

SPRING/SUMMER 2021

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# The Public Eye



The Mainstream Pill: How Media and Academia Help Incels Rebrand • Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwives Lifestyle?  
A Storm Is Coming: Horror and Hope in QAnon Apocalypticism • Excerpt: "Prisons Make Us Safer"  
Book Review: *Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump* • Author Q&A: *Red Pill, Blue Pill*

As this issue was going to print, a young Ohio man was charged with a federal hate crime for plotting to carry out a mass shooting of women, inspired by an earlier misogynist massacre in 2014 that left six dead and 14 injured. As M. Kelly writes in “The Mainstream Pill” (page 3), the Ohio man was quickly identified as a member of the largest online forum for the misogynist incel, or “involuntary celibate” movement—a vile corner of the internet where men stoke each other’s rage, revel in stories of women murdered by male partners, and glorify mass killers. And yet, over the last two years, the founder of the very same forum has been elevated by media and academic institutions in the name of understanding, aiding the movement’s larger effort to rebrand its toxic ideology for the mainstream.

In our next feature, Mariel Cooksey investigates how young women and girls are being drawn into another online anti-feminist movement: tradwifery (page 10). Part aesthetic, part ideology, “trad life” encourages women to trade empowerment for a patriarchal vision of gender norms. Since its debut around the 2016 election, the movement has appealed to—and targeted—increasingly younger women, lured by promises of domestic bliss as well as one of the only accessible roles for women in the White nationalist Right. Just as young men have been recruited into far-right politics by edgy meme culture and red pill rhetoric, “trad girls” are crafting their own wing of the movement, one like at a time.

Over the last several years, the conspiracist QAnon movement has grown increasingly bizarre, even as it’s become so widely embraced that numerous politicians now echo its false claims at the state and federal levels. But as Damon Berry writes (page 15), the enduring appeal of QAnon is how it taps into not just religious feeling, but ancient apocalyptic narratives of horror and hope, where visions of atrocities only serve to enhance the promise of a glorious new world to come. As Berry warns, nonbelievers must not underestimate the power of these narratives.

The specter of private prisons amassing billions of dollars by incarcerating people in for-profit detention facilities has inspired significant and successful divestment campaigns. But as Victoria Law writes (page 22), in an exclusive excerpt from her new book *Prisons Make Us Safer*, private prisons are only a small part of mass incarceration in the U.S. Tackling the larger problem requires confronting the financial incentives driving public prisons and their workers’ unions, which have lobbied for years against bills that would make a saner, fairer legal system, but which could harm their bottom line.

We also look at two recent books in this issue. Shane Burley reviews the recent anthology *Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump* (page 24), considering how, in the years after World War II, a new transnational fascist movement emerged, united by demographic panic about the end of a “pure” White race. And Deyanira Marte speaks with David Neiwert (page 26) about his new book *Red Pill, Blue Pill*, a sharply perceived guide through the origins and implications of the growing world of right-wing conspiracy theories.

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ISSUE 105

[www.politicalresearch.org](http://www.politicalresearch.org)

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BY M. KELLY

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# The Mainstream Pill

How Media and Academia Help Incels Rebrand



An image of Pink Clouds. #PinkCloudsForBianca was used to share original artwork and photos of pink clouds to combat the spread of the images containing Bianca Devins' corpse. (Credit: Arjun/Wikimedia commons)

On July 13, 2019, in Utica, New York, 17-year-old Bianca Devins was murdered. Her alleged killer, a 21-year-old man named Brandon Clark, was charged with second-degree murder after he posted a photo of her body and nearly decapitated head on Discord and Instagram. The photo later circulated on Twitter, 4chan, 8chan and other platforms.<sup>1</sup> According to a report from *Rolling Stone*,<sup>2</sup> one of Clark's likely motives was that "he was incensed [Devins] would not agree to a monogamous relationship with him."

The day after the murder, on the largest online forum for the misogynist incel, or "involuntary celibate" movement,\* the picture of Devins' dead body was posted on a thread titled "E-girl beheaded by her boyfriend." Two years later, this thread is still in the top five most-viewed threads

\* I distinguish between individuals of all genders who personally identify with the term "incel" and do not hold worldviews that are rooted in misogyny, and misogynist incels: those who participate in misogynist, male-only incel spaces and adhere to a male supremacist ideology marked by dehumanizing women and glorifying violence against them. More information on this distinction can be found here: <https://www.malesupremacism.org/tips-for-media/>. For the purposes of this article, when I refer to incel, it is referring to the misogynist incel movement unless otherwise noted.

and top five most commented-on threads in the forum's main discussion section. While this thread is now closed to further replies, others discussing Bianca Devins continue to draw degrading new comments today. While a few forum members express disgust at the image, many others cheered: "cunts get exactly what they deserve for choosing wrong," "good riddance to another dirty hypergamous whore who drove the wrong guy crazy," "Thot Status: Patrolled. Rest in shit, foid."

Horrifying as these conversations are,

they're not an anomaly for the misogynist incel movement, which is defined by a sense of entitlement to women's bodies, justification of violence against them,<sup>3</sup> and reverence for both self-proclaimed incel men and other misogynist killers who perpetrate mass violence as "saints" and "heroes."<sup>4</sup> Within these forums, conversations about murdered women and girls are a regular topic, usually framed as violence women brought on themselves for choosing "the wrong guy." Meanwhile, the women's killers are celebrated for "sav[ing] many men the trouble" and preventing "decades of thotdom" (a reference to the misogynist online slur "thot," or "that ho over there").

But what was more unusual is that

the main root of their violence, and arguing that at least one of them "wouldn't be considered unattractive by most standards," as though to suggest he couldn't be a real incel after all.

And yet just this July, an Ohio man who appears to have been an active member of Ash's forum was charged with a federal hate crime for plotting to carry out a mass shooting targeting women. On July 21, a 21-year-old man in Ohio was charged with a federal hate crime for an attempted mass shooting of women. From July 2019 through his arrest in the spring of 2020, the would-be attacker had been "a frequent poster" on "a popular incel website," according to a statement from the Department of Justice.<sup>7</sup> The day the hate

argued in a recent public panel (echoing, not so incidentally, the justification used by former President Donald Trump to excuse his own clear misogyny).

That a movement best known for promoting violence against women wants to overhaul its image is unsurprising. But recently, incels' attempts to reframe their identity have also been helped along by researchers, journalists, and "counter-violent extremism" experts, who, in their attempts to investigate and understand incels, have given them larger, more mainstream platforms. These new platforms have allowed incels to reframe the public narrative about them; minimize the threat their community poses; and have amplified—or even endorsed—

***These new platforms have allowed incels to reframe the public narrative about them; minimize the threat their community poses; and have amplified—or even endorsed—their hate-laced grievances, centering their self-perceived victimhood at the hands of women who deny them sex.***

several months before Devins' brutal murder became fodder for the incel commenters, the forum's founder and administrator, who uses the pseudonym Alexander Ash,<sup>5</sup> penned an appeal for greater public understanding of what he said was a frequently misunderstood community.<sup>6</sup> In his essay, "Incels," published in February 2019, Ash argues that inceldom is neither a movement nor a political subculture but merely "a [life] situation," and sets out to create an "objective" and "realistic portrayal" of incels by addressing what he perceives as the "often sensationalist overtones" in media coverage of incels. He tries to distance incels from the violent and misogynistic ideology its most prominent members have expressed. And he attempts to absolve the community of any connection to "incel criminals," like the perpetrators of mass casualty attacks that took place in 2014 in Santa Barbara and in 2018 in Toronto, which together left 16 people dead. He did this by misrepresenting the perpetrators' involvement in online incel spaces prior to their attacks, suggesting mental health or autism diagnoses were

crime charges were announced, people on Ash's forum identified the would-be attacker as a fellow member, matching descriptions of his posts in the indictment with those posted on the site. The posts in question detailed the attempted attacker emulating actions of the Santa Barbara attacker prior to his 2014 attack, including spraying women and couples with orange juice through a water gun. And like the Santa Barbara attacker, the thwarted attacker also seemed intent on targeting sororities.<sup>8</sup>

Ash's essay, with all its misrepresentations, was one of the first of several recent attempts to rebrand the misogynist incel movement and present a more palatable version of their online forums, where—as ample documentation has shown—dehumanizing misogyny and glorification of violence are the norm.<sup>9</sup> In this new narrative, incels aren't violent misogynists so much as misunderstood, lonely men being persecuted because of their lack of sexual contact with women. The hateful rhetoric they've become known for online is recast as just "controversial"<sup>10</sup> "locker room talk,"<sup>11</sup> as Ash

their hate-laced grievances, centering their self-perceived victimhood at the hands of women who deny them sex.

## FROM SUPPORT GROUP TO HATE GROUP

Today's misogynist incels are a radical evolution of where the term and community came from 24 years ago, when a bisexual Canadian woman named Alana created an online mailing list and website to serve as a peer-support network for people who "had difficulty starting relationships or finding partners."<sup>12</sup> In the early 2000s, "involuntary celibate" was used as an academic survey term, but the name "incel" was coined on Alana's forum and quickly adapted as a self-identity. Unlike contemporary misogynist incel forums—which only allow cis-gender heterosexual men to join,<sup>13</sup> and are united in their adherence to a male supremacist ideology<sup>14</sup>—early incel and shyness forums such as Alana's welcomed both men and women, and people of varied sexual orientations and histories. On these early forums, being an incel was not presented as a permanent, unchangeable identity,

but rather a situation that could be experienced by anyone. Although they were not devoid of negativity, they offered emotional support, and according to a former member, also “dating advice and coping strategies.”<sup>15</sup> The fatalistic and misogynist sensibility that defines incel spaces today was kept in check by attentive moderators.<sup>16</sup>

But over time, some incel forums became increasingly toxic and insular. Members banned from highly moderated forums for sharing misogynistic content flocked to forums where it was allowed.<sup>17</sup> Those forums then started to change, becoming, as a 2020 study found, “increasingly militant and hostile to women,

In May 2014, a member of PUAHate, who identified as an incel on the forum, killed six people and injured 14 more before killing himself in Santa Barbara, California. The perpetrator left behind a manifesto and several YouTube videos describing his hatred of women he thought should be attracted to him and his desire to seek revenge.<sup>23</sup> (Specifically, the perpetrator fixated on White, blonde sorority women, reflecting the broader incel movement’s emphasis on gaining sexual access to attractive White women.) In short order, the manifesto and videos became an inspiration to incels,<sup>24</sup> and the perpetrator became a martyr celebrated on new forums that were popping up

***They began to believe that their personal issues were systemic, and so women’s “hypergamous nature,” and the society that supports it, must be addressed systemically—either through the reinstatement of social norms that limit women’s choices, or through mass violence and suicide.***

expressing offensive biologically deterministic memes and openly advocating violence.”<sup>18</sup> Today, the most prominent incel forums are defined more by shared misogyny than by celibacy, allowing as members men who don’t fit any definition of “incel” but who do echo the forums’ virulent misogyny. Eventually, the forums that had emphasized support and moderation dissolved, leaving only the increasingly militant misogynist forums, which then, according to Vox journalist Zack Beauchamp, “cross-pollinated with members of other, similar online subcultures.”<sup>19</sup>

One of them was the “anti-PUA” community, composed of men angry that the dating and seduction techniques suggested by so-called pick-up artists—a booming online industry in the mid-2000s that gave men dubious advice on how to “pick up” women<sup>20</sup>—had failed to get them either girlfriends or sex.<sup>21</sup> Although anti-PUA communities, like the PUAHate forum, claimed to hate PUA gurus and their advice, they shared a common perspective on women—as a target or prize<sup>22</sup> that some men could win while others were denied.

across the web—on Reddit, 4chan, and elsewhere. It was also around this time that a new facet of misogynist incel ideology, the black pill, began to take form.

### FROM RED PILL TO BLACK

Since the early 2000s male supremacist movements, namely pick-up artists, Men Going Their Own Way, men’s rights activists, and members of the r/TheRedPill subreddit,<sup>25</sup> have embraced what they call the “red pill.” The term—now ubiquitous across the Far Right—comes from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, where the protagonist Neo is given the choice to take a blue pill or a red pill, representing the decision to remain in a comfortable illusion or confront the hidden reality of how the world truly operates. Today far-right groups use the term to describe how they learned and accepted their various ideologies. For White supremacists and the Alt Right, the red pill denotes accepting a variety of beliefs, ranging from White genocide and Great Replacement theory to antisemitic conspiracism and fears of

the New World Order.<sup>26</sup> The core red pill for male supremacists is the belief that men do not, in fact, hold systemic power and privilege in the world, but rather they are socially, economically, and sexually at the mercy of women’s power and desires. And the architects of this oppression are feminists, whose advocacy for gender equality has led to men becoming the sole victims of sexist discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

The red pill also awakens men to the notion that they exist within a “sexual marketplace” where everyone has a “sexual market value” determined by various characteristics, from physical features and status to their wealth and charm. And within this marketplace, argue members of the “manosphere”—an online network of male supremacist groups—women always seek out men who have a higher sexual market value than their own. This concept, often referred to as “female hypergamy,” was popularized among the manosphere by White supremacist and men’s right activist Roger Devlin in his 2006 essay “Sexual Utopia in Power.”<sup>28</sup> Devlin argues that hypergamy “is an irrational instinct” that “implies the rejection of most males”; that the feminist-driven “sexual revolution in America was an attempt by women to realize their own utopia”; and that this utopia is a consequence of women’s “natural” hypergamous instinct. Marriage, Devlin asserts, is a way to “[channel] female hypergamy in a socially useful way” as “sex is too important a matter to be left to the independent judgment of young women, because young women rarely possess good judgment.” “Heterosexual monogamy,” he argues, “is incompatible with equality of the sexes” and therefore a “husband’s leadership” is “necessary to accommodate female hypergamy.”

Within the worldview of the red pill, some adherents feel they must increase their marketplace “value”—a desire pick-up artists responded to with books and tutorials on strategies for “picking-up” women or becoming the kind of man they believe women want. But some red pill adherents, like members of PUAHate, came to distrust these promises as a “blue pill” illusion, and argue that there exist no individual strategies that can help them improve enough to have sex-

ual relationships with the women they desire. Rather they began to believe that their personal issues were systemic, and so women’s “hypergamous nature,” and the society that supports it, must be addressed systemically—either through the reinstatement of social norms that limit women’s choices, or through mass violence and suicide.<sup>29</sup>

These ideas became the cornerstone of the “black pill” ideology: a term that seems to have been coined by anti-feminist bloggers in the early 2010s to describe incels’ fatalistic embrace of a biological determinism<sup>30</sup> under which they are destined to always remain alone, and wherein their isolation and lack of access to women renders them—in their own words—“subhuman.” Since blackpillers believe women choose sexual partners based almost solely on physical characteristics, they also believe that means

by fellow forum members<sup>33</sup>—or they can try to change society, through policy or violence. In some cases, forum members who express suicidal ideation are encouraged to commit mass murder before they kill themselves, emulating perpetrators of other incel massacres<sup>34</sup> and thus drawing attention to incels’ plight.<sup>35</sup> Others advocate for changes to the legal system, ranging from re-establishing “patriarchy,” to removing women’s rights, or compulsory monogamy and “state-issued girlfriends.”<sup>36</sup>

These solutions are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to normalizing violence against women. Self-identified incels who have committed mass murder, other mass murderers, and violence against women are regularly memorialized or celebrated in the forums. Dehumanization of women is so deeply embedded in misogynist incel communities that women are

forum, where Ash is the administrator, officially defines incels as any “Person who desires a romantic relationship but is unable to enter one,”<sup>41</sup> in reality forum members are frequently challenged about their legitimacy as incels. Until sometime in late 2018 the forum granted “conditional” membership to people who weren’t incels but who did express a “blackpilled mentality,”<sup>42</sup> suggesting that the acceptance of a political ideology, and not one’s relationship status, was the actual uniting factor for membership. Further, members who post content that doesn’t align with the black pill are often labeled “LARPers,” fakecels, noncels, or volcels (voluntary celibates). And while content that expresses “blue pill” ideology is no longer explicitly banned from the forum,<sup>43</sup> members seen as offering “blue pill” advice—such as “take a shower,” “work on your personality,” or “don’t be misogynist”—are still likely to be banned or ostracized by other members.

While both Ash’s essay and the incels wiki note that some women identify as incels, or “femcels,” most forum members don’t accept them,<sup>44</sup> and women are barred from most incel forums, including Ash’s. For the most part, femcels are only acknowledged insofar as they can serve as a defense against accusations of misogyny.<sup>45</sup>

And while leaders like Ash have tried to publicly distance themselves from overtly misogynistic rhetoric—even as their forums remain as misogynistic as ever—the core arguments remain the same. In Ash’s case, his “Incels” essay still blames “social behavior” like “hypergamity” and feminism for “oppress[ing]” and “disadvantaging men.”<sup>46</sup> It may come with fewer explicit threats, but the misogyny of these arguments and terminology is so deeply rooted that it can only be understood as a fundamental feature of incels and other male supremacist identities.

## A FRIENDLY EAR

In 2018, a man drove a rented van into a crowd of people in Toronto, killing 10 and injuring 16 others. Shortly before his attack, the perpetrator posted on Facebook that the “Incel Rebellion has already begun,” paying homage to the Santa Barbara perpetrator in his post. After the

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some men are doomed by their genetically predetermined looks to never find a mate. Under this philosophy, incels are seen as intensely victimized—by women, by society at large, and particularly by feminism, since they blame women’s increased agency for their situation.<sup>31</sup> And what follows from this sense of victimhood is an escalation of the misogyny common among most incels, graduating from considering women targets or rewards to dehumanizing and glorifying violence against them.<sup>32</sup>

Accepting the black pill leaves incels with limited options on how to proceed. While some still aim for “ascension”—the movement term for leaving incelhood by having sex with a woman—it has many caveats and is rarely viewed as a realistic possibility. Therefore, most argue they can either resign themselves to their fate—which, for many, leads to a suicidal ideation that is sometimes encouraged

frequently referred to with both animalistic slurs—such as beasts, holes, or roastie—and mechanistic<sup>37</sup> ones, like femoid or foid (which are abbreviations for “Female Humanoid Organism”).<sup>38</sup>

## REFRAMING MISOGYNY

Over the last two years, incels have tried to reframe and normalize their beliefs by disavowing—on blogs, wikis,<sup>39</sup> and articles—the most obvious or overt expressions of misogyny and emphasizing the heterogeneity of their members. Part of the reframing involves casting incelhood as a “situation,” rather than a movement or subculture, which is shared by many, whether or not they claim the incel label.<sup>40</sup> But this effort to rhetorically draw the movement under a larger, more mainstream tent is at odds with how the community identifies and regulates itself. While the largest incel

attack, *The New York Times* published an article by Ross Douthat titled “The Redistribution of Sex,” arguing that “recent Western history” teaches us that “sometimes the extremists and radicals and weirdos see the world more clearly than the respectable and moderate and sane.” In this case, the extremists and radicals Douthat meant were incels, and he used the massacre as a springboard to consider a question subsequently posed by econo-

the normies, the listeners would actually be open to engaging in an empathetic dialogue with them.”<sup>51</sup> And, as she hopefully notes in the podcast’s first episode, “when people feel heard, they stop hating.”<sup>52</sup>

But giving a platform to people who participate in a bigoted and misogynistic community also risks validating that rhetoric and spreading it to new audiences, particularly given the podcast’s format, wherein Kates rarely pushes back or

## **Giving a platform to people who participate in a bigoted and misogynistic community also risks validating that rhetoric and spreading it to new audiences.**

mist Robin Hanson: “If we are concerned about the just distribution of property and money, why do we assume that the desire for some sort of sexual redistribution is inherently ridiculous?”<sup>47</sup> Douthat ultimately concluded that society may soon “address the unhappiness of incels” through the “logic of commerce and technology,” likely in the form of sex workers or robots. But Douthat completely failed to recognize or challenge the misogynist rhetoric underlying Hanson’s question, and instead he helped legitimize some of the “solutions” incels suggest. As several published critiques of the article pointed out, Douthat ignored the impact a “redistribution of sex” would have on women,<sup>48</sup> and equated incels with marginalized groups instead of addressing the violent misogyny they have unleashed.<sup>49</sup>

More recently, incels have been given several direct platforms, allowing them to reframe their image as unhappy but not hateful.

In August 2019, *The New York Times* named a new podcast, “The Incel Project” (often shorted to just “Incel”), as one of its summer recommendations.<sup>50</sup> The show’s host, Naama Kates, presents her podcast as a journey of empathy and listening, giving incels “a chance to tell their own story in their own words,” as she put it in a 2020 video from the “counter-violent extremism” organization Light Upon Light. She hypothesizes that doing so might impact the incel community “by making them realize that the outsiders,

challenges the beliefs of the incel forum members she interviews.<sup>53</sup> While Kates sometimes voices her disagreement, she rarely offers a different perspective or fact checks her guests as they describe themselves, their beliefs, and communities in palatable, whitewashed terms. In an episode where Kates addresses criticism that she is platforming and legitimizing a violent male supremacist community, she asserts that she is a “free-speech person” who doesn’t “believe that censorship works as well as compassion, and listening and engagement.”<sup>54</sup>

In this regard, Kates seems to have recapitulated a now-common pattern in initially defending racist, misogynist, or other bigoted speech out of professed concern about censorship, but in time, repeating and spreading that speech herself. On both her own and the podcast’s Twitter accounts, she has occasionally shared tweets from the largest incel forums<sup>55</sup> as well as blog posts that promote black pill ideology.<sup>56</sup> In 2020, she contributed an article to the incel blog “The Misogynist Spectrum,”<sup>57</sup> in which she downplays the dehumanizing terms that incels call women, namely “femoid” or “foid.”<sup>58</sup> Specifically, she tries to reframe the terms’ meaning, claiming they are “not an indictment of women themselves, but rather of these women, these cheap imitations, these imposters, that look and act like the real deal but lack any soul or humanity.” She identifies these “femoids” as “Modern women, the women

that reject and object, that taunt and betray, that exploit both the beta males and their own sexuality for profit.” And she goes on to compare such “femoids” with what she calls “actual women,” whom she says “represent something good or at least neutral” for incels in that they are “coveted, as is actual intimacy.”

Incels’ use of the term “femoid,” and Kates’ interpretation of the term as applying only to “imposter” women without “soul[s] or humanity,” is textbook dehumanization, and such a categorization can have dangerous consequences. The Dangerous Speech Project, a U.S. organization that monitors the effects of violent and bigoted rhetoric, explains that language casting people as subhuman is not metaphorical or harmless,<sup>59</sup> but rather is often a preparatory step to condition audiences “to condone or commit violence, by making their targets’ death and suffering seem less significant.” That’s exactly how it’s used by incels, as terms like “femoid” and “foid” are commonly interspersed with celebrations of violence against women on incel forums: “*Thot Status: Patrolled. Rest in shit, foid.*”

Shocking as it is for Kates to justify incels’ dehumanizing rhetoric, she also seems to defend black pill ideology as being, “like most philosophy, a broad critique of modern society.” In April, she even described a woman interviewee, confoundingly, as a “fellow femoid black-pill-adjacent content creator.”<sup>60</sup>

While Kates began her podcast claiming she was just trying to hold the door open for incels to rejoin society—arguing that an empathetic ear could defuse incels’ combustible rage—it increasingly seems that Kates has instead walked through that door herself, no longer just reporting on incels’ misogyny, but justifying and sharing it with the world.

## **AN ACADEMIC WELCOME**

In 2021, incels’ quest for mainstream representation received another boost from the International Center for Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), a Washington, D.C.-based research center known for providing research, training, and counsel to government and intelligence leaders around the world.<sup>61</sup> The group,

founded in 2015, has another center in Brussels, partially funded by the European Union,<sup>62</sup> which has focused on ISIS, “militant jihadis,” and more recently on “those considered domestic extremists.” In January 2021, ICSVE’s Washington branch hosted a panel with Jeff Schoep, a purportedly former neonazi<sup>63</sup> currently being sued over his involvement in the deadly Unite the Right rally in 2017.<sup>64</sup> This year, ICSVE also began to focus on incels, hosting a panel discussion this January and publishing five reports on the movement since January.<sup>†</sup>

The first of ICSVE’s two full-length “research reports” was published on January 21 and focuses on how or whether Covid-19 quarantine measures and the Canadian government’s terrorism charges against a man allegedly inspired by “incel ideology” had increased incels’ isolation and resentment. The second report, released on February 3, was titled, “Involuntary Celibates’ Experiences of and Grievance over Sexual Exclusion and

have the administrator of an incel forum be listed as a co-author. While previous ICSVE reports have drawn from primary data, including interviews and surveys with members of the community being studied, this seems to be the first time—at ICSVE or in academic research more broadly—that someone actively involved in a community that regularly expresses bigoted or violent ideology has co-authored the resulting study.

While ICSVE and the similar “counter-violent extremism” group Light Upon Light seem to be the first two organizations to actively include someone still involved in communities organized around bigotry or promotion of violence, some past reporting and research<sup>66</sup> on incels has expressed sympathy for their supposed plight and offered solutions to addressing incel violence that do not fully consider the misogynist beliefs that bind the misogynist incel movement together.

But these aren’t the only concerns. In one of ICSVE’s brief reports, the authors

than 200 people from North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia registered. It seems to be the first time that ICSVE has included a panelist still actively involved in the community under study.

In his comments, Ash spoke about supposed “misconceptions”<sup>69</sup> about incels, mirroring the claims he made in his 2019 “Incels” essay. But this time his arguments were made to a public audience, and backed up by other panelists. One panelist affirmed Ash’s framing of the community as a life “situation” not a movement by arguing that, compared to other violent groups, “the most fundamental difference that we have found is that for incels it’s a circumstance, and as the name says it, it is an involuntary state of being.”<sup>70</sup> But this claim fails to accurately portray the group ICSVE had actually studied: not anyone who is temporarily celibate, but rather people who chose to join and associate themselves with misogynist incel forums.

The panel also addressed incel forums’

## **Some mainstream researchers have dismissed incel forums’ misogyny and glorification of violence as mere “locker room talk” or “venting.”**

the Potential Threat of Violence Among Those Active in an Online Incel Forum.” Both reports use survey data procured from Ash’s forum. The group also published three shorter “brief reports” on the movement, which were cross-published by the national security website *Homeland Security Today*.

One obvious problem with this scholarly work though is that Ash is listed as a co-author on four of the five reports and Naama Kates is similarly credited on three.<sup>65</sup> Though Ash’s role in writing the reports is unclear, it’s concerning to

† The panel with Schoep as well as the panels and reports on incels have involved one of the co-founders, Jesse Morton, of the “counter-violent extremist” organization Light Upon Light. On their website, Light Upon Light lists several “Shape Shifters,” whom they define as “those that can shift the paradigm and shape the Light Upon Light movement so that it can elevate consciousness and attack the problem of extremism at its root.” Light Upon Light’s Shape Shifters are composed of at least one CVE practitioner and several “former extremists”; on their website, they include Schoep and Kates among their official “Shape Shifters.” Until late June 2021, Ash was also listed among them, and he seems to be the only Light Upon Light Shape Shifter who was still actively involved in a community that regularly expresses bigotry and violence. (“Shape Shifters,” Light Upon Light, archived page on June 23, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210623160903/https://www.lightuponlight.online/shape-shifters/>)

argue that “incels seek understanding; they are willing to engage and interact with nonjudgmental researchers, they are willing to convey their grievances to broader society and most importantly they feel the threat of terrorist violence coming from their community is exaggerated.” A few things about this depart from normal social science practices: the sympathy extended to incels who don’t want to be judged; the presumption that incels publicly conveying misogynistic grievances is a productive endeavor; and allowing incels to assess whether concerns about violence from their community are warranted. In terms of the last point,<sup>67</sup> it doesn’t seem that ICSVE researchers usually ask groups they are studying whether they agree with public concern over the threat they may pose,<sup>68</sup> which begs the question: Why are incels seen as an exception?

On January 27, ICSVE hosted a Zoom panel discussion to launch the first report, with Ash and Kates as panelists and more

misogyny and glorification of violence as another “misconception”—or what Ash framed as “locker room talk”<sup>71</sup> and “venting.”<sup>72</sup> Kates agreed, claiming that when “incels sort of worship or celebrate the mass killers or... incel killers... usually that stuff is said in irony or just venting.”<sup>73</sup> The initial research report from ICSVE takes this argument one step further by suggesting such “venting” might serve a positive purpose, by deterring individuals from committing violence. The authors posit that if the 2018 Toronto perpetrator had “engaged in incel discussions online, as opposed to passively reading them, he may have found the interactions to be a kind of venting and the community a psychosocial support that prevented his turn to terrorism.”<sup>74</sup>

But there’s no reason to believe those arguments are accurate. First, it’s unlikely that misogynist incel forums, where members encourage other people to commit suicide, can really be seen as a form of psychosocial support. Although incels



might call the forums a “second...or even a first home,” as Ash put it,<sup>75</sup> that doesn’t mean they aren’t violent and radicalizing spaces. Similar language has been used by White supremacists to describe their online forums,<sup>76</sup> but we don’t call those

value of violence,”<sup>81</sup> leading to a threshold wherein “people no longer feel satisfied and begin to redefine venting as ‘in-action’ or not enough action.”<sup>82</sup>

Exactly that sentiment is clear in the manifesto of the 2014 Santa Barbara mass

the narratives they want heard, spreading the message of male victimhood, obscuring that narrative’s foundation in male sexual entitlement and misogyny, and erasing the very real violence and dehumanization women suffer because of incels’ ideology.<sup>88</sup> As a landmark study in 2020 found, comments that affirm this “feeling of ‘victimhood’ or persecution among men not only undermine any political action on gendered violence, they actually encourage those who feel ‘persecuted’ towards violence.”<sup>89</sup>

While it’s important to understand bigoted and violent ideologies, especially those that have led to violence, it’s also important to consider how that’s done. Mass media and researchers can play a critical role in whether and how far-right groups and other violent or bigoted actors spread their message.<sup>90</sup> As Joan Donovan, director of the Technology and Social Change Project, has pointed out, when journalists cover White supremacists and other violent or bigoted actors, it’s critical to avoid allowing them to “use their own terms to describe themselves,” as doing so can aid in the “soften[ing]” or “re-branding”<sup>91</sup> of these movements. In some cases, research has shown,<sup>92</sup> it’s helpful to include the insights of current and former members of these groups, in order to have a full understanding of how the ideology and group dynamics function.

But that’s a far cry from simply handing people involved in bigoted and violent ideologies a megaphone, so their voices can travel farther.

*M. Kelly is a PhD candidate and researcher.*

***While incels’ numbers may be limited, their misogyny and the violence they have committed is not exceptional. It’s simply not possible to separate incels from the wider spectrum of misogyny, which can be witnessed in femicide, rape, domestic violence, and other violence against women.***

support groups. Second, as studies of the rise of the Alt Right made clear, irony has been deftly used by far-right groups to spread and normalize bigoted views; far from negating potential harm, it has often served as a recruitment tool.<sup>77</sup> Third, this “venting” and irony framework echoes incels’ existing efforts to distance themselves from accusations of promoting violence and misogyny, and so in platforming this rebranding effort, it also helps normalize the dehumanization of women.

But perhaps most concerning is the threat that this sort of “venting” can easily lead to far more concrete action. In 2021, a report from the Dangerous Speech Project found that dehumanization is a “hallmark” of speech that can “increase the risk that its audience will condone or commit violence against members of another group.”<sup>78</sup> Dehumanizing rhetoric is widely recognized as a necessary precursor to genocide. Notably, in his manifesto, the Santa Barbara perpetrator called for all women to be put in concentration camps where “the vast majority of the female population will be deliberately starved to death.”

Dehumanizing language might also be understood as what sociologist Pete Simi and co-author criminologist Steven Windisch call “violent talk.”<sup>79</sup> While sometimes, they note, such “violent talk” can be a substitute for “overt acts of violence,”<sup>80</sup> other times, it’s the spark. Violent talk, they write, can “reinforce the

killer. In a section about fellow members of the forum PUAHate, he writes, “many of them share my hatred of women, though unlike me they would be too cowardly to act on it.”<sup>83</sup>

### THE PROBLEM WITH PLATFORMING

In his 2019 essay, Alexander Ash set out to reframe misogynist incels as misunderstood men venting online. Clearly, his efforts weren’t in vain, as the examples above show, of mainstream figures supporting this rebranding, and helping an active member of a misogynist community re-center incels’ narrative of male victimhood.

It’s hard to imagine the editor of the Daily Stormer sitting on a panel alongside researchers on far-right White supremacy. So why was it done here? Is this an example of what philosopher Kate Manne calls “himpathy”<sup>84</sup>—situations where men’s feelings are centered even after they have perpetrated violence or harm? Self-identified incels have surely caused harm, and not just mass violence, but also revenge porn,<sup>85</sup> cyberstalking,<sup>86</sup> and harassment.<sup>87</sup> While incels’ numbers may be limited, their misogyny and the violence they have committed is not exceptional. It’s simply not possible to separate incels from the wider spectrum of misogyny, which can be witnessed in femicide, rape, domestic violence, and other violence against women.

Providing incels a platform amplifies

BY MARIEL COOKSEY

## Why Are Gen Z Girls Attracted to the Tradwives Lifestyle?



An advertisement from Ladies Home Journal in 1948, showing a woman with an apron and a refrigerator full of food. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

At first glance, Sarah (not her real name) is your average, social-media-savvy, Generation Z girl.<sup>1</sup> Her Instagram account is typical of a “Zoomer” feminine aesthetic: inspired by the alternative, colorful style of late 1990s/early 2000s counterculture fashion, her page is full of sparkles, Hello Kitties, black-painted nails, and a photo of her Nike Airs. What you wouldn’t be able to discern at first glance is Sarah’s far-right political leanings. Supported by a follower count of over 17,000, her TikTok account provides her a substantial platform to spread her gospel of right-wing, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ

rhetoric. Mixed in with her lip-syncing videos about boys and her favorite bands, she comments frequently on the degeneracy of feminism, repeats racist stereotypes about Black men, jokes about killing liberals, and shames White people who criticize their own race.

Sarah isn't alone. She's part of a growing group of teenage girls and young women who fully embrace the misogyny

of followers on Instagram and YouTube.<sup>5</sup> These influencers use their platforms to guide "red pill"<sup>6</sup> women, teaching them how to cast off the chains of modern feminism and embrace traditionalism.<sup>7</sup> While traditionalist, gender restrictive roles for women have been prevalent in right-wing religious groups for centuries,<sup>8</sup> the tradwife movement is a uniquely social-media-based movement, defined by

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nistic talking points of the Far Right. On any given day you'll find them on TikTok preaching a "hip-to-be-square" lifestyle: modest, often zealously religious, and purposefully restricted. In their videos and on their Twitter accounts, between posting fashion inspiration and memes, they fantasize explicitly about the mythical post-war Americana of the mid-20th century, which they envision as full of Aryan nuclear families and blonde, Tupperware-touting women who are submissive to their husbands.

The online trend Sarah is part of is known as "tradwifery": a movement that's part aesthetic and part ideology, encouraging women to embrace supposedly feminine characteristics like chastity and submissiveness, and trade feminist empowerment for a patriarchal vision of gender norms.<sup>2</sup> In some circles, being a tradwife—short for "traditional wife"—also means being a fundamentalist Christian, and accepting that women shouldn't work, shouldn't have the right to vote, and should fully submit to their husbands and their faith to live a happy life of homemaking.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging as an online movement around the 2016 election and the rise of the Alt Right, the first generation of tradwives, dominated by Millennial housewives and mothers,<sup>4</sup> is older than Sarah. The most popular tradwife influencers have a large audience, with the largest 10-15 accounts having tens of thousands

of followers on Instagram and YouTube.<sup>5</sup> These influencers use their platforms to guide "red pill"<sup>6</sup> women, teaching them how to cast off the chains of modern feminism and embrace traditionalism.<sup>7</sup> While traditionalist, gender restrictive roles for women have been prevalent in right-wing religious groups for centuries,<sup>8</sup> the tradwife movement is a uniquely social-media-based movement, defined by contemporary marketing strategies and social clout. Popular influencers will often post YouTube videos giving advice on how to make your husband happy,<sup>9</sup> how to express femininity in a "God Honoring" way,<sup>10</sup> and general criticisms of feminism to their numerous subscribers.<sup>11</sup>

While not all tradwives associate with White supremacist politics—and not all are Christian fundamentalists—the movement offers an elegant solution for women seeking acceptance in White nationalist factions. Some popular tradwife influencers are explicit in their connection to far-right ideas, using their platforms to disseminate White supremacist propaganda. Social media personalities Ayla Stewart (aka "Wife With A Purpose")<sup>12</sup> and Caitlin Huber (aka "Mrs. Midwest")<sup>13</sup> both follow and interact with White nationalist accounts online. Stewart in particular has spread White supremacist ideas such as "replacement theory," the conspiratorial belief that White people are being systematically replaced by non-White immigrants.<sup>14</sup> More prominent influencers, including Huber, are more circumspect in their political associations, following White supremacist and neonazi accounts on Instagram but not explicitly repeating pro-White propaganda.<sup>15</sup>

But with the rise of new social platforms like TikTok, which generally appeal to a younger demographic, the movement is poised to spread as a new generation of girls are introduced to #trادلife. Genera-

tion Z—those born after 1996<sup>16</sup> and colloquially known as "Zoomers"<sup>17</sup>—is a cohort of internet natives. Scarcely aware of a pre-internet reality, they were raised in the "Lean In" era of feminism and are immersed in a constant stream of web information. They also statistically skew more progressive, are less intent on fixed gender roles,<sup>18</sup> and are more ethnically diverse<sup>19</sup> and queerer<sup>20</sup> than most generations before them. But amid this overall trend of greater progressivism, a subsection of far-right Gen Z women is mounting its own social media backlash. Within this world, women and girls, sometimes as young as 16, are amassing tens of thousands of views on TikTok by presenting themselves as aspiring tradwives, lip-syncing or dancing to trending rap or pop music as they disparage women's rights, quote the Bible, and muse about the modest outfits they'll wear and the meals they'll cook once they've married.<sup>21</sup>

Zoomers' foray into tradwifery signals a massive change in the movement. Not only is this ideology becoming more mainstream with younger, Right-leaning female audiences, it's becoming integrated into Gen Z internet culture, taking on timely cultural trends, political views, and concepts of gender. Tradwifery is a complicated movement, entangled in a difficult history of patriarchal religiosity, racism, and misogyny, but aspiring Zoomer tradwives are actively simplifying it, transforming tradwife ideology into fun, musical video bites, easily digested by their followers in 30 seconds or less.

While much research into the Far Right has focused on young men's radicalization into White supremacist and White nationalist groups, considerably less attention has been paid to the radicalization process of modern-day teenage girls. But just as young men have been lured into the far-right pipeline by edgy meme culture and red pill rhetoric, trad girls may be crafting their own domestic wing of the movement, one like at a time.

## THE GENERATIONAL BACKLASH TO FEMINISM

Understanding the draw of tradwifery requires first understanding the historical and cultural context in which Generation Z has come of age, particularly in

regard to feminism and gender roles.

A certain strand of third wave feminism, which took hold in the U.S. in the early 2010s, popularized “individualistic careerism feminism”<sup>22</sup> or what we’ve come to know as corporate feminism or #girlboss culture.<sup>23</sup> This version of feminism was epitomized by works like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 book, *Lean In*, which focused more on individual women pursuing corporate success over systemic critiques of gender bias at work.<sup>24</sup> This style of corporate feminism was criticized for prioritizing capitalistic success for elite, primarily White women intent on competing with male colleagues at the expense of broader group solidarity, intersectionalism, and racial justice.<sup>25</sup>

Corporate feminism also paid little attention to the first wave dream of domestic revolution. In pursuit of financial independence and social equality, material feminist leaders in the 19th and early 20th centuries believed that women would need to socialize housework and childcare in order to manage both work and domestic life and thus campaigned for the creation of “housewife coopera-

tives,” day-care centers, community kitchens, and dining halls that would be run by paid female domestic workers.<sup>26</sup> In theory, employing collective or communal mothering in order to give women working in other fields a chance to progress in their careers was a good idea. In practice, these ideas were implemented in a system of racial capitalism, leading to the contradictions of this ideology being resolved by employing (and underpaying) working class and poor women of color.<sup>27</sup>

We are now in the fourth wave of U.S. feminism—a movement progressively more focused on diversity, intersectionalism, queerness, and openness about sexual violence and assault than earlier waves. But for all these positive steps, many women have been failed by the compromises of modern feminism and late-stage capitalism, unable to find a workable solution for the quandary of work-life balance. Gen Z girls have watched their working mothers lean into unequal workplaces only to earn less money in a capitalist system that also devalues their domestic workload.<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, the Far Right has renewed its old backlash fight against fem-

inism, warning that working women empowered by feminism are stunting their children’s growth and tearing the traditional family structure apart.<sup>29</sup> As academic Angela Nagle explains in her book *Kill All Normies*, this argument debuted at the height of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and early ’70s, when conservative anti-feminists like Phyllis Schlafly battled the Equal Rights Amendment on the grounds that women’s equality would “destroy the US family, moral restraints and tradition.”<sup>30</sup> Backlash leaders in Schlafly’s era celebrated traditional gender roles for women as the backbone of the nation, honoring domestic labor and childbearing as vital work in the service of preserving tradition and a conservative status quo. Fifty years later, the Far Right has reaffirmed that message and make explicit its racial agenda as well: that White women embracing #tradlife is the key to saving the “White race.”<sup>31</sup>

And so, today, young women trying to gain access to male-dominated far-right circles encounter an endless stream of anti-feminist rhetoric, and often proudly embrace the label. On female-exclusive right-wing Reddit forums like r/Red-PillWomen, they echo far-right talking points about women’s sexual value or biological duties, and how feminism doesn’t liberate women but diverts them from their true calling as mothers and wives.<sup>32</sup> In the mid-2010s, Alt Right social media influencers Lauren Southern and Lana Lokteff recruited women by framing their choice to reject feminism and join the Far Right as an act of empowerment, leaving behind the “false consciousness” of liberalism, equal rights, and anti-racism.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps affected by their own experience with working mothers or simply influenced by far-right talking points, aspiring Gen Z tradwives often echo the same anti-feminist, anti-work, and pro-family sentiments. Yet, despite these claims, aspiring tradwives on TikTok also unknowingly repeat feminist rhetoric: openly promoting gender equality in relationship decision-making; pushing back against objectification and over-sexualization of women, particularly of under-age girls; and criticizing the porn industry for normalizing sexual violence and aggression against

### The “Liberated” Feminist

Wears tons of makeup because of her low self esteem

Smokes marijuana

Sleeps around to improve her self esteem but it only makes her feel worse

Got a crappy flower tattoo when she was 15

Chubby from her diet of fast food and microwave meals

Has disdain for men and “male patriarchy” but complains that she can’t find a decent man

Thinks God is gender-fluid

Raised Catholic but hates Church

Has no moral code to live by, only endless nihilistic relativism



Damaged hair from over dying

Fake, cheddared tan

Believes guns should be illegal because of homicide rate, but thinks abortion should be legal

Wears clothing that barely fits her

Claims she’s bisexual but has only dated men

Works minimum wage job because gender studies degree got her nowhere

Aborted her own child, has 3 cats

Looks down on prayer

Loves Christ, family, and husband in that order

Feminine and modest

Loves her God-given natural beauty and wears light makeup

Loves and follows husband, as the Church follows Christ

Husband loves her as Christ loves the Church

Beautiful figure from healthy, homemade meals, and following Church fasts

### The Tradwife



In 20s but already married with beautiful children

Long and beautiful natural hair

Homeschools children so they aren’t taught progressive liberal BS

Prays without ceasing

Husband works hard to support the family

Has taught her children to memorize the Our Father, Creed, and Trisagion prayers from age 5

Bilingual, and knowledgeable of family tradition and roots

A meme from the tradwife reddit forum on the differences between feminists and tradwives. Recreated by PRA.

women.<sup>34</sup> Much like Schlafly in the '70s, today's anti-feminist tradwives use the victories of feminism to undermine the very movement that fought for them to have such agency. And as young, mostly unmarried people in middle-class America—where many aspects of basic gender equality are taken for granted—their advocacy is mostly risk-free, allowing them to push back against liberal convention and modernity without much threat of facing danger or oppression themselves. Tradwifery, as the technologized, aestheticized movement it has become, offers a perfect gateway for teenage women to experiment with anti-feminist right-wing and far-right politics from the safety of their parents' homes.

## INCREASINGLY COMPLICATED GENDER ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Another important factor for aspiring Gen Z tradwives is the promise of a fulfilling, traditionalist relationship. In response to their generational peers' widespread acceptance of queerness and gender non-conformity, tradwife influencers often conspicuously push back by aggressively romanticizing heterosexuality and heteronormative gender roles.<sup>35</sup>

***These mythical portrayals also serve as “coded language on demographic panics,” harkening back to a time when the American identity was primarily White, conservative, and heterosexual, and making an implicit call to restore that status quo.***

As Miranda Christou, a senior fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, details in her article “#TradWives: Sexism as Gateway to White Supremacy,” words like “tradition” and “traditional” invoke notions of heritage and nationalism, even if, as she adds, these traditions are merely “frozen moments in history arbitrarily chosen from the cultural repertoire as ‘the’ authentic expression of the national collective.”<sup>36</sup> For tradwives, that means their depiction of tradition in TikTok videos tends to glamorize a mythical post-war 1950s Americana, populated by White, often blonde, nuclear families

sitting around the fire, eating dinner, or attending church. As Christou surmises, these mythical portrayals also serve as “coded language on demographic panics,” harkening back to a time when the American identity was primarily White, conservative, and heterosexual, and making an implicit call to restore that status quo.<sup>37</sup>

These videos paint a clear picture: traditionalist Gen Z women are dreaming of a perfect marriage in a culturally conservative world, untouched by queerness, immigration, and progressivism. In these fantasies they are adored homemakers, respected and cared for, financially and emotionally, by traditionally masculine men—men who are wealthy, fertile, handsome, and strong, but also tender, kind, and cognizant of their needs.<sup>38</sup>

In reality, gender dynamics are shifting quickly for Generation Z; particularly in liberal-leaning groups, more Gen Z men are ditching traditional notions of manliness in favor of a more empathetic vision of their gender identity,<sup>39</sup> with about half of the Gen Z population agreeing that traditional gender norms and gender labels are outdated.<sup>40</sup> This is in tandem with a noticeable uptick in self-identified fluidity, with 41 percent of polled Zoomers from Western countries identifying as “neutral”

in terms of their position “on the spectrum of masculinity and femininity.”<sup>41</sup>

This evolving vision of masculinity has caused intense backlash among far-right Gen Z men. Young male White nationalists have begun putting enormous stock in supporting and identifying with male chauvinism and aggressive heterosexuality, attempting to distance themselves from what they perceive to be their generation's degeneracy. Women-bashing and slut-shaming as a way to assert dominance is nearly ubiquitous in Zoomer Christian paleoconservative and White nationalist circles. There, the general

attitude toward women can be summed up by America First leader Nick Fuentes' unofficial mantra: “no e-girls, never!”<sup>42</sup> (E-girls is a slang term for teenage girl influencers with a cute, anime-inspired aesthetic.<sup>43</sup>) Young far-right groups like Fuentes' base—commonly known as Groypers<sup>44</sup>—typically exclude women and girls.<sup>45</sup> Fuentes has also openly argued that “women cannot be red pillled,”<sup>46</sup> and thus cannot be part of the movement<sup>47</sup>; or, as he more succinctly put it, “my ideology is fuck women.”<sup>48</sup>

While Fuentes' sentiment cannot be applied to all young paleoconservatives, his viewpoint (and his popularity among Gen Z White nationalists) could be indicative of the Far Right's evolving gender relations. If women are no longer able to participate in the Far Right—even in gender segregated spheres like the r/RedPill-Women forum—the traditional symbiotic relationship between men and women in White nationalist movements could be changing. As Kathleen Belew, author of *Bring the War Home*, recounts in her chapter “Race War and White Women,” women's activism has always been crucial to the success of White supremacist groups, strengthening social and familial bonds within the movements and providing more attractive spokespeople for White supremacist positions on female sexuality, “race-mixing,” and abortion.<sup>49</sup> But if the Groypers' female-exclusionary trend continues or spreads, it may represent a pattern where both far-right men and women share the same desire for a traditionalist, heteronormative relationship, but have diametrically opposed expectations for what that looks like, leaving them unable to relate to one another.

## THE FEAR OF COLLAPSE

The last, and often underrepresented, factor drawing Gen Z women to tradwifery is the fear of imminent collapse. Collapse, as an all-encompassing term, includes mass displacement, economic depression, food scarcity as agricultural production fails, political upheaval, the end of non-renewable resources, disease, war, and irremediable climate change.<sup>50</sup> Eco-anxiety in particular is common, with many Zoomers and Mil-

lennials feeling that climate change has robbed them of their future before they've had a chance to enjoy it.<sup>51</sup> In the wake of such gloomy prospects, many young people have replaced fantasies of flashy, consumptive lifestyles with a romanticized vision of agrarian life known as "cottagecore,"<sup>52</sup> dreaming of finding a stable microclimate in which they can own a house, grow their own food, and live a happy life.

The anger and helplessness young people feel about collapse is justified by current trends, but it also makes them vulnerable to dangerous movements that want to help them make sense of this downward spiral. As Dr. Eviane Leidig,

***The anger and helplessness young people feel about collapse is justified by current trends, but it also makes them vulnerable to dangerous movements that want to help them make sense of this downward spiral.***

a researcher on the Far Right, gender, and online radicalization, explains in a 2020 *Impakter* article, "From Incels to Tradwives," young men and women are attracted to far-right ideologies because "these extreme movements simplify an increasingly complex world, one that is easy to retreat into through chat rooms and algorithmic recommendations. The nostalgia for a mythic past in which gender norms are dictated by a clear division of labor, or the reinforcement of social status according to biological masculinity and femininity, becomes appealing."<sup>53</sup> In short, the trad movements may be displacing the anxiety young people feel about collapse onto anxieties about relationship and gender.

In the case of aspiring tradwives, the homespun lifestyle they seek inadvertently promotes this necessary civilization-wide return to a less consumptive lifestyle. In fact, many of the far-right religiopolitical ideologies Gen Z tradwives appear to align with include elements of communitarianism and the return to a simpler life. There is even a small subsection of cottagecore adherents (albeit more Left-leaning) who identify as anarcho-primitivists or "an-

prims," advocating for the dismantling of industrialized civilization in order to return to a more eco-conscious hunter-gatherer style of society.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, from a White nationalist point of view, the return to a rural lifestyle makes obvious connections to colonization and frontierism, harkening back to cultural beliefs like Manifest Destiny and racial "civilizing" as a justification for European expansion.<sup>55</sup> The Gen Z tradwife vision of cottagecore is not eco-minded or diverse, but rather a knowing nod to the White supremacist politics that governed American conservationism for over a century—the same politics that fought to preserve nature for the sole

enjoyment of White Americans.<sup>56</sup> As student journalist Claire Ollivain writes in a piece on "Cottagecore, Colonialism, and the Far-Right," the line between "Blood and Soil" *Volkism* and cottagecore has already blurred online, with some speculating that the Far Right may be "exploiting [cottagecore] as a recruitment base targeting people who already accept 'white, westernized beliefs about nature.'"<sup>57</sup> This phenomenon is reflected in TikTok tradwife content with videos displaying various images of White heteronormative families exploring nature and enjoying an agrarian lifestyle.<sup>58</sup>

As such, tradwifery strongly appeals to White supremacist accelerationists who welcome the collapse of society in order to return to a White-dominated, patriarchal status quo.<sup>59</sup> Annie Kelly, a PhD student who researches White supremacist women,<sup>60</sup> told me in an interview that many Far Rightists welcome societal breakdown because they believe that the outcome of such a collapse will serve as a lesson to hard-headed feminists who refused to embrace their own inferiority and will thus suffer without the protection of a man. By embracing the sectarian

politics and rigid relationship structures of a fundamentalist lifestyle, aspiring tradwives presume they can not only expect to receive such male protection in a dangerous future but are also freed from the burden of participating in an increasingly complicated globalist society right now. Perhaps in the face of enormous uncertainty about the future and their role as women in it, aspiring teenage tradwives may see this protection as a promising alternative.

Our modern world is a difficult one for young women, particularly for those entering adulthood and trying to navigate their worth in a highly technologized, oversaturated social media market constantly bombarding them with information about acceptable femininity and their place in society. For some Gen Z women, tradwifery offers a simple offline solution; regardless of how racist, misogynistic, and extremist these spaces may appear to outsiders, it's clear that the comforting, nostalgic aesthetics of the modern Far Right is speaking to these aspiring tradwives. If we are to re-route the next generation of underage women away from this toxic lifestyle, we need to reflect on the unfinished work in our own politics, fully embracing and acknowledging the fear of collapse and the failure of modern feminism to support those women who want to choose an alternative path.

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BY DAMON T. BERRY

## A Storm Is Coming

Horror and Hope in QAnon Apocalypticism



A woman at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, carrying an image of Jesus wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat and the QAnon slogan, WWG1WGA, on his chest. (Credit: Tyler Merbler/Flickr.com)

On October 28, 2017, the now infamous “Q” posted for the first time on 4chan in a chat thread titled “Calm before the Storm.”<sup>1</sup> The thread’s title seemed to reference a puzzling statement President Trump made while posing for photos with military leaders earlier that month, suggesting that the gathering might represent “the calm before the storm.” While most news media took the statement as a reference to the likelihood of military action against North Korea, Iran, or ISIL, some among President Trump’s base interpreted it differently. Among the community of his supporters who later came to be

known as “Anons,” Trump’s words at the meeting were used to confirm that an operation was underway to destroy the president’s “Deep State” enemies and that Q was signaling to them, the Anons, what was coming next.<sup>2</sup> The post read:

HRC [Hillary Rodham Clinton] extradition already in motion effective yesterday with several countries in case of cross border run. Passport approved to be flagged effective 10/30 @ 12:01am. Expect massive riots organized in defiance and others fleeing the US to occur. US M’s [likely referring to the U.S. Marines] will conduct the operation while NG [National Guard] activated. Proof

check: Locate a NG member and ask if activated for duty 10/30 across most major cities.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent QDrops—as the riddle-like postings from the individual or individuals thought to be Q came to be known—solidified Anons’ conviction that a covert war was raging behind the scenes. One faction in that war, led by Trump, wanted to save America; the other was led by a secretive cabal of maleficent elites who wanted to destroy America as part of a larger plot to impose dictatorial rule over all humanity. Nothing less than the future of the human race was at stake in a cosmic battle between good and evil.

A number of scholars and journalists—including Adrienne LaFrance in *The Atlantic*, and religion professor Amarnath Amarasingam and extremism scholar Marc-André Argentino in a joint article for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point—have provided important perspectives on the rise and spread of the QAnon phenomenon and its potential danger, as well as its roots within, and specific appeal to right-wing expressions of Christianity. But the religious undertones of the movement are

radical rhetoric and violence those stakes seem to justify—will be part of the American political and social landscape for the foreseeable future.

### THE APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARY

Going back to its Greek roots, “apocalypse” refers to something being uncovered or revealed. The word derived its popular meaning—the destruction of the world in some cataclysmic event—from its association with the Bible’s Apocalypse of St. John, alternatively titled in English

**QAnon’s popularity seems to have declined since the violent events of January 6, at least for now. But the apocalyptic imagination it nurtured will be part of the American political and social landscape for the foreseeable future.**

even more specific than that, and understanding it requires recognizing the apocalyptic imagination expressed by key QAnon influencers: a presentation of horror and hope that mirrors Trump’s political rhetoric and continues a tradition of deploying visions of tribulation and redemption in the political discourse in American social life.

Of course, Trump did not remain in office and his political enemies were not arrested, nor did he take power in a military-backed coup, as some Anons thought might happen. The alleged plan Q cryptically communicated to the Anon community did not materialize. In the aftermath of the devastating violence at the Capitol on January 6, some Anons, like the infamous QAnon Shaman, expressed remorse.<sup>4</sup> However, others viewed these seeming failures as part of a larger plan. They saw Trump’s apparent defeat as part of an ongoing conflict between the forces of darkness and tyranny and the forces of light and freedom. And even as some former Anons distanced themselves from Q, their references to the apocalyptic narrative inherent in QAnon discourse remained. QAnon’s popularity seems to have declined since the violent events of January 6, at least for now. But the apocalyptic imagination it nurtured—and the

translations as the Book of Revelation. In her 2012 book *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation*, religion scholar Elaine Pagels discusses how early Christians, from around 100 to 300 C.E., began to distinguish between those who were saved or damned based upon their position toward specific doctrines. “Ever since,” she writes, “Christians have adapted [John’s] visions to changing times, reading their own social, political, and religious conflict into the cosmic war he so powerfully evokes.”<sup>5</sup> Examples of this abound through early centuries of the first millennium, to the time of the Reformation when both Catholics and Protestants accused each other of being manifestations of the Antichrist, to the popular *Left Behind* series of books and films that blended 19th century dispensationalism with the popular 20th century tropes among some evangelicals about the Antichrist emerging from the European Union. Pagels, however, goes on to say that John’s apocalyptic vision in Revelation “appeals not only to fear but also to hope.”<sup>6</sup> Her point is that alongside the scripture’s horrid images of judgment and death, there is also the promise of “a glorious new world” in which the faithful will enjoy “abounding...joy and delight.”<sup>7</sup>

These have been the two dimensions of

Christian apocalypticism since the early centuries of the tradition: the sheer terror and violence of the End Times and of central figures like the Beast, and the promise of a new reign of righteousness and peace after the defeat of God’s enemies. Further, as Pagels notes, apocalyptic visions often incorporate the authors’ social and political views. Though Q conspiracies have been popular among White evangelical Protestants, both of these points from Pagels’ work are clearly visible among the Anons regardless of their individual tradition.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, QAnon apocalyptic discourse plays on the tropes of horror and hope as Anons simultaneously read QDrops as confirmation that evil forces are at work to destroy and enslave good people and that these forces will be defeated if the faithful will just, in the often repeated words among Anons, “trust the plan.”

That much is visible in considering the work of three major QAnon influencers: the popular videos produced by a QAnon content creator who goes by Joe M; a book titled *QAnon and 1000 Years of Peace: Destroying the New World Order and Taking the Kingdom of Christ by Force!*; and podcasts and interviews with a Q “interpreter” who goes by the online name Praying Medic. These examples demonstrate the power of apocalyptic imagery to the Q movement and how, even where influencers aren’t explicitly invoking Christian beliefs, the apocalyptic narrative of enduring and overcoming evil is key to understanding how Anons imagine history unfolding during the Trump presidency and now.

### THE COMING STORM

In a video originally posted on October 17, 2018, an anonymous content creator known as Joe M, under the tag “Storm is Upon Us,” posted a video titled “Q—We Are The Plan.”<sup>9</sup> In it, he explained that the world has come “under the growing influence of a vast transgenerational criminal mafia” known as “the Deep State or the cabal.” Agents of this powerful group, he continued, now occupy the “highest levels of power in government, corporations, and education... [and] most dangerously of all, they achieved almost total



influence over the media.” Over flashes of images of Beyoncé and George Soros, he claimed that the cabal was responsible for human trafficking and drug cartels, as well as creating “false narratives” of racism and colonialism to weaken peoples’ resolve to push back against “globalism.” Where that failed, he asserted, they perpetrated devastating wars. They

unveiled; new scientific advancements would improve people’s lives in every conceivable way. Further, the income tax—which the narrator said was “illegally imposed to pay back interest on loans taken from the cabal banking system”—would be abolished, ushering in an era of economic freedom and prosperity. In short, paradise will be realized in an age

Although he didn’t name it as such, Joe M painted a picture of what evangelical Christians call spiritual warfare, explaining that “raging around us is the final phase of a vast shadow war, not between nations but between the forces of good and the most unimaginable of evils.” With this, the video concludes with the assurance that Q is here to make this war intelligible to the public and ends with the exhortation:

History is being made.  
You are the saviors of mankind.  
Nothing will stop what is coming.  
Nothing.

Joe M reinforces this narrative in a video from March 8, 2019, titled “Q—The Plan To Save The World.”<sup>11</sup> In this video, once again, he blames the global criminal cabal for every imaginable atrocity and for deceiving the world into believing that “human nature” is behind the suffering in the world. Whatever the mode of suffering—crime, racism, poverty, child sex trafficking—he exclaims that “it was the criminals all along.” However, once again, he asserts that the tide has turned in favor of righteousness. Trump and “brave patriots” have achieved victory “against the greatest force of evil the world has ever known.” Yes, we have endured horrors, but still, there is hope if our faith and commitment hold.

The several videos originally posted by Joe M in 2018 and 2019 demonstrate how, while biblical references were plentiful in the Q community, they weren’t the only outlet for Anons to express their apocalyptic readings of QDrops. Whether or not they were explicitly Christian or made reference to scripture, QAnon content frequently followed a common pattern: describing the horrors of the present perpetrated by an evil cabal to point to the promise of hope in the future when they are defeated.

## A THOUSAND YEARS OF PEACE

In other contexts, references to the Bible and to Revelation are more pronounced. One such example is *QAnon and 1000 Years of Peace: Destroying the New World Order and Taking the Kingdom of Christ by Force!*, published in October 2020, and written by a woman who goes



Still from “Q—The Plan to Save the World” by Joe M., depicting the suffering created by a global criminal cabal, and the patriots that are working to dismantle the Deep State. (Credit: YouTube.com)

also engaged in ritualistic abominations and installed “rogue operators” within the American government to weaken the military and political opponents and funded even the Islamic State. They intended to destroy humanity, he claims, even while they sought to dominate it. And the conspiracy targeted the United States specifically because it represented the hope of the world.

While the cabal had been aiming for an “endgame” that would have resulted in nuclear destruction, explained Joe M, it was thwarted by Trump’s unlikely election in 2016. And in the aftermath of that sea change, the cabal was losing ground thanks to “patriots” who were fighting to end their stranglehold on humanity. And when they won, Joe M continued, a new world of possibility would open up. Free energy technologies once kept from the public, to “force our dependency on their fossil fuel monopolies,” would be released; cures for diseases would be

of peace, plenty, and freedom. Trump’s war on the Deep State, aided by Q, would lead to the revelation of a “global human renaissance the likes of which we have never seen.” The video concludes with the appeal for the viewer to “be the plan,” as the words “Q Be The Plan” is flashed in stylized silver letters on the screen.

Another video by Joe M posted on January 28, 2019, titled “Q—Dark To Light,” reiterates this narrative, but with more attention to the use of nostalgia, recalling times when Americans took pride in their country.<sup>10</sup> Here again, the narrator talks of the cabal’s “endgame,” a key component of which was Hillary Clinton’s run for president. Had she won, Joe M says, the world would have been plunged into a worldwide “nuclear holocaust” within eight years—a fate only averted by the “miracle” of Trump’s election. Now, with the aid of “the plan” led by “brave patriots,” the cabal was losing their hold on the people and on our government.



Still of Melissa Redpill The World from the video “Basilea Melissa,” talking about her religion. (Credit: Omega Kingdom Ministries/Youtube.com)

by the name Melissa Redpill The World. The term “red pill”—adopted from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, and a common term among the Alt Right and other right-wing circles—means “to be woken up.”<sup>12</sup> Melissa explains that she wrote the book to help readers “untangle the maze of confusion and fear that has surrounded the book of Revelation.” Her aim in the book, then, is to use the Bible to shed light on the revelations from Q and to use Q to further explain the meaning of the Bible. She’d felt a calling to do this kind of work, she writes, after what she calls “the Great Awakening” in October 2016. This refers to October 2, 2016: the day on which she

website for “Freedom Force Battalion.” Many of the videos associated with this account have been deleted, but the Freedom Force Battalion group still has a presence on other sites, including Gab and on a website called *freedomforce.live*.<sup>14</sup> Both sites engage in interweaving biblical references, discussion of Q topics, and copies of QDrops in an interpretive framework to make sense of current events and to prepare for what might be happening next. The *freedomforce.live* site offers Q merchandise; Melissa’s book in audio, print, and in Spanish translation; as well as links to outside sources like statements from Trump and other posts associated

QAnon catchphrase—variations on “It’s going to be Biblical”—that underscores how enmeshed the movement has become with certain expressions of conservative Christianity, just as Melissa Redpill’s efforts represent a specific weaving of Christian apocalyptic tradition with QAnon conspiracism. And all of these have merged in the movement’s feverish support for Trump. Playing on older tropes in American evangelical discourse, Melissa writes on *freedomforce.live* concerning the book that she was compelled to do research concerning “the book of Revelation, and discovered that the New World Order IS the Beast of Revelation!” She explains further that the fight now involving Q was one in which they “are exposing this evil cabal and will destroy them, and then have 1,000 years of peace on earth.” However trying the times are, she continues, the “BAD NEWS IS ONLY FOR THE CABAL,” and “Humanity is being rescued!” Apocalypticism wedded to contemporary political events has been in style among U.S. evangelicals since at least Hal Lindsey and C. C. Carlson’s bestselling 1970 book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, but it continued in a new form as Q’s popularity peaked in 2020.

Through the exposition of key passages from the Bible, often interwoven with statements from Q or interpretations of the Bible passages in light of QDrops, Melissa Redpill establishes the absolute

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believes a number of children being kept in underground tunnels—one common conviction of QAnon adherents—were rescued, and ritual Satanic sacrifices and worship were interrupted, ushering in an era of resistance led by Trump and his allies. This date, like so much of Q lore, is tied to a vague statement made by Trump during the 2016 Presidential campaign that “there is light at the end of the tunnel.”<sup>13</sup>

She also invites readers to join her and her “band of patriots” on the YouTube

with her Gab account. When describing her work on the *freedomforce.live* site, Melissa explained:

I have been facilitating Bible studies for 35 years, and a full-time missionary for the last eight years. I woke up during the Feast of Trumpets 2016, just before President Trump was elected. As soon as I began finding out about the horrifying corruption ... I knew what was happening was monumental! BIBLICAL!<sup>15</sup> The last word represents a common

vileness of the enemy “cabal” and exhorts the reader to fight the enemy for the sake of establishing a pure and wholesome society. She describes the opposition as satanically inspired and guilty of the most shocking crimes, including the ritual murder of children and human trafficking. She alleges that all of this is facilitated by political corruption and global organized crime networks that include political elites, the Illuminati, the Rothschild family, major corporations and

banks, celebrities, and those whom she calls “fake Jews.” (Although she doesn’t explain what she means by this last phrase, it echoes the current of antisemitism that runs through the movement, which historian Deborah Lipstadt notes is common among Trump’s base of Christian support despite their apparent philosemitism and support for Israel.<sup>16</sup>)

All of these actors, she argues, were part of what she calls “a worldwide criminal pedo mafia.” But after the “Great Awakening,” and the revelations from Q, she writes, “We are holding on, overcoming, keeping [Jesus’] words, and helping Him smash their evil kingdom to bits!” When this evil cabal is finally and inevitably destroyed, those loyal to God “will be kings and priests and reign with Him [Jesus] on the Earth.” The “NWO [New World Order] satanists” may seem to have the upper hand now, she argues, but soon Jesus will conquer this enemy and usher in the days of peace and justice on the earth. And amid the satanic

and pedophilic horror of the Beast and its agents, hope remains assured because of the Word of God and because of “our Q Army, with Q posting periodically, helping us stay together and focused.”

Interestingly, on January 23, 2021, Melissa Redpill self-published a new revision of her book, with a new title—*End Times and 1000 Years of Peace*—and references to Q all but eliminated. The text still makes references to her “Great Awakening,” the importance of the 2020 election, the “Worldwide Mafia Cabal of satanists,” and apocalyptic passages from the Bible, but QDrops play no specific role in the discussion. She mentions Anons once, concerning “Patriots destroying the Deep State,” but explicit references to Q are gone. However, Melissa Redpill is still quite active in purveying the apocalyptic narrative she wove in her earlier work. After the failed insurrection, she seems to have set about to reframe her apocalypticism for a post-Q environment.

## THE DEVIL HAS ONLY A SHORT TIME

Dave Hayes, also known as Praying Medic, is among the most prominent Q influencers: a frequent presence on various podcasts and, as of 2020, in mainstream news reports concerning the lawsuit he and others filed against YouTube after they were banned for sharing videos that might provoke violence.<sup>17</sup> Hayes has self-published several books, including *Divine Healing Made Simple* (2013), *Seeing in the Spirit Made Simple* (2015), and *American Sniper: Lessons in Spiritual Warfare* (2015), which, according to the book’s description, draws upon “scenes from the popular film *American Sniper*” to “[give] readers a look inside the mind of a well-prepared kingdom soldier.”

In an interview posted on YouTube in July of 2020, Hayes describes how he came to be involved with QAnon. He believes Q is an “open-source intelligence operation developed by the U.S. military and backed by President Trump.” And

*Still of Dave Hayes from the video “Praying Medic Learning to Hear God’s Voice Truthseekah Podcast,” talking about his spiritual connections. (Credit: Truthseekah on Youtube.com)*



he became a Q researcher and influencer after he began frequently dreaming of Q—dreams he believed were sent to him by God, as a “divine assignment... to follow Q” and “decode Q’s posts.” Much like Melissa Redpill stated, Hayes sees his mission as performing the kind of incisive and interpretative work that his listeners can’t devote themselves to, “sort[ing] through” QDrops and associated material to “put it in some context” for his audience. “I consider this,” he said, “to be a service to my fellow man.” In this way, Hayes positions himself as a teacher for the Q community, using divinely-inspired insights from his dreams to decode QDrops and explain how they bear on current political and social events.

Hayes’ view of prophecy, though, is

is a podcast from June 20, 2019, in which he discusses QDrops with news about Trump’s position toward Iran, as well as Q posts that he believes are signaling that the CIA and Deep State actors are secretly in charge of North Korea.<sup>18</sup> In his exposition of these connections, Hayes discusses the usual QAnon fare—CIA and Deep State operatives controlling nations that engage in human trafficking and are connected to the larger machinations of the cabal. But in this podcast, the pattern of horror and hope continues. The “globalists” are cast as fighting a losing battle against Trump and his allies and Trump’s effort to ensure that such corruption never occurs again will lead to “public trials and...public executions,” likely conducted by the military to achieve “justice.” On

or there would be such civil unrest brought on by “pissed off patriotic people” that the military would have to intervene and take control of the government. While Hayes claimed he was praying for peace, he also promised that no peaceful transition of power could happen. Looking at the presence of the National Guard and the perimeter around the Capitol in January, Hayes called it proof that corrupt government actors who subverted the election “know what’s coming.” However changed the circumstances might be, the apocalyptic narrative of first horror, then hope, persisted, as Hayes predicted that the devastation of another revolutionary war would eventually give way to peace under an uncorrupted government free from the influence of a “globalist shill like Biden.”

### ***In Anons’ pattern of horror and hope, globalists are cast as fighting a losing battle against Trump that will lead to public trials and executions. But on the other side of this carnage is a hopeful future, free of corruption or demonic cabals.***

different than Melissa Redpill’s. Rather than seeing QDrops as a means for prophetic guidance for future events, Hayes explains in the interview that he sees the posts as a means to put events into context. Regarding the cryptic nature of the QDrops, Hayes explains that Q cannot clearly state what is going on because of “national security laws,” but also because of “bad actors” in the “Deep State” whom Q and his allies are trying to evade. One might then see that for Hayes, the point of Q’s mission is to not predict the future. Hayes argues the point of the drops is to create a sense of awareness of what Trump and his allies are doing to thwart the malicious plans of the cabal, not to predict what will happen next. He argues further that Q’s message is essentially that “the two-tiered justice system” that has allowed wealthy and elite people to escape justice is being dismantled, and this message “gives people hope.”

On his own podcasts, Hayes discusses a number of topics—including “How God Speaks through Emotions,” “How God Makes His Plans Come to Pass,” and general news analysis—alongside his interpretation of QDrops. An example of this

the other side of this carnage is the implication of a hopeful future, free of corruption or demonic cabals.

That podcast, of course, was recorded during the Trump presidency with the full expectation that Trump and his allies would prevail. At this time, too, Q was still quite active. However, once Trump seemed to have lost all legal avenues to remain in office, the tone of Hayes’ exposition began to change. In his show on January 8, 2021—recorded two days after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and titled “Welcome to the Second American Revolution”—Hayes attempts to explain why the electoral count had gone against Trump and Pence hadn’t done more to help him stay in office.<sup>19</sup>

Trump had been compelled to make every legal effort to retain power, in spite of the futility of legal challenges to voter fraud in such a corrupt system, Hayes said. But now that those avenues were exhausted, “non-civilian options” could be pursued, and Hayes continued that it appeared to him that “military intervention is on the way.” He offered two possible scenarios: either the military directed by Trump would overthrow the government,

In a more recent podcast, Praying Medic participated in an interview posted on March 15, 2021.<sup>20</sup> In it, Hayes holds out hope that the war against the “cabal” that was started under Trump will still end favorably. While many believed that, following Biden’s election and Trump’s departure from Washington, Q forces have lost, Hayes encouraged listeners to “look at the big picture.” Over the last 100 years, he said, globalist forces have been “brainwashing people” through higher education, the media, and other forms of indoctrination to accept “socialism,” using the New Deal and Social Security to normalize socialist solutions, as progressive steps toward a globalist world order. Until Trump emerged, there seemed to be no stopping these forces from implementing their agenda to “enslave us” under a “global government.” And although Trump may have lost political power for now, Hayes said the revolution Trump started would continue, and eventually, he and his allies will be victorious. Rather than seeing the Trump electoral defeat as a refutation of Trumpism, Hayes thinks that those behind the alleged “agenda,” like the Rothschild family and George So-

ros, recognize that their time is short and that they will ultimately lose.

Describing the cabal's efforts as ultimately doomed, Hayes quoted a portion of Revelation 12:12, which states "For this reason, rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them. Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you with great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time."<sup>21</sup> Here, too, Hayes references the hopeful possibility of the U.S. military overthrowing "the Biden regime," rooting out the cabal and its allies and establishing a new, righteous regime. So despite the seeming hopelessness of the situation in which Trump has

fail to heed his call to "make America great again." Although she notes that Trump "injects his own dangerous brand of megalomania into the country's apocalyptic tradition," his blending of terror and hope in American political discourse was not new. McQueen writes, "it is easy and even comforting to think of apocalyptic rhetoric as marginal and extremist, as beyond the pale of mainstream politics," but this is not the case. Rather, she continues, "visions of tribulation and redemption also find their way into the mainstream of American politics." McQueen's thesis has been explored in other scholarly works, like Matthew Av-

QAnon—has become so noticeably that multiple pastors have expressed their concern, as *Religion News Service* noted last August.<sup>24</sup> A January survey by the conservative American Enterprise Institute, assessing U.S. views on conspiracy theories and political violence,<sup>25</sup> found that Republicans who identify as evangelical Christians are more likely to believe the 2020 election was fraudulent, that the "Deep State" actually exists, and in the theories espoused by QAnon. As evangelical flagship magazine *Christianity Today* reflected, what was even more concerning is that the survey indicates that "white evangelicals also stood apart from other religious groups when asked about the potential for violent action," with "41 percent of those surveyed completely or somewhat" agreeing that "if elected leaders will not protect America, the people must do it themselves even if it requires taking violent actions."

The concern, then, is not only that a few rogue actors may take the bloody visions provided in the QAnon ecosystem as a call for violent action. As *Religion News Service's* Katelyn Beaty noted last August, the conspiratorial ideas associated with QAnon are "no longer fringe." Nor, as McQueen has argued, is apocalyptic thinking in U.S. politics unique to Anons. We must consider that even when the Q movement fades, many Americans and their representatives will still commit themselves to apocalyptic visions of the world and its problems, and will continue to describe their ideological and political opponents as villains who must be eliminated to pave the way for paradise, rather than fellow-laborers in building the future we all must share. Q may have begun to fall out of fashion as of January 2021, but apocalypticism is always in vogue.

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## **Nonbelievers shouldn't underestimate the power of these narratives.**

lost the presidency and no plan to keep him in power, including military action, materialized, Hayes is still hopeful that disappointment will give way to the inevitable victory over evil.

### **THE POLITICS OF DOOM**

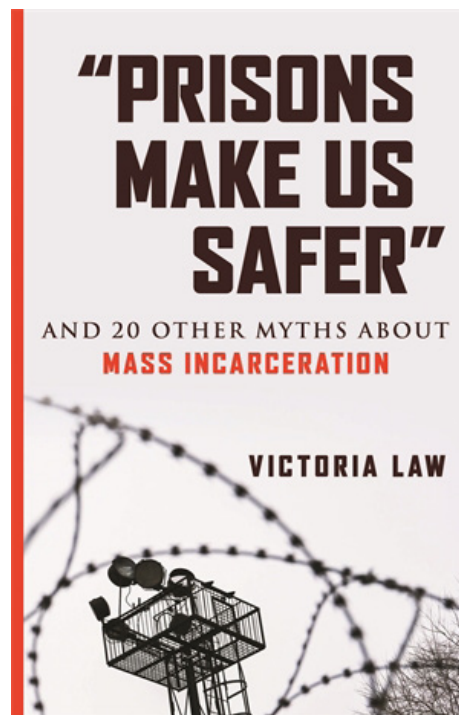
In her June 2020 *Atlantic* article on QAnon, journalist Adrienne LaFrance argues, "QAnon carries on a tradition of apocalyptic thinking that has spanned thousands of years," offering "a polemic to empower those who feel adrift." Concerning this particular influence on Anons, scholar Marc-André Argentino adds, "QAnon has become a hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the world."<sup>22</sup> This is certainly true for Joe M, Melissa Redpill The World, and Praying Medic. But the apocalyptic narrative structure found among Anons and Q influencers is not exclusive to those circles, nor is it likely to fade from American political life in the near future.

In 2016, political scientist Alison McQueen, author of the 2017 book *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, noted that then-presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump posed as a "prophet of Doom."<sup>23</sup> His speeches frequently featured references to some dread event befalling America, usually at the hands of "illegals" or terrorists, should citizens

ery Sutton's 2014 book, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, which argues that apocalyptic language has shaped not just American evangelicalism but also Americans' political sensibilities. In short, Anons are the latest expression, perhaps a distinct one, of the kind of rhetoric long present in U.S. political discourse. And there is no reason to expect that this trend will cease even after the fever for Trump and the interest in QDrops dissipates.

Nonbelievers shouldn't underestimate the power of these narratives. Of course, as Amarasingam and Argentino have stated in their article for the Combating Terrorism Center, "the QAnon ecosystem" may play a role in "radicalizing uniquely vulnerable individuals with experiences of trauma or mental illness and the consequent threat QAnon could pose to public security." But at least as important is how this sort of discourse overlapped with the populist rhetoric Trump used to gain office; the particular resonance of apocalyptic narratives among the U.S. Right; and the stunning fact that two freshman congressional representatives, Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene, have had explicit association with Q conspiracism. The proliferation of conspiracist thinking among U.S. Christians—whether about COVID-19, Jeffrey Epstein's death, or full embrace of

Excerpt:  
**“Prisons Make Us Safer”**



In 1983, the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA, now CoreCivic) was founded. That year, approximately 24,000 people were sent to state and federal prisons, bringing the total number of prisoners to 438,830. It was a 12 percent increase from the previous year’s prison population (414,362 people) and more than double the 229,721 prisoners in 1974.

Two years later, in 1985, CCA’s main competitor, Wackenhut (now called GEO Group), was formed. These two corporations have since become the giants of the private prison and detention industry, though they remain dwarfed by the larger systems of publicly managed prisons and jails.

The myth that private prisons drive mass incarceration has fueled divestment campaigns pushing universities and pension funds to divest their investments from private prison corporations. Divestment campaigns have also target-

ed banks that provide financing to these corporations. Both CoreCivic and GEO Group are set up as real estate investment trusts, which allows them to avoid taxes but requires them to distribute 90 percent of their profits to shareholders. Thus, they rely on bank financing for daily operations and expansions.

In March 2019, divestment campaigners celebrated when JP Morgan Chase, which had provided at least \$254 million in debt financing to the two largest private prison corporations, announced that it would not provide new financing to the private prison industry. Since then, eight banks have followed suit, though they still honor (and have extended) already existing financing contracts. In late

2019, California passed Assembly Bill 32, which prevents the state from entering into or renewing contracts with for-profit prison companies after January 1, 2020; the bill also phases out private facilities by 2028. The law does not extend to privately run federal prisons and city jails. It also does not require that people currently held in private prisons or detention centers be released.

While these victories are significant financial blows to private corporations that profit from caging people, they do not end mass incarceration. No one in prison (or in immigrant detention) will go home as a result of these divestments. Meanwhile, existing (and proposed new) legislation continues to send people to jails, prisons, and immigrant detention centers.

This is not to say that these corporations don’t work to expand imprisonment—and their profits. They have spent tens of millions of dollars in lobbying not only to keep and grow their busi-

nesses but to advocate for punitive laws that would lock people up for longer periods of time. GEO Group, the nation's largest private prison corporation, spent \$2.5 million on lobbying between 2004 and 2012; CCA (now CoreCivic), the second-largest private prison corporation, spent \$17.4 million on lobbying between 2002 and 2012. In 2016, GEO Group spent \$3.3 million in lobbying while CoreCivic spent \$1.8 million. Both have spent millions in political contributions as well.

But these contributions to individual lawmakers are often dwarfed by those from public sector unions, which represent guards working in government-run jails and prisons. In 1998, for instance, private prison corporations contributed \$285,996 to both Democratic and Repub-

of the 1990s, including the 1994 three-strikes ballot initiative, which resulted in the explosion of California's prison population. It has also contributed millions to electoral candidates, including to the campaigns of Governors Pete Wilson, Gray Davis, and Jerry Brown. CCPOA also holds the promise of delivering over 30,000 votes.

As of January 2017, California had 35 state prisons and 43 conservation camps, which, altogether, incarcerate approximately 129,000 people. Another 9,000 Californians were incarcerated in private prisons either within California or out of state. CCPOA opposes prison privatization, equating it with job loss and an attack on public sector jobs and unions. For years, the union successfully fought

create harmful working conditions by sending the state's most violent prisoners back to other prisons. In New York City, the Correction Officers' Benevolent Association (COBA), which represents the city's jail guards, has condemned efforts to close Rikers Island and replace it with four smaller jails that will hold only half the number of people that the city's sprawling island-jail complex currently detains. COBA contributed \$971,012 to state electoral campaigns between 2009 and 2014. The union for New York's state prison officers, which has opposed reforms to solitary confinement and parole practices, spent nearly \$1.2 million between 2009 and 2014.

Finally, and most importantly, as abolitionist and prison scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore has noted, "Ending a prison contract does not relieve anybody who's locked up of one minute of time that they owe to the building."

*Excerpted from "Prisons Make Us Safer": And 20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration by Victoria Law (Beacon Press 2021). Reprinted with permission from Beacon Press.*

*Victoria Law is a freelance journalist and author. Her books include Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women (PM Press 2009), Prison By Any Other Name: The Harmful Consequences of Popular Reform (New Press 2020), and "Prisons Make Us Safer": And 20 Other Myths About Mass Incarceration (Beacon Press 2021). She frequently writes about the intersections between mass incarceration, gender and resistance. Victoria has over 10 years of experience working with writers to shape and revise their works for publication. She is the co-editor of Don't Leave Your Friends Behind: Concrete Ways to Support Families in Social Justice Movements and Communities (PM Press 2012) and has worked with other published authors to ensure that their ideas are clearly articulated in ways that engage a wide range of readers.*

## **Focusing on private prisons also obscures the role of an even more powerful interest group and lobby—prison guard associations and unions.**

lican campaigns. In contrast, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association (CCPOA), the union for California's 31,000 state prison guards, contributed nearly \$2.2 million. Politicians understand that, unlike private prison corporations, unions also deliver votes.

Focusing on private prisons also obscures the role of an even more powerful interest group and lobby—prison guard associations and unions.

In the early 1990s, concerned that private prisons threatened public prison jobs, the Florida Police Benevolent Association created the Private Corrections Institute (now called the Private Corrections Working Group), which advocated against the privatization of incarceration. The institute developed the messaging that privatization led to more escapes, poor medical and rehab services, and increased violence in the prisons. What the institute did not acknowledge is that these issues also plagued (and continue to plague) publicly run prisons.

CCPOA is considered one of the most powerful political unions in California. The union has supported campaigns for the state's tough-on-crime measures

to keep private corporations from operating any of the state's prisons.

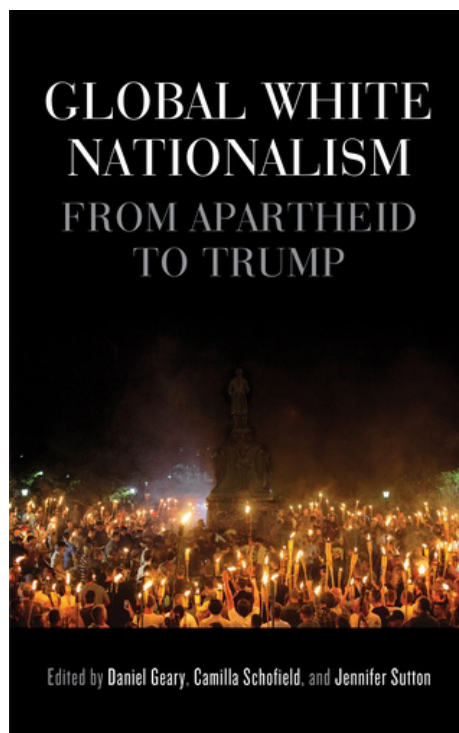
Unions representing jail and prison guards have also opposed decarceration measures, understanding that having fewer people incarcerated increases the risk of closing prisons and cutting back on correctional officer jobs. CCPOA spent more than \$250,000 on a campaign opposing 2004 revisions to the state's three-strikes law. It also spent one million dollars to kill California's 2008 Proposition 5, which would have increased funding for non-prison diversions for people convicted of nonviolent drug offenses and allowed for time-off prison sentences for the completion of prison programs.

The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) represents 85,000 prison guards nationwide. When advocates began a campaign to close the notorious super-max prison in Joliet, Illinois, where people were held in long-term solitary confinement for years, AFSCME Council 31, which represents Illinois prison guards, waged its own campaign, invoking fears for public safety. The union also filed a lawsuit claiming that the closure would

Review:  
**Global White Nationalism**

In the years following World War II, far-right ideologues, led by figures like fascist philosopher Francis Parker Yockey, attempted to re-create fascism for the post-war era. Instead of European ethnic divisions and reliance on the politics of imperialism, Yockey envisioned a new order of global coordination based on an amorphous White identity, organizing people of European descent into a loose, self-conscious diaspora, and ultimately into a globalized movement.

The bedrock of this new transnational fascist movement was demographic panic: the belief that a once pure White race was headed to extinction. This idea has motivated right-wing activists from South Africa's neonazi Afrikaner Resistance Movement, which terrorized Black South Africans during the fall of apartheid, all the way to the mass murderer who killed 51 worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. This narrative has built the impetus for some of the most atrocious violence of the 21st century, while also helping grow some of these fascist movements at a stunning rate. As one recent study



showed, most of the rioters arrested or charged for storming the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6 came from communities where White people represent a declining percentage of the local population, and where “Great Replacement” talk may find a ready audience.

*Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump*, an anthology published in September of 2020 by Manchester University Press and edited by Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield and Jennifer Sutton, considers how this approach played out in real politics, before and after the White Power movement of the 1980s ful-

ly broke with establishment conservatism. While the actors and rhetoric may change, the imperiled fragility of Whiteness remains at its center, capable of driving horrors beyond imagination.

The book's essays cover a wide range of case studies: how segregationists in the U.S. Jim Crow South coordinated with European and African fascists before and after the Civil Rights movement; how right-wing British figures, like the anti-immigrant Enoch Powell and the anti-Irish Independence crusader Ian Paisley, helped give the emerging U.S. White nationalist movement an international agenda; and how the White nationalist government of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) banked its survival on courting immigrants with appeals to White identity. These interventions give us a sense of how both White reactionaries in Rhodesia and their allies in mainland Britain dealt with demographics.

Fear of demographic replacement—the notion that White people would be racially “swamped” and overrun—flows through every essay in the book as a deep, motivating force for the varied, interna-



tional movements examined by the authors. It explains how the White nationalist regimes of Rhodesia and apartheid-era South Africa became focal points for U.S. Southern segregationists and their heirs, and how their perceived common cause helped solidify Whiteness as the rallying cry of contemporary fascist movements. It also helps explain how White supremacists, once divided across lines of ethnic heritage, united under the common perception that all White people were under threat. This “unite and fight” approach helped to solidify the apocalyptic White

ing its ties to the murder of Ethiopian student Mulugeta Seraw in Portland, Oregon, in 1988. Bruce’s chapter demonstrates how the trends of international fascist groups—such as their decentralization, radicalized rhetoric, saintly view of Whiteness, and praxis based on impulsive violence—led to an embrace of street violence over more well-structured organizations.

While these snapshots are particularly interesting, the opening chapters of the book do the most to set it apart from other recent studies on White nationalism by unpacking the history of anti-Black-

**White nationalism today is less tied to one country or one national myth, but instead reflects the current state of Whiteness: a racial supremacism that binds together different national backgrounds and ethnicities into one shared, violent identity.**

identity that fueled the terroristic U.S. White Power Movement of the 1980s and 1990s, and continues to motivate accelerationist groups like Atomwaffen today.

In a wonderful essay, “White Australia Alone?,” researcher Evan Smith explores how under-covered groups like the Australian Nationalist Workers Party (ANWP) and the Australian National Socialist Party (ANSP) were created as a part of an explicit effort to build an international fascist collaboration during the Cold War era. The organization’s use of neonazism as an ideological brand, and the inspiration they took from the success of groups like Britain’s National Front, helped elevate the mythology of Whiteness above particular national concerns. This can be seen especially well in the World Union of National Socialists (WUNS), one of the clearest examples of transnationalism, creating a bridge between figures like American Nazi Party’s George Lincoln Rockwell and explicit Nazi sympathizers, in Europe and beyond, who were forging an identity after the Axis defeat.

Another author, Kyle Burke, offers a smart analysis of the White Aryan Resistance, a U.S. neonazi organization known for motivating skinhead violence, includ-

ness and the legacies of colonialism that set the stage for militant White identity politics. Few previous scholars have connected our historic constructions of Whiteness, colonial erasure, and the frenetically violent White nationalist movements. Author Kennetta Hammond Perry writes about how Black experience is often completely erased from discussions of White supremacy, drawing a comparison between W. E. B. Dubois’ writing on “the propaganda of history” and colonial narratives that continue to influence the story of White nationalism. Stuart Ward flips the colonialist script by talking about the fear of “reverse colonization” that pervades White nationalist thinking: a perverse and paranoid co-optation of BIPOC victimization, which warns that “White homelands,” won through colonization, are in danger of being “reconquered.” These narratives erase White culpability in the actual history of colonialism, while using that real history as a prediction of what is coming for them.

Framing the book this way presents Whiteness in its correct, corrosive demeanor, while also refusing to depict White nationalism as just an insurgent fluke. Rather, the authors say, it is built into the structures of our countries.

The opening chapters do feel a bit disconnected from the following sections, largely as these themes are not revisited at any length and the later chapters are more specific in scope. But there is more than enough in *Global White Nationalism* to recommend, particularly in the breadth of its coverage of White colonial history from Britain and Northern Ireland, to Australia, to South Africa and Zimbabwe. This helps show how colonialism continues to inform White supremacy, both in its institutional and insurgent expressions. Including the histories of people like Ian Paisley adds to our discussions of what fascism is and what coordination looks like, bringing new context to historical conflicts like “The Troubles” that are rarely discussed in terms of fascism and antifascism.

Each scholar in the book should be commended for their contributions to this new reckoning with the crisis we are faced with. White nationalism today is less tied to one country or one national myth, but instead reflects the current state of Whiteness: a racial supremacism that binds together different national backgrounds and ethnicities into one shared, violent identity. This means that the only way to think about fighting back is through a similar embrace of internationalism, to think about anti-racism and advocacy for multiracial democracy as a shared struggle across borders. The racists certainly are.

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BY DEYANIRA MARTE

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Author Q&A:  
**Red Pill, Blue Pill**



An anti-lockdown protest in Toronto, Canada, on April 25, 2020. (Credit: Michael Swan/Flickr.com)

Conspiracy theories can be many things to different people. For some, it's fun: the entertainment value of outlandish "alternative facts," the promise of secrets revealed, the thrill of envisioning oneself a detective, scouring the internet for clues. For others, it's a reaction marked by fear or a sense of loss, with conspiracist thought serving as the embodiment of unspoken anxieties. Sometimes, they're real—not conspiracy theories but actual conspiracies that have been exposed: Watergate,

COINTELPRO, the Pentagon Papers, Tuskegee—and the legacy of distrust they leave in their wake. But for many these days, it's a dangerous rabbit hole without a bottom, which can leave people who buy into them alienated and detached from reality, and perhaps more susceptible to acting out in violence.

In his 2020 book, *Red Pill, Blue Pill: How to Counteract the Conspiracy Theories That Are Killing Us*, author David Neiwert guides us through the origins and implications of the world of right-

wing conspiracism. Within that world, baseless conspiracist narratives serve to perpetuate racist and xenophobic rhetoric, uphold White supremacy, undermine public health, transform already heated political disagreements into an epic battle between good and evil, as well as make select conspiracist leaders profit as they monetize their theories online. Increasingly, these conspiracy theories are strung together into a seamless, lonely, and paranoid worldview.

In the era of ongoing pandemic, as

the Right has argued that masks are a dangerous infringement on bodily autonomy, or that vaccines are a ruse for government tracking and population control, the insights of Neiwert's book are more relevant than ever. He spoke with PRA this spring.

**PRA: What prompted you to start researching this topic?**

**Neiwert:** It actually came out of my upbringing and my early work in newspapering. I grew up in southern Idaho, which is John Birch Society country, or at least it was in the 1960s. While I was an editor for the *Daily Bee* in Sandpoint, Idaho, the Aryan Nations moved in about 40 miles down the road. We were inundated in the region with this influx of White supremacists and far-right extremists.

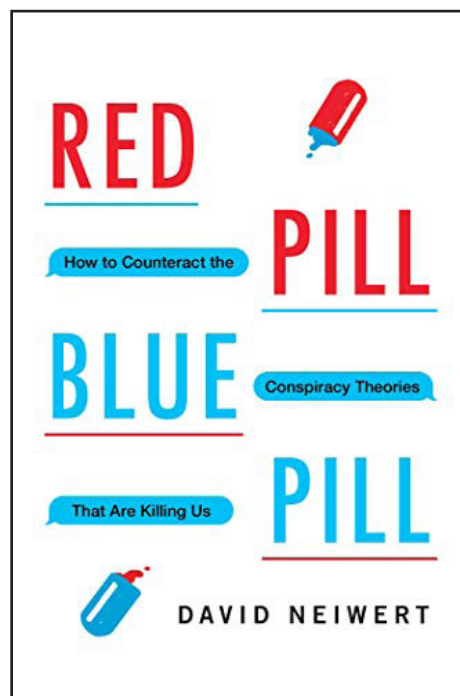
In 1993, I started writing about the militias organizing in the Northwest. I was an environmental reporter at the time and I covered them as an anti-environmental backlash story. I went out to the woods in Montana, Idaho, and Oregon and interviewed people who were in militias. Then the Oklahoma City bombing happened and I suddenly became this sort of "militia expert."

The more I had to cover these kinds of guys, the more I became familiar with the conspiracy theories that fueled their belief systems. This is particularly true of Aryan Nations, who had a wide-ranging and complex set of conspiracy theories all about defending the White race against Black people and Jews.

After Oklahoma City, there was a gathering of researchers and journalists put together by this man named Bill Wassmuth. He bent my ear for about an hour about researchers' ongoing "beef" with journalists: that most of them parachuted in to these stories, got a thin veneer of the ideology and background, then moved on to whatever the story was the next day. He said what we really need is people who treat this as a dedicated beat. By then I had realized that right-wing extremism left behind a trail of human wreckage wherever it goes, so there was always going to be a story about them. For that reason alone, they were worth writing about as a dedicated beat.

**How did Trump's election affect mis- or disinformation, including conspiracy theories?**

Politicians have a long history of trading in disinformation, like the Iraq War. But Trump took it to another level—to the conspiracist level—that had never really been done before in American politics, at least not to this extent. He was the most authoritarian personality we've ever had in the office. There are authoritarian followers—people who have authoritarian personalities and need someone to follow—and authoritarian leaders, who have a different set of personality



traits. We call them "social-dominance oriented" people, or SDOs. And they wield the truth like a weapon. They do this partly for the purpose of driving a wedge between their authoritarian followers and the reality in which the rest of us live, and it makes his followers actually feel closer to him. He knows when he uses "fake news" to describe perfectly legitimate, non-fake news, he's creating a hall of mirrors, where people can't distinguish what's true and what's not. That was the key to him basically lifting the lid off Pandora's Box of hate.

He gave permission for everybody to be as ugly as possible. I think about all the various times where he could have denounced ethnic and racial hatred and he instead ran in the other direction.

**Like when he told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by"?**

That one was really chilling. I had been watching the militia movement for a long time and the Proud Boys building off the militia movement, but with their own uniforms like polo shirts and MAGA hats. In my mind, I always felt that we would know we were on the cusp of fascism in America if and when we had a president who embraces these militias and uses them as a street-fighting force. When Trump did that with the Proud Boys, that set off the warning bell I had set for myself 10 years ago.

**You write in the book that Left-leaning conspiracy theories also exist, but they're fewer and less influential than those on the Far Right. Why is that?**

I initially planned to write a section on left-wing conspiracy theories. These are mostly health-related, like anti-vaccination theories, theories on "chemtrails," or on UFOs. I first encountered [UK conspiracy theorist] David Icke's material at hippy Barter Faires in the 1990s. That was his original market.

One of the interesting dynamics for me is what happens to left-wing conspiracy theories over time. They often start out on the Left, and over time, they're absorbed into the larger alternative universe of conspiracy theories, and become more and more right-wing. We've certainly seen that dynamic at work with the anti-vax movement.

In the end, it doesn't matter if it's left- or right-wing. It's authoritarian, because it's sowing confusion so that people can't tell what's truthful and what's not. That's the kind of environment that induces an authoritarian response in people, because when you have that kind of chaos in the information stream, people become very disoriented, and authoritarian figures become appealing sources of answers to the insecurities raised by that.

**Something that intrigued me was your ability to connect one theory to another. Apart from the obvious motive to “red pill” as many people as possible, what holds these theories together? Does one conspiracy theory birth another?**

Some of it is the question what’s creating the market for this? What motivates people to want to go find this information on the internet? I think one of the strongest motivators is this need to feel heroic. The dynamics of heroism really are central to right-wing personality types. I haven’t met many who don’t conceive of themselves in heroic terms. This includes the woman who followed border militia conspiracy theories and founded the Minutemen American Defense vig-

Some of it has to do with malignant forces in the world today, particularly the lords of the internet, who allow this stuff to spread unchecked, and to be encouraged by their own algorithms. Even in the '90s, militias were among the first people to start using the internet as a tool for organizing and, more importantly, recruiting. Once the internet came, they could reach people all around the world.

One of the things we also saw is that these theories and ideologies began to seep into the mainstream and were propagated by edge sites like the Free Republic forum, and that they also bled over to Fox News. This was being picked up and used in the mainstream increasingly, particularly once Barack Obama was elected.

be responsible, because they’re certainly not doing it on their own.

**Is there a safe way to consume conspiracy theories?**

Yeah, I consume them all the time! I would say, in the case of all conspiracy theories, stick to the principles that I outlined early on in the book: the three differences between conspiracy theories and real conspiracies. Because there are real conspiracies out there, and it’s worth knowing them, but it’s always helpful to keep in mind that no actual conspiracy in history that we know of has ever been uncovered by a conspiracy theorist. That’s only been done by a journalist, or a whistleblower [or activists] who goes to a journalist, and works through channels where they can write more authoritatively.

***In the end, it doesn’t matter if it’s left- or right-wing. It’s authoritarian, because it’s sowing confusion so that people can’t tell what’s truthful and what’s not. That’s the kind of environment that induces an authoritarian response in people, because when you have that kind of chaos in the information stream, people become very disoriented, and authoritarian figures become appealing sources of answers to the insecurities raised by that.***

ilante group, and who gunned down a nine-year-old girl named Brisenia Flores and her father in Arizona in 2009. Once you’ve convinced yourself that you’re a hero, you’re capable of anything, because anything is justified. We certainly saw this on January 6.

One of the aspects of heroism is that they’re finding meaning in their lives. The real world is very complex and messy, whereas in the world of conspiracy theories, everything neatly fits together. This is very satisfying on an important level. At the same time, heroes need an enemy, so in right-wing conspiracism, a lot of energy is devoted to creating and naming enemies. In the '60s, the JBS had Communist enemies; more recently, [the enemies are] Antifa.

**You also suggest we’re in a new age of conspiracy theories, marked by the fact that there’s no demand for evidence to support the claims made. How did we get here?**

**Do you think reviving the Fairness Doctrine—and updating it for the internet age—could help mitigate the spread of conspiracy theories?**

I’ve heard it proposed a lot. The FCC was dedicated to broadcaster rights, because there was a legal ground for the airwaves belonging to the public. When it comes to the internet, it’s hard to make that argument. It’s much harder to find a legal ground to regulate the internet through the FCC.

Ultimately we need to have a discussion about the First Amendment and understand that, in order to make free speech work and keep it free, the First Amendment does not extend to lies. That would take a national conversation. Ultimately, that’s the only thing I see solving it, because I don’t know if the regulatory body can handle it. However, in the interim, I’m totally on board with having some kind of federal regulatory agency overseeing social media and their algorithms and ordering these companies to

I think the best way to consume conspiracy theories is as research: to go out and be active in debunking them. If you’re actively engaged in the work of bringing people back to reality, you should be fine. If you’re dedicated to living in reality and basing your worldview on factual evidence, I think you should be perfectly immunized.

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## The Art of Activism: An Interview with Cover Artist Eva Redamonti



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2020 has been a turbulent and destabilizing year. Your work reflects particularly salient themes for our current moment. How has this year impacted your art?

This year, my art was really impacted by the pandemic. I spent more time thinking about the purpose and messages behind my work rather than making work purely out of enjoyment. I had a lot of time to reflect on the events of the year, and processed them through artmaking and journaling.

In 2020, we witnessed the largest civil rights movement in our country's history unfold. What are some of the images from this incredible movement that you want to live on in our memories?

The BLM movement was really powerful for me, and I'd like to see that kind of activism continue on, instead of just being a momentary reaction to the tragic events of this year.

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