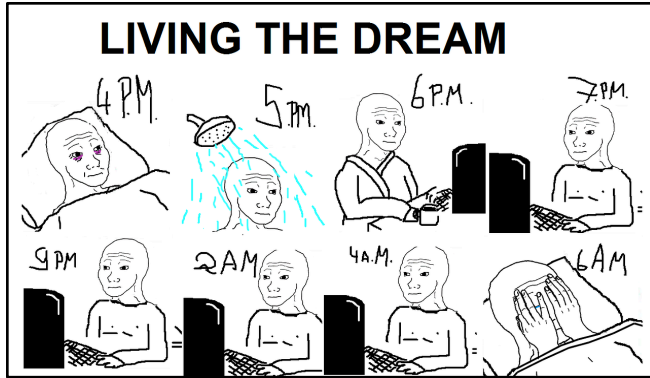


Fig. 8 A wojak meme about the feeling of despair in facing monotony in society. <https://www.nssmag.com/en/fashion/21372/how-wojak-became-the-meme-of-the-moment/image:237852>

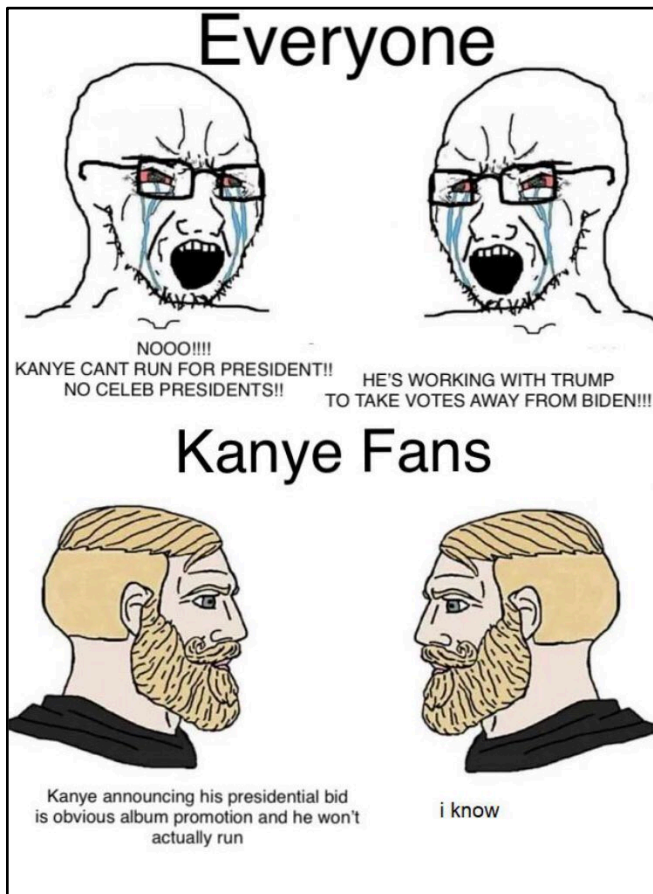


Fig. 9 Meme that is insinuating those that believe Kanye is actually running for president aren't Kanye fans, and thus don't understand that Kanye is doing it for promotion. The two characters featured below are both 'Chads', or superior people, because they know and because they are Kanye fans. The Wojak caricatures are emotional because they don't know, and are thus inferior because of it.

The question posed at the top of the image posted by CMT is "Where do you get your news from?", pushing the audience to ask themselves that question to engage with the meme (Fig. 7). However, what makes this post somewhat different from the ones discussed earlier is that the persecution in this case is not being done to those who relate to Chad, but rather to those who relate to Wojak. Those who relate to Chad are superior and thus free from emotions of negativity associated with relating to Wojak, namely being a user of any of those sources mentioned in line with Wojak. Indeed, Chad in fig. 7 operates as an affirmative statement to those on Gab that they are superior, while also operating as an invitation to those who want to escape association with Wojak that they can, by getting news from Chad's sources instead of Wojak's. The 'in-group' is superior, and listens to InfoWars, while the 'out-group' is inferior, and watches CNN. The implication in this meme is that people are victimized by Wojak's sources, but they can choose to escape that victimization by getting 'news' from the same places that the seemingly empowered Chad does; Gab and these sources are by extension positioned as empowering and superior. It should be noted that InfoWars and Daily Veracity feature a diatribe of right-wing reactionary content, where InfoWars is run by Alex Jones, a conservative commentator well known for his 'the Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax' story, and political

advocacy for Donald Trump (Van De Bulck 2020). Valiant News was inaccessible at the time of this writing.

In the next few sections, I will discuss some common themes, or patterns of framework, that I have found in this rhetoric of persecution, frameworks that externalize the problems created by U.S. neoliberal policy onto Others while simultaneously idealizing a white supremacist patriarchal culture: **Diminishing Whiteness** and **The ‘Death’ of Traditional Gender**. It should be noted that both of these exist on top of the rhetoric of persecution that I have identified in this section in some capacity, and I will demonstrate that in my analysis. I also aim to highlight that these themes reinforce traditional white supremacist patriarchal values in the creation of this sense of persecution.

Diminishing Whiteness

In this first thematic section, I will focus on the ways in which racial rhetoric is intermixed with the sense of conservative persecution that is prevalent on Gab, as identified in the previous section. I aim to show that a ‘**diminishment of whiteness**’, the belief that ‘white people’ are being persecuted in favor of other ‘races’, is fundamental to the discourse of the users discussed below, and that it also reinforces the creation of a persecuted in-group on Gab, and the association of that persecution with whiteness. A post by Andrew Torba, the owner of Gab, exemplifies this trope (fig. 10).

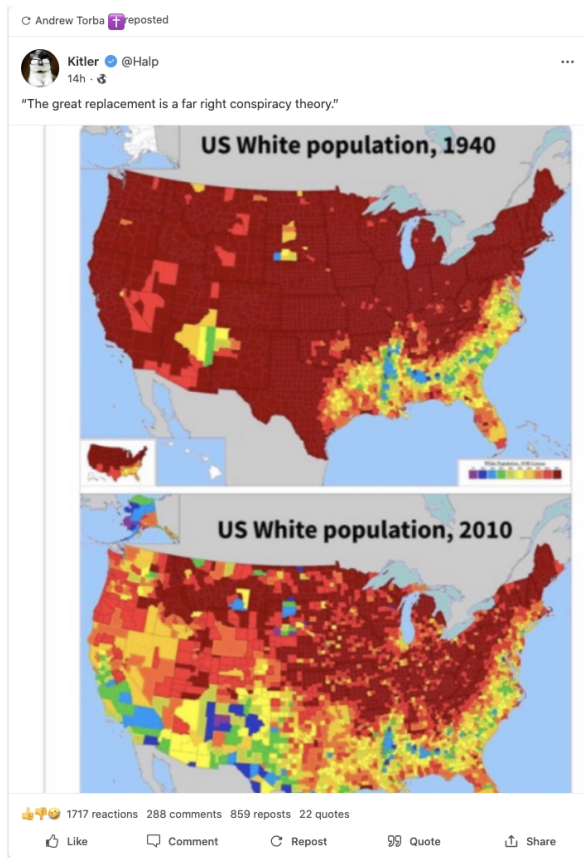


Fig. 10

In this post, Torba reposts an image from Kitler, which shows imagery of a demographic change in the “white population” from 1940 to 2010. Kitler quotes the graphic with, ““The great replacement is a far right conspiracy theory.””; Kitler uses the quotation here in a mocking sense, to insinuate that charges of “The Great Replacement” as a “conspiracy theory” are false, and that indeed, “The Great Replacement” is happening, wherein Kitler’s claim is supported by the changing evidence of the demographics on the map. The Great Replacement is a theory that has been circulating in white nationalist circles in the United States since the early 20th century, with films such as *Birth of A Nation*, insinuating that the white population is at risk because of the growth of the non-white population (Cosentino 2020; DW Griffith 1994).

For the rhetorical framework presented here, The Great Replacement ultimately serves as evidence of persecution against whiteness, and the data sheet shared by Kitler serves as evidence of the Great Replacement. The main implication of the Great Replacement is that there is an active effort by an unnamed group to supplant white people and their culture, but contends that marginalized racial groups may not necessarily be directly responsible for it (Cosentino 2020). This caveat, that minorities are not the perpetrators of the Great Replacement, operates as an absolution of racism latent in the rhetoric that leaves open the possibility of attracting those individuals who are not already racist towards minorities. Ultimately, Kitler’s rhetoric reinforces a few things: (1) White people are being attacked (2) This attack on whiteness is being done to **diminish whiteness** (3) **Diminishing whiteness** is ‘orchestrated’ and not just necessitated by globalization, implied in his invocation of the Great Replacement. Kitler paints an image that places ‘white interests’ as outside the interests of power, framing whiteness as ‘persecuted’.

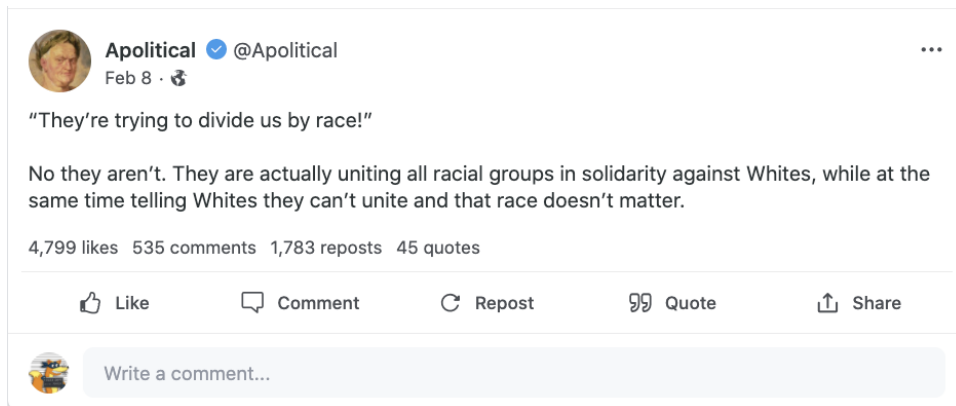


Fig. 11

In the next example, user Apolitical starts his post (fig. 11) by saying, “They’re trying to divide us by race!”, seemingly quoting another discourse that attempts to insinuate people ‘in general’ are being divided by race by a “they”. The “they” is important because again, similar to

the rhetoric outlined previously, it insinuates that there is a “they”, in terms of an external influencing body of power, whether it be the government or an external corrupting body, that has the ability to manipulate political divisions, and it simultaneously places user Apolitical outside of that “they”. Apolitical goes on to state that that “they” are not “dividing us by race”, but instead “they” are “uniting all racial groups in solidarity against Whites”. The implication here, similar to that featured in the Great Replacement conspiracy, is that Whites are the persecuted group, while the minorities are directed, surreptitiously, by the “they” to unite against whites. Apolitical’s rhetorical framing here also acts as an absolution of racism as it did in Kitler’s, because of how it places the blame on the “they” instead of directly on “minorities”. Whites are persecuted, and thus it becomes justified to fearmonger about a ‘united minority group’ because said fearmongering operates as a form of self-defense. The image painted by Apolitical is akin to the one painted by Kitler: that there is a fundamental persecution of Whites being undertaken, and minorities are part of this persecution, if not directly responsible for it. There are more complex and subversive rhetorical frameworks than this, however, that attempt to insinuate the same thing as these two posts did, in terms of a diminishment of whiteness.



Fig. 12

In this example, user Ashley Rae attempts to criticize an advertisement for its representational choices, and uses it as an example of a ‘diminishment of whiteness’. This (fig. 12) is a repost of her own post from earlier that day, with the original headline being ‘Every single clothing ad I see now makes me feel like I’m the one who doesn’t belong in America’, which she reposts it with the tagline stating, “...the one possibly white woman pushed in the back behind everyone else.” Ashley, indirectly implying that she identifies with the “white woman”, insinuates that the advertisement creates the sense that whiteness is “pushed in the back”, simply by virtue of being white. Ashley claims that “every single clothing ad” Ashley “sees” invokes the same feelings as she gets from this one, and thus “every single clothing ad” features a similar framework of diminishment of whiteness. The rhetoric from Ashley here operates to frame a societal pattern of delineated Whiteness, wherein the backgrounding cultural order, or hegemony,

that these advertisements emerge from has a 'prejudice' against Whiteness. This theme of diminishing Whiteness is prevalent in all of the posts featured in this study, and is heavily laden with a sense of persecution, but Ashley's rhetoric here is specifically focused on identifying representational evidence to justify her sense of persecution.

The belief of persecution paired with the diminishment of whiteness above are functionally where Lipsitz' (2018) genealogy of new patriotism begins to avail itself most clearly: A perceived problem, in this case the diminishment of whiteness, is identified, but the issues are not with the American system of meritocratic capitalism, but rather they are a result of external forces attempting to 'corrupt' said system. New patriotism functions as a rhetorical strategy from which one can maintain an idealized image of American nationalism, neoliberalism, and capitalism, in the face of the growing crises that it enables. Consider the discourse that scapegoats immigrants for the issues necessitated by capitalist forces, as written by William Robinson and Xuan Santos (2014) in *Global Capitalism, Immigrant Labor, and the Struggle for Justice*:

Around the world borders are militarized, states are stepping up repressive anti-immigrant controls, and native publics are turning immigrants into scapegoats for the spiraling crisis of global capitalism. The massive displacement and primitive accumulation unleashed by free trade agreements and neo-liberal policies, as well as state and "private" violence has resulted in a virtually inexhaustible immigrant labor reserve for the global economy.

Robinson and Santos (2014) sum up quite well how 'unauthorized laborers' are a huge benefit to the productive capabilities of capitalism, because of their inherently exploitable position in

operating outside of the confines of the law. However, the posts above do not recognize this problem, and instead present ‘non-whites’ as in a position of privilege.

In the end, the ideal of neoliberal capitalist America is preserved in a framework of diminishing whiteness, as material decline is not caused by America itself, but because of an erosion of it due to externalities that are evidenced by the persecution of whiteness itself. In this framework, as much as there is an association of a decline between diminished Whiteness and immigration, there is a reverse implied association made between Whiteness and the ‘integrity of America’, as if the two things are inherently co-reliant. Consider the next post by user CriticalMemeTheory as both a more subtle, but similarly racially persecuting, rhetorical example of this association (fig. 13).

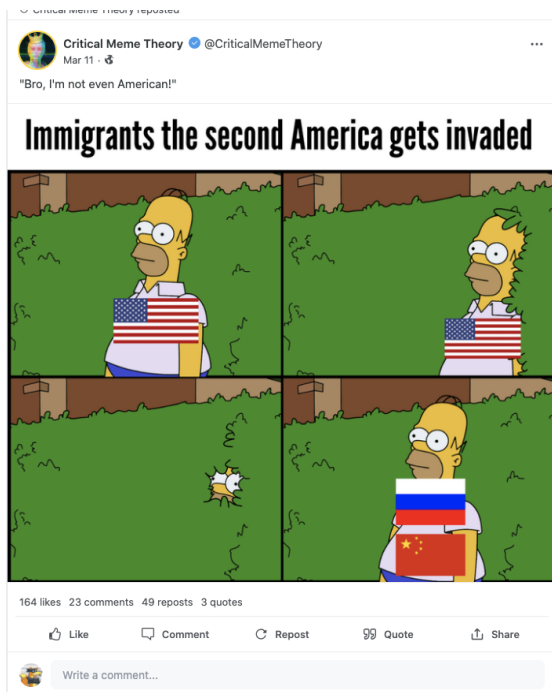


Fig. 13

CriticalMemeTheory is using a meme titled on *KnowYourMeme* as “Homer Simpson Backs Into Bushes,” (HSBB) which is used in this context to insinuate that someone, or

something, is disloyal to their host nation, so to speak, and is quick to ‘switch sides’, or reveal their true interests, if they perceive it is in personal their benefit to do so (fig. 14). CMT’s HSBB meme positions America as vulnerable to potentially ‘disloyal immigrants’, reinforces an idealized version of American nationality, and frames America as a potential target for persecution from externalities such as China or Russia.



Fig. 14 The meme here is being used to insinuate that those who support Bernie Sanders are also members of the group ‘Antifa’, which is short for “anti-fascists” and became a site of right-wing media sensationalism and obsession. It can be read as insinuating that BS supporters always were ‘secretly’ ANTIFA.

The insinuation made above by CriticalMemeTheory (CMT) (fig. 13), in the context of the HSBB meme, is that immigrants, specifically immigrants from China and Russia, will ‘switch sides’ if America is invaded by the country which they are from. The use of HSBB in this

case is applying a negative connotation to immigrants, in that they are disloyal to the U.S., as Homer is in the meme (fig. 13). Disloyalty to America is marked as a negative, and it is implied by CriticalMemeTheory that all immigrants would perform this way if invaded by their ‘home nation’; one can consider the prevalence of Japanese internment camps during WWII, or the anti-soviet propaganda of McCarthyism as examples of fundamental events that shape this rhetoric of nationalist treason. The specific use of Chinese and Russian flags plays on fears about the decline of the American economy in the face of rising powers, and ties into the idea of America as persecuted (Svetličič 2020). However, the rhetorical logic featured in CMT’s post (fig. 13) problematically upholds that there is a non-immigrant that can identify as American, an ‘original American’, when America as a nation is a colonial settlement upon which people had to immigrate into. The rhetoric insinuates that an ‘original American’ exists, but it is impossible to conclude what CMT’s rhetorical framework considers that to be, beyond it not being person(s) from Russia or China. It is possible to conclude, however, that this idea of pure national loyalty assumed to be existent by CriticalMemeTheory, operates as a rhetorical framework that allows one to identify as an ‘original American’ by maintaining loyalty to the state, in case of an invasion.

The implied negativity behind the HSBB meme contains subtext that does a few things: (1) Frames ‘immigrant status’ as a negative (2) Falsely insinuates you can be a ‘non-immigrant’ in America (3) Implies ‘non-immigrant’ and ‘loyalty to america’ are co-reliant. For CMT in their use of this meme (fig. 13) American nationalism, and loyalty to America, is upheld as being ‘the right thing to do’ simply by the fact of one being in America; those who don’t exemplify this idealized nationalistic loyalty are thus not American. CMT’s rhetoric falls in line with the

framework of persecution in terms of how it diverts the cause of concern for invasion away from what Perry Anderson (2013) in *Imperium* refers to as an ‘imperialist’ U.S. foreign policy that necessitates a hostile response from other nations, and onto those that are the victims of American imperialism: immigrants, or non-American subjects. CMT’s rhetoric ignores the problems that American imperialism may bring upon itself, and instead presents America, and non-immigrant Americans by extension, as at risk of persecution by disloyal immigrants.

In the next example for this section, I want to focus on the way persecution is perceived within racial contexts, and how it reinforces a belief of an encroaching ‘liberal moral order’ as evidence of the **diminishment of whiteness** (fig. 15).

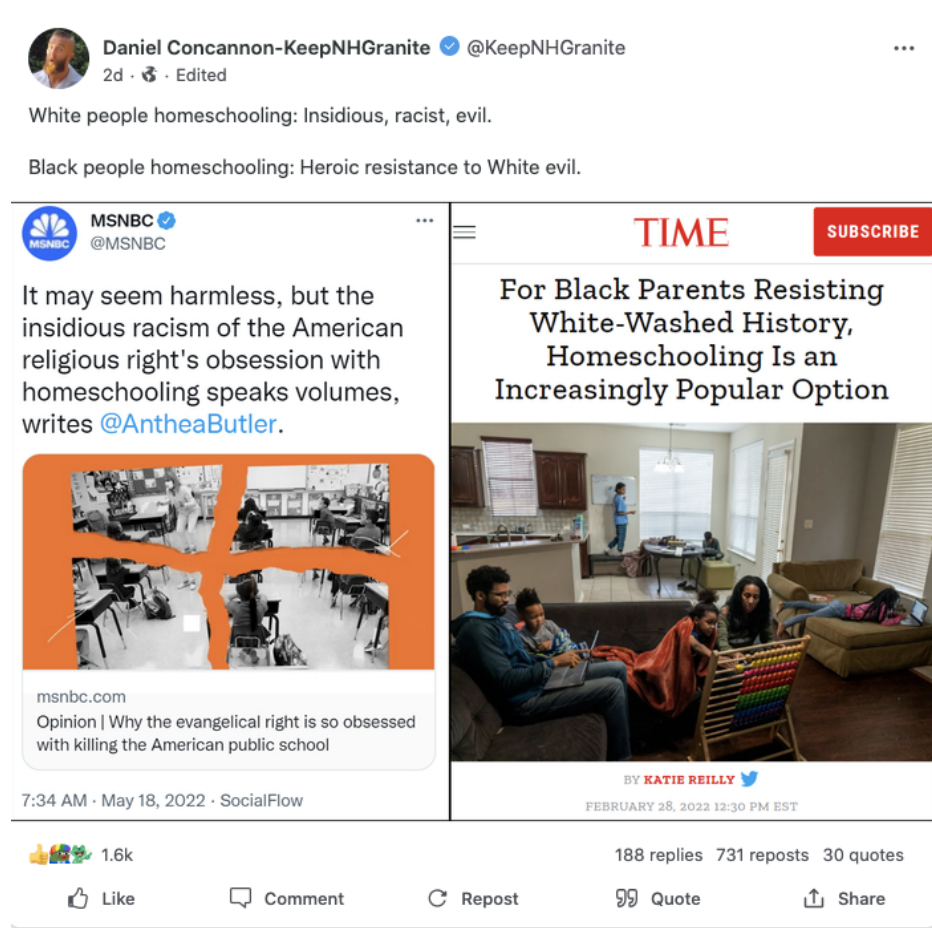


Fig. 15

In this example, user ‘KeepNHGranite’, or Daniel, remarks on the difference between two headlines of articles discussing homeschooling in racial contexts. Daniel posts two headlines from two different legacy media outlets discussing racialized homeschooling, namely TIME and MSNBC, and positions the headlines in opposition to each other; He states, as if summarizing the message latent in these headlines, that “White people homeschooling: insidious, racist, evil” and “Black people homeschooling: Heroic resistance to White evil”. However, in placing these articles in opposition, Daniel insinuates that the articles from different legacy media outlets are informed by the same perspective, without substantiating it, and that these outlets hold prejudice against “white homeschooling”.

The framework developed by Daniel in this post is developed in line with a rhetoric of persecution, one that perceives a persecution being undertaken against those who are ‘White’, and in this framing, the charge of racism against ‘Whites’ is the persecution; the “religious right’s homeschooling” becomes not racist, and instead a persecuted practice. The ‘Religious Right White American’ is reinforced as a category through the association between the two articles, and framed as under attack by comparing the two articles from two different outlets as if they were from the same source. This rhetorical framing creates the impression that two separately owned legacy media TIME and MSNBC, which occupy somewhat different places on the political spectrum of center-left, have a prejudice against White people, and thus there is a trend in society that seeks to persecute whiteness in favor of, in this case, ‘Blackness’.

As established earlier, Gab was created to serve as an ‘alt-tech’ platform, and thus it inherently attracts those who believe there is currently mass censorship being undertaken by ‘the mainstream’; this framework positions Gab users inherently again as counter-cultural, or

‘persecuted’, and thus victims (Jasser et. al. 2020). Daniel seems to be operating with this understanding of Gab as a counter-cultural space in mind, since there is already an assumed link between TIME and MSNBC, typifying ‘the mainstream’, that needs to be acknowledged and accepted by the viewer before one can fully engage with his point. Daniel’s rhetoric is a continuation of the rhetoric highlighted in this section of a ‘persecution of whiteness’, and one that is mimicked by all the users discussed here. Ultimately, one of the main thematic frameworks that comes through from this rhetoric of white persecution is that said white persecution is something ‘external’ to American neoliberal capitalism. This rhetoric may serve to exclude those it may be identifying as non-white in its invocation of this framework, since the evidence for diminishment of whiteness is infact based on the apparently increasing prevalence of ‘non-whites’. It begs the question as to if someone who is identified as ‘non-white’ would be able to accept, or be susceptible to, such rhetoric.

It should be noted that not all the users featured in this paper discussed race, and notably, out of the two accounts for politicians on Gab that I was following, only Paul Gosar mentioned race, or even the word white, in any capacity a single time since the research period began in March 2021 (fig. 16).



Fig. 16

The rhetoric in the post is comparing the “persecution” of the “race rioting” of Black Lives Matter (BLM) to the persecution of individuals involved in the January 6th incident in Capitol Hill, Washington. The race invocation by Gosar here does not directly reference a ‘diminishment to whiteness’, but it does constitute the construction of a persecution being done to “grandmas in MAGA hats”⁴ by claiming that there was a lack of such persecution on those who were involved in the “BLM race riots”. Gosar specifically blames the Department of Justice (DOJ) for the persecution, referring to their decision to hire “131 attorneys for prosecutions relating to January 6th”; the implication from this rhetorical framing is that the Department of Justice, a government institution, is showing preference to those who participated in BLM, and is going after those who participated in January 6th, with prejudice. Gosar’s rhetorical framework inherently positions the overarching power structure that enables the DOJ as preferential to the “BLM race riots” that “burned down nearly every city”, and with prejudice towards those who were involved in or supported the January 6th incident in Capitol Hill. All at once, Gosar constructs a systemic preference for Other, racialized supporters of BLM, and a prejudice against Trump supporters who support or participated in the January 6th riot, despite the fact that thousands of ‘rioters’ from the summer of 2020 were prosecuted (Pavilonis 2022).

In a ‘diminishing whiteness’ framework of persecution, Lipsitz’ (2018) new patriotism avails itself in a rhetorical misdirection from American fascism; economic issues that arise as a result of white supremacist capitalism become ‘externalized’ to anti-oppressive movements, and ultimately the problem with society for this rhetoric becomes a persecution against whiteness.

⁴ MAGA is a reference to Make America Great Again, the slogan of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign.

The ‘Death’ of Traditional Gender

‘Diminishing whiteness’ is one of several modes of articulating persecution on Gab. The other significant rhetorical theme that constructs persecution is a framework of eroding ‘traditional gender roles’, where ‘traditional’ refers to naturalized associations between masculinity-maleness and femininity-femaleness. By associating an erosion of traditional gender roles with a chaos that comes with the instability of non-conformity to said traditional gender roles, persecution is framed as a turn towards gender fluidity. The chaos associated with the instability of gender is framed as a corruption of idyllic America, and ultimately this discourse both at once disparages contemporary society and upholds an idealized chauvinist framework of patriarchy. Problems of identity in America are framed as caused by the turn away from the structures of gender, deflecting from the notion that those traditional genders are themselves socially constructed and oppressive (Butler 1990, Reeser 2011). Let’s get into the first example, a repost by Andrew Torba (fig. 17).



Fig. 17

This post requires us to return to the explanation I had made earlier about the positional relation between two meme caricatures: ‘Wojak’ and ‘Chad’ (fig. 7, 8, 9). Wojak is positionally an ‘inferior’, or subject to some form of suffering, in meme formats that utilize said caricatures — although there are discrepancies that are usually ‘parodies’ of Wojak attempting to assert positivity (Fig. 18). Chad, on the other hand, is associated with superiority (fig. 7, 9). The caricature is usually coded ‘white’, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and featuring an undercut hairstyle⁵. Chad has become a common caricature on the internet, but essentially the key to understanding the memes the character is featured in is knowing that it implies superiority over something, meaning there is always another subject for Chad to be superior to; the meme is oppositional by nature.



⁵ An “Undercut” was originally a military hairstyle

Fig. 18 Sunset Wojak is an interpretation of Wojak, one that is 'letting go' of those ills that trouble him, instead of letting them define him. A more positive interpretation of the caricature.

In the case of figure 17, there is quite a bit to unpack in terms of how these characters are used to contextualize and frame a rhetoric of persecution. The meme, overall, is comparing "teachers in the 80s" to "teachers now", but is positioning the group in the 80s as superior. It does this by first captioning the image with, "Something went horribly wrong," to set up the frame of the post's interpretation as an assertion of the featured meme. The "something going wrong" is the perception of the introduction of liberal and gender liberationist ideas into classrooms.

The right side of the meme features a characterization of teachers today as gender fluid, and negative simply by way of being gender fluid. This 'wrongness of gender fluidity' is achieved by the opposition made by framing "teachers of the 80s" as superior to "teachers now". They code this superiority through a lens of adherence to patriarchal gender roles, namely in the performance of men as patriarchal and misogynist, and in the performance of women as subservient and maternal. As Todd Reeser (2011) and Judith Butler (1990) have highlighted, gender roles are constructed by our 'performance' to them. The naturalization of the association between traditional gender and sex (i.e. male = masculine, female = feminine) is a structural/systemic feature that can be influenced for an individual depending on the images and representations that are available for them to identify with (Reeser 2011, Butler 1990, Derrida 1976). Patriarchy is dependent on keeping 'maleness' in a superior position to 'femaleness', and the naturalization between maleness and authority is a fundamental aspect of maintaining the

patriarchy. Patriarchy is defended here as not just natural, but the superior way of organizing society. The ‘Chads’ in the meme are presented as authoritative, both making disciplinary statements: “I don’t care if it’s snowing, we’re going for a five mile run!”, and “Any funny business with me will be met with a slap and detention.” The use of the Chad caricature is meant to imply superiority to these concepts of teaching and maleness, namely it attempts to convey that authoritative men are ‘good teachers’, and “something going wrong” is the loss of this authoritative male as a teacher.

There is also a third caricature featured here, two blonde-haired caricatures wearing dresses, simply known as ‘TradGirl’ on *KnowYourMeme*. TradGirl is short-hand for ‘traditional girl’, and was originally circulated on forum-based site 4chan, paired with arguments for ‘traditional and conservative values’ (fig. 19). The TradWife, or TradGirl, is meant to imply that women can be happy in their traditional and subservient roles. The TradGirl in this context uses lines that feature their maternal instinct such as, “You poor thing, show me that knee.” The implication of the post is that ‘teachers now’ don’t possess these ‘maternal instincts’, and thus there is ‘something going wrong’.

The difference in visual presentation is also important, in terms of the clothing that each wears, and the visibly identifiable genders that they may associate with. The four teachers of the 80s are coded male, and female, because of the use of caricature and the choice of outfit - those things are simultaneously reinforced as being ‘natural’ to male and females. On the right hand side, the versatility of the color of hair and ‘difference’ between the caricatures is meant to frame non-conformity, or difference, in a negative light. The post functionally insinuates that there has been a ‘decline’ in the teachers from the 80s to now, and that the decline of said teachers is

associated with a turn away from traditional gender roles and towards gender fluidity, as well as stereotypes against feminists and queers, such as being unattractive, unpleasant, and grumpy. It rhetorically creates a 'problem', gender fluidity and feminism more generally, and proposes a solution, a return to patriarchal traditional values. The 'problem' with gender fluidity is not entirely specified, but because of a lack of such specificity, the problem in this rhetorical frame IS gender fluidity. Gender roles are naturalized in this 'problematization' of gender fluidity, since fluidity is connoted as a negative. It is important to note that the characters figured as the good 80s teachers are coded as white, and the bad teachers as racially ambiguous, where feminist and anti-racist politics brushes all teachers as morally and racially impure.



Fig. 19, the Tradwife in comparison to the Liberated Feminist, imposing that 'liberated feminist' is actually unhappy, while 'traditional wife' is much happier because of her adherence to traditional values.



Fig. 20

In this example reposted by CriticalMemeTheory (CMT) (fig. 20), the framework focuses on a “modern woman moment”. The ‘modern woman’ is implied to be naive and ignorant about “empowerment”; the rhetoric suggests that it is better to “remain dependent on your husband who loves you” than it is to focus on “being dependent on your employer who hates you”, because the husband operates out of “love”, whereas the employer operates out of “hate”. The “modern woman” is framed as naive because of her response to each of these things, wherein she refers to “being dependent on a husband” as “patriarchy and misogyny”, while referring to “being dependent on your employer” as “empowerment”. The post functions to reductively frame a “modern woman”, characterizing said woman as ‘mis-recognizing’ patriarchy in dependency on marriage. This post operates to criticize the perceived empowerment in seeking to work, which holds some merit as a criticism of neoliberal ‘workplace’ feminism, but suggests that the better alternative for women would be to remain dependent on their husband, so it

reinforces traditional notions of patriarchy and gender roles. It also criticizes the “modern” aspect of the woman, inferring that there is a problem with something “modern” that is leading women to such naivety, in this case, seeking “empowerment”.

This post rhetorically frames the modern woman who wants to empower themselves as conducting an act of self-persecution. A problem is created, the “modern woman” is conducting self-persecution by seeking empowerment in employment, and a solution is proposed, a return to dependency on one’s husband. One thing that is necessary to interpret this post through a frame of persecution is an understanding that this rhetoric of naivety frames women as ‘natural’ victims, inherently naive. In this framework, traditional values of patriarchy and misogyny are idealized, where women are presumed to be inherently better off in their dependency on men, while modern values of “empowerment” are demonized as problematic and persecutory towards women. This persecuted woman framework also reinforces the naturalization of women as inherently submissive, subservient, and in need of protection from a rhetoric of “empowerment” (Butler 1990). This rhetoric implicitly idealizes patriarchy, and asserts that adherence to traditional gender roles is beneficial for women, and seeking empowerment is inherently self-defeating. To draw back to the thesis of this paper, the blame for women seeking empowerment is diverted from the oppression they face in their imposed gender roles, and onto their own unwillingness to accept those gender roles as natural (Lipsitz 2018).

In the next example, I want to focus on the ways in which Congressperson Marjorie Taylor Green’s rhetoric blames the ‘persecution of traditional gender’ roles on a ‘morally corrupt left’ (fig. 21).

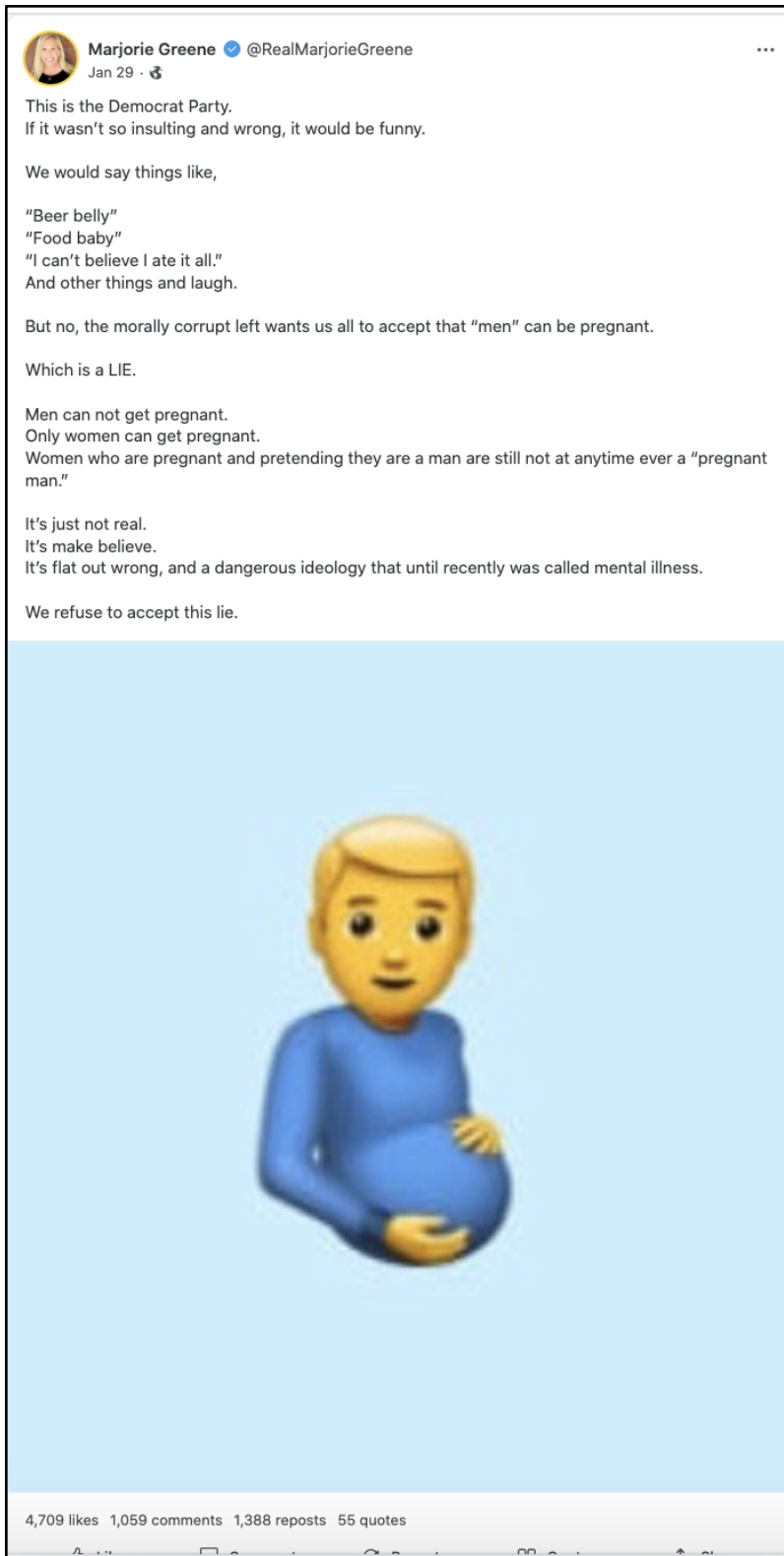


Fig. 21

The image featured is of the recently added Apple emoji, featuring a male with a rounded belly. MTG here frames the emoji as a “pregnant man”, and goes to assert that the conception of a “man being pregnant” is a “lie”. The rhetorical diatribe, although unsubstantiated, asserts that “men” cannot get pregnant, and pregnancy is something only a woman can do. These statements are explicitly transphobic. The transphobic rhetoric asserts that “pregnant men” do not exist because they choose to, but because of the “lies of the Democrat party” (note the derogatory use of “Democrat” instead of the correct term “Democratic”); the framework here suggests that those who reject this “lie of pregnant men” are being forced to accept it, evidenced by Apple’s implementation of said emoji. At once, MTG constructs sexual fluidity as a “lie”, implying a vested interest by those in power to assert such a lie, while also implying that transmen *used* to be considered mentally ill. Those who agree with these ideas are also at once positioned as outside the mainstream order and persecuted by a “morally corrupt left” because “they want [all of us] to believe in this lie.” The persecuted group who “refuses to accept the lie” are positioned as counter-cultural purveyors in a landscape of political power that operates in line with the goals of the “morally corrupt left”, in this case evidenced by their perceived ability to impose the implementation of the pregnant man emoji. Traditional gender itself is positioned as under threat of persecution by said “morally corrupt left”.



Fig. 22

In this next example, transphobic ideas are justified through the conspiracy theory-based claim that transness, and medically transitioning, is a plot to increase corporate profits of the pharmaceutical industry. Here, anti-corporatism and transphobia align rhetorically. The invocation of both anti-corporatism and transphobia is done through reference to the film *What Is A Woman?* in the post, by stating the de-coupling of sex from gender is no longer a “mystery” because it is clear from the film that said de-coupling is being manufactured by “Big Pharma”. This rhetoric is transphobic primarily, but it also operates to place the interests of a large conglomerate of power, namely “Big Pharma”, as in line with a turn towards gender/sexual fluidity. TheSaltyCracker refers to trans people with a slur, while also stating that trans people are “cash cows for Big Pharma”. Such offensive terminology is used to denigrate and imply

inferiority to a certain group, as it is historically used in racial contexts. The rhetoric in the post positions this idea of trans people as manufactured, or unnatural, and thus a ‘problem’ created by “Big Pharma”. Traditional gender-sex male and female roles are inversely implied to not be manufactured in the placement of transexual people as manufactured, despite the fact that such traditional conservative roles are themselves culturally reinforced (Butler 1990).

As outlined by Todd Reeser (2011) and Judith Butler (1990) natural sexual roles falls in line with ideas established in Christian conservatism, and patriarchy more broadly. The post implicitly positions those who agree with what are deemed “natural” sexual roles as outside the interests of the conglomerate of Big Pharma, and in turn, persecuted by the culture of gender fluidity they are supposedly manufacturing (fig. 22). The rhetoric of persecution is invoked here, but in a complex way: (1) The ‘problem of transexualism’ is identified implicitly (2) Big Pharma is invoked as the ‘external’ force attempting to inculcate a culture of such transexualism (3) Naturalized american traditional gender roles are framed as persecuted. As such, this example conveys how the root of new patriot rhetoric is reinvented and reinvigorated through transphobia.



Fig. 23

In the final example of this section, Figure 23 reflects how Gab users feel persecuted and under threat by broader societal acceptance of the idea that gender identity is socially constructed. The implication is that educational institutions, and the people that work within them, are now influencing, or determining, the sex of a child over healthcare providers. This post is not paired with any dialogue, and I highlight it because it speaks to how widespread the sentiment is, that it does not need further explanation or contextualization within the Gab community. This post exists within a rhetorical lexicon on Gab that has already asserted the natural association between sex-gender, while also asserting that traditional institutions, in this case medical and educational, are operating in line with the idea that “the kindergarten teacher will determine if its a boy or girl.” The post in drawing a connection between education and medicine, combined with its adherence to the gender-sex naturalization, frames an overarching political landscape of power, or hegemony, that attempts to assert that the sex of any one person is now being defined by said political power. The mis-recognition of gender-sex difference is

itself the assertion of patriarchy, as mentioned earlier, and a placement of those who also have that same fundamental mis-recognition as outside the political landscape of power.

In a **'death' of traditional gender** framework, American decline is contextualized within a turn away from patriarchal notions of gender and sex. The breakdown of the naturalized association between gender and sex, and a break away from behaviour that limits categories of identity, is framed as a turn into confusion and chaos. The idea of gender liberation is framed as a cause of problems, not an attempt to escape problems. In reality, gender liberation is one of the fundamental anti-oppressive movements that operates as resistance to, and release from, patriarchal essentializations of identity (Butler 1990). The rhetoric, in attempting to maintain naturalized associations of gender and sex, serves to reinforce patriarchy while disparaging against a turn away from patriarchy.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described the ways in which rhetoric on Gab functionally operates to defend the power structure of U.S. patriarchal white supremacy through a rhetoric that frames whiteness and patriarchy as under threat. This rhetoric enables the identification of a subset of the white working class with U.S. neoliberalism and externalizes the problems it enables (i.e. the threat of 'immigration' is not due to the global exploitation enabled by U.S. neoliberal capitalism, but because of an Other that seeks to 'persecute' white culture and traditional cultural patriarchy). In the two-step process of 'persecution' and 'externalization' outlined in this paper, the faults of U.S. neoliberalism are absolved for the working class that is targeted by this rhetoric; those ideologies or person(s) who benefit from this neoliberal power structure, such as owners of capital, or even the systemic production of capital itself, are absolved as a result.

I do not intend to generalize that all users of Gab are subject or participatory to this rhetoric, but this paper argues that there is a digital community that exists on Gab defined by this white patriarchal defence rhetoric. This paper argues that Gab exists as an oppositional enclave that dialogically positions itself as outside the mainstream, or hegemonic, public sphere (Fraser 1990). The rhetoric within this oppositional enclave creates a community framework that presents whiteness and traditional patriarchal gender roles as persecuted, serving to frame the overarching power structure the community exists in spite of as antagonistic to white supremacist patriarchal values. Implicitly and explicitly, the economic decline of America is associated with a lack of white supremacist patriarchy, while simultaneously absolving its capitalist neoliberal policies.

Moving forward, I propose that further research focuses on establishing whether this pattern of persecuted white patriarchy exists in other right-wing digital communities. In turn, I want this paper to aid in awareness for possible justification that this rhetorical framework serves for expanding authoritarian principles in the U.S. to preserve white patriarchy, such as Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis' bill to restrict sexual and gender education in public schools. I consider this paper a part of a developing academic field in cultivating awareness of the oppressive rhetoric, by unpacking the digital context that it exists in.

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