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Discourses of Division: An Ethnography of the Oklahoma Proud Boys

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Discourses of Division: An Ethnography of the Oklahoma Proud Boys

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My love and appreciation to you all cannot be overstated. The words I am dedicating to you now do you no justice.

## **Abstract**

As a self-described group of "Western chauvinists," the Proud Boys have become lodged within the national consciousness because of their participation in historical and contemporary discourses concerned with fascism, militancy, and White supremacy. Members of Proud Boys chapters from across the nation have been continually vilified for espousing racist, misogynist, homophobic, and other repugnant ideologies. This study harnessed the methodological toolkit of ethnography to understand how members of the Oklahoma Proud Boys find meaning by joining this fraternal order. It takes as its point of departure an analysis of three competing strains of thought that make assertions about racial formations, specifically whiteness. The first, voiced by members of the Oklahoma Proud Boys ties whiteness a set of gendered and classed values, practices, experiences, and institutions while reducing it to a dichotomy of moral and immoral living. The second, voiced by popular pundits and best-selling authors that analyze the contemporary as a reflection of White supremacy and prescribe a set of tools for combatting this. Among this strain the basic assumptions about whiteness and how it can be challenged can be considered a reductive binary of racism and antiracism. Finally, a third body of literature is voiced by scholars who offer an alternative approach to the ways that racial formations operate as intersectional and contingent upon particular histories, power structures, and social relations.

## *Part One*

I SAW A dozen men gathered around a cluster of black metal tables on the back patio of a bar just off the interstate service road. They were dressed in the same black gold-trimmed polo except for one who leaned on the back legs of his chair sporting a colorful Hawaiian button-up puffing on a black vape pen. A bunch of White guys in uniform, I thought to myself. Must be them. I made my approach.

“Would Andrew happen to be around?” I asked.

A man close to my height in black sunglasses and a polo of his own turned towards me and extended his hand with a welcoming smile, “Hey, you must be Zach.”

Andrew was the president of Oklahoma Proud Boys. We had spoken over the phone a few weeks before about the prospect of me conducting ethnographic research for my master’s thesis among his group. After consulting with his local members and national leadership I was given permission to attend their next meeting.

“Zach is the guy I told you all about. He’s going to be writing a paper over us, kind of like a journalist.”

A few nodded without saying much. I made my way to a chair at the far end of the table but before I could take my seat a man called for me to come over. He was holding a can of beer in each hand

and asked if I wanted one. I accepted. He extended a can out and I caught a glimpse of his forearm, bearing a tattoo that read “PROUD BOYS.”

“So you’re the guy that Andrew told us about right?” he asked.

“Yep. I am Zach Chandler. Nice to meet you.” We shook hands.

“Tommy. Same here.” Before I could find something else to say another man who had just arrived caught Tommy’s attention. They began to talk and I walked back to my seat. Sitting across from me was a man and a woman who appeared to be in their late thirties. They were married. He worked in the automotive industry repairing car engines and she taught English as a second language while pursuing a graduate degree in education. For a few weeks he had been vetting this chapter from afar and today would mark his formal entry as a member. This was the nearest chapter to their home. They had driven hours from Texas to Oklahoma so that he could be initiated into the Proud Boys.

The woman eyed me. “Are you going to be taking pictures of us?”

“I hadn’t planned on it. Not unless someone asks me to.”

She turned to her husband and in a quieter voice said, “I just don’t want to be in any of the pictures with anyone here.”



He raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Well, you know, this is a political group and I don’t want it to come back to my job. I could get fired.”

With a cocked head and peering eyes he dismissively replied, “No, no. I don’t think it’s political.”

“Well I don’t know about that. I sure think it’s political.”

The man shrugged and turned his head towards the guy in the Hawaiian shirt who until then had been staring off into the sky with a smirk listening to Queen’s Somebody to Love blaring on the outdoor speakers. “Man, Freddie Mercury is my favorite fag.” This caught the attention of just about everyone at the table. Some chuckled while others showed a mix of humor and confusion on their faces. Seeing that he had the table’s attention he continued, “He could really sing. Really though.” A few affirming nods. “I was introduced to homosexuality in the eighth grade. I learned that you’re born that way but it’s not biological—you just like the dick. Some people are just born that way. There’s nothing wrong with that. I actually heard Freddie Mercury was pretty built. He could apparently hold his own in a fight.” His monologue was cut short as Andrew stood up at the head of the table.

“Gather ‘round everyone.” He instructed everyone to smile and snapped a picture.

Tommy then stood up and asked all non-members to go inside. The meeting was about to begin. The initiate's wife and I got up and we made our way inside the bar, decorated with irreverent slogans and a kind of décor that felt familiar, like I was visiting someone's home. Looking back I should have taken this time to speak with the woman about her thoughts on the Proud Boys but at the time I was more interested in observing them from afar. The tables had been moved into one long surface. Andrew was standing at the head holding a small gavel. He passed a tin bucket to Tommy and one by one each would drop cash into it and pass it on to the next person to repeat the process. Their meeting had been going on for about ten minutes when they all suddenly turned to face the initiate. He mouthed a few words and everyone clapped and cheered and he was thrown his own gold-trimmed black polo, which he promptly put on. Hands raised one last time and glasses clinked against one another. The gavel struck the table.

As I retook my seat outside, Andrew was talking with a few members who kept turning their heads in my direction. They approached me and Andrew said, "Some of the boys would like to talk with you to get further clarification on what you're doing here." Almost immediately everyone took a seat around the table, too. I felt surrounded and a bit intimidated but understood their apparent apprehension and curiosity about my intentions. I began to fumble around with how to start off when a bald man covered in tattoos and facial piercings sat across from me and spoke.

"We're not a bad group of people. We just think the West is the best. All these people call us racists." His tone then shifted from confident to frustrated, "But they don't realize, you're talking to a Jew."

“Yeah, in our chapter we actually have two Jewish members,” another quickly interjected and pointed to the man next to him.

“I’m Lebanese,” Tommy added while pointing down the table, “and look at David over there, he’s an Indian.” David smiled and waved. So far he was the only member I saw amongst them who appeared to be phenotypically White.

“I’m Asian-American. My grandparents were in internment camps.” another remarked.

A short silence. Then Tommy began again, “So what are your preconceptions of us?”

I diverted my eyes from Tommy, thinking of a diplomatic response. “Well, I find y’all forward-facing and outspoken and strong in your convictions.” I continued, “I haven’t really looked up that much about this specific group. The only real picture I have had is from a SBS Dateline documentary. Other than that I first found this chapter from seeing a picture posted online from a toy drive y’all had here last December.”

“Is that the one with those guys from Texas? Fuck them,” one man snorted. He was referring to a chapter of Proud Boys out of Texas who had recently dissolved after their members made anti-Semitic statements.

“We actually don’t do those toy drives anymore,” Andrew added. “We had trouble even giving away toys during that event. The army almost didn’t accept them because we are Proud Boys. The police were doing their ‘fill the cruiser’ thing and even they wouldn’t take our toys.”

“I just want to make sure you aren’t here to fuck us,” Tommy said pointedly. “You’re coming from OU which has in the past tried to deplatform us. We tried once to meet with the College Republicans at OU and they told us to fuck off. Now if you really want to see the good we do, then you’re going to have to come to Church.”

Church is what they call the members-only portion of each Proud Boy meeting. To attend I would have to become initiated as a member of the Proud Boys. This would require me to recite a simple vow: to profess myself a Western chauvinist who refused to apologize for creating the modern world. Although it caught me off-guard, I still felt the pull of Tommy’s proposition. Being a member would give me a privileged perspective into how the group operated from the inside. I would be granted access to their local meetings, to national gatherings, to private group chats and social media pages. But there was one major problem: I did not actually share their beliefs of Western supremacy. It put me in an uncomfortable position. How could I respond in a way that was ethical, honest, and might allow me to gain enough access to learn something about this group? What was I really trying to learn?

“I need to keep my distance from y’all. I can’t be a part of this group and besides I’m not really too interested in what happens during Church anyway,” I replied. “I am more interested in the

conversations y'all are having, such as what we're doing right now. This is the kind of stuff that anthropologists are interested in, what others see as mundane.”

What I had told them was true, but it didn't go far enough. At the time, I only knew that the Proud Boys were an international organization of self-avowed “Western chauvinists.” Meaning that they saw themselves as intensely patriotic towards the United States of America as they proclaimed that “The West is the Best.” However, I had little actual information about them, their beliefs, or who the members really were. Looking back, I should have told them from the outset was that I was not a Western chauvinist and disagreed vehemently with their ideologies but still wanted to learn about them.

Initially, I saw these tensions—of proximity and distance, sameness and difference, ethics and belonging—as mere questions of access. But I soon began to realize that they were much more: substantive heuristic concerns that came to inform the central questions of this project. This study never aimed to infiltrate a hate group or reveal some hidden rites or secrets. I did not presume to be able to show who these people really were. Instead, I wanted to better understand how such a hateful group was appealing to men, many of whom were quite similar to myself: young, straight, White, and working class.

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THE PROUD BOYS have exploded into national consciousness. They figure prominently within discussions of rising White supremacy, which 60 percent of Americans see as a growing threat to

the nation (Hawkins et al. 2018). The group is difficult to miss. They frequently dress in matching gold-trimmed black Fred Perry polos, matching hats, tattoos, repeat phrases like “uhuru” and “Proud of your boy,” and make the signature “OK” hand gesture which has been called a dog-whistle for the alt-right (Bishop 2017). The exact number of Proud Boys is unknown to the public<sup>1</sup> but their structure, demographic makeup, and political sensibilities have been made clear by their own admissions and actions (Proud Boys International LLC 2018). The national structure is comprised of semi-autonomous local chapters from state to state, an elected body of members who sit on the Elder Council and govern local chapters through bylaws and, finally, an elected President who acts as the public face for the fraternity. The group is unabashedly pro-American and seeks to defend their vision of a pure and true America for pure and true Americans. They adhere to twelve commandments: minimal government, maximum freedom, anti-political correctness, anti-drug war, closed borders, anti-racial guilt, antiracism, pro-free speech, pro-gun rights, glorifying the entrepreneur, venerating the housewife, and reinstating a spirit of Western chauvinism (The Elders 2017a). These commandments reflect a core set of shared beliefs that binds its members together as part of a moral crusade against the existential threats to Western civilization.

Proud Boys believe that the crowning jewel of Western civilizational progress, the United States of America, is in a state of degenerative decay. In their eyes, society has been corrupted by the progressive Leftist politics of feminism and Marxism. Left-wing politics has come to be nothing more than an attempt at cultural Marxism through the tyranny of corrupt politicians. These

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<sup>1</sup> When I began this project their website claimed to have an international presence. Their chapters could be found across the US, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Sweden, UK, Australia, China, Israel, and Japan. Since then their website has been taken down and now redirects to their page on the group text application, Telegram.

politicians' aims are to erode Judeo-Christian virtues and democratic values and sow division by playing a game of identity politics. In their view, one of the most prominent debates occurring in the public sphere—that of America's complicity in structural racism—is perceived by the Proud Boys as an intersectional scheme to remove responsibility from troubled minorities and direct blame for all the ills of society onto straight White men. Yet White men, according to the Proud Boys, are not the problem. If anything, they say, the problem is coming from minorities who are racist against Whites, feminists who are sexist against straight men, and anti-fascists who wish to enact Orwellian legislation that would turn straight White men into second-class citizens.

The group outwardly positions itself under a mandate that promotes Western civilization through the cultivation of traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Men get things done. Men change the world. Men run the companies that champion societal progress. Men engage in violent confrontations to solve problems because violence solves everything. What men should be doing is fighting, having sex, and building businesses. Unfortunately, modern men have become passive and effeminate. They spend their time masturbating, playing videogames, and getting physically and mentally weaker. They have become complacent and by the time they wise up in their adulthood and attempt to reenter the gene pool they find themselves unable to find women. They are without the strength and willpower to actualize their true masculinity. Men may be the ones who change the world but it is only with the support of their wives.

Women, *real* women, run the households that champion the nuclear family. Women prepare children to enter the world while their man is preparing the world for their children to enter into. What women should be doing is competing with one another to weed out the weakest links so that

they may find strong men to raise strong families with. Instead, modern women have become misguided and their femininity misplaced. They spend their time listening to feminists, being unwittingly victimized by and indoctrinated into liberal notions of girl power and female independence. They choose a career instead of a husband, children, and a house. They have become complacent and by the time they wise up in their adulthood and attempt to reenter the gene pool they find themselves bitter that their youthful rebellion against nature has robbed them of their body's most fertile years.

In a resoundingly consistent manner, in the few years since the group was founded in 2016,<sup>2</sup> Proud Boys chapters from across the nation have been and continue to be overwhelmingly vilified in the media and by civil liberty groups who critique them for their bigoted rhetoric, violent escapades, and questionable connections with a broader network of White supremacists, White nationalists, and anti-semites (Barnes 2017; BBC News 2017; Cosgrove 2018; Wilson 2018; Bogel-Burroughs and Cochrane 2019; Dixon 2019; Moynihan 2019; Timmons 2019; Wilson 2019; Luna 2020; Richer 2021; Rosten 2021).<sup>3</sup> Drawing on such reports, the Southern Poverty Law Center labeled

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<sup>2</sup> The group first emerged in name in September 2016 on *Taki's Magazine*, a far-right online publication, whose list of employees and publications are sympathetic to and encourage notions of White exceptionalism, nationalism, and supremacy. Most notably, Taki's formerly employed Richard Spencer as its Managing Editor. Spencer is a self-avowed White nationalist who, in a 2016 interview, when asked about his views on a White ethnostate responded with, "The ideal of a White ethnostate, and it is an ideal, is something that I think we should think about in the sense of what could come after America. It's kind of like a grand goal... I think we actually kind of hate each other. And that is a very tragic thing. And that's a very sad thing. And we don't trust each other. And we can talk about how one day we're going to all be holding hands, or we can actually be realistic about this and we can actually look at the power of human nature and the power of race" See <https://revealnews.org/podcast/a-frank-conversation-with-a-white-nationalist/>.

<sup>3</sup> Beyond the persistent condemnation by news media representations, the Proud Boys have also been banned from a slew of social media and tech sites. In 2018 the Proud Boys Twitter account was suspended for "violating the platform's policy against 'violent extremist groups.'" See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/aug/10/twitter-suspends-proud-boys->



them as a hate group whose “rank-and-file Proud Boys and leaders regularly spout white nationalist memes and maintain affiliations with known extremists” (2021) Likewise, the Anti-Defamation League states that “The Proud Boys are a right-wing extremist group with a violent agenda. They are primarily misogynistic, Islamophobic, transphobic and anti-immigration. Some members espouse white supremacist and antisemitic ideologies and/or engage with white supremacist groups” (2021)

Despite the critical press that they have received since 2017, the Proud Boys but remained relatively obscure until their highly visible role in the televised and violent protests that took place during the summer of 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Throughout these protests, a host of news articles from widely read and well-received publications, such as *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *BBC News*, and *USA Today* described the Proud Boys in terms of their militant opposition to the Black Lives Matter and Defund the Police movements and self-avowed anti-fascists (Baker et al. 2020; McEvoy 2020; Sardarizadeh and Wendling 2020; Shannon 2020). For many reporters, their readers, and society at large, there was at this time a heightened sensitivity to the anti-democratic disorder and an existential urgency to make sense of the growing prevalence and attraction of fascism, militancy, and White supremacy being expressed in broad daylight for all the world to see.

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[charlottesville](#). Two months later Facebook banned both the Proud Boys and Gavin McInnes’ accounts from its social media site and from Instagram. A spokesperson stated that “We will continue to review content, pages, and people that violate our policies, take action against hate speech and hate organizations to help keep our community safe.” See <https://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-bans-proud-boys-accounts-groups-2018-10>. The Proud Boys have banned from Amazon and PayPal for promoting hate, violence, intolerance, and discrimination. See <https://thehill.com/policy/technology/416012-amazon-paypal-cut-ties-with-proud-boys>.

The attention only increased throughout the chaotic political season of 2020. Donald Trump infamously called out to the Proud Boys in a Presidential debate when asked if he would condemn White supremacists. “Proud Boys,” Trump said, “stand back and standby.” He returned his gaze back to the debate room and continued, “But I’ll tell you what, I’ll tell you what. Somebody’s got to do something about Antifa and the Left” (Ronayne and Kunzelman 2020). Almost immediately after the debate reports came in claiming that Proud Boys across the nation took Trump’s statement as a formal order by their Commander in Chief (Obeidallah 2020). Their Parler and Telegram feeds included comments, such as, “Yes sir, Proud Boys standing by,” and “Thank you President Trump.” Links were posted to online vendors with shirts reading “Proud Boys Standing By” (Hesson and Cooke 2020).

A few months later the announcement came that Joe Biden had won the presidential race against Trump. A familiar crowd of faces seen during the summer once again took to the streets, this time to protest the legitimacy of the election as they attempted to “stop the steal.” In line with their party leader, House and Senate Republicans joined Trump in denying the legitimacy of the election. Tensions reached what appeared to be their climax when on January 6, 2021, a large mob comprised of hundreds of right-wing Trump supporters descended upon Capitol Hill as Congress convened to certify the election results. By noon crowds waving a cacophony of Trump, American, Gadsden, and Confederate flags assembled outside one of the nation’s most sacred of spaces, fortified by puny metal barriers and insufficient personnel. One hour later the protestors clashed with the handful of officers, marched through the haphazard barricade, and poured into the Capitol building. Both houses of Congress were taken to shelter while the angry mob marched towards

their chambers, some wearing familiar tactical gear, sporting zip ties, and calling for the hanging of Vice President Mike Pence with a makeshift gallows erected in the front lawn (Associated Press 2021; Colvin 2021) It would later be reported that pipe bombs were found at both the Republican and Democratic National Committee headquarters in D.C. (Tan et al. 2021). In the immediate aftermath of the storming of Capitol Hill five individuals lost their lives, one police officer and four rioters - and in the following months four additional officers who defended the Capitol building committed suicide (McEvoy 2021; Wolfe 2021).

The Proud Boys played a pivotal role in the storming of the US Capitol, which postponed the election certification. Two days prior the sitting president of the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrío<sup>4</sup>, was arrested in Washington D.C. and charged with burning a Black Lives Matter banner at an historic Black church while being in possession of a firearm magazine above legal capacity (Reuters 2021). Tarrío, was prohibited from entering D.C. on January 6 so as to mitigate potential violence. According to a Justice Department court filing made in March 2022, instead of immediately leaving D.C. as he was ordered to, Tarrío secretly met with leaders of the Oath Keepers in a parking garage and upon his return home in Florida proceeded to plan and then direct members of the Proud Boys to breach the Capitol (Cheney 2022). After breaching the Capitol, a rank-and-file Proud Boy asked in a text group “are we a militia yet?” to which Tarrío replied “Yes.” Since January 6, several members and chapter leaders of the Proud Boys have been arrested and charged

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<sup>4</sup> Tarrío has a troubling criminal record. In 2014 he pleaded guilty to selling relabeled diabetes test kits. Though denied by Tarrío, it was confirmed by court documents and official statements made by his own lawyer, so to reduce his sentencing Tarrío became an FBI and local law enforcement informant, leading to the prosecution of at least twelve individuals involved in drug and child smuggling, and illegal gambling. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-proudboys-leader-exclusive/exclusive-proud-boys-leader-was-prolific-informer-for-law-enforcement-idUSKBN29W1PE>.

for their involvement with the Capitol riot (Associated Press 2021; Goldman and Feuer 2021; Lynch and Lynch 2021; Shortell 2021).

The consequences of the attempted coup reverberated beyond the borders of the US, including for the Proud Boys. On February 3 the Canadian government designated the Proud Boys as a terrorist entity and the Proud Boys of Canada officially disbanded in May 2021 (Parliament 2021; Reuters 2021). A public statement made by the now defunct chapter claimed that they were an innocent group of misunderstood citizens who had been wrongly accused of inciting political violence and racial hatred for an insidious leftist political agenda. “The truth is we are electricians, carpenters, financial advisors, mechanics, etc. More than that we are fathers, brothers, uncles and sons...In the face of a tyrannical leftist government, we regular citizens were banned and outlawed for holding the same beliefs as the men who built this country.”<sup>5</sup> The message was simple yet profound. It begged everyday people to consider what they held most dear—their families, financial security, democratic freedoms—and wonder not *if* they could one day be the victims of political persecution by the tyrannical Left, but *when*.

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APPEALING TO THE existential precarities of social, economic, and political life is in vogue. Or has it always been? The past several years have been a spectacle as the making and unmaking of reality has become increasingly apparent through the proliferation of commodified concepts such as “fake news,” “alternative facts,” “mainstream media,” “radical Left,” “deep state,” and “witch

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<sup>5</sup> Statement can be found on the Proud Boys public Telegram channel, posted May 3, 2021.

hunt” (Debord 1994). For those like me, who are bothered by and susceptible to doomsday thinking, the illusory reality that these political concepts offer have certainly held a degree of appeal.

By the time I completed my undergraduate degree in 2015 it had become commonplace to see a particular kind of narrative make its way into public discourse. Time and again stories followed a particular formula. They went that a White person (usually a straight man) did or said a thing that was in some way indicative of their White racial privilege. A person or group claiming a racialized identity other than White and/or a gender identity other than cis would become offended. Finally, there would be a form of public outcry for the instigator to be publicly ridiculed, often by being summarily ousted from their employment. To many, these stories could only be interpreted as manifestations of a deep and enduring racial hatred of people of color by a White-dominated society. There seemed to be a critical mass movement of young people oriented towards correcting the racist atrocities of the past that continued to determine present-day realities.

Terms and concepts such as “microaggression,” “trigger warning,” “safe space,” “implicit bias,” “phobic,” “patriarchy,” “diversity and inclusion,” and “White privilege” made their way into everyday conversations. Many of these concepts had been around for decades though those who used them found that they had acquired new purchasing power in debates about social justice and antiracism. As I saw these words used to encapsulate all aspects of life, from the inner realms of individual consciousness to the outward flow of societal structures, I felt conflicted, and mostly just confused.

The national debates surrounding social justice hit closer to home in 2016, when I read about an incident at my alma mater, the University of Oklahoma. The article claimed that after a class was assigned to fill out a 100-question “privilege checklist” a White student was told that singing a Rhianna song constituted a racist microaggression (Starnes 2016). I knew that I was not there to participate in that particular lecture so I did not know what actually happened, but something felt off. While I understood the concept of a microaggression and I also understood that microaggressions could be racist, the idea that anyone would interpret a White person singing the songs of a wildly popular pop artist as a racist microaggression seemed off. Once again I felt conflicted, and confused. I felt there was some moral force, abstract and disembodied, that I had never actually experienced yet was being monitored and judged by. And I was not alone in that feeling.

I continued to occasionally read and listen to stories about people, predominately White men, receiving some form of what at the time I perceived to be backlash after being accused of being complicit in racialized oppression. In June 2017 videos circulated of Bret Weinstein, a professor of biology at Evergreen State College in Washington, being berated by students because he protested a university tradition where White students and faculty would stay off campus for a day to emphasize the achievements of people of color (VICE News 2017). Weinstein questioned whether racially segregating the campus for a day was the correct response to racism. He was immediately labelled as a racist and his administration instructed him to stay off campus because they could not guarantee his safety (Voloikh 2017). He would soon make the same rounds and frequent the same spaces on social media and podcasts as others I would later come to know, such as Jordan Peterson, spreading a similar message that was critical of a growing cohort of young

people attempting to censor those they deemed as acting against their radical identarian agenda that had been fostered by Marxist educators. I enthusiastically listened to Peterson and Weinstein when they appeared on the *Joe Rogan Experience* and warned us against radical neo-Marxists using identity politics to turn the Western world into a communist hellscape (PowerfulJRE 2017).

It was about this time that the language of identity politics made its way into my own life. During a house party some friends were swapping stories about being arrested in their teens. Despite numerous run-ins with law enforcement and several arrests throughout my youth I always got off with minimum and deferred sentencing, even for my more serious and consequential actions. When I was in middle school three friends and I were arrested, me with a six-inch hunting knife sheathed by my sock and shoe, at a middle school we did not even attend. We were there to fight a group of other boys who ultimately never showed up. While I was suspended from school for an entire quarter and sentenced to over one hundred hours of community service, nothing else came from it. A year later I would be calling my mother asking her to pick me up from the local juvenile intervention center after being arrested for curfew and once again for public intoxication. During my senior year of high school I was arrested after a teacher reported me for being high on Xanax. A week suspension, several hours of drug counselling, and a handful of community service hours later it was all behind me. A couple of months and a couple of arrests for public intoxication later I would be spending a few more nights sleeping at the county jail after being arrested and charged with an aggravated DUI, all of which has to this very day never materialized into anything other than a recurring sense of regret, remorse, and embarrassment.

After I took my turn cataloging my illicit escapades, one of my friends commented that my stories of receiving lax treatment by the criminal justice system demonstrated that I was the literal embodiment of White privilege. Everything came full circle, from the article about cultural appropriation to privilege checklists to warnings of the coming identarian apocalypse. That one consistent box of White privilege was checked for me by my friend. I chuckled with everyone else and brushed it off but the comment stuck in the back of my mind. My friend's jocular accusation made me question my potential complacency with a terribly unequal world. It led me to consider how my successes, or in this specific context my lack of experiencing a particular kind of violent juridical retribution, meant that I was complicit with the forces that continue to imbue some lives with greater value at the expense of others. After all, I was White. I was a man. I was straight. I fit neatly within the category of those who had for centuries dominated the globe and subjugated its population. And I finally felt guilty and complicit. At the time I had little recourse to debate against a reality which led me to benefit from that system. I did not have the words, or perhaps I did and they did not make sense to me at the time.

However, I felt a contradiction within myself and could not rationalize it. One part of me felt guilty while the other resisted that feeling. In some ways the guilt I felt was in response to my privilege as a White person. It made me angry in that, despite my abhorrence of racial injustice, I was somehow also responsible for it. I felt trapped. I could not escape that reality. My very racial identity precluded my exit. For all of the lessons I had learned during my undergraduate education, which taught me the dynamism and fluidity of identity, I was stuck in my White body and unable to transgress the privileged borders of my whiteness. My identity had been reduced to that whiteness, an identity of static and stable privilege. But how could that be? I had never placed



much stock in my ancestry, but I am a descendent of Cherokee peoples and am an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation. It may be a running joke in Oklahoma that all Whites claim to have descended from a full-blood Cherokee princess, but how could the past lives and struggles and accomplishments of my Indigenous ancestors be so readily erased because of my white skin?

While my childhood was rather peaceful and quiet I was raised by working-class parents who put on a pretense of middle-class America. My earliest memories involve spending time at the pager shop my parents owned and operated while also delivering newspapers for the local press. After the pager shop closed down due to the proliferation of cell phones my mother found work in bookkeeping for her brother while my father continued to throw newspapers. For the first twelve or so years of my life he would leave for work as my brother and I were going to sleep and would come home as we were waking up. While money was tight at times I could never tell because my parents were always willing to make sacrifices for their children and when what failed they could turn to the social safety net of family who lived close by. Even though I had never faced such extreme punishment by the justice system, my rap sheet of substance abuse and criminal activity does not suggest privilege. The conflict had me grappling with myself and the pieces of my life that did not line up with the narrative that would erase my experiences and history and paint me as a privileged White man.

Coincidentally and conveniently enough, I had an outlet which I believed spoke to my sense of contradiction and conflict. I had been drawn to the charismatic characters of Peterson, Weinstein,

McInnes<sup>6</sup>, and Rogan. For me they stood up and out against an impending tyranny. I wondered if the censorship that they claimed to have experienced at the hands of social justice warriors hostile to straight White men might one day become my own censoring. I believed that I had even subtly tasted it after my whole life had been reduced to my phenotypical whiteness. The precarity of my existence was pervasive. By the time I decided to begin my graduate studies I was quite nervous because I expected at some point to be told to check my privilege, be called out for making some kind of microaggression, or censored for speaking my mind. From the first moments I spent with the Oklahoma chapter of the Proud Boys I detected an energy amongst them that I was already quite familiar with. In some ways I was aware of the Proud Boys even before they emerged in late 2016. The energy that moved the Oklahoma group had previously moved me.

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THE OKLAHOMA PROUD Boys, unlike those you may have read about, like to stay out of the spotlight. But they do not operate completely in the dark. I initially found the personal information for dozens of their members or associates online. At the time of this writing there was only one media related report I could find concerning the Oklahoma group. Self-proclaimed hate group watchdog, The Warriors, formerly Hate Trackers reported that, “a peaceful March Against Fascism

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout McInnes’ career he has reached widespread audiences. He was a founding member of *Vice Magazine* and has authored multiple books, opinion pieces, and wrote and starred in his own 2013 film, *How to be a Man*. He has hosted a slew of internet television shows, from *Free Speech with Gavin McInnes*, *The Gavin McInnes Show*, and *Get Off My Lawn*. He has been a guest twice on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, which reaches over 10 million viewers per episode. McInnes was once a regular of *Fox News*, appearing on *Red Eye*, *The Greg Gutfeld Show*, and *The Sean Hannity Show*.

in Tulsa was invaded by members of the hate group Proud Boys, who showed up to stand for fascism, hurl racial insults, and assault people...one Proud Boy has been accused of assaulting a peaceful Native American elder, while his associates assailed others, including a transwoman” (The Warriors 2018). By the time I found my way among the Oklahoma group they had decided to take a step back from participating in public demonstrations in large part because of how the Tulsa march turned out. It was more trouble than it was worth. Perhaps in response to their stepping back from public spaces, Hate Trackers would go onto claim that the Oklahoma group was the butt of jokes among the national body as the “Oklahoma’s members are being derided as ‘do nothing’ and have earned the vulgar nickname of the ‘Proud Pussies of Oklahoma.’”

I was strangely disappointed by how the Oklahoma group behaved after my first day of fieldwork. I had come to study a right-wing militant hate group and understand what kinds of processes led them to the margins of the political Right because just a couple years before I had felt a similar pull. But after spending about eight hours with them I was given no glimpse into their militant behavior and heard only a little of what could be considered hateful speech. Some of what they said even surprised and impressed my own progressively liberal sensibilities. My first impulse was one of suspicious distrust, to consider that they had been simply lying to me and had toned down their rhetoric while they sussed me out. But that was no way to begin my work with them. After all, I hoped that they would give me a chance. I had to reciprocate. All I knew, whether their behavior was genuine or not, was that what I witnessed did not seem to fit the description of all the reports I had previously read about other Proud Boys. They did not appear to be a group of violent bigots. Instead, they were more like a frat group.

Many of them even reminded me of my friends and of myself. They were engaging in the kind of activities my friends and I often did. They were congregating at the bar with other men, collectively poisoning their bodies with tobacco and alcohol, pushing the boundaries of acceptable discourse with questionable jokes and vulgar anecdotes, talking about their mutual interest in guns, off-roading, and *South Park*. They also looked and came from similar backgrounds as my friends and I. All but one were phenotypically white. Several were born in Oklahoma to working-class and poor families. Several worked blue-collar working-class jobs. How could I write about them if they were not as militant and as violent as many seemed to already believe?

I became struck by how the group introduced themselves to me. Of about twelve men, two identified themselves as Jews, one Lebanese, one Native American, and one as an Asian-American whose grandparents had been interned during WWII. Although I interpreted all but one of them to be phenotypically white, half of them identified as a member of an ethnic or racial minority that called into question their whiteness and, in turn, their supposed experiences and sociopolitical commitments. They seemed to be clinging onto those less detectable identities, such as my own Cherokeeness, which had always been conveniently neglected, by myself and others, because of my skin color. This led me to an uncomfortable paradox. Could they truly be a group of hateful fascist White supremacists? Had they been misunderstood because their rhetoric had been incorrectly interpreted after being filtered through the social justice vocabularies of antiracism because of how their whiteness was interpreted in different ways? How could I attempt to understand why they did what they did without falling into and reproducing the all too comfortably familiar trope of a morally superior linear history of Western progress and exceptionalism, which the Proud Boys then come to simultaneously stand in for and against (Harding 1991)? Could taking

seriously their positions, beliefs, histories, and lives lend itself to a deeper understanding of how our existential crises are continually being ordered and reordered by essentialist and polarized impulses?

To grapple with such impossible questions, I turned to ethnography (Robben and Sluka 2012). This methodology is the primary toolkit by which anthropologists apprehend the world through first-hand, sensorial experiences (Martin 2013). In the Boasian tradition of American anthropology, ethnography is a method that is culturally relative yet historically particular, comparative, holistic, and inductive (Boas 1887, 1896, 1920, 1974). Perhaps the core strength of ethnographic inquiry is its potential to problematize any singular normative framework, accepted orthodoxy or category of the person. By critically engaging and immersing oneself with everyday lived experiences, ranging from the extraordinary to the mundane, ethnographers are well-equipped to challenge what is considered commonsense, acceptable, and true (Malinowski 1922). I follow in a belief that, “through ethnographic rendering, people’s own theorizing of their conditions may leak into, animate, and challenge present-day regimes of veridiction, including philosophical universals and anthropological subjugation to philosophy” (Biehl 2013:573). Anthropology, operating as such, begs us to work within the cracks, with and against the fault lines that are constantly being used to try and order the world around us as sensible (Petryna and Follis 2015). It demands that we do not settle for the explanatory power of theories drawn up by those who have never witnessed the kinds of experiences we are attempting to describe. Ethnographers must always be willing to accept that theory is not an untouchable eternal. Instead, theory should always be informed by practice. Ethnography can help us to grapple with the tensions we feel within ourselves when we are drawn to any one narrative from a desire to make our lives coherent

while at the same time living, experiencing, and being cognizant that life is anything but coherent and orderly. Ethnographers do this, not by attempting to dispel the false to reveal the truth, but rather, by working within that very space between true and false, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy (Taussig 1987).

To some this may sound fanciful, idealistic, and perhaps a bit naïve. And in some ways they are probably right. Ethnographic writing has a knack for leaving readers with open-ended questions, instabilities and uncertainties. The intent is not to leave readers on precarious ground. Instead, ethnography hopes to open up the possibilities of human existence which are always precarious in their potential trajectories yet firmly grounded within contingent realities and human action.

The challenge I faced, then, was how to use ethnography to better understand the contemporary and problematize certain taken-for-granted assumptions about people whose perspectives appear repugnant, vile and dangerous (Harding 1991). Specifically, the following thesis aims to explore how essentialist notions of racial, gender, and class identities, with a particular emphasis concerning race, are being mobilized to propel political projectson both the American Left and the Right in ways that materialize as a politics that strategically disregards certain dimensions of human life.

Before we proceed further I must outline exactly how I am using the concept of “essentialism” here, which I will also refer to in its various forms, such as, “essentialist” and “essentialize.” Essentialism is a concept dating back to at least the time of Plato. As a platonic concept, essentialism relies upon the assertion that objects have sets of innate qualities. Circles are

essentially round. Water, by its very essence, is wet. This line of thought has also regularly been applied to describe presumably inherent qualities of humans. Perhaps a salient example of essentialism that speaks to our contemporary moment is racism. White supremacists' assertions that Black people are inherently less intelligent than White people is an essentialist claim that makes a connection between the phenotypical presentation of black skin and an underlying immutable core of inferior intelligence relative to people who are phenotypically white skinned. However, essentialisms can take many forms. And regardless of the shape they take, oscillate between an exteriority that is perceptibly variable and an internality that is presumably knowable. Throughout this thesis you will be confronted with various essentialisms which often function as a way for people to make sense of and order our messy world.

In what follows I draw from seven months of ethnographic fieldwork among the Oklahoma Proud Boys between September 2019 and March 2021. During my research I have conducted participant observation fieldwork and held formal and informal recorded interviews. The setting of my fieldwork took place exclusively at the bars where the Proud Boys held their monthly meetings. Because I was never allowed to sit in during their official members-only meetings, my analysis is confined to what goes on in public spaces. Of course, this project is neither an endorsement of the Proud Boys and their belief system nor an attempt to convince readers that they are simply misunderstood. Instead, this is a story about people who are defiantly rejecting discourses that they perceive to be narrowing their lives with a narrowing of their own. I hope that my account of the events that unfolded during my time with the Oklahoma Proud Boys may offer insights into how we make sense of ourselves and others in the face of inequality and oppression. However, while this essay relies upon the practical application of anthropological methodology and theory it is

always skeptical of any absolute conclusion or ultimate explanation (Rosaldo 1989). The experiences, perspectives, and interpretations that drive ethnographic inquiry are always open to change. The story does not end at the end of the story.

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MY INITIAL ENCOUNTER with the Proud Boys left me with more questions than answers. Questions that were on my mind as my tires once again crunched the gravel lot. I wanted to know why these men decided to become Proud Boys. What drove them to join such an extreme group and what would possess them to remain members in the face of all the overwhelmingly critical and negative attention they received? Once again we met at a bar. Overall, the meeting was typical of what would be several future meetings. I would arrive, greet everyone and thank them, purchase a beer, sit down and talk, be asked to leave while they held their official meeting, and finally return for the rest of the evening for more beer and conversation. This particular afternoon began warm and overcast. But as the evening drew closer the sky turned dark and a gusty gale of wind and rain beset us. One by one the men slowly trickled out into the parking lot, into their cars, and off to their homes. By about 7pm only Tommy remained. We sat on the outdoor patio just outside the reach of the rain. Two women who had been seated at a table across from us for the past few hours let out a loud guffaw, which caught Tommy's attention. He meandered on over and offered to buy them a drink. They happily accepted and Tommy nodded his head. He returned to his seat and his attention was again focused on me. He was eager to talk. I considered the most pertinent questions I could ask him. The Proud Boys had been consistently characterized by their Islamophobia, so I decided to ask him about Islam. And once again, I was surprised.



“What are your thoughts on Islam and Muslims?”

“I feel like there is anti-Islamic sentiment because of 9/11. I’m not their biggest fan, but when you take an entire group of people there are always people who want to do good things and people who want to do bad things and people in the middle who don’t know what to do. Depending on the region of the world you live in you are being taught different interpretations of the Koran.” He continued and described the similarities between the Old Testament and the Koran. Then he abruptly shifted the conversation in another direction.

“That’s the story I was going to tell you! Last Sunday I headed out to a house. I’ve done work with this girl for years while she’s lived in this house and I had no idea she was a Muslim. We had always gotten along perfectly. She is very respectful. We’re just sitting there in the bathroom and I say ‘Ok, you’re Muslim?’ She goes ‘Yea.’ And I said, ‘What Mosque do you attend?’ She looks at me and says, ‘Thank you for not calling it church. We don’t go to church; we go to Mosque.’ Over Saturday and Sunday we had a set of conversations. The thing was it was Americanized Islam.” He paused for a moment trying to find what words to say next.

“I don’t know how else to say it. It sounds weird but it’s not like in Iraq, where they’re like ‘Oh you kissed a girl so we’re going to bury you to your head and stone you to death,’ or throw gays of the roof or any of that weird shit that they do. That’s the one problem that I had. Up until our conversation last Sunday I had not realized that there were sects of Islam that had modernized. When she talked to me she said she loved wearing the hijab because it is not about control, but

instead modesty. I can get behind that. She said that when you're dressed like that people treat you with respect."

I continued to sit there and attentively listen as he continued to tell me about his interaction with his Muslim client.

"We had that conversation and talked a little bit more about her religion and dating with kids. I have a kid myself and just got out of a relationship so I asked her about her experiences dating while being a single parent. It didn't matter what the conversation was about, but it was the first time I had perspective beyond any media-driven narrative. Why is it ok for a nun to wear a headdress but someone of Islam can't? The joke goes—nuns don't randomly explode. Well, that's a very small sect of the Westboro Baptist Church. You know there is just a small sect that is scattered out across the Middle East that do crazy shit like that and the rest of the people are just saying 'Can you please stop doing that so I can live my life normally?' And so, I found common ground and I don't have a problem with it anymore."

"Really?"

"No."

"So," I began with a smirk, "it seems like that you had a conversation with somebody, like we're doing right now, with someone that you may not agree with on everything, and you found common

ground. Then, the problem sort of subsided because you realized maybe that you were wrong to begin with—to some degree?”

“I agree. It’s perspective. You have shit like the Covington kid. Everyone posts videos where this kid is smiling in this Indian dude’s face. But you don’t know the context. I can understand how bubbles form. Yes, there is anti-Islam sentiment. But that girl was just a regular sonuvabitch trying to get through her life. She just believes in a different version of the Old Testament than Christians and once you realize there are people out there like that—I don’t know if it’s good or bad because there are always the bad people that are going to blow up the World Trade Center or whatever, but for once I was like, ‘She’s always nice to me. She doesn’t doxx me. She doesn’t do anything like that.’ We just had a couple of conversations and it was enough for me to go ‘Oh ok this isn’t as bad. Not every Muslim has a bomb strapped to em’. There is a famous line in Star Wars where Luke is asking Obi-Wan ‘Why didn’t you tell me that Darth Vader was my father?’ He starts talking about point of view and perspective. It goes back to the bubble thing. If you don’t ever talk to people outside your bubble you are never going to truly find out, you’ll never be able to change your opinion of a situation if you don’t go out and do your own investigating.”

The wind and the rain settled for a moment. The two women Tommy had bought drinks for came over and introduced themselves to us as Laura and Michelle. They were on their way out and wanted to thank Tommy once more. Laura saw the red flashing light of my tape recorder and asked what we were doing and if she could join us. Michelle gave her farewells and Laura pulled up a stool. Laura had never heard of the Proud Boys but told Tommy that she did not like seeing all of them wearing MAGA hats.

Tommy quickly defended himself, “So you say, the problem that you had was that you saw someone wear a MAGA hat and that it represents arrogance, or White supremacy—”

“—No, no. Not White supremacy cause I think that’s two different things. But it’s about being arrogant and disrespectful.”

Tommy tilted his head and came back with another question, “Have you ever been disrespected by people wearing MAGA hats? Cause I have one. I don’t wear it because—”

“—it’s politics. I’m not in politics. When people get in, start talking,” She began, “I’ll literally excuse myself.”

Tommy found her statement unfortunate and encouraged her, “You should be involved though. Everyone should be.” For a few minutes they continued their back-and-forth, eventually landing on the migrant crisis at the Southern border. Tommy continued, “Sometimes when humanity is taken out of the situation. People can be all shallow and say, ‘Fuck those kids in cages.’ But you’d never catch me saying that. The thing is that I don’t have a frame of reference because I don’t know what the fuck is going on.”

“And I don’t know what’s going on either.” Laura replied while shaking her head back in forth.

“I’m having the media tell me one thing and then everybody on YouTube is saying another. That it’s not as bad as the media is making it out to be. But at the same time there’s still kids in cages. So, what’s the narrative and how do we get the kids out of the fucking cages?” He took on the polished voice of a newscaster, “Well the Democrats have to do this, and they won’t do it.” Returning to his own voice, “Well that doesn’t make any sense. It’s a never-ending cycle of bullshit and you never get the truth.”

Laura and I sat nodding. Our server came by to refill our drinks. We sat for a few moments collecting our thoughts and I wanted to move the conversation along. I asked them what they thought about our country’s leadership and Laura said that she felt those who run the country too often draw off of their own emotions, which she saw as something that should be avoided. Tommy believed that considering one’s feelings was an important aspect of leadership, one that, he claimed, had kept the US out of many wars.

“Yea, yea, yea.” Laura bounced her head around for a moment thinking. “But I feel like when you run a country you can’t go off your personal feelings. You have to hear America. You know what I’m saying? Whether you like or agree with it or not. Like you were saying,” she pointed at me, “he has a different opinion from what I have.” I sat listening intently as Tommy made his plea.

“But I want to listen to those opinions, I want to hear them. That is how it’s supposed to work. This right here is how it’s supposed to work on Facebook and everywhere else and it doesn’t. People get interrupted, they’re judged by the color of their skin and not the content of their character. It’s insane.” He turned to me and continued, “But I can sit here with her. We have two

different skin colors and we are getting along just fine. Her beliefs are way different than mine. But I'm going to listen to what she says and I'm going to get her perspective on it. We're going to find a commonality, common ground, and then we're going to be fine. I like cake, she bakes cake! Commonality. There's a humanity that you have to accept. She works her ass off—so do I. If everyone started paying attention to what we have in common than dividing people up into this or that group then everybody would get along.

Laura nodded, “Yea, so I told all my friends, all White people are not racist. All Black people are not racist. You know what I mean? All my best friends are White and we may have different opinions but we don't love them any less than anyone else.”

“That's part of being human.”

The wind and the rain became too much for us to handle. Laura had to go home and put her kids to bed. She bid her farewell. Tommy and I decided it was as good of time to leave as any and made our way to the parking lot.

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I FELT SURPRISINGLY good on my drive home as I reflected on my second day in the field, considering that once again I had failed to see the violence and could barely detect the hatred of this particular chapter. Even prior to my conversation with Tommy and Laura, in the few hours I spent with all the other members, there was little that could be used to corroborate the prevailing

literature concerning the Proud Boys. I did not have any solid ground to stand on and report that they were a violent hate group. An overwhelming feeling came upon me as I found that the potential trajectory of my project needed reorientation. But the good feeling did not last too long. The thought that I could write about the Proud Boys and not focus on their violence and hatred seemed blasphemous and unsettling. What would happen if I did not end up highlighting their repugnancy? Would I be labeled as an apologist for their wider platform of vitriol, provocation, and bigotry?

My mind raced for hours with the anxious potentials of my work until I finally fell asleep. But as I drifted out of consciousness that nagging sense of fear with how I would be affected by the reception of my work refused to dissipate. That night I had a dream in which I was suddenly woken up at 5:50 in the morning by my phone's alarm. I stumbled out of bed and begrudgingly began to prepare for my day job. Their words were still ringing in my ears. "We're not a bad group of people. We just think the West is the best." I didn't know what was going on with the echoes but I had no other choice than to get ready for and make my way into work.

Upon my arrival to the office an overwhelming feeling of anxiety rushed over me. Something wasn't right. I sat down at my desk and almost immediately my boss's voice roared over me.

"Zach I need to you come to my office right now."

I stood up and entered the office.

“Close the door.”

A woman from HR was sitting down and proceeded, “We got a call from someone who says that they have evidence you are a member of a White supremacist group.” She pulled a picture out of her pocket. There I was at the end of a long black table, smiling.

“You don’t understand. I’m no—”

“—We’re going to have to ask you to leave. We cannot tolerate this behavior.”

I exited the office and was back in my bedroom. I grabbed my head in both my hands in a fit of rage, dizzy with anger. “What had happened? Why would they do this to me? I’m not one of them! Did they not know that I was a student. I’m not one of them! This isn’t fair!”

I had been doxxed,<sup>7</sup> just like the Proud Boys. This time it cost me my job.

“This is just a taste of what it must be like, I thought to myself, to be a Proud Boy. To have to worry about someone you will never meet and talk to and never know attempting to and occasionally succeeding at derailing your life, your career. Thank goodness I don’t have children I thought. I guess this is what I get for associating myself with such a contentious group of people. I guess I knew what I was getting myself into.”

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<sup>7</sup> Being doxxed refers to the process by which an individual’s personal information is obtained and then published online, usually with malicious intent



Suddenly, I heard the sound of my phone’s alarm going off again. I rose up out of bed, checked my phone, and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

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SCHOLARSHIP CONCERNING THE Proud Boys is sparse. Beyond what now amounts to mountains of journalistic accounts, there are only three published scholarly accounts that focus specifically on the Proud Boys. Each contributes scholarly affirmations of previous research into the far right and emergent alt-right.

DeCook (2018) explored the prowess and success of alt-right groups in the virtual worlds of online messaging forums. The concept of “alt-right” is a relatively recent invention and is applied in multiple ways. Most salient to this discussion is that the alt-right is commonly used as an umbrella term to describe a fragmented association of conservatives who have grown tired of mainstream Republicanism and have begun to draw on White supremacy and anti-feminism as a unifying force (Soenke 2013; Jost 2017, 2019; Wetzel 2020). With this in mind, DeCook sought to explore how memes circulating through Instagram marked with “#proudboys” and other hashtags were being used. She found that they often defy commonsense notions of rationality by falling into the realm of absurdity all the while being undergirded by a powerful propaganda that promotes racial hatred and White supremacy. Silly memes with nefarious subtext. “In a way, these memes function in their own form of logic, and despite the absurdity that they seem to present, behind the absurdist façade lies a powerful form of propaganda—an indoctrination that is subconscious, invisible, and

violate our very understanding of logic and rational thought” (501). Smuggled within the very memes that appeal to young people, such as Pepe the Frog,<sup>8</sup> are bite-sized pieces of propaganda which slowly nudge youth to become sympathetic to the alt-right’s anxieties over Western civilizational collapse. This dive into the virtual world of memes demonstrates how a sense of political identity can be obtained through easily digestible and otherwise innocuous images.

Likewise, Stern (2019) attempted to connect the Proud Boys to the broader network of the alt-right, whose demographics are “decidedly white, male, and aggrieved” (5). She asked, “Was the alt-right simply old wine in new bottles, the latest incarnation of American eugenics, racism, and anti-egalitarian[ism]...Could the alt-right appeal to younger generations of white Americans, who might be swayed by anxieties over demographic despair and tantalizing visions of racially homogenous homelands?” (4). To address these questions Stern scoured the internet for alt-right websites, forums, and memes sympathetic to or trafficking in notions of White genocide, racial homogeneity, and eugenics. Disappointingly and contrary to what one would assume when reading the title of her monograph, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*, Stern only dedicated a few pages to an explicit discussion of the Proud Boys in relation to the alt-right.

Despite this, Stern made sweeping claims about the fraternity.

The Proud Boys, argued Stern, are an essential piece to the broader White supremacist project of the alt-right precisely because they uphold stringent essentialized dichotomies between biological

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<sup>8</sup> Pepe the Frog is a popular internet meme that was taken from an online comic. It has been used on website, such as 4chan and Reddit and is often associated with White supremacists and antisemites.

males and females and their respective capacities as humans. Their strict adherence to the male/female and corresponding masculine/feminine dichotomies is vital to their corollary, of natural distinctions between human beings and the innate roles in breeding moral (White) humans. For Stern, while the Proud Boys chose to focus on gender in place of race their choice did not exclude them from espousing White supremacy because of an “Escherian stairwell built on the ideological affinities of anti-feminism, xenophobia, and racial othering” (75). Considering their problematic associations with well-known White supremacists, their vigilance in maintaining gender binaries and innate biological roles had allowed them to stay out of the spotlight while being in dialogue with and a servant to White nationalist notions of imperiled homelands and anxieties of racial contamination through unnatural miscegenation. For Stern, the connections are hiding in plain sight for anyone to see and it is the duty of every progressively minded person to call out such connections.

The most serious work on the Proud Boys is that of Samantha Kutner, the self-proclaimed “Proud Boys Whisperer,” who has conducted a series of online interviews with individual members of the Proud Boys (2020a). In those interviews, she identified reasons that led people to join the group. Kutner concluded that many members joined because they sensed their position in life, as straight White men, had become threatened by feminism and multiculturalism. The driving factor for recruitment, she claimed, is a perception of precarious existence as the critiques of masculinity under feminist and multicultural logics are making their way into and corrupting mainstream Western civilization. They saw White men like themselves as victims of the progressive left in the US and many are finding little appeal in mainstream conservatism. The Proud Boys, then, come to represent a safe space for a particular kind of libertarian-minded heterosexual White men to

gather and share their political and social ideologies amongst themselves without a fear of being persecuted.

In her writing, Kutner was keen to point out that not all Proud Boys were White and went so far as to define the Proud Boys as a “multiracial white supremacist group,” by which “Some multiracial members want to be contrarian, feel they have been put in a box by Democrats, and don’t realize how often they are used as ideological shields” (2020b) With a broad stroke she paints nonwhite members, perhaps unintentionally, as unwitting fools who are complicit in their own racial subjugation. Certainly not all of these non-white members are hapless ignoramuses and must have genuine reasons for joining the Proud Boys. In another piece Kutner states that in the United States, there is no unifying cultural identity of whiteness. Amidst this cultural vacuum, Proud Boys present a paradigm built on culturally normative sadism coupled with aggrieved male entitlement” (2020c) What drove Proud Boys, then, was not a unifying sense of White identity. Rather, she argues, what drives the Proud Boys and binds them together across multiracial and multiethnic lines is a shared sense injustice, entitlement, and a psychological proclivity to inflict harm upon others.

The prevailing research on the Proud Boys all seems to agree on some basic facts about them. The Proud Boys are overwhelmingly White heterosexual men; they perceive straight White men as being persecuted by feminism and multiculturalism; they are in cahoots with the alt-right and White supremacists; they peddle in bigoted logics; and they are militant and violent. Their authors’ conclusions are also quite similar. Each scholar aimed to shed light on the connections between alt-right groups, such as the Proud Boys, and White supremacy. For DeCook, she clung closely to

the specifics of her work. She urged readers to become more aware of how young people were using social media and interacting with memes as those who created online content were well versed in the subtleties of political propaganda and their potential for indoctrination. In turn, we should develop strategies to counter the creep of White supremacy that is smuggled into humorous online content aimed at young people. For Stern, the prescription is broad yet straight forward. Encouraged yet cautious, she hoped that by revealing the underlying connections between the various manifestations of the alt-right with historical legacies of White supremacy we could become more attuned to their subtleties and thus more readily and effectively able to combat them by keeping their bigotries at the margins of society. For Kutner, the value of this research was to reveal that people become Proud Boys because they find their identities, and therefore themselves, in precarious social standings.

Marginality seems to be a theme in Proud Boys research. DeCook, Stern, and Kutner all keep the Proud Boys at arm's length. DeCook looked at memes with #proudboys. Stern looked at online videos, social media, and news reports. With the one exception of Kutner's online interviews, academic inquiries concerning the Proud Boys have relied on detachment and abstraction of its subjects. Stern dismissed the Proud Boys to such a degree that she titles her book after them but only devotes less than a dozen pages to mentioning them by name. She was so sure that she knows the Proud Boys because of their repugnancy that she did not need to do any more research, even though her research relied solely on online material. She was condescending near the end of the book and left me wanting. She dismissed the Proud Boys as racist because they were acting like racists. With what little time these authors spent on their discussions of the Proud Boys, readers are continually left with very little substance to what the Proud Boys are like beyond their vitriol.

What they leave readers with is an authoritative abstraction, of a group of comfortably repugnant others, already maligned by their race, class and gender.

As I began reflecting upon my work among the Oklahoma group I hit a number of roadblocks that complicated this prevailing academic representation of the Proud Boys. Although the rhetoric they used was certainly problematic, they did not appear to simply be unwitting pawns of White supremacy. There was more to it than that. However, because of the violent actions and hateful words we are now all too accustomed at reading about when we search online for “Proud Boys,” it is easy to pin them down as simply an impediment to social progress and not a response to other social problems. What is missing from the accounts above is a serious engagement with the actual arguments that the Proud Boys are making in relation to broader societal discourses. There lacks a holistic approach that substitutes convenient correlations over substantive connections. Some of the missing connections can be found in the biographies of Proud Boy members.

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“I AM FIRST and foremost a father,” Andrew stated while wearing his signature happy smile. His posture was firm and steady, with a straightened back and protruding chest. A cue of his time spent in the Air Force. Beneath his crew-cut brown hair and matching eyes was short brown stubble on his face. His jowls and laugh lines complemented one another with every smirk as his face held an almost perpetual smile of contented confidence that was almost infectious.

Andrew grew up in a family just bordering the bottom of the lower-middle class in Southeastern Oklahoma. His parents were both raised Catholic and he considers himself a God-fearing Christian man. For the first decade of his life he lived in a majority Black neighborhood, which was reflected in his school demographic and his friend group. He attributes this to influencing him in a positive way. As he entered junior high his parents sent him to an outside school district that was composed of predominately White and some Indigenous students. Before he graduated high school he had a child and college was at the moment an unattainable goal, though he was eventually able to take college-level courses thanks to the GI Bill.

Lacking only a semester's worth of credits in environmental sciences, Andrew did not plan on graduating with a college degree. This did not bother him, though, as going to college was never his primary goal in life. While theories on a chalkboard may be accessible for some, he preferred a hands-on approach. This did not diminish the value he had derived from college. Over the years he had taken a smattering of courses in the trades. One semester of electrical engineering was enough for him to grasp how to wire a house. Becoming an expert was not his concern. Practical applications of knowledge that can pay the bills were his focus.

Andrew took it upon himself to embody the Proud Boy tenet which is the model of masculinity: that of the glorified entrepreneur who acts as a means of financial security for his family and a role model to his children and friends. His time spent as a co-owner of a small business stressed for him the importance of paying a fair wage to his employees. As the president of the Oklahoma Proud Boys, he takes it upon himself to act as a role model and mentor for his members.

“Often at times during our meet ups I’ll feel like I’m neglecting someone,” Andrew began, “They want to talk and I’m a family-oriented dude. Turns out, by the time it gets around to it, it’s like, ‘Ah, I forgot to talk to that guy.’ It’s all the time. The guys are calling me and its eleven o’clock at night and I feel kind of bad. So at the last meet up I went around and just asked, ‘Alright, so, how’s your life? Are you appreciative? What can we do to make it better?’ And by like the fifth or sixth person it’d taken on its own. The meeting just went on its own kind of way and it was really awesome cause I got to know a lot more about my guys.”

He was the father of three children, ranging from preteen to late teenager, with the middle one being both autistic and nonverbal. His wife was a homemaker, the embodiment of the feminine which Proud Boys so enthusiastically celebrate. As our conversation progressed two additional members, Bill and Arnold, overheard and approached our table. We were on the topic of family and I figured it was worthwhile to explore how they see women and wives.

“One of your central tenets is to ‘venerate the housewife.’ What do you mean by that? Some could construe it as you saying women belong and should remain in the home.”

Bill was the first to speak up, “We’re not saying that. We want women to be able to choose what they want to do. We want them to have the economic freedom to go out and do what they want, whether it is stay home and take care of the kids or go out and get a job”

I was intrigued. This did not fit with my prior assumptions of the Proud Boys, particularly after hearing statements that their founder had made to the contrary. In fact, Bill’s statement ran contrary



to how I interpreted their tenet, which when put into juxtaposition with glorifying the entrepreneur, seems to make a rather obvious statement about the proper gender roles between men and women. I decided to press them further. “But you can see how people just don’t understand that from looking at your tenets. What would you say about venerating the househusband?”

“Well, I have nothing against the househusband I guess. It’s just not the traditional family,” Bill explained.

“Yeah, I have nothing against the man staying at home,” added Arnold, “But women have a big role to play in shaping children in the community. Who are the people mostly on school PTAs? Women are. I don’t think we are telling women to stay home, but for everyone to appreciate what they offer to the community.”

“Well traditionally the child-bearing parent stays home,” Andrew continued, “That’s just how it’s always—I don’t have breastmilk. I don’t need to be there. I don’t need paternity leave. I understand that women do and I agree. I couldn’t have got my wife home from working fast enough. And so that’s why I say we’re feminists because my wife is a stay-at-home mom. She’s a housemaker, she’s a wonderful woman and if I would have to pay somebody to do all the work that she does it would cost 60 grand a year. She’s way better at it and she shapes my children’s lives and makes sure they get to school ok, makes sure my lunch is ready every day, and makes sure all of our laundry is done. She basically creates a home.”

His tone grew solemn and circled back to explain that the nuclear family is what holds together Western society. “We see the fabric of society change. We see less emphasis of values on family and Western values. Whether or not it’s Judeo-Christian or just good liberty loving freedom-minded people.” He continued to talk about statistics in annual income by ethnic group as a metric, albeit an imperfect one of success. “Eastern Asians who are family-oriented have the highest annual income in the United States because they believe in the nuclear family. The family values of the West. It’s easier to pursue great things and freedom and liberty for Western society than it is in Eastern society. That’s why they come here. Ethiopian Americans are tremendously successful. I mean, we’re number seventeen, being Caucasians. But the common denominator when you go down the list at the highest income annually per ethnic group is one thing: family-oriented, church-going people. Except with the exception of gay men. They’re in number seven. I mean as couples. You’re both making a great salary, awesome.”

By this point Bill and Arnold had long checked out and left for to refill their drinks. Andrew, though, wanted to continue with our conversation, so as he had comingled Western values with the nuclear family I asked him about what makes a value an inherently Western one. “We have always, if you think about medicine or highways, interstates, electricity, or technology. All that starts in the West and we send it overseas to get made for a variety of reasons. Not always the best though.” He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts and continued, “Think about it like this. The Chinese had gunpowder for a thousand years before a White person found it and put it, pointed it at a person. You have fireworks for a thousand years and you never thought to turn it on its side? It’s the greatest weapon in history. Right?” His response was that continual improvement was a fundamentally Western fascination. Suddenly his focus shifted onto Africa, “There’s not much

improvement going on in Africa, with the exception of a couple countries. I'm not saying Apartheid was good but whenever they got rid of it, whenever England gave them the country back they've gone to shit.<sup>9</sup> They can't do anything. Period. There are I think 3% of the producing agricultural crops for humans. Only 3% of the ones that were functioning in 2000 are functioning today, and they're starving in South Africa.

The Proud Boys, for Andrew, is about much more than a casual drinking club for men. Family, gender, religion, hard work, and self-improvement seem to be the forces driving his life decisions but those traits are not themselves unique, let alone enough to bring someone to start their own Proud Boys chapter. There is more at stake than living the good life—that virtuous lifestyle, with its accompanying beliefs, ethics, and morals, must be continually celebrated, practiced, and passed on to future generations. The maintenance of particular kinds of people who embody particular kinds of identities is paramount to the success or failure of the nation.

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ANDREW'S PERSONAL NARRATIVE, which weaved in and out of our conversation, offers us a fertile field by which we can explore and unravel the historical and contemporary discourses informing how he makes meaning and finds a sense of belonging through his identities. His perspectives speak to his own racialized, gendered, and classed positions that he navigates and

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<sup>9</sup> I must take pause here to note that this statement is demonstrably and inaccurate take on colonial Africa. However, my point is not to criticize Andrew's take. Instead, it is important to be attuned to how falsehoods factor into how people make meaning and understand themselves in relation to others.

negotiates as they differentially fit into a panoply of discursive practices. Moving in and out of focus throughout his story are languages tied to competing mythologies of capitalism and colonialism. These various discourses may be firmly rooted within history, though their relevance to contemporary political projects cannot be understated. Most salient to our discussion of identity and discourse is their oppositional and contradictory nature. Andrew's narrative, as we will see, is not simply a product of history but a real-time effort to validate his own life through the very discourses he perceives to be often mobilized to invalidate the values, beliefs, and institutions he holds most dear.

There is a great body of scholarly literature on identity and the way it is produced and reproduced. Of particular importance to this discussion is a canon determined to de-essentialize commonsense notions of identity. Rather than being determined by any internal and immutable core, scholars have argued that identities, such as race, gender, and class, have been constructed by historically and culturally informed practices (Barthes 1969), (Butler 1988), (Rosaldo 1994), (Astuti 1995), (Appadurai 1996), (Ong 1996), (Clifford 1997), (Conklin 1997), (Holland 1998), (Ortner, 1998), (Fischer 1999), (Sokefeld 1999). In the midst of this canon set against essentialism, Stuart Hall asked an existential question: with the proliferation of critical works that have successfully refuted essentialist philosophies of identity, why are academics still writing about these identities and for what reasons? He gave two possibilities.

First, he suggested that while identity had been thoroughly critiqued and its essentialist assumptions no longer "good to think with," one reason it continued to be discussed is that the concept of identity and its corresponding terms, such as racial, gender, and class, had yet to be

replaced by new concepts and terms (1996:1). However, the possibility of identity as concept being supplanted by a new concept, Hall believed, was all but impossible because the only way to think with de-essentializing conceptualizations of identity was to also think with and against those earlier notions of identity that were essentializing. While a major consensus of scholars agreed that identities did not speak to innate human types and the supposed capacities of humanity, it was obvious that those very identities had become fundamental to how people negotiated their relationships with others and fit within larger power structures.

Second, Hall suggested that identity was an important concept to social theory because our identities were constituted by our provincial attachment to, or identification with, particular subject positions. Subject positions are the places from where we speak. It is where we make claim to certain experiences that inform our perspectives and how we use them to interpret the world. They are grounded in concrete material realities and social relationships that part of broader power structures. We do not simply exist, passively absorbing. As Donna Haraway (1991) theorized, our perspectives, and the knowledges they produce, are situated, ephemeral, and influenced by our subject positions and the knowledges they produce. We always act from a particular place lodged in a particular time. Just as our bodies do not exist outside of particular spaces or times, neither do the insights that can be gained through careful consideration of the lived experiences of people. Knowledge itself is contingent upon our experiences in relation to others and our positions within society.

Andrew's narrative speaks to his own subject position as a White heterosexual middle-class man. Each of these particular identities, of race, sexuality, class, sex, and gender have all come to

influence how he makes meaning by way of their relationships to one another. And by a large, they speak to a broader consensus among other Proud Boys which is reflected by their organizational texts. The most significant identity that Andrew draws from is being a father. Not only was this his first answer when I asked him to tell me about himself but a theme that he continually returned to throughout our conversation that also continually brought a smile to his face. Undoubtedly, informing the significance of his fatherhood is the composition of his family, specifically, a heterosexual nuclear family where he was the chief breadwinner. Underlying his identity as a supportive father and husband is a particular attachment to his masculinity and the kinds of qualities a man should embody.

In line with the organizational texts of the Proud Boys, Andrew performed particular activities that emphasized his masculinity. Not only was he economically productive, but so productive that his wife was able to fulfil the role she was most suited for, raising children. There was a dichotomous positioning of masculinity and femininity running throughout his narrative. Although there is certainly merit to interpret Andrew as endorsing the economic subordination of women by men, his story is not so clear cut. Andrew emphasized the economic burden lifted from his family's shoulders because his wife played her part as he played his. Instead of defining his relationship with his wife as one defined by feminine subordination, he chose to highlight the synergism between his masculinity and his wife's femininity. His narrative actually praised the economic impact of women in a very matter-of-fact way that also emphasized his wife's agency and ability. Not only did his wife save their family money by becoming a housewife, but she willingly chose to do so and has provided better care to their children than strangers in a daycare would have.

Identities are the particular positions from which the subject is obliged to take up. But the experiences and perspectives of any given identity are always negotiable. Identities are never in stasis. Indeed, those very identities we hold so dearly close to us are produced by historical contingencies and the discourses that rely on and construct those very identities. Coincidentally, identities, as points of contention and as a process of contingent identifications, are strategic positionings that signal the very instability and incoherence of those identities. “Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse,” Hall wrote, “we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutionalized sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (1996:4). The particular identities that Proud Boys, such as Andrew, are clinging most closely to need to be situated within discourse.

Discourse is most fundamentally about the spatiotemporal relationship between language, perception, and culture. Who we have been, who we are now, and who we will become are all in constant dialogue with broader historical, social, and political flows. It’s part personal choice and part historical ascription, however we are always lodged within linguistic systems of differential meaning-making and interpretation. In his analysis of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin identified the dialogic quality of discourses. As with the language of a novel, broader societal discourses are comprised of “a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (1984:47). For Bakhtin, language was inextricably linked to sociality and perception. His concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism are invaluable tools that we can use to work through how Proud Boys come to their particular conclusions about racialized, gendered, and classed identities that are hotly contested as essentialist and bigoted.

It is quite obvious that the ways in which Proud Boys interpret their core tenets conflicts with how non-members understand their meanings. One of their most controversial tenets, as we have seen, is their glorification of the entrepreneur and veneration of the housewife. During my conversation with Andrew, Arnold, and Bill, I pressed them to provide me with the rationale for choosing to celebrate explicitly gendered forms of activity. Interestingly enough, they argued that these tenets did not mean what others thought they meant, that women belong in domestic spaces. In fact, they meant quite the opposite, that due to their physiological equipment, women are better suited to perform particular kinds of domestic activities.

Dialogism describes the inherent asymmetry of language as a communicative medium. As our primary means of sharing information, language is necessarily complex, imperfect, and charged with meaning. For Andrew, Arnold, and Bill, to venerate the housewife was to celebrate a truer form of femininity in the face of a post-second wave feminism that vilified that form as a subordination to patriarchy. Indeed, this was not the first or last time that upon scrutinization Proud Boys would have to take a step back to clarify what they *actually* meant by the language they used. Did venerating the housewife mean that their wives could not go out and get a job? According to Arnold it was acceptable for a women to seek employment outside of the house. However, that diverged from tradition. Did venerating the housewife mean that it was inappropriate for a husband to be the homemaker and their wife to be the breadwinner? Not necessarily, they responded. Instead, and once again, it was not the traditional arrangement of the nuclear family. Certainly there was a tension between them that spoke to a desire to cling onto tradition while being open to novel familial arrangements.



As a concept, dialogism helps us understand how no language is neutral of ideology because it is never isolated from other languages with their own respective ideological assumptions. My line of questioning introduced a perspective they had not seriously considered. So much so that that my questions interrupted an otherwise smooth flow to our conversation. They had to stop and process this contradiction. Despite this, they retreated to their essentialized connections of biological sex corresponding to particular gender roles and their respective places within Western civilization. Even as they reconciled the contradictions between their rhetoric and its deeper meaning, there was a dismissal of those interpretations that conflicted with their own.

Interestingly, Jane Hill's concept of indirect indexicality can be useful in understanding this dismissal of opposing interpretations. In semiotics, indexicals are words or images that point towards particular concepts or material things through a presumption of co-occurrence. As Hanks (1999) discusses, indexicals encode a connection between an object and a context. For example, when a person is quickly moving towards an elevator door and yells, "Can you grab that for me?" The word "that" indexes, or points to the existence of the elevator door which needs to be held open. Not only does "that" stand in for the elevator, it also indexes a specific relationship between the interlocutors. A request is being made and an expectation is set. To be successfully understood, or decoded, both the person who speaks and the person who is spoken to need to understand a layer of indexical relationships.

As an example of direct indexicality, a housewife points to the presence of well-cared children, financial security, and a nourishing home. However, as an example of indirect indexicality, housewives point towards an inherent inadequacy when it comes to femininity and money-making

or competing for dominance among men. The negative implications of the housewife are that they are inherently inferior to men outside of the house. There is certainly merit to this line of critique. When the Proud Boys argue that women are better than men at taking care of children because of the ability to carry children and produce breastmilk they explicitly emphasize what men lack and set women up in a synergistic relationship. However, this argument relies upon a set of assumptions about women: that they are ineffective at making money, that they belong in domestic spaces, that they are too emotional, too weak, and too lazy.

Not only do people actively imbue language with differential meaning during any communicative event, as the Proud Boys do when they recite their organizational rhetoric. Language itself, argued Bakhtin, is necessarily diverse, it is heteroglossic. Even within a single language, such as English, are multiple and competing meanings between words. An individual language has inherently diverse and contradictory languages embedded within it. Even before Andrew, Arnold, and Bill communicated their own perspectives, their words were imbued with meaning apart from themselves. Their utterances were not created by them, *per se*, instead, these words were pre-formed and embedded with semiotic meaning they could then reduce to their own.

One interesting kind of linguistic practice I found multiple Proud Boys perform, including Andrew during our conversation, demonstrated an awareness that on some level their words were not even their own. On more than one occasion a Proud Boy would take the guise of Gavin McInnes' voice and parrot his words almost verbatim. McInnes, the founder of the Proud Boys, does not just speak through organizational texts, he quite literally speaks through its members. This double-voicedness, as Bakhtin (1983) would call it, speaks to the immense influence that McInnes has had

over how members of the Proud Boys come to find meaning through the repetition of particular utterances than reinforce a sense of sentimental solidarity among the fraternal organization.

These two Bakhtinian concepts, of dialogism and heteroglossia, go hand-in hand. They complement one another and are useful when analyzing discourse to reveal how on one hand, perspectives influence linguistic meaning in differential ways, and on the other, languages themselves are differentially imbued with meaning prior to any person filtering that language through their own perspective. These two concepts show two different ways in which language, as a medium of communication and signification, is necessarily a mediation of difference that can never be fully resolved.

Despite the irreducibility of language, discourses analysis can be an effective means to discern meaning-making strategies. A theme of construction, of building and improving, runs throughout Andrew's narrative and is complimented by Arnold and Bill's input on femininity and housewives. The construction of families, homes, economies, technologies, and futures that are the building blocks of Western civilization. And for each particular identity that Andrew appealed to, layers of meaning can be found and placed within broader discourses.

Andrew's narrative speaks to and with mythologized discourses of a linear human history and progress. There is a contradictory wedding of Enlightenment era notions of rationality and scientific progress set against the adherence to Christian notions of faith in the supernatural, colonial encounters of difference, and the productiveness of the Protestant work ethic. Lodged within these competing discourses we find Andrew's narrative on race, gender, and class. What it

comes to mean to be a man to is be economically productive and supportive of their family. In dialogue with this are capitalist and colonial discourses about racial difference, religious observations, and technological progress.

Identity is a constant and collective negotiation with the pasts and presents of self and other. As this is not a passive process, its effects come to be acutely felt. They are centered within and upon the body. Our bodies, wrote Foucault, come to be shaped by practices that are shaped by discourse, “the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration” (1984:83). Our bodies, and the identities we position ourselves within, are written upon by history itself and are constantly being destroyed and remade in our present by how we interpret the past.

The Proud Boys are not exempt from the ways in which historical flows and contemporary discourses come to construct their identities around the histories and structures of capitalism and colonialism. The wedding of these two structural forces have been integral to how race, gender, and class identities are created and recreated in contestable ways.

## ***Part Two***

ONCE AGAIN I found myself alone with Tommy. He was, as usual, eagerly perched on his stool, prepared to answer any questions I might throw his way. I pulled out my tape recorder and got to it.

What surprised me most during our conversation was that for most of his life Tommy was a registered Democrat. During both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections he voted for Barack Obama. But his allegiance to the Democratic Party was contingent. His faith in the Democratic Party's convictions towards Americans like himself was shaken as he felt the effects of the Affordable Care Act. Like many Americans, Tommy's premiums spiked as they shot up from \$150 per month to nearly \$700. This hit close to home for me. My mother, who lives a rather modest life, had her insurance premiums triple as a result of the Affordable Care Act. It may have helped millions of others but not my mother and apparently not Tommy either. Despite what he saw as an attack on his financial security, Tommy did not switch parties. He still believed in the Democratic party and continued holding onto his status as a registered Democrat. It was only during Donald Trump's 2016 bid for the presidency that his faith in his party's ideals were shattered after Hillary Clinton spoke about late-term abortions. Tommy crossed the aisle and found a new home.

Becoming a Proud Boy has not significantly impacted Tommy's life, or so he says. But that does not mean he is unaware of its effects. Like many Proud Boys he has been doxxed by random internet strangers he assumes are Leftists and part of "Antifa." His personal information is plastered across the internet for all to see. His phone number, address, employer, etc. One day he signed onto Facebook and found an unread message sitting in his inbox from an unknown sender. The only text was his home address. He did not think much of this at the time. After all, this was not his first rodeo when it came to being targeted because of his membership with the Proud Boys. Months before Wade's boss received a call from an anonymous and concerned person who informed his employer that a Proud Boys was working for them. It was just another day in the life.

However, a few days later he was sitting in his living room playing videogames when his daughter noticed a stranger was approaching their front door. The man's car was in poor shape, with dents and one of its windows sealed with a black trash bag. Tommy could tell this person was a stranger who did not live in his neighborhood. When the man stepped onto his porch Tommy quickly opened his door with shotgun in hand. The confrontation was brief. The man was flustered and appeared to be on drugs. Tommy told him to stay away from his daughter and his home. He hasn't seen the man since.

Tommy, like many other Proud Boys, works as a tradesman and is currently employed as an electrician. Similar to the experiences of others within the Oklahoma chapter, his employer has been notified on multiple occasions that they are employing a member of a violent racist hate group. Unlike most of his brothers, however, Tommy has yet to lose a job despite his employers knowledge of his associations. He told me that he makes his employer too much money for them to fire him over his membership with the organization. The threat, however, is always there, one that he occasionally considers but casually dismisses. But the thought must always be there in the back of his mind: at what point might his employer find that employing a Proud Boy is more trouble than what it's worth?

While the Oklahoma chapter no longer organized to participate in public demonstrations as a chapter by the time I began my fieldwork, many of its members remained politically active and attend rallies, Tommy included. In late 2019 he travelled to Portland, Oregon, to meet up with some other Proud Boys and members of Patriot Prayer. Patriot Prayer is a far Right-wing group most active in the states of Oregon and Washington. The story goes that they were to march down

the street and assemble at a local park where they would plant a flag, hold a small meeting, and make their way to a local bar. However, they were quickly met with counterprotestors comprised of self-avowed anti-fascists. A short clash ensued. Bike locks and bricks and bottles of piss were thrown at the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer demonstrators before a semblance of order was restored by police. Once again, it was just a day in the life of being a Proud Boy.

There is, of course, a politics to how different viewpoints are represented, by ethnographers and by journalists alike. Often, the difficulty lies in the disconnect between what people say they do and what they actually do, what they profess to believe and the ways such beliefs are enacted. I learned early on that Proud Boys often use sociality and friendship as a way to rationalize their membership. They claim to be a member because they desire company with others who like to drink and talk about politics. But it is never that simple. After some scrutinization of how the Proud Boys explain their membership it becomes difficult to disconnect that from their core value, which every Proud Boy must recite loudly and in a public setting. They require their members to proclaim themselves Western chauvinists who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.

For Tommy, his journey to becoming and existing as a Proud Boy follows a particular narrative with a theme of political neglect and finding community through faith in the face of continued persecution. He perceived Obama's healthcare reform neglected the financial security of Americans and believed that Clinton's views on abortion demonstrated a disregard for human life that led to his exodus from the left and marked his political conversion to the right. He found a flock, the Proud Boys, with whom he could connect with others who had experienced what they sensed as the political neglect and inhumanity of the Left. Together they solidified their communal

bonds by performing their initiation rites that bonded them along a faith in the institutions, practices, and values of Western civilization as a curative to their sense of being marginalized because of social justice movements opposed to whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality. As a result of their membership, it becomes common, and even a milestone of membership to face persecution by being harassed, doxxed, losing a job, losing friends, losing family, and being confronted in what was believed to be the safest and most sacred of spaces, the home.

The path that any one person's persecution narrative takes may not always intersect with that of another's, though there is ample potential for these narratives to run parallel as pathways of becoming.

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MY DREAM OF being fired at work weeks earlier revealed that I was slowly becoming aware of a growing anxiety inside of me. I had been so easily brought into their world and I even found myself empathizing with some of them on a human social level. I was conflicted and faced with an existential contradiction. It felt liberating that I was able to successfully navigate a sphere so hostile to the values I hold dear. At the same time, I felt as if I were drifting further away from those ideals. It was almost taboo, as if our identities were not supposed to come together, and I had to choose one or the other. There was a little bit of a thrill to it, like I was getting to cross some line or experience something forbidden and out of bounds.



I could not get the conversation between Tommy, Laura, and myself out of my head for weeks. After all, I thought Tommy took a number of compelling and principled stances during our conversation. He encouraged Laura to become politically active, considered the child detention centers along the Southern border to be dehumanizing, questioned the validity of often polarizing media narratives, felt troubled by the inability for people of different political opinions to sit down without relying on accusations of bigotry to legitimate their positions, believed that considering emotions was an important aspect of leadership, had a desire to reach through political differences to find commonalities, was a working-class person like my parents, and had shared in a similar experience of political neglect as my mother had by the previous administration.

I did not expect to be so drawn into siding with a Proud Boy. Often, our conversations meant agreeing to disagree in some spots yet agreeing much more frequently than I felt was right. I felt a familiar force, something I had experienced before without realizing at the time. Just a few years ago I had been drawn into the right-wing mediascape by its appealing to my identity as a straight White working-class male facing a future of censorship and its various critiques of leftist politics as a potential way out.

The unsettling truth was that Tommy reminded me a lot of myself. My connection to him was established largely by our shared identities, common experiences and even some sentiments. We were both straight White working-class men who had spent much of our lives in Oklahoma living relatively modest lives. We did not particularly believe in any religion. While he worked in the trades I had my fair share of hands-on manual labor work during my teenage years and early twenties. However, for all of the commonalities we shared that spoke to our various identities and

experiences, be they along the lines of race, gender, class, occupation, religion, etc., it was not solely along those lines that we connected. Simultaneously, the connection was brought about by the comingling of sensibilities.

I was being brought into his world so readily, despite my hesitancy, in part because we shared several sentimental scripts. These scripts, argues Appadurai (1990) rely on an “affective bedrock” that acts as a conduit between people. While at the time I was attempting to cordon Tommy off to protect myself against my own anxieties of being contaminated by my growing proximity to certain Proud Boys, I began to see a different light shine through the cracks. Our connection being strengthened by overlapping sentiments revealed one way in which communities can form in spite of the contradictory identities of the individuals that comprise the community.

The conclusion was staggering. It must be possible, then, to become a selective member of a hate group. To take the bits and pieces that work and cast aside those that don't. The Proud Boys exist to offer a brotherhood to men who feel as if the lifeways they cherish are being threatened; that unless they band together and perform their values they will inevitably lose them. But that fight is not without sacrifice. Surely those who heed its call will be met with violence. They will be persecuted.. In spite of the acknowledgements of the differing identities, experiences, and sentiments, the Proud Boys reinforce their fraternal bonds by emphasizing particular moral registers of those identities, experiences, and sentiments that can then be fed back into their fraternal creed and further bolstered through a shared sense of persecution which reaffirms their faith.

WHILE I FOUND a certain personal rapport with some of the Proud Boys, I felt less able to locate my sensibilities within their formal doctrine and degrees of membership, which are contingent upon perceiving oneself to be the victim of political persecution and constantly surrounded by and participating in violence.<sup>10</sup> Before being fully admitted into the fraternity as a brother, hopefuls must first become a probationer. To become this they must meet two criteria. First, they must have been born with a penis. Second, the recruit must stand in front of the members of the recruiting chapter and recite the Fraternal Creed: “I am a Western chauvinist, and I refuse to apologize for creating the modern world.” This is called the first degree and acts, as the name suggests, as a probationary period where the new member is monitored to ensure that they are a good fit for the fraternity.

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<sup>10</sup> The founder of the Proud Boys, Gavin McInnes, has been rather vocal about claiming to have experienced persecution because of his political philosophy and association with the Proud Boys. In a January 2017 episode from *Rebel News*, McInnes recounted a story of protecting women from “violent leftists” while they were forced to sneak into a venue to give a speech, “So we go around the side, because I thought, ‘Let’s not go in the front door,’ and there’s one thousand people...There’s a thousand people at least, just screaming at us, screaming their heads off, ‘Shame! Shame! Shame!’” (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng7Eep6bF\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ng7Eep6bF_I)) After a confrontation with self-avowed anti-fascists in February 2017, McInnes tweeted, “Still had pepper spray on my clothes when I got home. My non-white kid broke out in hives after hugging me. Antifa are going to die” (see [https://twitter.com/Gavin\\_McInnes/status/827661441050226689](https://twitter.com/Gavin_McInnes/status/827661441050226689)). After being fired from *Blaze TV* in December 2018, McInnes responded to an inquiry by *HuffPost* that stated, “Someone very powerful decided long ago that I shouldn’t have a voice...I’m finally out of platforms and unable to defend myself...We are no longer living in a free country” (see [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/proud-boys-gavin-mcinnese-fired\\_n\\_5c0ea391e4b0edf5a3a75bf8?guccounter=1](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/proud-boys-gavin-mcinnese-fired_n_5c0ea391e4b0edf5a3a75bf8?guccounter=1)). In January 2019 McInnes wrote an open letter to his neighbors after they planted “Hate has no home here” signs in their front yards. He expressed his frustrations with what he saw as misrepresentations of him and his group, “You may have heard that I am the leader of a hate group called the Proud Boys. Everything about that rumor is false. The Proud Boys are a drinking club I started several years ago as a joke. There is no racial or ethnic component to its membership, its program or the idea behind it” (see <https://officialproudboys.com/uncategorized/hate-has-no-home-here-means-i-hate-trump/>).

At first glance the first degree seems mundane and routine. The Proud Boys are simply practicing their organizational charter when they set criteria for membership and follow it through to the end. The recitation of the fraternal creed even comes off as playful and innocent as the picture of a grown man standing up in front of other grown men, telling them that he has a dick and then pledging his loyalty to Western civilization is quite a strange and silly sight. However, if we follow DeCook's claims that otherwise innocuous and entertaining memes can have deeper meanings whose intent is to be used for political conversion, we find that the first degree is undergirded by unspoken and implied assumptions about those who speak it that are both mythical.

There are, as Malinowski (1984) postulated, "...intimate connections [sic] between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales...their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities on the other" (195). Myths are told and retold, passed down from generation to generation. Myths are like a sacred charter. They help guide people and offer frameworks to navigate life. The myth of Western progress and supremacy is such an example. The Proud Boys regularly position themselves and seek to improve their lives through membership in their fraternal order. And, as we will see, explicit and implicit assertions are drawn through their organizational credo and degrees of membership that reflect a ritualistic cleansing of tendencies that are tacitly characterized by an immorality antithetical to their story of Western civilizational progress.

Every man must situate themselves within the mythical story of Western civilization progress to become a Proud Boy. Each time the fraternal credo is uttered a man symbolically embodies men of the past. Through repetitious recitations, the myth of Western civilizational progress is "justified

in excess” and “transform[s] history into nature” (Barthes 1972). In other words, mythologies erase histories by simplifying and reducing them. By stating their simple, yet loaded credo, they collapse histories of colonialism, slavery, and genocide—of overwhelming human suffering—into static events of the past that are firmly situated within a linear history. They are legitimated as necessary, even if unfortunate, contingencies of the modern era. The concept of “modern,” and therefore modernity is transformed from a linguistic sign open to manifold interpretations to a signifier whose set of traits are pre-formed and eternal. Modernity comes to be reduced from a concept that describes shifts in art styles, governmental institutions, globalized connections, sentiments, practices, and values into a set of qualities used to describe the civilizational (moral) worth of a people. Under this mythos, within the contemporary moment some people are modern and others are not based upon how their cultural practices reflect specific criteria of civilization. For the Proud Boys, this criteria includes “the rule of law,” “freedom of speech,” and “democratic institutions.” Not only is language reduced through this mythology, but so too are people.

As a performance, recitation of the credo narrativizes past events and recounts them as a story a single sentence long. But when a story is told events of the past are not just reaffirmed, they are also generated by the telling of the story (Bauman 1986). The events recounted by the first degree are imbued with contemporary perspectives and modern sentiments. The credo may implicitly tell a story of colonialism, but not one focusing on the systematic subjugation and genocide of entire populations of indigenous peoples. Instead of colonialism being defined by malevolence it is reinscribed with benevolence. As I was told during my fieldwork, colonialism may have harmed indigenous peoples but it brought them agriculture and civilization. In another instance the credo was described as emphasizing how Westerners supposedly have more rights than people living in

other nations throughout the world. The context that defines why the first degree is being uttered also defines the context of the history it creates.

There are three overarching discourses embedded within the first degree that both act to strengthen and sever connections between initiates and members to Western mythologies and their shared sense of persecution. The first is a discourse of masculinity. This discourse asks prospects to consider their innate potential as biological males. It relies on the belief that biological males and females are geared towards different kinds of activities.

The second is a discourse about morality. This discourse asks prospects to make a connection between their masculinity and the social, political, economic, and scientific progress Western civilization has achieved on the backs of men and women fulfilling their respective roles. But the phrasing of the fraternal creed ends up doing more than making a statement about the essential characteristics of men and women and their roles within society. Prospects are not simply stating that men have played a fundamental role in constructing modernity.

The third, and perhaps the most elusive and subtle discourse embedded within the first degree, is one about racial truth. This discourse asks prospective members to make a connection between the architects of Western civilization and their race. Coincidentally, this discourse about race is fundamental to the persecution of its members. Remember, one of the core tenets of the Proud Boys is “anti-racial guilt” which I posit is code for “anti-White racial guilt.” Together, these discourses intersect and require prospects to accept the following premise: Western civilization was built by straight White men who are now under attack by a growing coalition of liberal

feminists, academics, politicians, and young people who claim that the civilization they built is an inherently racist patriarchy. Not only are Whites under attack, but all men, regardless of their race.

To recognize the contingencies between Western civilization and its White architects is not to claim that only White people are able to participate in and perpetuate the moral living that Western civilization entails. Stating the fraternal creed does not mean that the man who said it has racial animus towards people of color. Instead, my fieldwork suggests that the recognition is one that is perceived to be matter of fact. The argument goes that it was Western Europeans, who were overwhelmingly White, that set sail from their homelands and spread Western civilizational values and morals through colonialism. It was not destined for White men to conquer the West, it's just how it turned out. With this line of thought undergirding the first degree, the Proud Boys can market themselves to both White and people of color. Whites are able to draw on both their whiteness and masculinity while non-White members are able to sympathize with their White counterparts via their mutual masculinity. As Hymes (1981) posited, "the performance of the myth itself, of course, is a repetition of words previously said by others, making the event formal and the words valid." A man of any race can then stand in solidarity with other men and refuse to accept that the realities of the past will determine those of the future.

Indeed, it is fruitful to consider the denotative and connotative meanings of the Proud Boy's fraternal credo (Barthes 1977). Denotative meaning is the most direct and apparent meaning that a word can have, while connotative meaning indirect and deeper. For Barthes, who was interested in photographs, an image of pasta used in a marketing ad explicitly

Their refusal to apologize is not an admittance and subsequent dismissal of their racial guilt. After all, one of their core tenets opposes the notion of racial guilt. Rather, their refusal has a deeper conative meaning behind it that is rebellious and hostile. It is an attempt to sever the connection between White men of the past who committed atrocities in the name of Western civilization from White men of the present who believe that those atrocities were worthwhile because they resulted in civilizational progress. Apartheid might have treated Black Africans unequally, though colonialism was good for Africa because it brought agricultural technologies. They acknowledge that the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of North America may have been bloody but to them it was worth it as it brought civilization to so-called “savages” and “birthed the first nation” governed by the “Rule of Law.”

The Proud boys are implicitly drawing a connection between the inherent morality of White racial essence and Western civilization while through sleight of hand replacing White exceptionalism with cultural exceptionalism. The implied inherent morality of White racial essence can be found in the following statement that I heard while in the field: “White people did not start slavery—they ended it.” What allows that contradictory sleight of hand to successfully function and even be appealing is because it relies on a persecution narrative. Once the first degree is uttered the threat of persecution is always present, even if the particular man who spoke it does not believe they have ever been persecuted for their race or their masculinity. The implication is that because of their implicit whiteness or explicit manhood they are always a potential target by those who would cast them as any kind of bigot. To extend Stern’s observation that the Proud Boys center themselves along the biological essentialisms of sex as opposed to race, to speak the first degree is to take ownership and responsibility for the biologically determined capacities for creativity and



progress that men have been endowed with while severing the connection between historical atrocities committed by and contemporary critiques of the violent tendencies of straight White men.

Once the prospect has recited the fraternal creed of the first degree they are eligible to become a “brother” of the fraternity by completing the second degree. Like the first degree, the second has two steps. First, probationers “must get the crap beaten out of [them] by at least five guys until [they] can name five breakfast cereals.” The second step of the second degree is to limit masturbation to no more than once a month, which the Proud Boys playfully call “#NoWanks” (The Elders 2017b) What are the underlying discourses? Again, we have one about the biologically innate capacities of men that comments on their physical strength and mental fortitude. And in turn, we have a discourse about the biologically innate capacities of women. As I was told during fieldwork the first part of the second degree is a test on an individual’s ability to focus during a fight. I was told, “If you can’t keep a cool head and say five silly names while your friends are punching you then I don’t want you fighting next to me if it comes down to that point.” The fight being against “Antifa” and other Leftists who they see as their rivals.

For the Proud Boys, men are supposed to fight, impregnate women, and build society. Women are supposed to weed out the weak men from the gene pool, get pregnant, and raise children. The second degree is in dialogue with their tenets of glorifying the entrepreneur and venerating the housewife. Again, there is an implicit sleight of hand at work with the particular words they use and the implications of them. On one hand, they are explicitly positioning men and women in

oppositional roles. On the other, they are accepting, although cautiously, of men who stay at home while their wife goes out and works.

A second discourse in dialogue with the second degree is one about sexuality. A caveat of the second degree is that gay Proud Boys are not required to participate in “#NoWanks” as “they are doing just fine for intercourse” The prohibition on masturbation only applies to heterosexual men. Both of these discourses intersect with one another to make a statement about the family. The family unit is of paramount importance to the Proud Boys. It seems to be the most explicit institution that their organization wishes to preserve. But not just any composition of people can make a well-suited and nurturing family according to their logic of Western supremacy. The form that the ideal family takes is that of the nuclear family, formed around a monogamous, heterosexual couple. According to this view, the ideal family is comprised of a biologically female mother and biologically male father who consummate their holy vows by producing and passing down their values to their offspring who will go out into the world and continue the process of promoting Western civilization and its values. Gay men, therefore, are written off when considering the second degree. Their masturbatory behaviors need not matter as they have presumably decided to not procreate. The lives of gay couples, as it turns out, can be best spent by contributing to the market and by making profit as they do not need to raise children. At the same time, if the prohibition on masturbation is to make men stronger then what does it imply about excluding gay men from this necessary bodily behavior? The prohibition on masturbation is not to make men stronger in the sense of physical strength, as the first part of the second degree does, rather, it is to make men stronger mentally which prepares them for supporting their wives and children.

In a strikingly similar fashion to the first degree, which allows nonwhite members to stand in solidarity with their White counterparts, despite the explicit belief that it was White men who built Western civilization and White men who are currently being persecuted for that history, the second degree recognizes that while it was not off the backs of homosexual men that Western civilization was built, because of their inability to create a heterosexual nuclear family, this reality does not preclude their participation in Western civilization. After all, as I was told, the Romans had bathhouses and we all know what was going on in them in secrecy, behind closed doors. At least gay members of the Proud Boys are able to tout their above average economic productivity, which is in service to the perpetuation of Western society. While the primary goal of the second degree is to make men more attractive to women by fostering the virtues of willpower, resilience, reliability, strength, and faith, gay men can come along for the ride too as long as they do not forsake their masculinity.

Puar's theory of homonationalism is quite salient here. The nation is not just premised upon familial bonds, as we see with the Proud Boys' elevation of the nuclear family. The nation is also formulated upon homosocial bonds that elevates heterosexuality. The Proud Boys are a homosocial gathering of men who celebrate their fraternal bond by calling one another "brother ." They find meaning and purpose through spending time with other men because doing so is necessary to foster the qualities of masculinity that they believe are the fundamental building blocks of Western civilization. By being put through the gauntlet of their degrees they reinforce what it means to be a man: to be responsible, decisive, strong, and attractive. In some ways, the Proud Boys is like a self-help group. The denotative meanings to these concepts are certainly appealing to men and don't explicitly differentiate between what kind of man fosters these qualities and for what reasons.

However, as we have seen, the degrees of membership do not just address neutral notions of responsibility, decisiveness, strength, and attraction. Outside of the text itself are statements made by Proud Boys about the importance of the degrees. For the second degree, Proud Boys often describe the primary goal as a means to get men out into the world with the intention of attracting a female mate. The specific language of the second degree may not outrightly denigrate homosexuality but the value of homosexuality is contradicted by the contingencies of Western civilization and the heterosexual nuclear family.

Homosexuality within the domestic space may not be beneficial to Western civilization, however, as one of my interlocutors informed me, gay men , on the whole, make more money than racially White people. Homosexuality can be good for the economy because gay couples are less likely to raise children and therefore they can spend more time making money. Here we return to Puar, who by way of Foucault, argues that when advantageous to the nation, particular forms of queerness are sanctioned. This is a form of biopolitics by which “delineates not only which queers live and which queers die...but also how queers live and die” (Puar 2007:xii). Certain homosexuals are sanctioned under these circumstances because of their perceived contribution to the economy. On the other hand, transgender people are by and large denigrated by the Proud Boys, whose talking points continually circle around their high rates of suicide and incidents of mental illness. In other words, non-normative genders and sexualities are only as legitimate insofar as they are seen to contribute to the virtues, values, and institutions of Western civilization as understood by the Proud Boys .

In what now might sound like a broken record, the third degree, is steeped in violence, persecution, and is in dialogue with broader discourses about masculinity. While the second degree involves the symbolic infliction of pain, the third degree is involves the controlled infliction of pain by marking the body. The Proud Boy must either get a tattoo, or if they are against tattoos, they must be branded with “Proud Boy”. This tattoo tends to be placed on the bottom or top forearm, so it is visible to everyone. It is a statement of belonging that cannot be easily removed and thrown away like their signature Fred Perry polos or silenced like a voice, which among the Proud Boys is often loud and proud. When I conducted my fieldwork most Oklahoma Proud Boys had their third degree. Here, getting a tattoo is seen as a manly thing to do, as sailors used to do. But it does more than just act as a marker of identity. It binds the men together. They become walking billboards for their ideological sensibilities and thus open themselves up to further persecution by their political rivals.

The fourth degree is perhaps most straight-forward in its dependence upon violence and persecution as it requires a member to “engag[e] in a major conflict for the cause.” This can include being arrested or getting into a physical altercation while standing up for one’s beliefs. During my initial phone call with Andrew he emphasized that the Proud Boys are not a violent group. He was quick to stress the importance of avoiding potentially violent situations and suggested violent altercations should be de-escalated as many of his members are the primary providers for their families and cannot risk the types of confrontations that would result in jail time. Herein lies a contradiction. While echoing the words of Gavin McInnes, in the same breath Andrew would tell me that violence is an effective tool to solve problems. At their most recent venue they would occasionally take inner chapter squabbles to the boxing ring. On the one hand, I was told that the

Oklahoma group was not taking to the streets and fighting Antifa like those chapters that have made their way onto television because they did not want to risk legal troubles., There was a stated aversion to violence because of the social effects. On the other hand, there is a valorization of violence because of its social effectiveness. Violence is part and parcel of becoming and being a Proud Boy. At all levels, Proud Boys affirm and reaffirm their existence through the strategic giving and taking of violence. Here, the violence is controlled. It is doled out where it is believed to be most effective and appropriate.

The bodies of Proud Boys are highly regulated by the historical contingencies of their vision of Western civilization. The discourses that surround and are ultimately written upon their bodies delineate what it means to be civilized, moral, and ethical. Simultaneously it is embedded with assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality. Violence and persecution are part and parcel of being a Proud Boy. Every step of the way and even before the steps to become a Proud Boy were explicitly made, the Proud Boys are legitimated by violence and persecution. We see the intersections of race, gender, and class make their way into how the Proud Boys legitimate their existence. It may have been Whites who built Western society, but Black and Brown folk are welcome to reap its benefits so as long as they play by the rules and forsake their uncivilized pasts. It may have been the heterosexual nuclear family that facilitated the proper nurturing environment to raise children and instill them with Western values, but gay men are welcome to reap its benefits so as long as they play by the rules and contribute to the economy.

There is a romantic aspect to this sense of being persecuted within the American imaginary. Its narrative is in dialogue with the Puritans who escaped religious persecution from Great Britain

and settled in Plymouth. Its narrative is part and parcel of why American colonists rebelled against Great Britain's antidemocratic levying of taxes. Not only do persecution narratives bind Proud Boys together across the varying ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are experienced, they also factor into what it means to be an American. Persecution narratives are familiar, comforting, and infectious because they underly much of American history and discourses of American life.

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I FOUND THEM gathered in the pool room of the bar. A couple of TVs were hung on the walls, each one next to table. They were quite small, not like the giant flatscreens many of us have grown accustomed to in sports bars. That just wasn't their style. I walked into the pool room through from the main bar and they all turned their heads toward me. There were about a dozen of them, the usual crowd. They were huddled around a table, some standing and some sitting in chairs along the wall.

Tommy looked at me and bobbed his head up with a big smile, "Are you tired of winning yet?" They were drinking PBRs and smoking cigarettes while watching Donald Trump make laps with his motorcade around the Daytona 500.

"Holy shit," I said under my breath, "life really does imitate art."

Another member I recognized from the Tulsa chapter entered the room. "Hey, fags."

Tommy then announced he “had to piss” and another guy stood up and said he had to as well.

With a childish grin, the Tulsa guy quipped, “Remember if your peckers touch it makes you gay.”

At this point I had to give in to the silliness of it all. It was everything I could have ever imagined, but more. I used to call my friends “faggots,” just as the Proud Boys do. I think nearly every person who grew up in the 90s, particularly from working-class backgrounds, did. Many people still do, even if they well know that many others consider the word pejorative. If I was with my friends and they used that kind of language I would suggest they consider not using that word. But what could I do here? What should I have done? I understood why they called each other “fags” because of personal experience doing the exact same thing. Albeit these were men primarily in their 30s and 40s relishing in their “playful” useage of the word. But I didn’t see it as my responsibility here to try and change their behavior, even though that is what I wanted to do all along. But it was a strange feeling. It took me back to a simple time in my life where I was less critical and aware of larger social problems, particularly the pervasiveness of homophobia. In this setting, such structural problems simply did not exist.

Tommy returned with beers and handed me one. I cannot remember how we arrived upon our next conversation. I think I asked them about what they mean when they say the West is the best. Eventually, maybe even inevitably, the discussion moved into the realm of Black people. I had previously brought up the concept of structural violence and tried to get the few of them to understand what it meant.



Tommy began, “How do you explain Black-on-Black crime in Chicago? Look at the statistics of those committing crimes. I don’t see any system as favoring White people. It looks like it’s a cultural problem.”

“That’s the thing with structural violence,” I said slowly, “it hides the sources and it’s not just one thing. There is not just one person or one institution moving the wheel. It’s groups of people, groups of institutions that hide where responsibility lies.”

Tommy dismissed my argument by suggesting that Black people could simply stop shooting one another and take responsibility for their own community, “There are people within the Black community that even agree with that. That it’s a problem they need to solve on their own.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you that there are people within that community that want to take it upon themselves to fix their problems.” I felt a slight tick of frustration. “What I am saying is that it’s not just a problem that came from the community itself. There are larger structures in place that have contributed. It’s not just one thing.” In return, I could feel their resistance. They did not want to concede. How else, I thought to myself, could I convince them?

“It’s crazy though,” Tommy added, “When we talk about it being a problem among the Black communities, something that even Black people say, we are then called racist.”

It felt like I was banging my head against a wall. Why couldn’t I get through to them, I thought to myself. What was I doing wrong? This wasn’t the first time we had a conversation along these

lines after the months I had spent with them and I had literally just given them a mini lecture on structural violence. Tommy had firmly rejected the concept and then he questioned why people continued to call them racists. What I wanted to say was that they were part of the structural violence and were complicit in using racist logics to, wittingly or not, prop up their own or other's political agendas. However, I did not think that would be the wisest course of action to take.

“But maybe one reason that people call you racist when you talk about Black communities and crime is because of the flattening of the problem by calling it a Black cultural problem, which presumes it is the Blackness from within that's causing this deficiency among their communities. It's saying that their culture is bad, their Black culture is bad, therefore Black is bad.”

Tommy stared at me for a moment. He finally proceeded, “I think we understand that, but that's not what we are saying. We don't think we are any better than anybody else or that a White person is better than a Black person. We just don't think that.”

I found Tommy's statement hard to believe. Particularly after all I had heard during previous meetings about how great the West was and how oppressive the East is.

“But you have to be a Western chauvinist and admit that Western culture is the best. By that very logic you are saying that there are better people.”

Clint, who had up until this point been silently shifting his eyes back and forth between Tommy and me, felt compelled to give his two cents, “There are inferior cultures.”

Inferior cultures. That hit the nail on the head and it almost did me in for the evening. I honestly did not know how to reply to that comment as I was already beginning to lose my patience and did not want to risk any unnecessary confrontation by expressing how much frustration I was feeling at that moment. It seemed to sum up my entire argument. We had gone full circle. I just stood there waiting for someone to continue the conversation while I deadpanned. My lack of facial expression probably gave me away as Tommy quickly attempted to calm my nerves with an appeal to commonsense and human decency.

“Look, we’re not saying that we should round up all these different groups of people and separate them from us. Right?” He looked around.

“Huh?” Clint murmured pulling his attention back into the conversation.

“I’m saying that it’s not ok to round up people and put them into camps.”

“Are we at war with them?” Clint asked.

Tommy stared at Clint for a solid few seconds. The look on his face was part disbelief, disappointment, and maybe even a hint of betrayal. “No! It’s not ok! See, was that so hard?” He turned back to me, raised his hands to chest height with palms facing outward.

It was as if the stars themselves had aligned and brought to him a moment of clarity. I could only hope that in that brief moment, even if he immediately chose to dismiss Clint's comments or would soon forget them, that he was just as frustrated as I was by the lack of progress in our conversation. I hoped that he had just received a taste of what it was like trying to reason when reason had already been removed from the table. That was never an option in the first place. That feeling of self-doubt in your ability to make sense of things, to validate your existence. What happens when your foundation crumbles in front of your eyes? How do you even go on? What happens if you come to find out that you have been complicit in propagating White supremacy? Looking back, those two or three seconds felt like a bittersweet eternity.

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INSTEAD OF BEARING witness to tangible and visible forms of racialized hatred, in my interactions with the Proud Boys, I found myself frequently confronted with the sentiments underlied by implicit and explicit racial animus. A century before, the Ku Klux Klan appealed to the sensibilities of Americans in strikingly similar ways to the Proud Boys

From its inception and brief existence during Reconstruction, to its revival in 1915, its rise to power in the 1920s, to its disbandment, and second revival in 1975 as the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the KKK has claimed to follow a moral mandate. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, waves of immigrants entered into the nation, many of whom were Irish Catholics and Eastern European Jews. In the face of what was perceived by many to be an invasion by racially inferior, non-White foreigners, the Klan mobilized a national anxiety about racial mixing to prop up their message that

the American social order was under attack and needed a defense force. . The only way forward was to foster the necessary virtues that would ensure the perpetuation of a racially pure United States. In its 1921 constitution, the Klan's imperial proclamation stated:

“We, the members of this Order, desiring to promote patriotism toward our Civil Government; honorable peace among men and nations; protection for and happiness in the homes of our people; manhood, brotherhood, and love among ourselves, and liberty, justice and fraternity among all mankind; believing we can best accomplish these noble purposes through a mystic, social, patriotic, benevolent association, having a perfected lodge system, with an exalted ritualistic form of work and an effective form of government, not for selfish profit, but for the mutual betterment, benefit and protection of our oath-bound associates, and their loved ones...thereby encouraging, conserving, protecting and making vital the fraternal relationship in the practice of an honorable clannishness; to share with us the glory of performing the sacred duty of protecting womanhood; to maintain forever the God-given supremacy of the white race; to commemorate the holy and chivalric achievements of our fathers; to safeguard the sacred rights, privileges and institutions of our Civil Government; to bless mankind and to keep eternally ablaze the sacred fire of a fervent devotion to a pure Americanism (Ku Klux Klan 1921)”

In their view, the Klan, stood for the very foundational values of not just America—but of a *pure Americanism*. The Klan sought true patriots whose sense of morality compelled them to defend the American values of life, liberty, fraternity, benevolence, charity, chaste womanhood, and the divine providence of White civilization. Becoming a brother within the KKK brought in it a sense of direction and purpose; a sense of continuity with a past that would act as a safeguard against the impending threat posed by the degenerate behavior of sexual deviants and the contaminating effects of racial mixing. Not only would joining the Klan unite men in brotherhood and provide them with a purpose, but it would also unify them as defenders of moral living.

Today we see everyday people and political actors alike engaged in discourses obsessed with defending the imperiled homelands of a supposedly pure citizenry. The nation is still dealing with

the aftereffects of 9/11 as it is locked in a never-ending War on Terror that has led more Americans to remain skeptical of and hostile to non-White foreigners seeking entry into the US. The entire campaign and presidency of Donald Trump played on sentiments of racial animus, fears of mixing and the consequent diminution of the White population, and hateful rhetoric in response to influxes of non-White foreigners (Time 2015; McCaskill 2016; Gray 2017; Fabian 2018; Fram and Lemire 2018; Graham et al 2019; Flagg and Calderón 2020). The mobilization of which drew on fear, anxiety, and hatred as a means to coalesce masses of people into believing that their positions within the social order were being threatened. In fewer words than the Klan, though in a resoundingly similar direction, the Proud Boys would a century later proclaim their objectives:

“the mutual benefit and assistance of its members; the binding by closer bonds of its members one to another; the rendition of mutual assistance to its members during life and after their death to their dependents; the extending of charity to all who need such assistance; the promotion of western civilization including free speech and the right to bear arms; the promotion of good citizenship; the training and developing of men to become positive role models as husbands, fathers, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders; and true patriotism” (Proud Boys International 2018).

I cannot help but point out the last few words of both declarations. Their obvious parallel seems to be more than mere coincidence. And the sentiments that speak to both are as equally and disturbingly in line with one another. At the center of both guiding texts is a moral imperative to safeguard the sanctity and purity of a social order in decay. Those who are charged with this sacred duty are men. What men must do is come together in brotherhood with other like-minded patriotic men who will, with benevolent intent, unselfishly devote themselves and fight for the cause.

Violence has moved both the Klan and the Proud Boys. However, the Proud Boys have continually rejected such claims. Perhaps it is salient to this conversation to reflect upon the words of their founder, Gavin McInnes, who has on multiple occasions encouraged violence as he positioned the Proud Boys as a vigilante gang:

“We will kill you. We look nice. We seem soft. We have ‘boys’ in our name. But like Bill the Butcher and the Bowery Boys we will assassinate you...Now part of the reason I agreed to do the talk is because I’m allowed to bring all my guys and we can fight our way in and fight our way out...I think it’s our job to do and the cops just turn a blind eye...If you’re wearing a MAGA hat and some guy with a slightly punk demeanor comes up to you and asks are you pro-Trump, choke him. Trust your instincts. Don’t listen to what he has to say. Choke him... You can’t call for violence on a specific person but can you say, ‘They’re throwing bricks, we should throw bricks?’ Can you call for violence generally? Cause I am...Fighting solves everything. We need more violence from the Trump people. Trump supporters, choke a motherfucker. Choke a bitch. Choke a tranny. Get your fingers around the windpipe” (Berger 2018)<sup>11</sup>

McInnes has repeatedly backtracked his calls for Proud Boys to inflict violence upon their political rivals by claiming that what he does is satire and humorous social commentary that is always taken out of context by his adversaries. During an interview with *ABC Nightline* he said, “I’m just, I guess you could say provocateur. But I do satirical commentary. I talk about the news. I make jokes” (2018). Perhaps the calls for violence are better understood when we consider who those targets are. In the same interview McInnes tried to downplay the violent tendencies of his members by claiming that they were overwhelmingly a drinking club, “Ninety-nine percent [of what we do] is meet in a bar once a month and drink beer just like everyone else. The other 1 percent is escorting

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that this block of text is from a supercut video of the several times McInnes has incited the Proud Boys to commit acts of violence. The quote, although based upon statements made on different days, explicitly defines the Proud Boys by their proximity to violence

conservative speakers to and from their cars.” I believe the words of McInnes speak to an integral disconnect between how the Proud Boys often position themselves as a drinking fraternity though are constantly committing violence.<sup>12</sup> While the fraternity may have begun as a joke drinking club for men, it is obvious that they have come to exist in part as a vigilante force whose role is to

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<sup>12</sup> McInnes has publicly stated that his impetus for forming the Proud Boys was his reaction to contemporary feminism. Specifically, McInnes pointed towards Gloria Steinem’s denunciation of men’s clubs and the subsequent encroachment academic feminists into mainstream society as spurring him to form the group. It is no surprise that the inspiration for the name, Proud Boys, came to McInnes after witnessing the child of a single mother who he determined to be too effeminate singing a song from Aladdin during a children’s musical recital. Reminiscing about this event in January 2018, McInnes explained that “We’re called Proud Boys because I went to one of my kid’s music recitals and some ponce got up there, and while everyone is playing the piano and the violin and doing stuff, they’re trying. He gets up and goes, ‘Proud of your boy, I’ll make you proud of your boy.’ It’s some song from Aladdin. And I was looking around for the dad cause’ I thought ‘there is no way this dad is proud of his boy and, of course, he was the child of a single mom. Duh. His mother told him, ‘Yeah sing a song, that’s a talent.’ And there was no dad to say, ‘No you’re not. Play the piano for Christ sakes” See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyGgqApYuO0>. However, his racism and transphobia has been documented. In a 2003 McInnes told The New York Times that, “I love being white and I think it’s something to be very proud of. I don’t want our culture diluted. We need to close borders now and let everyone assimilate to a Western, white, English-speaking way of life” See <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/28/style/the-edge-of-hip-vice-the-brand.html>. In 2010 McInnes once again underscored the superiority White culture via the innate inferiorities of non-White Muslims. In a Taki’s publication, he wrote that “the Muslim world is filled with shoeless, toothless, inbred, hill-dwelling, rifle-toting, sodomy-prone men” see [https://www.takimag.com/article/trouble\\_with\\_islam/](https://www.takimag.com/article/trouble_with_islam/). In 2014 McInnes posted an op-ed on thoughtcatalog.com entitled “Transphobia is Perfectly Natural”, where he states, “To justify trannies is to allow mentally ill people to mutilate themselves.” The original article was quickly removed after being flagged for hate speech and a mirrored website has since been posted for posterity” See [https://www.doc-developpement-durable.org/file/programmes-de-sensibilisations/transphobie/transphobia-is-perfectly-natural\\_Gender%20Identity%20Watch.pdf](https://www.doc-developpement-durable.org/file/programmes-de-sensibilisations/transphobie/transphobia-is-perfectly-natural_Gender%20Identity%20Watch.pdf). In 2017 he wrote an article for Taki’s, entitled, “10 Things I Like About White Guys,” where he praises the “strange trait that appears to be unique to white men” in their proclivity to invent things and uplifting backwards savage Natives. McInnes wryly adds, “The next time someone bitches about colonization, the correct response is ‘You’re welcome.” See [https://www.takimag.com/article/10\\_things\\_i\\_like\\_about\\_white\\_guys\\_gavin\\_mcinnes/](https://www.takimag.com/article/10_things_i_like_about_white_guys_gavin_mcinnes/).



protect the rule of law when governments bend to the violent anti-democratic fascism of so-called anti-fascists.

Acting as a pseudo-police force, the Klan positioned themselves as keepers of peace and democracy when they made their swift entry into Oklahoma in the early 1920s. By 1920 Oklahoma had only been a member of the Union for 13 years. In many ways the state was still a frontier whose lands promised limitless possibilities and unfettered autonomy. The combination of the state's youth with its corresponding lack of regulatory bodies acted as fertile soil that allowed the Klan to establish itself and grow as the guiding hand that would protect Oklahomans against those who stood in opposition to their vision of moral living. The swift hand of the Klan swept across Oklahoma like a supercell in the sky looming over land waiting to reign down indiscriminate violence and destruction as its members monitored the behavior of people and enacted righteous retribution against those they saw as deviants and degenerates. "The law often seemed inoperative," wrote Chalmers, "governors paroled and pardoned too much, and the vigilante tradition of privately administered law and morality was no stranger...This was an atmosphere in which the Klan could work" (1965:49). In the wake of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 the Klan kidnapped a local newspaper editor and paraded him through the towns of Shawnee and Tecumseh as a warning for "bootleggers, gamblers, joyriders, corrupt lawyers and bail bondsmen, lenient judges, and men who lived off their own wives or fooled around with those of others" (ibid:49).

There were similar incidents that occurred for the next few years across Oklahoma:

"In El Reno a Negro porter was whipped for being "too free" with guests at the hotel. A mail clerk was taken from his home and tarred and feathered. In Enid a man accused of beating his wife was whipped and told to pay off his mortgage and leave town...In Atoka and Balk Knob Klan posses beat I.W.W. and union

organizers and announced their intent to break up any attempts to form a farm labor union. In Ardmore, Klansmen who allegedly killed a bootlegger in a raid on his home were found not guilty.”” (ibid:51).

Interestingly, as Chalmers claims in his dense detailing, the majority of the Klan’s victims in Oklahoma throughout the early 1920s were not racialized minorities. Rather, they were White native-born Protestants who were accused of acting immorally. They were Whites who had lost their way after becoming complacent and complicit with the degenerative forces of socialism, communism, and anarchism. In our present day those threats to the democratic social order of America are precisely the same ones that the Proud Boys mobilize against. And, as we have seen, they are breaking down the rule of law. Interestingly enough, and quite unlike the Klan, the Proud Boys are not readily going out of their way to terrorize Whites who have lost their way. Instead, they seek to rehabilitate them through their degrees which require them to foster personal responsibility, physical strength, and sexual vitality. The threats that they point to, however, are quite like those of the Klan. The Klan gained a large following in Oklahoma during the 1920s by tapping into existing fear and anxieties over their nation being overrun by “un-American” radicals whose integration into the Union would disintegrate the social order:

“...the Klan achieved vast membership with its appeal to local grievances and fears. Its appeal to white Anglo-Saxon Protestants in the mining districts where aliens [sic] competed with them for work spurred the membership drive. Whites feared that they were being inundated with an un-American element that consisted of radicals...A large part of that apprehension among Kluxers resulted from the wartime tensions between conservatives and radicals. The conservatives looked upon nonconformists as Socialists or anarchists who wanted to tear down the fabric of the nation.” (Clark 1976:ix).

Over the course of the 1920s membership of the KKK in Oklahoma soared. To speak about the popularity of the Klan and its moralizing imperative, on July 4, 1922, the Klan assembled in

Woodward for a parade that turned out between 20,000 and 40,000 attendees. During the parade they held signs that read “One Hundred Percent Americanism,” “Lawbreakers, We Know Who You Are,” and “America for Americans.” (ibid) In June 1922, over 1,000 recruits were to be initiated at the top of a hill next to a burning cross just south of Tulsa. The spectacle drew a reported 60,000 onlookers and caused a traffic jam of an estimated 10,000 vehicles which resulted in half of the recruits missing their initiation. A few months later a bustling fairground with thousands of attendees cheered in Oklahoma City as planes with KKK banners flew overhead as hundreds of initiates were naturalized into the Klan.

In many ways their secrecy was appealing to many newcomers. They developed their own form of speech called Klanspeak, where to reveal ones membership one would ask “AYAK” (Are you a Klansman?), to which the other would respond with “AKIA” (A Klansman I am). This mysterious language was coupled with the outright absurd spectacles of the Klan’s rituals, poems, and songs that members would participate as spectators looked on. Once again, in a strikingly similar style, the Proud Boys surround themselves in secrecy. Only initiated members can attend their official meetings. One of their most prominent means of marking themselves as members is by inscribing their flags, clothing, and bodies with “POYB” (Proud of Your Boy). The coded speech is oddly reminiscent of that of the Klan’s.

Similar to its initial founding in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the KKKs rebirth in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it appealed to many as a way to break up the monotony of living a boring life in small towns across rural America (Harrell 1966). “Old-timers often remarked to later interviewers the thing they recalled the most about their early life in the territory and state was the awful boredom that was

their constant companion before towns grew up on the prairie...The ennui of rural and small town life found outlet in the Knights” (ibid:56). The constant insistence that the Proud Boys is only a drinking club for men is consistent with the perception of the KKK as a means to break boredom by assembling with other men.

Like the Proud Boys, then, historically the Klan was an organization that was shrouded in mystery, that provided action in the monotony of rural life, that engaged in massive spectacles, and that enforced moral codes. It also participated in philanthropy to curry public favor for White people to convert. Throughout the state Klan members would appear unannounced at funerals and lay wreaths on coffins, distribute small cash donations to needy Whites, and visit townsfolk with messages. They constructed hundreds of meeting places, called Klaverns, held parades to persuade men and women to practice moral behavior, held baked good drives, and raffled off automobiles. Often enough they would be shadowed by a local reporter so they could write about the Klan’s positive impact in the following morning’s newspaper.

While it is impossible to get exact numbers due to the secrecy of the group, estimates of the number of Klan members in Oklahoma range from 40,000 to 207,000 members at the height of the Klan’s presence (Harrell 1966). Despite the various ways in which the Klan appealed to Oklahomans, the Klan’s most profitable recruitment tool was that it became a symbol and an arbiter of moral life and proper bodily behavior in the face of moral outrage and social degeneracy:

Nevertheless, the single most important reason for the success of the body in Oklahoma was its strong claim that it was the most successful force in the community for the control of individual behavior...People joined the Klan desiring a defense mechanism against the people they feared and resented or whom they

identified as threats to the status quo. The order in the member's eyes was defensive rather than aggressive...Its mystery was more awesome, patriotism more pure, and its duty more clearly defined and imperative than those of any other body. The Knights offered something for everyone in the order's anti-radical sentiment which capitalized on the Red Scare fears of 1920, the anti-Catholic viewpoint of the American Protective Association of the 1890s, and the anti-immigrant stand which echoed the position of the Know Nothing Party of the 1850s. Accompanying these strains of thought were the group's advocacy of white supremacy playing on racial prejudices, moral living along the lines of the Puritan ethic, and the religiosity that appealed to the Bible Belt (ibid:60-61;76)

The Klan came to amass significant political power and reach throughout the entire state which they wielded as viciously as their physical acts of violence. In the face of Socialists and the Farmer-Labor Reconstruction League, the Klan ramped up their efforts to recruit conservative and right-leaning members who could be sure to vote in their favor. Ballot after ballot was cast in favor of KKK-endorsed candidates. Klan committees were formed to investigate the religious affiliations and personal habits of political opponents, Catholic churches, schools, and local wards. Klavern leaders would disparage opponents as Catholics, Jews, and impure racial mixers and race traitors. In 1922, just one year after the Tulsa Race Massacre, the Klan ran a successful campaign for the mayoral elections in Tulsa.

The power that the Klan held during its peak in the early 1920s cannot be overstated. Parallels can be made between efforts by the Klan to spread their moral righteousness and White supremacist ideologies to contemporary movements that operate in the name of elevating White people. In line with Klan members who sought to regulate the reproductive behaviors of American society so as to promote proper moral living, Bjork-James (2020) identifies conceptions of the family and accompanying reproductive politics as a primary nexus that unifies self-avowed White nationalists. In particular, heterosexual reproduction, she claims, is intrinsically connected to

producing White families, which “is tied to concepts of purity, respectability, and civility” (63). She argues that there are some notable intersections of the Religious Right and White nationalists in the United States throughout history that have made their way into the present. These two movements coalesce around “family values” that promote a “patriarchal social order rooted in the family” (ibid:70). It is the family unit, specifically the traditionally White composition of the nuclear family, one that is headed by the husband, that is seen as a moral imperative. This affords followers of these movements the opportunities to hold, and hold in good conscience, prejudicial views against acts of homosexuality and sexually promiscuous women as their carnal pleasures are thought to run counter to the very values that uphold civilization. In turn, the Religious Right and White nationalists see their claims as justified and morally righteous. It comes to be their moral obligation to stand against those who act against nature. They feel that their positions in the traditional social order have become destabilized because of the breakdown in family values as a result of feminism.

At the center of the White supremacist project of America’s KKK and contemporary alt-right organization is a set of beliefs that mark the boundaries between bodies, their innate abilities, and their proper moral behavior. For the Klan, both the problems and their sources were self-evident. They were based upon those very bodies and their perceived natural, innate, and eternal tendencies and sensibilities. The very fabric of a once great White society was being threatened from within and without. While Whites were frequently the victim of Klan violence it was not White men and women that were the root of social problems, they were just enabling its decay. Rather, it was non-White others and their anti-American moral heresy that was bringing about the impending apocalypse.

The bylaws, tenets, rhetoric, and behavior of the Proud Boys reflect an oddly familiar attempt at holding onto a social order that privileges one singular notion of humanity against which there can exist no alternative. Lining the Proud Boys up alongside more established White supremacist groups, such as the Klan, and contemporary religious and alt-right political projects, is fruitful. Considering the history of the Klan as a fraternal organization that centered itself around moral living, a comparison between the Klan and the Proud Boys is revealing. For both there is an impetus of moral outrage that continually charges its members with a sense of purpose. The territories that both fraternal organizations tread operate along strikingly similar borders that promote particular notions of the nuclear heterosexual family as the most effective at producing productive members of society, rigid dichotomies of sexed bodies as the primary determinant of natural and inescapable gender roles, and the virtues of a truer and purified patriotism that prevents degeneracy and ensures the continued survival of Western civilization being threatened by contaminating outsiders and traitorous insiders. We can see similarities in the kinds of institutions that are being threatened, the kinds of people who are to blame, and the ideal moral standard that all Americans should live up to.

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THE PROUD BOYS seek to increase their ranks by appealing to growing perceptions of White marginality in American society. Experiencing fear and anxiety at the prospect of being pushed to the margins frequently materialize as hateful rhetoric and violent action that defy commonsense notions of rationality. What the Proud Boys say they stand for is always in potential and often

intentional contradiction with their own rhetoric, actions, and guiding doctrine. What may be the most fundamental appeal of the Proud Boys, as with the Klan before them is that they represent, for prospective members, a chance to reclaim their human dignity. Lepselter (2016) argued that people who believe themselves to be living on the periphery of American society frequently make connections between historically grounded sentiments and the precarity of their own lives through a sense of uncanniness.

Uncanniness is a term that helps bridge the gap between what is known and what isn't. The concept describes how people occupying precarious ground come to make their existence dignified involves filling in the otherwise unknowable gaps that they believe led to their marginalization with uncanny feelings of being “out of place, just screwed over.” (137). Lepselter writes, “A sense of trauma fills many of the stories here. The referent of the trauma is elusive. The source is ambiguous not just for a skeptical critic but also as an element of the story itself. People telling these uncanny stories can only wonder about what really happened; but they just know something is wrong” (:2). As the Klan successfully did a century before, the Proud Boys are now filling in the gaps.

There is an eerily familiar mixing of affective triggers that are the vehicle of a perceived logical connection between events of the past and the strange, narratives, that are impossible to ever pin down yet seemingly resonate with the straight White men the Proud Boys speak to. What explains the perceived marginality of straight White men, to the Proud Boys, are the same forces that previously pushed straight White men to the margins—non-White foreigners, sexually loose women, and citizens holding anti-democratic and atheistic sentiments. The Proud Boys draw on



the same essentializing discourses of the Klan to assert their own dignity as human beings. In turn, they refuse that dignity to those who do not fit within that essentializing frame. The dignity of transgender men is dismissed as they consider them to really be just mentally ill gay men. The dignity of childless working women is dismissed because they think that they have, innocently or not, rejected their own biology and natural gender role. It is no small wonder that those peddling in such outdated and bigoted ideas are being pushed to the margins. The essentializing discourses that the Proud Boys perpetuate, those that rely upon assumptions of innate and immutable qualities being lodged within particular categories of humans, has been thoroughly critiqued, teased apart, and demonstrated to be nothing other than means by which those in power maintain their power through dehumanization of their perceived others. The dismissal of their dehumanizing ideology by those affiliating themselves with social justice and antiracism contributes to their perceived marginality.

The Proud Boys, by clever sleight of hand, are able to claim that they are both marginalized while being able to dismiss the words and actions and beliefs of the Proud Boys that have and continue to marginalize others. In her exploration of the Fundamentalist movement in America, Susan Harding explores the character of Jerry Falwell. Falwell was a conservative televangelist and founder of the Thomas Road Baptist Church, a megachurch in Lynchburg, Virginia. He was an integral figure and aided in the widespread growth of the Fundamentalist movement during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was a charismatic but flawed man, who was often larger than life. And he used this to his advantage. Harding explores how Falwell was able to effectively grow his flock by framing his life in ways that mirrored biblical journeys and he eventually came to be read by his flock in those very terms. In spite of his shortcomings and precisely because of them,

he became a living example of a person on a biblical journey who would succumb to the captivating allure of sin while always having the potential to escape and be freed by a redemptive God. The story of Falwell demonstrates that among the Fundamentalist movement the sense of belonging is a continual process of birth and rebirth. Falling into faith was a continual process of falling out of faith, a cycle that was predicated upon continued sin and redemption in the face of moral failings.

In similar ways, the Proud Boys are continually falling into their faith, one that is predicated upon being continually persecuted, by purposefully using a rhetoric that they know will lead to people critiquing and attacking them for that very rhetoric. In his framing of the Proud Boys, McInnes gleefully admitted that the whole reason he decided that he and his members would choose to call themselves chauvinists is because of the connotations that chauvinism carries. After all, as McInnes claimed, the Proud Boys is just a drinking fraternity. They started out as a joke. And for some reason the Proud Boys are being unfairly misunderstood. The words of McInnes, my conversation with Andrew, Bill, and Arnold about venerating the housewife, and my subsequent conversation with Tommy about Black cultural problems speak to the inherent ambiguity of their rhetoric. Venerating the housewife does not mean that they believe women belong in the kitchen. Rather, it means that women should be able to choose if they want to be housewives. Talking about the problems of “Black culture” does not mean that those problems come from the racial inferiorities of Black people. Instead, they believe it comes from the inferiorities of their culture. Calling each other “faggot” does not mean that they hate gay people. Instead, they claim it is an innocent play of words, much like many of us did in our youth. Calling transgender women “trannies” does not mean that they hate transgender people. In their framing, it is just what they

call mentally ill gay men. While they claim that they are being unfairly critiqued as racists and sexists, they continually have to backtrack on the words, actions, and beliefs of their organization. They are well aware that these terms are widely understood to be homophobic and transphobic slurs, however, they continue to use them.

The Proud Boys are always able to divert their hate by claiming that their words were simply taken out of context. The contexts are fragmented but in dialogue with past discourses that are connected in a piecemeal fashion so as to appeal to the greatest number of people. As Harding argued, Falwell's successful efforts to build a coalition of religious conservatives by appealing to sentimental scripts across otherwise heterogeneous groups, "[t]hey borrowed from different sources, merged voices from different traditions, reiterated speech from and to different constituencies, and created a panoply of partially overlapping registers of conservative Protestant moral indignation" (2000:18). Venerating the housewife is a celebration of essentialist discourses of femininity that place women solely in the domestic space—until they aren't. Upon further clarification, venerating the housewife does not mean that women belong in the house. After its initial understanding is critiqued, to venerate the housewife is to actually be a feminist and to champion women being able to decide if they want to operate within the domestic space or out in the world as an employee of a company. Again, we see a familiar strategy at play, just like how their first and second degrees position White heterosexual men as the architects of Western civilization while allowing for non-White and gay men to participate. The Orwellian doublespeak of venerating the housewife becomes appealing to both men who truly believe women belong in the house and men who believe that women should have a choice.

This is further complicated by the Proud Boys' continual deferment of explicitly discussing racial superiority. In its place they have substituted it with cultural superiority. Instead of discussing racial essentialisms by claiming that certain racial groups are better suited for certain roles, they opt to discuss gender essentialisms by claiming that men and women are differentially equipped for and therefore better suited for certain roles. This move does not change the fact that there is little scholarly work that they can draw on to validate their claims for an essential core that makes men and women inherently different. They see that for the majority of Western history that men and women do different things. They put this into dialogue with the physiological differences between males and females and well established ideologies that hinge upon such differences legitimating patriarchal hierarchies. The joining of their feelings and the consideration of biological facts is precisely what validates their essentialization of gender. They resoundingly reject all scholarly work that aims to describe social phenomena that is contrary to their own perceptions.

I often found it quite easy, though a bit frustrating at times, to exist among the Proud Boys precisely because of the lack of critique. While everything may have always been open to debate, those debates were constantly framed by direct observations and how those observations resonated with their own sense of identity. Their spaces were not comprised of academically-oriented individuals who wished to dig deeply and always question whether a thing was true or not. This was not, I believe, because they were being anti-intellectual, although there was definitely anti-intellectual sentiment among them. Instead, I believe it was because the work of intellectuals is so drastically different from and contradictory to their own notions of truth and reality. If there was a well-received and widely-accepted corpus of scholarly work for them to draw upon I'm sure that those

of them more inclined to critical thought would use such work to validate their ideological positions. Instead, from their perspectives, the lack of scholarship is itself an example that the social sciences have been hijacked by feminists and Marxists who are purposefully misleading and misrepresenting their studies because they let their false visions of reality dictate the terms of their work. Perhaps that is part of the appeal that I felt as it so easily lends itself to a critique of elite Leftists academics.

The political Right is well aware animosity against elite Leftist academics and uses that animosity to their advantage. PragerU is a shining jewel of right-wing pseudo-science seeking to position itself as a legitimately scientific source of objective fact. The same kinds of messaging used by the Klan have made their way into various media directed at evoking outrage among targeted populations on online forums, such as Reddit, video hosting platforms, such as YouTube, and social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. A popular video series under the name of PragerU publishes daily videos with titles that are questionably subtle in how they come to invoke fears and anxieties about an upheaval in the moral order.<sup>13</sup> In one PragerU video the presenter, Erica Komisar, attributes the contemporary breakdown of society to increasing numbers of people turning away from religion (PragerU 2021). Atheistic materialism, she argues, is immoral and has led to “broken families, distracted parents, school violence, and nightmarish global warning predictions.” The cure is quite simple, “having a religious community and a belief in God is the best antidote to all of that.” Here the family is front and center. Specifically, the responsibility of

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<sup>13</sup> A slew of other videos can be found on PragerU’s YouTube channel on the topic of masculinity, feminism, transgender, the family, Islam as threatening the social order. A quick perusing of their catalog includes titles such as, “Make Men Masculine Again,” “War on Boys,” “The Candace Owens Show: The Lies of Modern Feminism,” “Why Don’t Feminists Fight for Muslim Women?,” and “Preferred Pronouns or Prison.”

parents to safeguard their children from a growingly atheistic world. For Western civilization to continue people must continue to believe in God because faith keeps people emotionally stable, physically fit, productive, and chaste.

Discourses about cognitive ability, biological fitness, economic productivity, and sexual activity are indeed relevant. They are attempting to make sense of societal disparities and social disorder that are part and parcel of class divides that capitalism thrives upon. This warrants further exploration.

Across the US, socioeconomic mobility, wage growth, and the financial security of its citizens are at all-time lows. Between 1947 and 1979 the hourly wages of American workers grew by 2.2 percent; however, since then they have grown a mere 0.7 percent (Schmitt et al. 2018). It is now more difficult to climb the socioeconomic ladder than at any other time in the past 150 years (Song et al 2019). According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2020), in 2020, 57 percent of Americans believed that they would be financially worse off in five years. In 2022, that number rose to 60 percent.

Running in tandem with American's decreased access to economic mobility is the rising difficulty of obtaining a college degree, purchasing a home, and raising a family, which have all been a widely accepted pathways to future financial security and upward mobility. More than half of all Americans must become debtors to attend college (Federal Reserve 2019). Collectively the American public owes more than \$1.7 trillion dollars in student loan debt (Hanson 2022). Owning a home and starting a family is more difficult than it has ever been as home prices have soared.

Adjusted for current inflation, the medium home value in the US was \$58,600 in 1960, more than doubling to \$119,600 in 2000 (US Census Bureau 2000). As of 2015, the higher end of estimated expenses for raising a child from birth to age 17 was \$233,610 (Lino et al 2017). Two-parent two-child families spent 18 to 16 percent of their total expenses on raising their children and 26 to 33 percent on housing, respectively.

Life expectancies for certain racialized populations have begun to flatline in some cases and decrease in others. The life expectancy of Whites and non-Hispanics living in the US at age 25 dropped between 2010 and 2017, specifically when considering educational attainment (Sasson and Hayward 2019). Whites and non-Hispanics of the same age who obtained a college degree did not see their life expectancies decrease. It seems, despite growing sentiments among conservatives against that colleges are having a negative effect on the US (Pew 2019), those who obtain a degree do in fact live longer lives, which speaks to the general quality of life for those who earn their degrees.

Residents of Oklahoma have acutely felt the economic troubles that have affected the nation. With a minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour it has become impossible for many to own their own homes as more Oklahomans live below the national poverty line. Census data from 2019 reported that 15.2 percent of Oklahomans were living below the federal poverty line of \$26,200 for a family of four (US Census Bureau 2019). More Oklahomans are now relying upon governmental assistance to survive. Between 2004 and 2019 Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients increased from 411,840 persons living in 165,402 households to 531,728 persons living in 247,673 households (USDA 2006, 2021). In Oklahoma the average renter spends 50 percent of their income

on housing (Homeless Alliance 2020). Oklahomans must work 67 hours a week at minimum wage to afford the average 1-bedroom residence and 86 hours a week for a 2-bedroom rental home. In 2020 60.5 percent of homeless people in Oklahoma City were White and 65 percent were men.

Oklahomans are widely affected by mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence, illiteracy, inadequate education, and births to single mothers. Sixty percent of adults with a mental illness are unable to receive treatment, and 7.9 percent are dependent on illicit drugs or alcohol (SAMHSA 2014). Nearly 50 percent of women and 40 percent of men living in Oklahoma have experienced domestic violence at some point in their lives (Brown et al 2005). Only 21 percent of low-income fourth graders in Oklahoma read at their grade level compared to 43 percent of high-income children while 12.3 percent of adults are illiterate (ThinkImpact 2022). Oklahoma ranks 48<sup>th</sup> in the US for per-pupil spending in public education and lies below the national average of high school graduates 84.6 and 82.62 percent, respectively (OPS 2019). Marriage rates have dropped drastically in Oklahoma from 10.6 percent in 1990 to 6.3 percent in 2019. Almost 44 percent of Oklahoma births are to single mothers..

This data is indicative of an ongoing struggle for poor and working-class people. We must understand how the Proud Boys come to identify themselves is always in dialogue with their classed positions as working-class people who exist within certain socioeconomic structures, namely capitalism. There is also, of course, a race and gender component to these economic disparities that speak to the Proud Boy's sense of being marginalized (Steedman 1987). The Proud Boys are feeling the effects of economic inequality that is both racialized and gendered. Wages are low, homes are growing more expensive, mental health is worsening, mothers are increasingly



unmarried, and reliance on federal government assistance programs is on the rise. Part of what drives them is a shared classed narrative on whiteness and masculinity that emphasizes labor, fighting, and building. To make sense of their own class positions and the realities of economic inequality, they point not at the economic system that they are subject to. Instead, they rely upon a politics of resentment to make sense of themselves (Cramer 2016). What helps bind them together is not simply the belief that they are being persecuted, but also a set of grievances against feminism and the cultural Marxism of the Left for threatening civilizational cohesion by making men weaker and destroying the family.

In the process of responding to the particular inequalities of our contemporary moment, such as class struggle, the Proud Boys are attempting to purify bodies of deficiencies that lead to social maladies, such as effeminate men whose masculinity has yet to be purified by and harnessed in the greater project of capitalist profit acquisition. Making money is positioned as a civilizing and moralizing activity. It supports women in creating homes and is an expression of assimilation by non-White others.

In spite of their insistence that contemporary social problems, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia are not indicative of structural forces, but the actions of a few individuals, they are looking at the bodies of men and women who have fallen from civilizational grace, but whose immoralities will lead to structural decay. While they reject these structural problems that are continually identified by qualitative and quantitative scholarly work, they pull threads that come to highlight their own sets of structural problems, such as the societal feminization of men or the deterioration of the institutionalized nuclear family at a civilizational level. To combat the

feminization of men they turn up the dial on their conceptualization of masculinity as oppositional yet synergistic with femininity. To combat the deterioration of the nuclear family they enthusiastically celebrate heterosexual marriage. As they reject structural problems they intentionally reflect them as they aim to purify their bodies of traits they associate with “non-Western” lifeways: the effeminate, homosexual, nonwhite man.

The Proud Boys are making sense of their perceived status as marginalized, either by way of their racial identity, sexuality, or gender identity. They may be creating themselves through their own interpretations of contemporary politics surrounding identity, not exactly as they please. In a similar manner to Harding's take on Fundamentalists, so too must the Proud Boys be situated within modern discourses. We must remain attentive to how these discourses are "an apparatus of thought that presents itself in the form of popular 'stereotypes,' media 'images,' and academic 'knowledge'" (1991:374). Paramount to placing the Proud Boys within contemporary discourses within and outside of the academy that explore the concept of whiteness.

### *Part Three*

WHITENESS HAS BEEN developed by an interdisciplinary canon of scholars who have liberally drawn from the work of literary and film critics, linguists, feminists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others. As a concept, whiteness has come to be interpreted in many different ways and is viable as a concept to describe and analyze myriad sociocultural contexts.

In her ethnographic inquiry of how White women experience their race, Ruth Frankenberg cogently defined whiteness as a racial privilege, perspective, and set of cultural practices, all of which are contingent upon particular histories, places, and cultures. Whiteness, then, is manifold and is never stable as it “changes over time and space and is in no way a transhistorical essence” (1993:236). There is, however, one consistency across historical and extant experiences of whiteness, namely that of social privilege, which is pit against its oppositional forces, such as blackness and brownness. Following Frankenberg’s conceptualization of whiteness, Hartigan concluded that, “As an analytical register, then, whiteness stands as a sweepingly broad, effective means to characterize the racial content of white peoples’ cultural identity” (1997:496). This cultural identity is one that is consistently unmarked as a normative signifier of belonging.

Markedness, as a concept within scholarly discourses of identity, is used to describe how identities, such as race or gender, are expressed in ways that differ in their perceptibility. Hazel (2014), offered an insightful ethnographic commentary on how racialized identities are not merely constituted by phenotypical presentation. In the Dominican Republic, Hazel argues, “sensory markers,” such as sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing are vital to navigating and negotiating national identity, gender, and whiteness (79). Particular ways of walking, talking, and smelling are perceptible and significant as they speak to how individuals fit—or don’t fit—into Dominican society. Even within the so-called “racial democracy” of the Dominican Republic, the particular qualities believed to be associated with whiteness, such as being Western, American, or speaking English, were elevated as superior and privileged when juxtaposed to the blackness of Haitians.

Building upon the work of Urciuoli's 1996 analysis of Puerto Ricans living in New York City, Jane Hill (1998) explored the linguistic markedness of Brown Spanish speakers. Puerto Ricans, argued Hill, occupied a unique place within the racial topography where English-speaking Whites would regularly monitor, scrutinize, and seek to control their use of language. Central to her analysis is the White public space. Within the White public space whiteness was an unmarked set of racial and practical traits. This was the space where being phenotypically White and speaking English was the norm. For Puerto Ricans, they were doubly marked as antithetical to the existing social order of White English-speakers. So much did their racial identities stand out as dangerous, even when they spoke English they were open to critique by White people who detected real or imagined errors in grammar or pronunciation.

Scholars contributing to discourses of whiteness have, as we have seen, argued that their endeavors speak to more than a racialized identity embodied by those with white skin. In her ethnographic inquiry of Jewish identity, Karen Brodtkin defined whiteness "as a complexly held political identity and as a stable and powerful system of oppressive economic and political practices that are sustained by opposition to all manner of nonwhiteness" (1998:23). While White racial domination is the energy that fuels the practices of whiteness, the privileges it bestows can be afforded to persons of color. Racial and ethnic groups commonly considered to not be White can become whitened, such as Jews or Irish Catholics (Roediger 1991). Whiteness is about more than the process of racialization. It also occurs in tandem with the construction of social class. Alisse Waterston wrote, "Dreams of class mobility are not in themselves indicative of a desire among Latinos to 'become White,' but the interplay of social forces at work today make it more likely that more of them will be" (2008:137). She found that a particular segment of Latinos were being

targeted for inclusion into the category of whiteness through governmental censuses, and neoliberal policies, and media corporations. To become whitened, Waterston argued, was to be elevated socially and was one means by which historically non-White peoples could climb the socioeconomic ladder. Whiteness, then, as suggested by Brodtkin and echoed by Waterston, is a political identity that affords those who are ascribed to it with certain privileges over and against non-White others.

It is important to take note of just what is meant here by “nonwhiteness.” The concept is, as is whiteness, expansive, and is used as an umbrella term to describe “othered” identities and their respective sets of traits. As with the aforementioned scholarship on the unmarkedness of whiteness as a normative category, one that in Hill’s work was connected to linguistic and moral order, the otherness of nonwhite categories are marked as being undesirable to the existing social order. Concepts that speak to racial and ethnic identities, such as “blackness,” “brownness,” “Indianness,” or “Jewishness,” or to gender identities, such as “nonbinary,” “transgender,” or “two spirited,” or to sexualities, such as “homosexual,” “bisexual,” or “asexual” all come to fit within this umbrella term. Even ways of speaking, as we saw with Hill, and ways of smelling, tasting, touching, and hearing, as we saw with Hazel, are integral to how people are racialized as White or non-White. And here we find a slip-in by which whiteness, as an academic concept, is imperative to exploring how the Proud Boys fit into broader discourses that are deeply concerned with oppression, as the ways in which they embody their whiteness is manifold. However, before we dive back into the Proud Boys, we must further explore how the concept of whiteness is relevant to contemporary anthropological scholarship and popular discourse.

Drawing off the work of past scholars in the construction of whiteness as a manifold concept, anthropologists have begun to call for a disciplinary reckoning. In their provocative introduction to *American Anthropologist*, Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús and Jemima Pierre (2019) serve readers a scathing review of the discipline of anthropology as a White supremacist project. They cite the demographics of academic units, their hiring practices, and the placement of scholars of color within academia. Anthropology departments are overwhelmingly White. They continue to hire White people. Scholars of color are often treated as tokens. Using data obtained by the Open Syllabus Project,<sup>14</sup> they found that only 1 per-cent of texts used in undergraduate anthropology courses were authored by scholars of color. The authors accuse the discipline of being dominated by the sensibilities of White liberals, and their own ideas and interests which “depends on racialist imperial logics based on the privileging of whiteness” (69). Anthropology is dominated by White people, particularly White men, who continue to insulate anthropology with a monopolization of their White ideas. Thus, they unapologetically proclaim, that that the discipline is itself a complicit partner in perpetuating White supremacy.

There are two primary contentions they articulate as they critique the discipline for its whiteness problem which are to orient the discipline moving forward. First, they claim that anthropology, as a discipline, has overwhelmingly neglected the wide reach of racism as many have come to hyper-focus on particular cultural formations as opposed to globalized and hierarchically ranked racial formations. Anthropologist’s apparent obsession with focusing on particular cultural groups, they posit, has blinded ethnographers to broader power structures which influences social orderings on

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<sup>14</sup> The Open Syllabus Project can be found at <https://blog.opensyllabus.org/about-the-open-syllabus-project/>

both large and small scales. Second, they argue that while anthropologists have recognized that race is discursively produced, that not enough attention and care has been spent by scholars on adequately interrogating White racial hegemony as it manifests and functions globally, including in the practices of anthropology itself. After having diagnosed the problem of whiteness as being the single most existential threat to the discipline, the authors proceed to lay out a prescription to mitigate its affects.

Their solution to the shortcomings of anthropology are threefold. First, anthropologists should take as their point of departure in all studies that whiteness is itself constitutive of all power relations and is constitutive of privilege. Instead of focusing solely on race as a concept or processes of racialization, then, anthropologists must be sensitive to the racial privileges conferred by whiteness regardless of the particulars. Second, anthropologists should recognize that whiteness is constituent of domination itself. Whiteness, then, is “constituent of patriarchy, heteronormativity, settler colonialism, mass incarceration, police violence, and other global and imperial violences” (2019:72). It is impossible to disentangle whiteness from any form of domination and oppression as the privileging of whiteness can be found in every single situation where one person is dominant over another. Third and finally, anthropologists should position White supremacy as a global phenomenon that proliferates every social relationship. The power and privilege that whiteness confers is not just found within the contexts of domination—they are present everywhere at all times. Studies of race and racism must agree that whiteness is not just an expression of overtly racist acts, but part and parcel of daily life, regardless of where one is at or when they are. The goal of anthropology, then, should be to tear down the global power structures of both race and specifically, whiteness.

Ryan Cecil Jobson (2019), in line with Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre contends that anthropology is perpetuating White supremacy. Making his case he harkens to its original sin of complicity with slavery. Jobson attacks the anthropological tradition for its role in upholding and legitimating White colonial domination and subjugation of Black and Brown peoples. He highlights how the relationship between ethnographer and their subject was facilitated by the unequal power relations between colonizer and colonized. This relation is mirrored between anthropologist and subject. With this troubled history in mind, Jobson likens anthropology as an academic discipline to a plantation. The anthropologist, whose sensibilities orient him to interpret the world with the lens of liberal humanism, takes up his place as the figurative slave master. Following the logics of liberal thought, anthropologists reap the benefits from their subjects who were enslaved by the very logics of liberal thought by which anthropological practice emerged. Thus, he concludes that the discipline as we know it must be set ablaze and, following Shange (2019), on its smoldering rubble be rebuilt under the rubric of an “abolitionist anthropology” that would become a “genre of Black study.”

Outside of the halls and conferences of anthropology are popular scholars who have taken up the concept of whiteness and helped bring it to public discourse. One of the most prominent of these scholars is Robin DiAngelo. In her seminal work, *White Fragility*, she continues to follow past conceptualizations of whiteness as existing beyond the color of one’s skin. “Whiteness is thus conceptualized as a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a discrete entity (i.e. skin color alone). Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels” (2018:56). However, DiAngelo departs from past scholarship on whiteness through her central



concept of “white fragility” which speaks to how phenotypically white skinned people lack “racial stamina.” DiAngelo draws from her work as a corporate diversity and inclusion educator where she claims to be continually confronted by Whites who are dismissive of notions of structural racism and hostile to the concept of White privilege. Whites react negatively to discussions about race precisely because they are insulated by the unmarkedness of their phenotypical presentation that signifies their belonging. “In a white dominant environment,” she writes, “each of these challenges becomes exceptional. In turn, whites are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways. Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divide” (57). White people, because of the unmarkedness of their whiteness, have never had to seriously consider how their racial identities are caught up in broader systems of oppression. As a result, White people are emotionally and cognitively stunted when it comes to critically engaging with discourses that interrogate their complicity and complacency.

For DiAngelo, White people share a White standpoint, or unique ontological perspective which persons of color do not have access. Their perspectives, experiences, beliefs, ideals, and values are all shaped by their relationship to and complicity with unequal racist power structures which they continually benefit from. The challenge to overcoming racism is to get White people to improve their racial endurance, “it is critical that all white people build the stamina to sustain conscious and explicit engagement with race” (66). While she recognizes that the responsibility of challenging the inherent racist superstructure of the US belongs to everyone entrapped by its oppressive snare, the burden itself, is fundamentally White. Therefore, White people have more of a burden to bear, “although all individuals play a role in keeping the system active, the responsibility for change is

not equally shared. White racism is ultimately a white problem and the burden for interrupting it belongs to white people” (66). The path forward, for DiAngelo, is a collective movement whose participants will differentially work through because the problem of racism has differentially positioned those participants within an unequal racial hierarchy.

Complementing DiAngelo’s popularity within public discourse of whiteness, is Ibram X. Kendi. Kendi’s work has garnered national praise and admiration and has been rewarded with academic accolades and tenure for his writings over racism in America. Where Kendi departs from DiAngelo, however, is that he does not rely on an explicit use of the concept of whiteness. Instead, his project can be most succinctly characterized as antiracist. The state of race and racism, according to Kendi, is best analyzed by historically grounding it within the context of the United States and his own personal experiences with racist thoughts. He divides people into three groups by how they make sense of Black problems. First, there are “segregationists” who claim that Black people are responsible for their own subjugated positions. Second, there are “antiracists” who argue that racial discrimination is responsible for Black subjugation. Third, there are “assimilationists” who argue both points, that the actions of Black people and the racial discrimination they face are responsible for Black subjugation.

These three groups, then, can be placed on either side of a line relating to their complicity with racism. On one side is segregationists and assimilationists. They are the politicians, social workers, police officers, and anyone else who harbor racist ideas and act in racist ways. Their behavior, however, can be explained in rational terms. These types of people act in racist ways because, as Kendi argues, racism benefits them. Under the rubric of rational choice theory, to be a racist is to

act in one's own self-interest. Racism not only allows for people to maintain their superior positions in society over non-White others, but it also enables the subordination of middle- and poor-class Whites. Simply put, the problem with racism lies in its pragmatism and it does not only negatively impact phenotypically white skinned people.

On the other side of the line are antiracists. Most simply put, to stand on that side of the divide is to reject racism. As Kendi writes, "That is what it truly means to think as an antiracist," writes Kendi, "to think that there is nothing wrong with Black people, to think that racial groups are equal" (2016: 11). An undoubtedly simple and concise means to differentiate between, as we shall see, those who should rule and those who should not. Paramount to effecting an antiracist future is to establish how racism will be defeated and precisely how that future will be achieved.

Kendi's solution to eradicating racism is to go after its pragmatic quality. As racists benefit from racist actions, which manifests from racist ideas, the path forward a la Kendi is to de-incentivize racist beliefs through placing antiracists into positions of power at all levels of society, from academic institutions to government. Kendi writes, "Any effective solution to eradicating American racism must involve Americans committed to antiracist policies seizing and maintaining power over institutions, neighborhoods, counties, states, and nations--the world...An antiracist American can only be guaranteed if principled antiracists are in power, and then antiracist policies become the law of the land, and then antiracist ideas become common sense of the people..." (510). From their powerful positions antiracist leaders can devise legally binding policy and law which will sanction those who break with codified antiracist ideology. For Kendi, the path forward is simple. It is collective. It requires equally of those who consider themselves antiracists.

Whiteness discourse is a complex constellation of competing claims whose interlocuters draw on particular strands of whiteness as a concept to help drive their own intellectual and political projects. As a conceptual apparatus, whiteness is manifold. It is used to describe racialized and political forms of identity, privilege, power relations, practices, policies, experiences, and sentiments. Within anthropology a particular strand of whiteness discourse aims to reframe the types of questions anthropologists should ask while calling into question what kinds of people should populate the body that forms and is formed by anthropological pursuits. Outside of the academy, public scholars are taking the concept of whiteness and attempting to effect public policy in the name of antiracism. At the core of these projects is a duality between racism and antiracism that must be interrogated further as whiteness is the linchpin to dismantling White supremacist power structures and the inequality that is contingent upon White racial hegemony.

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JOSEPH WAS ONE of my best friends for much of my childhood and adolescence. I'd still like to see him that way, but as we've grown up so too have our lives spread apart. Joseph grew up in what could be considered the higher end of the lower end of the economic spectrum. But you couldn't easily tell that from the outside of the house. A colorful couch with an assortment of throw pillows and rugs littered the front porch with a small wooden side table, wind chimes, stone bird bath and swirly metallic decorations that just stuck there in the garden. His home was a real work of art and his mother was wildly eclectic. Rugs everywhere and shelves upon shelves of knick knacks. A large green parrot named Pete that would squawk at all hours of the day, waking me up

almost every time I spent the night. That bird was a real jerk. Understandably so, he was locked in a small cage for most of his life. Despite all of these baubles and shiny things, money was a big issue in Joseph's household. During elementary and middle school I'd have to make sure to eat or bring a few dollars with me before going over to his house as his parents would say they didn't always have enough food for company. They fed me when they could, which is more often than I may remember.

Joseph lived in Section 8 housing with his mother and stepfather who had both lived on disability since before we met in grade school. His mother had back issues but I honestly could never tell. She was just as active as anyone else but would constantly speak of her pain. She had been an avid gymnast in her youth and in middle age the stress she had put on her body had finally come to collect its dues. His stepfather, on the other hand, was a different story. When he was younger he was walking along a highway when a passenger in a passing car threw an unopened beer can at him that crashed directly into his head. He was mostly there, a little slow in his speaking cadence, but for the most part I thought he was normal. I thought that's how he always was until I was told the story. They were a relatively normal family to me. Different from mine I knew, but I never saw them as abnormal compared to any of my other friends' families. Just as some of my other friends, his mother, stepfather, and older sister would have screaming matches often while I was over. Sometimes I'd just have to look down at my shoes, feeling sorry for him and his sister. What would make his parents do this, I would think to myself. You could tell the screaming, even though it was an often occurrence, really bothered him. We'd sit there for who knows how long, then hear a forceful "knock, knock, knock" at the front door. It was usually either the cops or his uncle Dan.

In our early teenage years, Joseph and I were always happy to see Dan as he would happily go buy us cigarettes and alcohol in exchange for a finder's fee. When he was in his early 30s he was doing a roofing job. He had glued back the safety to his nail gun so he could work quickly and one day, so the story goes, while on the job he lost his footing and stumbled to catch his fall. A nail went from the gun and into his head. Skip to the moment of our adolescence and Dan was now in his 40s, a homeless alcoholic and regular meth head. Cigarettes and alcohol were not the only treats that we had access to while in the company of the adults in Joseph's home. His mother used to trade us diazepam for house chores, grocery shopping, and fixing her computer. When money was tighter than usual we could buy some for about \$5 per 10mg pill. Not a bad deal at the time, especially since my parents would often give me a few dollars before heading over to his house for food. Save up enough lunch money and you've got yourself a nice little pill party. His father usually kept a supply of hydrocodone due to his headaches and leg pain and would kindly distribute them to us free of charge. He just wanted to have a good time. The first time I bought pot was through his older sister's friends, some of whom to this very day are my good friends.

Joseph's steady supply of prescribed dextroamphetamine was a nice reprieve from all of the downers. It was also a source of his own form of income. When Joseph was 16 he got into a wreck on a friend's minibike and broke his leg. Within a month he was addicted to painkillers. After complaining enough about his continued pain, which was supposed to have subsided, his family doctor—the same family doctor who prescribed him his daily allotment of legalized speed—happily signed off on a daily supply of blue Watson 540s, which he also sold and traded to his friends and family. To supplement his fledgling pharmaceutical business, he began to make bi-weekly visits to the local CSL Plasma. Being as skinny as he was did not bring in as much money,

though. He eventually began selling pot to his friends. It was nice being friends with a dealer, especially when they'd hook you up fat. Business was booming for a while, but when he was 18 he was arrested in a school zone with a zip of schwag. Instant felony.

Over the past couple years he had been an avid collector of guns. He would regularly pawn one or two of them down the street so he could afford the large upfront costs of pot. When he received his conviction he had to sell all of his beloved firearms. But maybe that was for the better. One time when we were 16 he negligently discharged one of his rifles through his ceiling while we both sat on his bed. His mother came in screaming bloody murder. As a result of his reckless behavior, which led to his felony conviction, he lost one form of income and couldn't find a job. When Joseph finally got hired to do roof work he saw a man fall off a two story home and break his leg. The guy didn't have health insurance. Neither did his boss. Joseph soon quit. He later got hired to cut down trees, which he loved doing. A few months in he lost handle of his chainsaw and almost cut off his own arm. Those living with felony convictions often flock to trades work, but these jobs were just not working out for him. By the age of 20 he was smoking meth with a couple of our other friends and their friends. I'm sure his uncle Dan facilitated his early acquisitions just as he did with cigarettes and booze years before.

When I began working on this project I had not seem Joseph in a couple years. In 2017 he was living out of his car after being kicked out of his mother's boyfriend's apartment. She had lost her house. Something about she had been paying the landlord rent which would be going toward her eventual ownership of the home. One day the landlord sold the home and she was forced to relocate after over a decade of making a home for herself. When he came to knock on my door he was in

good spirits. He had just gotten an interview at Home Depot and was hopeful. I had recently put on a few pounds and gave him some old dress clothing and let him sleep on my couch and use my shower. He didn't get the job and went back to meth. About three months later I was leaving a liquor store when Dan approached my car, "Sir, would you happen to have a dollar or two?" He didn't even recognize me.

For the next year and a half I did not hear from Joseph. Then one afternoon I heard a knock at my door. At first it seemed that nothing had changed. He was still living out of his car, didn't have a job, and hung up about his ex-girlfriend who had left him years ago. After we were done with the usual chit chat that comes with not seeing a friend for an extended period of time he began to talk about the white cars that had been following him. They were state agents. The red cars were feds. The black ones were from California. They were monitoring him. Even the military was onto him—they were piping voices into his head from satellites from orbit. His grandmother had recently passed away and he had an enormous inheritance that the Norman Police Department was keeping from him until he got clean. I nodded my head to much of it. Near the end I shifted my tone and went from telling him what he was a serious of crazy circumstances to telling him that he was literally sounding like a crazy person. He shook it off and told me that I would see.

After he left my house I got into contact with his sister to inform her that he sounded schizophrenic. Apparently over the past number of months he had gotten deeper into meth. He had spent a few nights here and there in the hospital for suicidal ideation and another few for meth-induced psychosis. She told me she felt defeated and had tried all she could to get him out of his addiction



but that she had to give up after years of trying. She thanked me for telling her and told me to not get my hopes up.

Seven months later I saw his mugshot on the county blotter. He had been charged with petty larceny. By the end of the month I got a call from a random number. It was Joseph. He had, through the local hospital, found a six-week rehab program in a town outside of Oklahoma City and was about two weeks in. His thoughts appeared to be clear. Nothing crazy. He told me about the strict schedule they had to keep. Waking up at this time, doing group therapy at this time, taking a nap at this time, having TV time, working out, sneaking in cigarettes. They would help teach him the skills needed to stay sober and after his six weeks move him downstairs, find him a job and a car. This was all great news. I was excited for him and quickly messaged his sister. He called me a few more times over the next two weeks to update me. Everything was going well he said. His calls stopped for around three weeks and I figured he was busy with staying clean. Good for him.

Then the phone rang from a different number than the rehabilitation center. Joseph had been kicked out after completing his six weeks and immediately relapsed. He told me a story about walking out of a liquor store and being assaulted by two men with a bat. He had been released from jail for battery earlier in the week and subsequently released from the hospital for dehydration. The phone he was speaking to me with was from a local homeless shelter. His case worker was trying to get him back to Norman, which was a little over one hundred miles away. I asked what had happened and he gave me some bullshit about how one of the employees knew a guy he had used to work with in the tree trimming service and how there was this vendetta against him. I bought him a Greyhound ticket online for the following day.

Another knock on my door. His shirt was stained. Pants were large and baggy. The sandals he wore were provided to him by the county jail after he was released. All he owned was what he wore and a new ID his case worker had helped him obtain. I gave him some socks and shoes, a shirt and pair of shorts, and let him sleep on my couch. The next day I dropped him off at a local halfway house. He called me three hours later saying they had accepted him and already found him a job just a ten-minute walk away. Good for him. One month later a friend messaged me. Guess who had shown up at his door in the middle of the night, homeless, jobless, and strung out on meth. I don't know where Joseph is now.

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IT WAS MARCH 2020. The eve before the US and much of the world began to shut down. The bar was packed we sat at a large table drinking beers. It was just to the two of us, Tommy and me. Today wasn't one of their monthly get togethers. We weren't sure what was going to happen but you could feel the calm before the storm.

Tommy was always wanting to talk. Specifically, he was always ready to answer questions. Many times he would start the conversation by asking me if I had any questions for him. Being the topic of my thesis seemed to genuinely intrigue him, more-so than the rest. While everyone I spoke with was consistently polite enough to answer my questions, Tommy really appeared to take a liking to me, and in turn, I to him. This was the perfect time, I felt, to see what he was like outside of the

Proud Boys. Perhaps without the other members around we could have a more intimate conversation much like the one with Laura months ago.

At some point we picked back up on our prior conversation about inner-city violence and Black-on-Black crime and I once again brought up structural violence. Tommy would not budge on his position that there were no structural factors, such as systemic racism or over policing of poor and mostly Black and Brown neighborhoods, or a lack of social safety nets. I was once again a bit frustrated. I had expected him to stand his ground but I felt I made a rather compelling argument. Feeling that I was getting nowhere I figured that it might be more illustrative if I used a real-world example that I could speak to on behalf of my own personal experience with it. So I told him the story of my friend Joseph.

My argument followed that I believed there to be systematic failures that contributed to him occupying a space that was difficult for him to escape. From the moment he entered into the world he was exposed to very struggles that would follow him up into this very day. His household lacked money. His mother and father were both disabled and found that they could scrape by on their monthly governmental checks without holding down fulltime jobs. After just twelve years on this earth his own family and their family doctor was providing him with reliable sources of nicotine, alcohol, and pharmaceuticals, which would eventually lead to him becoming addicted to opiates. And so on and so on. He should have been taken out of that home, I told him, or at least DHS should have stepped in and tried to help remedy the situation.

Tommy said that Joseph was a loser, as a failure, as someone that society did not fail, but as someone that failed himself. He saw DHS as the societal stopgap that should have captured Joseph and taken him out of his home that contributed to his failure to thrive. A hardened sense of personal responsibility seemed to be all that there was to Tommy. Despite the fact that he agrees DHS should have removed Joseph from his home, he did not see his continued living in that home a failure of society. He saw it initially as a parental failure but ultimately Joseph's failure that he had every opportunity to make better.

“Regardless of your race, sex, or whatever, after you graduate high school and turn 18 everyone is on a level playing field,” Tommy said, “Everyone is given the same tools through public school, and it is up to them to live up to their own potential after that. After that it is no longer anyone's problem but the individual's.” I returned his comment by saying that Joseph never graduated high school and dropped out during his senior year.

“He could have escaped. He could have gotten out. He could have been like you, Zach. No one forced him to smoke meth though—that's on him. I'm sorry Zach, but your friend is a loser. He had the same potential as everyone else and he chose to smoke meth and be a loser.”

That's likely true. I don't think anyone held a gun to my friend's head and told him to get high. He could have finished high school and moved out of his parent's house. His judge could have been lenient with his sentencing like they had always been with me. It's not like his life was determined from birth to be a constant struggle of addiction, homelessness, and run-ins with the police. I did not think that Tommy was totally wrong in his assessment of Joseph. But he wasn't

entirely right either. A lack of personal responsibility has certainly played a role in leading Joseph to where he might be now but it wasn't the whole story. There is much more to our lives than being unfettered and free from all outside pressures. The oppression that my friend Joseph is experiencing is not reducible to his own lack of personal responsibility. It is multifaceted and warrants a serious engagement with the kinds of power structures he is subject to.

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OVER THE LAST two centuries, the concept of whiteness has been developed across a wide array of interdisciplinary scholarship, representing a panoply of intellectual genealogies, backgrounds, and political commitments. My aim is not to summarize the major debates and intellectual histories that have influenced this important body of scholarly work. Instead, I take as my point of departure one disjuncture that appeared within my ethnographic fieldwork and that was articulated by those I interviewed. It is from this narrow space that I am interrogating three different ways in which whiteness has been understood. The first was voiced by members of the Oklahoma Proud Boys. Here, whiteness was tied to a set of gendered and classed values, practices, experiences, and institutions reduced to a dichotomy of moral and immoral living. The second was voiced by popular pundits and best-selling authors that analyze the present as a reflection of White supremacy and prescribe a set of tools for combatting this. The basic assumptions about whiteness and how it can be challenged in this second body of work can be considered a reductive binary of racism and antiracism. Finally, as we shall see, there is a third body of literature that has crafted alternative and sophisticated analyses of the ways that racial formations operate, not least through what Ann Stoler (2016) calls the "mobile essentialisms" of racial categories.

As I have discussed above, the Proud Boys are intimately participating in a discourse of whiteness. The concept of whiteness, as a cultural imaginary, is surely an effective analytical tool to improve our understanding of how members of the organization find meaning by being Proud Boys and following its organizational doctrines. Their fraternal credo, degrees of membership, and personal narratives speak to essentialized notions of race, gender, and sexuality. In their own ways, whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality are elevated by how they are perceived to be inherently creative in their capacities in ways that nonwhiteness, femininity, and homosexuality are not. The generating potentials of the White heterosexual man is placed on a pedestal because of it is perceived to be one of the fundamental building blocks of Western civilization. However, the increasingly popularized strand of whiteness discourse that is taking place through public forms of media is collapsing these intersecting identities and their historical contingencies as being epiphenomenal productions of racial hegemony.

Consider the work of Kendi, one of the most popular public scholars engaged in whiteness discourse. For Kendi, a comprehensive history of racism in the United States can be traced by drawing out how the material reality and experiences of Black people within the US has been shaped by racist ideas and, subsequently, racist acts. Kendi pulls threads from Enlightenment era philosophy, imperial empires, and colonial travel writing to illuminate how the logics underpinning racist thought in the US today predate the nation's foundation. Without explicitly stating so, he acknowledges that racism in the US has been informed by multiple discourses, that have taken place within scholarly circles and the other public spaces. While his book is grounded in historical events, figures, and thought, his analysis is singularly concerned with the formation

of racial identity. He neglects to engage with and, in turn, erases scholarship illustrating the intersectional construction of identities.

Regimes of production overlap. They are never totalizing forces and they never construct identities that are static. There are always instabilities to our identities. Racial formations, argued Arendt (1945) are produced through multiple and competing discourses. Within the context of imperialism, racial identities of imperial subjects relied upon different sets of contingencies which she called the “imperial frame.” Within the imperial frame, proximity to colony and metropole defined the racial identity of its subjects. In the metropole a different set of social relationships and activities were set apart from those of its colonies. And in the colonies there were always local populations that were set apart from the colonizers. The colonizers and their indigenous counterparts were racialized in relation to one another. For the colonists and colonized alike, the discourses that constituted their racial identities were fueled by anxieties and fears about the contaminating effects of racial intermixing, which were set apart from and contradictory to the kinds of sentiments and sensibilities that drove the racializing discourses within the metropole because of disconnects in proximity and day to day living.

The contradictory and competing productions of colonial identities, argued Ann Stoler, were centered upon discourse of sexuality. “These discourses circulated,” writes Stoler, “in a racially charged magnetic field in which debates about sexual contamination, sexual abstinence or spermatic depletion produced moral clusters of judgment and distinction that defined the boundaries of middle-class virtue, lower-class immorality and the deprivations of those of colonial birth or of mixed-race” (1995:176-77). What it meant to be European in the metropole was

different than what it meant to be European in the colonies. Those born to the colonies, even to two White European parents, were automatically suspect precisely because of their presumed contamination.

The nexus of identity construction during the colonial encounter centered upon the body, particularly the female body and the productive potential of motherhood. Therefore, nurseries in European nations and their colonial claims, such as the Dutch Indies, both drew upon maternal sentiments while the ways they were expressed differed (Stoler 1996). These nurseries were always constituted by contemporary discourses of class and gender. While nurseries in Holland and Germany were initially devised to function more like daycares for working-class women, they eventually became moral and intellectual training grounds. However, the nurseries founded in the Dutch Indies were devised to combat the degeneration of European children. Their mothers had chosen to neglect their maternal responsibilities and left the burden up to indigenous caretakers and their decivilizing language.

European racial typologies were not merely imported from the metropole to the colony. European views of racial essence were informed by colonial confrontations with difference and resulted in a fragmented European identity. The world had been opened up and Europeans were encountering peoples whose differences they sought to account for. Out of a desire, or perhaps out of necessity, efforts at purifying the racial essence of Europeans were influenced and shaped by the competing discourses between colony and metropole. The resultant racial formations were constituted by co-occurring gender and class formations. Therefore, “Colonial discourses of sexuality were productive of class and racial power, not mere reflections of them” (Stoler 1995:176). Race,



gender, and class identities coming out of the colonial encounter were always constitutive of one another and cannot be discussed in isolation. Racism has always coincided with sexism which has always coincided with classism. The ways in which they are experienced never completely line up because the discourses that constitute them are always in motion and always disconnected through degrees of proximity.

Arendt's and Stoler's work were intersectional. Intersectional theory, also called intersectionality, asserts that different identities, most commonly, those of race, gender, and class, but not limited to them, influence degrees of advantage and disadvantage a person or people experience. Although the Proud Boys vehemently oppose intersectional theory, the ways in which the Proud Boys appeal to people are demonstrably intersectional. The core demographic of the Proud Boys is straight White men. There is an appeal made to straight White man who perceive themselves to be under attack by a feminist and Marxist identity politics seeking to blame them specifically for the structural problems of White supremacy and patriarchy. While they perceive straight White men to be under this particular kind of attack, by way of their fraternal credo and degrees of membership, different configurations of "men," from men of color (heterosexual and homosexual) to homosexual men (White or person of color), can draw on different grievances. Men of color can draw on their masculinity as being under attack by feminists who critique patriarchy. They need not feel persecuted for their race because that particular component of their racial identity is non-White. And to indulge in a little speculation, if we follow John McWhorter's (2021) critique of popularized antiracism that he argues holds Black people to a lower standard than White people, a Black Proud Boy could perceive themselves to also be persecuted by feminist and Marxist identity politics in a way that White Proud Boys are not. In a contradiction, perhaps coming from

an ignorance of its literature, the Proud Boys perform intersectionality while they categorically deny it.

To further bring this discussion of intersectionality into my ethnography, on two separate instances Oklahoma Proud Boys commented upon intersectionality. On one of these occasions, a Proud Boy described intersectionality as a game, calling it “the oppression Olympics” because he perceived it to be hierarchically ranking the suffering of humans. In another instance a Proud Boy derided intersectionality for “putting people into boxes.” The ways in which they interpret intersectionality may have been put into simple terms and I never explored them in depth. However, there is a deeper significance to how their rhetoric surrounding intersectional discourse that is in lockstep with their sense of being marginalized. I believe this partially speaks to how they are performing a class critique while, in a contradictory manner, parroting talking points fed to them through Right-wing talking heads who are part of a larger mediation of information and truth, once again demonstrating Bakhtin’s concept of the double-voicedness of language and the internal contradictions of it.

Before I continue it is important to note the kind of work Kendi (and DiAngelo) are doing. Their work is scholarly but their audience is not the academy. Their writing is largely oriented towards public audiences. The kind of writing an author produces is contingent upon the knowledge they presume their audience to have prior to reading their work. The process of mediating hotly debated histories, which have been subjected to and the subject of intense scholarly scrutiny over centuries, to public audiences must necessarily be simplified to be accessible. Heady theory and academic jargon, for example, are not likely to be appealing to general audiences. However, this does not

excuse a writer's responsibility to truthfulness. This is not to accuse Kendi and DiAngelo of lying to their readers. Instead, while Kendi and DiAngelo are certainly raising awareness for racism within the US their work simplifies racism and accompanying systems of oppression to such a degree that it decreases the analytical tools we have to understand oppressive structures. And now we turn to DiAngelo.

The work of DiAngelo is reductionist and oversimplified to the point of drawing White people into a caricature. With confidence she claims, that "Because whites live primarily segregated lives in a white-dominated society, they receive little or no authentic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think about it critically or with complexity. Further, white people are taught not to feel any loss over the absence of people of color in their lives" (58). The core concept of her work is centered upon the emotional and cognitive deficits that White people continually demonstrate to her while she leads corporatized diversity and inclusion trainings. And here we can to this list educational deficits. For DiAngelo, to be White is to think incorrectly and feel incorrectly.

White Americans, as DiAngelo claims, are often characterized by an apprehension to discuss race and racism. While there is certainly truth to this, what is consistently neglected are critical conversations about class, predominately among Antiracism. Americans *passionately* do not like to talk about class or classed inequality. Imagine DiAngelo performing a diversity seminar and asking everyone to stand up together and chant "We are the 99 percent!" DiAngelo's and Kendi's work both defer class analyses in their explorations of racial formation and oppression.

One emergence of race and racism within the Americas coincided with the institutionalization of slavery during European conquest and was inextricably linked with classed forms of labor. Hierarchical social structures were constructed out of relations of production and validated by the institutionalization of scientific racism. What it meant to be Black or White was in dialogue with the particular modes of production and their corresponding material realities. Slavery was to Black and a lack of freedom as indentured servitude was to White and a marker of freedom. Post-American Civil War White supremacy in the South rested upon the connection between labor as a marker of freedom. White landowners remained in power and continued to perpetuate this race/labor logic with Chinese immigrant sharecroppers who were ascribed similar racial characteristics and pitted alongside and against Black sharecroppers. All the while scientific endeavors that described the distinctions between racialized groups continued to demonstrate how each race was better suited for different kinds of tasks.

By the 1960s, Reed writes, "Poverty was reinvented as a cultural dilemma, and 'white racism' singled out as the root of racial inequality" (2013:52). Discussions of inequality severed the connection between capitalist exploitation and racial inequality. This disconnect is, Ignatiev and Allen (1976) argue, a tactic readily used to divide working-class people along racially privileged lines and distract them from the commonalities of class that would serve as an effective means to organization. "The ideology of white chauvinism," they write, "is bourgeois poison aimed primarily at the white workers, utilized as a weapon by the ruling class to subjugate black and white workers. It has its material base in the practice of white supremacy, which is a crime not merely against non-whites but against the entire proletariat" (28). In the decades since, race, and to varying degrees gender, have stood at the forefront of national discussions of inequality. Racial

and gender identities are the most visible and relatable ascriptive hierarchies in the US. They are easier to sense and appear more tangible compared to classed identities. These hierarchies, in turn, have received the most attention by those who attempt to dismantle unequal power structures.

What gets neglected in popular discourse is class struggle. Wacquant (2010) offers an alternative perspective that challenges arguments treating racial oppression as antecedent to other forms of oppression. In his discussion of the criminal justice system, Wacquant is keen to posit we not consider incarceration as a practice that affects the masses. The term “mass incarceration” is misleading. This is because conceptually “mass” presumes indiscriminate incarceration of large swathes of people. Instead, he proposes the term of “hyperincarceration” because it orients us to pay closer attention to the specific populations of the masses that are being incarcerated. The concept of hyperincarceration is most widely used to describe how the demographics of prisoners flipped post World War II from 70 percent White to 70 percent Black and Latino. However, by digging further into statistical figures, Wacquant reveals that across all inmates of all racial identities, fewer than half of inmates held a full-time job prior to their arraignment and 60 percent of inmates came from homes living below the national poverty line.

Looking within and between racialized populations of prisoners is telling of class overlap. While at the time of Wacquant’s writing, Black men were eight times more likely to be imprisoned at some point in their life compared White men, the likelihood that Black men without college education would be imprisoned was twelve times as likely compared to college-educated Black men (58.9% and 4.9%). White men who did not hold a college degree were sixteen times more likely to be imprisoned than their White college-educated counterparts (11.2% and 0.7%). Twenty

years prior, those ratios were significantly smaller. Between the 1990s up through the beginning of the 2010s those figures increased threefold for Black men and eightfold for White men.

Wacquant makes a compelling case that race is not the primary category that leads a person to have increased odds of being imprisoned within the US. Instead, class identity is the most significant factor that increases a person's likelihood to experience imprisonment. This echoes in a parallel fashion to the conclusions Franz Boas reached about race in 1907, where he found that within just one generation the physical properties of children born to immigrant parents changed to such a degree that racial typologies could not account for. His most significant finding was that there was more physical variation within racialized populations than between them. The concept of distinct and discontinuous racial types based upon objective phenotypical features, was debunked.

The deferment of class critique is indicative of an underlying reliance on capitalist metanarratives. Anthony Monteiro writes, "Kendi wants to change capitalist policies, but not replace the capitalist system; in the same way he wants to replace racist policies, but not structural and systemic racism. He rejects using socialism or communism, preferring the words anti-racial capitalism" (2020). Kendi's prescription to ending racism is overtly an argument coming from rational choice theory. The wedding of the Enlightenment and the emergence of capitalism has been undergirded by assertions that people should curb their irrationalities with their reason and their passions with their interests. Rationality gets tied up with economic interests. In turn, the public is given an easy to follow and familiar prescription for undoing racism. Since, according to Kendi, humans make decisions guided by their own interests, what we need are antiracists who have actualized their

“*intelligent self-interest*” to seize positions of authority within government and legislate antiracist policy (2016:504).

Kendi’s story is one of collective redemption. It is familiar and that is comforting. Is it not familiar for us to imagine people as rational self-interested actors? If only social problems were as coherent as rational choice theory would have us believe. Undergirding Kendi’s work is a trickle-down antiracism that presumes the integrity of our governing institutions and capitalist system. He believes that the academy and government will work as one coherent unit for the betterment of all members of society. He ignores the competition between these hegemonic forces when he paints the world with dichotomous strokes and reduces racism as rational choice which only people curtailing their passions with an intelligent rationality can overcome.

Interestingly enough, this framing of the “good” person overcoming racism is a trope within popular antiracist discourse. A similar appeal was made by Stern when she called for, “white people of good conscious call out sexist and racist narratives of white victimhood and dispossession” (2019:136). For Stern, it is not just any ordinary White person—it is a *good* White person.

Through this strand of whiteness discourse taking place within the public sphere, a Manichean divide between good and evil has been constructed. The theological underpinnings of Manicheism is one that is, as rational choice theory, familiar to us. McWhorter (2021) makes a compelling case as he compares antiracism to a religion, with its own original sin of White racism, clergy who convert racists to antiracists through ritualized confessions of White privilege, and

heretics it brands at racists. If we take McWhorter's critique in line with Kendi's political project the case can be made that one day antiracism become the dominant state mandated religion.

What the public writings of DiAngelo and Kendi leave us with is a "the politics of actual or would-be race relations administrators, and it is completely embedded within American capitalism and its structures of elite brokerage. It is fundamentally antagonistic to working-class politics, notwithstanding left identitarians' gestural claims to the contrary" (Reed 2003:55) While this strand of antiracism explores the inequalities between racial groups, substantive and critical analyses of gender, and to a larger degree class, are either ignored or oversimplified to the point of caricature. This popular strand of whiteness discourses scholars reduce the impact that complex historical and material realities of oppressive economic systems have on the construction of whiteness they treat it as a monolithic transhistorical category (Reed 2013). Capitalism, as an oppressive structure, remains unchallenged and even elevated for its potential to end racism. Even calling out capitalism as harming not only Black people, but also White people is seen as suspect. Consider Stern: "...white people of good conscious [should] call out sexist and racist narratives of white victimhood and dispossession" (2019:136). At the heart of all oppression is White racism.

This strand of whiteness discourse that has been taken up within popular scholarly work directed towards the public spends the currency of racism to excess. In a Bataillian sense, never be exhausted. This is perhaps because of how the whole of whiteness discourse exceeds the bounds of what is currently being discussed by popular authors. A monolithic whiteness is the fuel source which feeds the kilns of all structural problems according to this popular scholarship. Indeed, it is through divergence of these conflicting discourses - the spaces between them - that reinforce



whiteness as essential while allowing that essential condition to be flexibly maneuvered to be epiphenomenal to all other forms of oppression.

The power of racial essentialism, argues Stoler (2016), lies in its mobility, “Race as a concept performs in a mobile field. It animates vacillating discourses with dynamic motility. Racial lexicons accumulate recursively, producing new racial truths as they requisition and reassemble old ones” (250). As modes of production, discourses over whiteness participate in creating and sustaining the very categories they rely on to make their critique. Within popular scholarship, whiteness is reduced to an existential threat to the world that binds antiracism together while remaining open enough to be continually retooled to fit new socially emergent situations that warrant analysis and critique. The mobility of racial essentialisms is demonstrated by both the Proud Boys and popular public scholars in how they differentially imbue White racial identity with their own unique sets of qualities by looking backwards.

The Proud Boys find meaning in White racial identity by tracing the origins of Western civilization. White racial identity was supposedly always there but its essence can only be realized through specific points in history. Moments in time are emphasized as watershed events that speak to the inherent morality and creativity of White people. During the Enlightenment White civilization turned to reason and rationality. During the colonial era White people brought their enlightened philosophies and economic system of capitalism to civilize savage natives. When White people left their former colonies they fell back into chaos. Under this worldview, whiteness is monolithic. It is stable throughout time and space. Whiteness is productive. It is moral. It is civilizing. However, it is also mobile in that through tracing its origins its essential core is

continually produced and reproduced by different sets of circumstance whose histories can never be exhausted.

Under the binary of racism – antiracism, whiteness too is stable but in an opposite way. Whiteness is destructive. It is immoral. It is corrupting. And it is also mobile. Performing a similar task of tracing origins, moments in time become indicative of the supposed immutability of whiteness. Let us once again consider DiAngelo as we trace her take on White people. White people are cognitively and emotionally defective because they do not talk about race. White people do not talk about race because it makes them feel uncomfortable. White people are uncomfortable talking about race because they do not have close relationships with Black people. White people don't have close relationships with Black people because of segregated housing. White people live in segregated housing because it is what they have been taught. White people are taught to be racist because it benefits them. White people are complicit in racism because they continually benefit from a system that was built to benefit them. White people live in a system that benefits them because a history that will continually demonstrate their racism. Here we follow a hypothetical tracing of the origins of White racism through how DiAngelo presents her concept of White fragility. Each time we take a step back we further illuminate how White people express their racism. White racism is reflected in emotional and cognitive impairments, lack of close relationships with Black people, by their discomfort in talking about race, in their housing patterns, etc., etc. Each movement backwards reveals a new truth about White racial identity that speaks to and even expands upon its essential qualities.

Whiteness discourse, as with all discourses and language itself, is never stable. This discourse that has spanned at least the last two centuries has continually shifted the boundaries of whiteness. This scholarly canon is inherently contestable and contradictory as its interlocutors have drawn on and made claims to a wide variety of intellectual genealogies, backgrounds, and political commitments. And for popular and public writings that incoherence is perhaps its best and worst defense mechanism.

Not all who call themselves an antiracist share the same perspectives over what whiteness is and how it takes shape. The political projects coming out of this strand of whiteness discourse must be interrogated and understood by its blending of the affective and the rational as it operates along *interior frontiers*. “Not least,” Stoler (2016) writes, “the concept blurs the distinction between political rationalities and the affective economy in which these designations of belonging and exclusion are lodged. Interior frontiers hover in the grey zone that makes the personal fundamentally political, fortifying the tenuous attachments that allow a ‘me’ the sense of being part of a ‘we,’ an elemental feature in recruiting that ‘me’ to invest in distinguishing ‘us’ and ‘them.’” As a concept, interior frontiers helps us understand how sentimentality and rationality can co-opt one another under politically-oriented projects that maneuver the kinds of bodies that belong and those that don’t. Whiteness discourse, as it has been taken up in public spaces by popular authors meanders within and between, drawing liberally from scholarly work on colonialism, liberalism, capitalism, and Christianity. Through Kendi we see a wedding between sentimentalist appeals to a political project aimed at ending racism through actualizing our collective rationality. The shifting of a “we” and a “they” is defined by if a person has harnessed their rationality in an antiracist way. At this time it is simply to be antiracist that defines an “us”

and a “them.” But through the political project that aims at enacting and enforcing antiracist public policy those borders can be shifted once again as people and institutions acting in racist ways would come to be sanctioned by the government for their racist transgressions.

To once again borrow from McWhorter, this popular form of antiracism is able to shift its borders through acts akin to religious conversion, confessions, and penance. To convert is to transition from racist to antiracist, to cross over. Through confessions of complicity in the original sin of whiteness White people can be brought into the fold. A penance is paid by befriending Black, Indigenous, and persons of color. And heretics are cast out who challenge its scripture. A series of transformative acts that are deeply sentimental and are rationalized through the political struggle of ending racism.

Within the academic corridors of anthropology, we see that a small foothold has made that is intimately tied to the strand of antiracism that has found its own footing in public spaces. A small faction has emerged to challenge the original sin of anthropology: its complicity with racist colonial power structures. These anthropologists are attempting to redefine the boundaries of what kinds of people can practice anthropology, the kinds of questions they can ask, and the kinds of people that anthropologists can study. This form of anthropology would be unabashedly anti-humanist as it coalesces into a politics that discounts, discredits, and disregards particular forms of the human.

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WHEN I FIRST met Robert he had been member of the Oklahoma Proud Boys for a little over a year. He stood a tall six foot four and loved wearing his Proud Boys hat, black sunglasses, and rebel flag belt buckle. He had spent three months prior to joining vetting the group online seeing if they would be a good match. Turns out he fit in quite well with the group. He was always in good spirits when I saw him, even when the topic of discussion became personal and he detailed pieces of his past that appeared to have a profound effect on him. In many ways he had an attitude that operated on a “shit happens—move on” mentality. For the first few months of being a member he spent much of his time laughing at memes he would post online.

For Robert, the Proud Boys was more than a drinking club. In a similar way to Andrew, it was a brotherhood that in some ways acted as a social safety net for members who might be going through rough times. He saw his fellow members as family and made it a point of pride that other chapters of Proud Boys across the nation made fun of the Oklahoma group for allowing women at their meet-ups. As he explained, “We kind of bend the rules in this chapter. We get a lot of shit from other chapters for letting our wives and girlfriends come to our meetings, but if these guys are my brothers I want to get to know their families too as they are my family as well. That doesn’t mean they stay for Church though, that’s members only.”

The Proud Boys served as a surrogate family, one that he never saw himself planning on leaving. This was not just because of the men themselves, but the values that he sees the Proud Boys standing for. “I don’t think anything could make me leave my brothers. Even if the Proud Boys weren’t a thing I’d still be a Proud Boy, even if the name or group wasn’t a thing.”

I found his devotion intriguing, “Sort of like you have always had these values but now you have a group of people who you can share those values with?”

“That’s right. Some of us have lost relationships and jobs because we are Proud Boys. Just the other day Clint got doxxed and had to walk into work wondering if he was going to have a job. I don’t think anything could make me leave this group. My ex-wife wasn’t a fan of me being part of it, but we had other problems, it was clear it wasn’t going to work out.” In a turn of events he had since found a new girlfriend who shared many of his beliefs.

Like Tommy, Robert was a single father who, like most of the other members I got to know, worked a blue-collar job. He mentioned that work had not been going too well and that money was tight, which prompted me to ask him what he thought about Andrew Yang’s proposal for universal basic income. Laughing dismissively he opined, “Man that guy is a joke. If you give people free money do you think they are going to want to work?” Then he shared with me that during his childhood he grew up in poverty, “I mean, I grew up poor.” Before Robert became a teenager his father had walked out on the family, leaving his mother to support him and his siblings. Without many other options she turned to governmental assistance programs to feed her children. He was quick to point out that his mother worked hard and eventually climbed her way out of poverty. His father finally returned shortly after his seventeenth birthday but was never very active in his life since.

He continued to tell me about his childhood, “I grew up really poor. I know what discrimination is like. I was only one out of three White kids at my high school.” Speaking to his feelings of

experiencing victimization because of his identity as a racial minority he told me a brief story about walking home from school one day. It was a sunny afternoon just ahead of summer break. The final bell had rung minutes before and he was walking alone just passing outside of the school grounds. He turned to see a large group of about a dozen Black kids from school following behind him. By the time he figured out what was going on he was on the ground with broken ribs. He finally made his way home and his mother took him to the hospital.

It was difficult for me to find the right words. All I could muster was, “That’s terrible.” Before I could find the words to escape the awkwardness of my obvious discomfort he added a statement that crowned the entire story.

“You know that saying among Black people, ‘My father left to go get cigarettes and hasn’t come back?’ Well it’s a stereotype because it is true. Maybe not the leaving for cigarettes, but the father leaving and not coming back. I know what being the Black kid is like.”

I was silenced. How was I supposed to respond to this one? His words weren’t in mockery or with some hidden intent. He was speaking to some traumatic experiences. Living in poverty, having an absent father, feeling isolated, being victimized by his peers because of who he was. I could never relate to this, I thought to myself. It was all so foreign to me. I felt powerless for a moment under the weight of his experiences. The sky had grown dark and the patio lights flickered on. I could finally see his eyes after he took off the black sunglasses he had been wearing all day. We had been sitting together talking for about four hours. Everyone else had left long ago.

Perhaps projecting my own fatigue after being at this bar for about eight hours I asked, “Do you ever get tired of talking about all of this?”

“Nope,” he said with a grin, “This is who I am. I’m not afraid of who I am or people seeing that.” Then he paused and let out a sigh. His generally cheerful demeanor shifted to a more somber one, “People cast us in a bad light. They call us a hate group or racists.” Looking down at the table he took a moment and continued in a slightly different tone, “I’m not a demon. I don’t think I am.” He looked back up at me and widened his eyes, “I’m just a guy who wants the best for his family and wants to raise them in a culture where they will be safe.”

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WE STAND TOGETHER at a crossroads and collectively face the unsettling proposition that the essentializing logics of the alt-right and identitarian left are remarkably similar. They are both a different form of an authoritarian identity politics. The essentialist thinking of the Proud Boys and the strand of antiracism popularized within the public sphere must be rejected.

History is full of examples of people working through the kinds of existential crises we are currently facing. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars attempted to make sense of how people can so readily subscribe violence and hatred while rejecting essentialist theories that would have violence and hatred be innate facets of particular human types.



During his imprisonment under Mussolini's fascist regime, Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to make sense of how regular people consent to their own oppression. Hegemony is a kind of power that aims to naturalize domination so that those who are dominated come to see their oppression as natural, and therefore, acceptable (Hall 1986). Hegemonies cast a wide net upon societies as they appeal across vast distances of intellectual, moral, political, religious, and economic ground. The social composition and configuration of any given hegemonic formation is not universal. The demography and kinds of ideological, philosophical, and religious sentiments of any given hegemony is never homogenous. In turn, the heterogeneity of bodies and thought result in an unstable ruling class and a subsequent lack of coherent teleology. The leaders are from groups within the dominant economic class, but they are not the class itself. One hegemonic regime may be dominated by clergy, another by intellectuals. Instead of being distinctly coherent political projects, hegemonies are better understood as unique historic blocs characterized by the very sets of the sentiments, sensibilities, and unequal social relations that people consent to.

Hegemonies are never totalizing and they are always multiple. Gramsci rejected the possibility of an "absolute" victory between any two hegemonic forces which would result in the completion absorption of one force into another. There is always an "unstable balance" of power and what could be considered a loss by one side does not mean the complete eradication of the loser or complete incorporation of the loser to the victor. Allied forces may have officially defeated the Nazi regime in 1945 which led to the downfall of Nazi hegemony, however, many Nazis remained in Germany, some fled to South America, and others were hired by the US government to work for NASA. But as we can see, Nazism and its existence as a hegemonic force is still alive. Fascist and Nazi symbolism is still present in our contemporary moment.

Hegemonic forces may not be totalizing in their ability to gain complete control of any given society, though that does not mean that their influence cannot be found throughout the corners of that society. We live in a globalized world that came into being through conquest and capitalism. Colonial and imperial efforts to produce land through conquest and wealth through resource extraction, were competing and contradictory regimes to produce national identities. As we have learned with Arendt, Foucault, Hall, and Stoler, the incoherence of these productive enterprises centered upon human bodies and acted on them in competing and contradictory ways. How people have come to experience their racial, gender, or class identities has been neither universal nor stable. The ways in which people have come to experience their self is always in dialogue with their relationship to these boarder structures of power.

Have conquest and capitalism been the only ways that our world has become interconnected? Likewise, have conquest and capitalism been the only social systems that have led to particular productive formations of identities and the boundaries they draw between bodies? Certainly not. Conquest and capitalism do not precede humanity because they are human inventions. The human had to first come into being before campaigns of territorial conquest and ventures of capitalist enterprise aimed to subjugate the world. Nonetheless, these two kinds of social systems have worked well together and have functioned as a catalyst to globalization. However, as history regularly shows, these two systems order the world and the social relations of their subjects-cum-objects in unequal and hierarchical ways. Certain kinds of people are propped up while others are kept under heel. If this is all true, that these systems rely upon domination, then they must be

critiqued. Further yet, they must be dismantled and replaced by systems that would equalize the field.

But how are we going to achieve this? The popularized strand of antiracist has framed the contours of this equalizing effort by naming a singular conceptual object as the linchpin that would bring the entire oppressive system crumbling down: whiteness. As Beliso De-Jesùs and Pierre claimed, White supremacy is a globally pervasive and all-encompassing hegemony. It can be felt everywhere one goes and is found at all levels of society.

Whiteness is certainly a hegemonic force. The error they make, along with Jobson, is the same that Kendi makes. They presume that the hegemony of White supremacy is totalizing. Hence, we get their calls for a disciplinary purging of whiteness. As if anthropology is ever a coherent discipline with any one singular ideology running the show for all involved. This does not mean, of course, that I am arguing the discipline cannot be or has never been dominated by a particular strain of thought. Their claims about the discipline's cozy relationship with colonialism and White supremacy and paths forward that they offer are only as true as the terms of their genealogies allow them to be.

It is unfortunate that Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre believe that anthropology has never seriously engaged with White supremacy. In their critique of Boasian anthropology they neglected to mention Boas' report to the federal Immigration Commission on the biological plasticity of racial categories or his subsequent publication of the 504 page hand-written data set that informed his conclusions (1911 and 1928). There are numerous ethnographers throughout anthropological

discourses who have aimed at dismantling essentialist racial taxonomies and bigotry in the biological sciences (Montagu 1972; El-Haj 2007; Gravlee 2009), linguistics (Boas 1910; Hill 1998; Alim 2004; Hill 2008; Hartigan 2013), military (Benedict and Weltfish 1943) and among the American people in general (Mead and Baldwin 1971). Anthropology has been engaged in fighting White supremacy since at least the emergence of Boasian anthropology one hundred years ago. And for at least the last fifty years a diverse group of anthropologists have been invested in dismantling colonial power structures that make their way into ethnography.

Talal Asad (1973) highlighted the dialectical connection between Western and non-Western perspectives and cautioned us to be attentive to the political and economic forms that anthropology takes, which have been constituted by different forms of colonialism. Anthropology is not always a handmaiden to colonialism, though it must always keep the complicity of its historical forms in check as it always has the potential to rear its ugly head. Edward Said (1978), whose work has become indispensable to anthropological critique, revealed that the historical and extant representations of the Orient by those residing in the Occident were mirrors by which Western imaginaries were imparted with a sense of civilizational superiority. Confrontations with difference throughout the colonial era did not only construct what the Orient was, it also constructed the Occident. In turn, these representations were used to justify colonial efforts of subjugation as those representations were simultaneously being constructed. Eric Wolf (1982) echoed Said when he argued that when names are turned into things it creates a false sense of reality. When the nations of western Europe became the West, there was a politics of truth at play in how the kinds of people, sentiments, and practices of the West were constructed in opposition

to non-Western Others. How the “we” of the West was defined was by centuries of global confrontations and an attempted reconciliations with difference.

Gayatri Spivak (1988) argued that anthropologists working within Western traditions had confined the subaltern into a place of alterity by which they were forever unable to speak because the terms by which they conducted their scholarly pursuits was framed by liberal discourses of personhood and agency. Instead of dealing with anthropology, she argued, we should first deal with the power structures that had confined anthropological theory and practice. If the structure that anthropology is embedded in is not changed then anthropology will not change because the form it takes is contingent upon the structure that its scholars call home. Trouillot (1991) was critical of what he called the “savage slot,” a perpetually othered subject of anthropological inquiry that allowed the discipline to continually define and redefine their subject-object while retaining scholarly authority over them. Once again, the terms by which anthropologists operated came to define how they studied their subjects. Visweswaran (1994) called for anthropologists to see ethnography as a fictional reproduction constructed from the subjectivities of memory. There is an inherent political edge to how ethnography can position and reposition people and perspectives to interact with and challenge power structures. The representations offered by ethnographers are always embedded within power structures between anthropologist and anthropological subject and those power structures must always be targeted by critical scholarly inquiry because, as we have learned, these structures inform how people perceive the world and re-perceive through memory.

Time and time again, scholars have concluded that we are obliged to take up the terms of the discourses that we are exposed to and participate in. Frantz Fanon (2008) located language as being

a fundamental hegemonic force that continually reaffirms the ontological and epistemological terms of their respective power structures through mediation. And his framing is similar to the language picked up by other scholars to describe the process of whitening:

“...the more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human being...For the time being we would like to demonstrate why the black Antillean, whoever he is, always has to justify his stance in relation to language. Going one step further, we shall enlarge the scope of our description to include every colonized subject...The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will have become...To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture. The Antillean who wants to be white will succeed, since he will have adopted the cultural tool of language” (2-3;21)

The process of whitening for Fanon was clear: it was fundamentally one that was defined by the loss of blackness that was mediated through the adoption of cultural practices. But it was more than linguistic. It involved manners of locomotion, sensibilities, and social relationships. His conception of whiteness is quite familiar as we have considered anthropological notions of whiteness, which is most broadly defined as a set of practices hostile to what is considered nonwhite. He understood that the kinds of practices that set whiteness apart from blackness varies from place to place, therefore, there was no concrete set of cultural practices, such as manners of speaking, which constituted a universal whiteness. However, as an abstraction, his conception of whiteness remained reliably set against the racialized identities and respective practices of its Other, “We recall once again that our findings are valid for the French Antilles; we are well aware, however, that this same behavior can be found in any race subjected to colonization” (9). The behavior he was referring to was the process of whitening, which involved the colonized taking up

the linguistic cues, locomotive gesticulations, and other practices of their respective colonial metropolis.

In his struggle to exist in the White man's world, which continually dehumanized him and denied him of his own ontological capacities, Fanon considered the irrationality of it all:

“The psychoanalysts say that there is nothing more traumatizing for a young child than contact with the rational. I personally would say that for a man armed solely with reason, there is nothing more neurotic than contact with the irrational...I had rationalized the world, and the world had rejected me in the name of color prejudice. Since there was no way we could agree on the basis of reason, I resorted to irrationality. It was up to the white man to be more irrational than I. For the sake of the cause, I had adopted the process of regression, but the fact remain that it was an unfamiliar weapon: here I am at home; I am made of the irrational; I waded in the irrational. Irrational up to my neck” (98; 102).

Fanon was onto something with his movement to the irrational. The movement between the rational and irrational is, as we have learned by way of Stoler (2016), precisely what gives racial essentialisms power. It is also how whiteness can continually be retooled. What whiteness is, means multiple things. But what I mean by this needs to be clarified. Let us consider Fanon's dual conception of whiteness as means to move further. Fanon makes a distinction between two separate kinds of whiteness. On one hand, it is a set of culturally-defined practices. On the other, it is *the* practice of denying humanity to nonwhite Others. What mediates this is language.

There is obviously a linguistic differentiation that is continually neglected within our conversations about whiteness and oppression. Guy Debord recognized this when he spoke about society being constructed by while always constructing, its own spectacle which represents itself through a façade of unity but operates through division. The kinds of language we use, and therefore the

terms by which we frame our efforts to combat the inequalities of our times are always constituted by the particularities of those times:

“In order to describe the spectacle, its formation, its functions, and the forces that work against it, it is necessary to make some artificial distinctions. In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle’s own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle. For the spectacle is both the meaning and the agenda of our particular socio-economic formation. It is the historical moment in which we are caught” (1967).

The language we use to talk about the processes of racialization and the resulting hierarchies can confuse us and confound our analyses. Imperialist, colonizing, or oppressive projects are never stable in how they formulate the identities of either self or other. Their resultant formations are never monolithic. The particular infrastructure of objectifying a racialized form takes is consistently broken apart by coinciding or cooccurring with other regimes of racialized objectification elsewhere that are always intersecting with regimes of gender and class objectification. But the ways we come to talk about dehumanization and objectification are embedded within the debates of our times and the historical genealogies we draw from. By the time we begin to home in on any particular infrastructure that led to a particular formation it becomes clear that they are never realized as a rational or coherent project. This lack of rationality and coherence is part and parcel of the spectacle, which in one hand generates and in the other negates. And so the spectacle continues.

Fanon, as we have seen, was well aware that what it meant to be White was not universal. Whiteness was a concrete experience, though the kinds of experiences were culturally relative. Despite this, the rigidity of his abstracted concept of whiteness as a hegemonic force seeking to



whiten and deny nonwhites their humanity, remained. However, it is my assertion that what he was really talking about, what he was really critiquing, was not whiteness. His writing is explicitly anti-colonial. He was calling for revolution against colonial power structures that thrive on economic exploitation and the systematic dehumanization of its subjects. To preface his essay he makes some clarifications:

“..it necessary to say one or two things. I am speaking here on the one hand of alienated (mystified) Blacks, and on the other of no less alienated (mystifying and mystified) Whites...alongside normal people behaving rationally according to human psychology, there are those who behave pathologically according to an inhuman psychology. And it so happens that the existence of such a type of person has determined a number of realities that we would like to help eliminate in this study” (12; 15).

The key here is his framing of Whites who can be “no less” alienated than Blacks. He is not talking about whiteness—he is talking about colonialism. Colonialism, which was no doubt perpetrated by White people and promoted whiteness, but which was no less a form of universalized objectification and dehumanization for everyone involved. How that was felt was by no means universal, however, as Fanon was quick to note that how Black bodies experience the oppression of colonialism was different than that of White bodies. Near the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon recounts a case study of a woman who was experiencing facial tics, spasms, and loss of motor control. After psychoanalyses and testing conducted, “her insanity [was] the result of a fear of the black man” (184). The racism that found safe harbor within colonial and imperial powers resulted in psychological distress. This line of thought was developed further in his subsequent work, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

European colonialism had not only colonized the colonized. The colonizer had simultaneously been colonized and their psychic interiority distorted. When the colonizers committed acts of grotesque dehumanization upon the populations of subjugated natives, they did not do so simply out of racial hatred. It was because these indigenous people had been othered. They had been turned into objects—not people. Through various processes of objectification, colonialism and imperialism denied the humanity of its newly acquired subjects-as-objects. It was easier to commit acts of violence on objectified pseudo-human indigenous bodies than their fully human European counterparts. However, the dehumanization was not unilateral. It was not simply directed exclusively towards the colonized, though that is where it was most explicitly visible.

Colonial rule comes to manifest as embodied dispositions that are inseparable from the imperial hierarchies themselves. How colonialism is embodied is neither logical nor rational, rather, it is affective and laced with its own set of sensibilities that make it intelligible. It operates, as Stoler would later claim, along its own interior frontiers. That dehumanization was felt differently depending on the bodies involved and their relation to one another and the broader oppressive system. Nonetheless, everyone was affected by it. The hegemony of colonial and imperial rule was found in a mutual and universal dehumanization. Fanon recognized this and begged for unity and called for revolution:

“The Third World must start over a new history of man which takes account of not only the occasional prodigious theses maintained by Europe but also its crimes, the most heinous of which have been committed at the very heart of man, the pathological dismembering of his functions and the erosion of his unity, and in the context of the community, the fracture, the stratification and the bloody tensions fed by class, and finally, on the immense scale of humanity, the racial hatred, slavery, exploitation, and above all, the bloodless genocide whereby one and a half billion men have been written off” (2004:238).

Following Fanon's move to a psychic interiority of colonial rule and the mutual dehumanization of colonizer and colonized, Freire (1963) argued similarly that while the oppressed come to be dehumanized and objectified by their oppressors, so too do the oppressors. In the process of denying the humanity of other people the oppressors simultaneously dehumanizes themselves. Oppression hurts not only the oppressed—it also harms the oppressor. To break this cycle meant critical engagement with pedagogical methods.

Education, argued Freire, does not teach students to question their humanity. To the contrary, it acts hegemonically by teaching students to accept their dehumanization. In turn, despite the well intentions of popular revolutions which have overthrown their oppressors in the name of freedom or equality, the formerly oppressed repeat the cycle of dehumanization and end up entrenching a familiar, albeit different, hegemonic regime that perpetuates oppression through the dehumanization of others:

“The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world” (2005:48).

Perhaps we hear the influence of Gramsci and Fanon in that oppression often relies upon internalizing the terms of that oppression and consenting to its domination. Interestingly enough, Freire was never explicit on who can or cannot be oppressed. This, I believe, is because for Freire, as with Fanon, oppression is the norm—it is precisely how we experience the wedding of colonial

conquest and capitalist extraction. What undergirds his philosophy is an attraction to a liberatory call for a common humanity, one that can and is continually suppressed by oppressive regimes. Under his frame, when we operate within the bounds of our present social system we are all simultaneously the oppressed and the oppressor. Of course, however, the ways in which oppression is experienced is not universal nor is there a universal body of oppressors or oppressed. It is relationally, temporally, and spatially contingent. One path forward, a means by which to “eject the oppressor within” is to reject the cycle of dehumanization and objectification. We must critically engage with ourselves and our humanity.

Speaking to the importance of critical engagement is Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Adolph Eichmann. Eichmann was a Nazi logistics official who was in charge of organizing the transport of Jews to concentration camps and charged during the Nuremberg trials. In her analysis, she was troubled by how such an ordinary human being could be capable of living with themselves after knowingly orchestrating the deaths of countless others. She wrote that during Eichmann’s trial:

“The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else...Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing” (1963:xx).

For Arendt, Eichmann was a living example of what she called “the banality of evil.” Eichmann was a regular person. He was not an inherently immoral or evil person. But by way of the Nazi regime he committed acts of unimaginable evil. Instead of joining the Nazis out of harboring anti-Semitic feelings, he fell into the Nazis because of what they could offer him, a purpose. Within

the Nazi regime he found guidance and direction. It was his thoughtlessness, lack of imagination, and singular obsession with his own material and social gain, argued Arendt, which led to his complicity in genocide.

Indeed, following Alfred Memmi (1957), it is most often good people who come to be the perpetrators of unimaginable dehumanization, "...contrary to what many wish to believe, the men who, on a racial pretext, carried out the attempted extermination of entire human groups were neither monsters nor insane; they were often just 'ordinary men'" (126). Racism is one of the most self-evident ways in which people are oppressed and is appealing because it is the most convenient tool of aggression by which people can empower themselves at the expense of others. As such, it is also one of the most common ways that people describe experiencing oppression. But racial formations are not invented out of thin air. Racial identities are always constituted by discursive practices that are simultaneously constitutive of gender and class identities.

Whiteness, just as blackness and brownness and any other racial formation, as we have learned, is differentially experienced. By exploring aesthetic practices of art Gilroy (1993) sought to oppose essentializing understandings of race. Different African diasporas were formed as a result of the Transatlantic slave trade, which led to a hybridity in how blackness was experienced depending on where it was constructed. Black and White as categories were created from association with slavery, which was a transnational encounter of mixture and domination. It provided those categories to come into focus in multiple ways in multiple places. This multiplicity of racial formations, argued Gilroy, undoes the hegemonic potential of those categories.

A few years later, Gilroy (2000) took his work even further. In a bold move he argued that we must appeal to more than our universal humanity. We must redefine the terms of the debate surrounding the human by rejecting the concept of race:

“This is not the humanism of existentialists and phenomenologists, short-sighted Protestants or complacent scientists...this humanism is as unfriendly toward the idea of ‘race’ as it is ambivalent about claims to identity progress that do not take the de-civilizing effects of continuing racial division into account. I want to show that important insights can be acquired by systematically returning to the history of struggles over the limits of humanity in which the idea of ‘race’ has been especially prominent. This humanism is conceived explicitly as a response to the sufferings that raciology has wrought. The most valuable resources for its elaboration derive from a principled, cross-cultural approach to the history and literature of extreme situations in which the boundaries of what it means to be human were being negotiated and tested minute by minute, day by day...I am suggesting that the only appropriate response to this uncertainty is to demand liberation not from white supremacy alone, however urgently required, but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racializing thinking, and racializing thinking about thinking” (17-18; 40).

This is not just a call for us all to become color blind. Rather, it is one that would require a restructuring to how we talk about humans and their potentials in a way that exceeds the racial typologies we have grown so hostile to yet comfortable with as we rely upon them to make sense of existential crises. The problem is, however, that this reframing of the debate requires us to undo the very racial identities we have come to rely on and cherish for the stability, community, and power that they bestow. These are the very identities that mediate the kinds of lifeways and relationships that the Proud Boys and antiracists alike are working for and against. If we were to give up race as our primary vehicle by which we come to apprehend the world and position ourselves in relation to others, then what could we draw on to bring humanity together in its fight against oppression?

Gilroy's solution is for us to reach out towards a non-normative universal humanism that appeals to others on a non-corporeal, species level. This universal humanism, however, must always be cognizant of our differences. It is resistant to DiAngelo's critique that universalism erases the ways in which people are treated because of their racialized identities because it is undergirded by a theory that racialized identities are by default contingent upon the discourses of their time and place and the corresponding cultural sentiments, values, and so forth.

If we follow the conclusions of the scholarship discussed above, we have a way out. We must always be cautious of the terrible inhumanity that humans are capable of enacting upon others, as Arendt's analysis of Eichmann shows. By way of her example and the work of Freire, we can come closer to realizing our goal through critical engagement with what it means to be human. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is indispensable to analyses oriented towards oppression because it helps us understand how our consent is vital to the continuation of oppressive hegemonies. The way out, for Memmi, is to appeal to a universalism that is at once both against any form of oppression and a coming together of humankind under a reciprocal fraternity. The struggle against racism is a struggle that intersects with all other struggles against oppression. He urges us to fight against all forms of oppression—not just racialized oppression.

This call for a universal human commons set against oppression is the very project that Fanon took up by calling for a global humanism which would work by "reintroducing mankind into the world, the whole of mankind" (1963:106). The kind of project that Fanon suggests is fundamentally anti-essentializing. His project is one that never holds onto racial identity at its center. Whiteness, blackness, brownness come to all be decentered while acting as binding agents

that contribute to, but are always just pieces of, various forms of oppression. Dehumanization and objectification are part and parcel of the oppression, not some manifestation of the innate racial essence called whiteness. Gilroy's project of de-essentializing race and appealing to the non-corporeal is liberatory. It can be picked up from and dropped into vastly different and spatially distant social contexts. It calls upon a human connection in a way that phenotypical presentation or biological realities cannot.

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I CAME ABOUT an hour ahead of their meeting to speak with Andrew and make sure that my being there would not be a problem. This was mostly a mission for following-up with everyone. A lot had transpired since I had last seen them before the COVID-19 restrictions were put into effect in March 2020. Although Oklahoma never closed down like other places across the county, the Proud Boys had found a new venue. Meeting attendance started to become an issue and they decided it would improve their numbers if they moved to a new, permanent meeting location that was more centrally located for their members. Their new locale was quite spacious. When I sat down to speak with Andrew he smiled and pointed at the ceiling. A flag with a rooster and "POYB" (Proud of Your Boy) was hanging from the rafters for all patrons to see.

"Oh, the presidential debate was huge. We were getting so many applications that I had to shut down the online process."



The Oklahoma City chapter was going through new and interesting times. Since Joe Biden called them out by name on the national stage they not only stopped taking online applications but they also were planning to go to invitation only. In Biden's attempt to get Donald Trump to condemn White nationalist militancy he actually initiated the Proud Boys' most prosperous period of recruitment on a national scale.

As everyone began to roll in through the entrance I noticed only a few familiar faces. Out of about the two dozen Proud Boys who showed up I knew six. Finding it rather surprising to see so few members from my previous time spent amongst them I asked where they all went. I was told a brief story about an exodus of a small handful of their once established members in late 2020. These now former members wanted to take their chapter to the next level, or perhaps to a few levels higher, and act as a militia. Specifically, they wanted to drive around protests to patrol them for militant Leftists.

Perhaps to ease my astonished face Andrew was quick to tell me that he and his chapter did not participate in militancy, "I don't allow any of my boys to be part of any other group. You want to be a Three Percenter? Well you gotta make a choice to either stay or go."

Without going into much detail he told me that last winter they had a meeting to confront the militant members which almost came to blows and resulted in their exit from the group. No worries now though, as the last few months had certainly been an interesting time for them. They had more members than they ever had and a new meeting place that welcomed them with open arms and unapologetically displayed their banner.

I took my place outside as their meeting began and tried to collect my thoughts. It was hot. Up walked Robert wearing his usual Proud Boys cap and his matching polo. His face lit up and he pointed at me.

“Hey you’re back!” He sped up with his arms spread wide open and we hugged. “How have you been? So are you back to do more work?”

“Yeah I think I might be. I came here mostly to do some follow up and ask everyone if they’d have me back. It’s been a whole year since I’d seen everyone and a lot has happened since then.”

“Oh yeah it has.” He looked down at his watch, “Hey, I’ll catch up with you in a bit I’m running late for the meeting.”

After their meeting was over I came back inside and another member noticed me. “Hey! Look whose back. Missed us that much I guess, huh? Finally come to take your first degree? Here, give me a hug.”

Around five o’clock I saw others begin entering the club and set up some tables on the dancefloor.

“What’s going on,” I asked

“Oh, they’re having a marijuana expo.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Over the next several hours more and more people made their way into the club. By the time I left around ten o’clock there must have been close to two hundred people there. I was quite surprised. As the club became more crowded I kept my eyes peeled to see if anyone would try and start something with one of the Proud Boys. Nothing ever happened. Interestingly, some of the newer members had changed out of their Fred Perry polos.

One of the men I was sitting with scoffed, “You’re supposed to be a proud Western chauvinist, man.”

The other guy shrugged it off.

Over the course of the evening I met just about every new member. I remember very little of what they told me. It was much more to take in than I had expected and I was not recording anything or writing notes. I was actually not prepared for it all and was caught off guard. The evening continued and I spent most of my time sitting with Robert and a couple of others while we caught up. By about eight o’clock the commotion from the crowd combined with the music to drown out everything. I sat there for the next two hours nodding to the bits and pieces I could actually discern as intelligible as the music was deafening. At about ten o’clock I decided that I could not sit around pretending to listen any longer and left. This would be my final meeting with the Oklahoma City chapter.

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THE OKLAHOMA PROUD Boys have found a place for themselves within the historical landscape of Right-wing America extremism without having to overtly participate in that extremism. While its members may gain value out of the community it offers, there are significantly deeper sociopolitical implications. The chapter is certainly a drinking club, but it is far more. To its members, the Proud Boys represents one of the last bastions in which men can cultivate their masculinity and celebrate “traditional” conservative lifeways.

The Proud Boys have heard a call to arms and answered by pledging themselves to perpetuating the morals and virtues of civilized Western man. Their appeal is effective because it is mediated through emotions and sensibilities that are deeply rooted in the sentimental history of America and Oklahoma, of which their residents are sensitive to. The mythology of past struggles are imprinted upon present ones and those who participate become linked in a continuing battle against tyranny. By colluding with the very historical streams of Right-wing extremism they participate, willingly or not, wittingly or not, in that same violence.

The deployment of essentialist theories of race and gender and unilineal model of civilization progress to ease fears and anxieties about a changing world—that which binds the Proud Boys together—have been thoroughly explored and critiqued over the past century by anthropologists, beginning with Franz Boas and his students (Boas 1910, 1920; Mead 1928, 1935; Benedict 1934; Benedict and Weltfish 1943). The use of such theories and models, particularly by authoritarian,

totalitarian, and fascist regimes as a means to gain mass support has also been explored (Adorno 1950; Arendt 1951; Benjamin 1969; Gramsci 1971; Waring and Paxton 2019). With all of the terrifying examples of dehumanization throughout history, the ways in which certain patterns become clear. The sanctity of homelands and the purity of its people are believed to be in peril. The source of that contamination is believed to be from the pure intermixing with lesser corrupted others who do not belong. Strong leaders rise up to serve as a prophetic guiding hands for the masses. Nazism, the Klan, Jim Crow, the Proud Boys. Good people continue to fall into hatred. And other good people, who are not even interested in such discourses, continue to suffer.

Surely we can and should continue to critique the American Right and its extremism.<sup>15</sup> However, what has yet to be done as thoroughly is to turn a critical lens onto the discourses and theories of those who position themselves as an alternative to the existential threat of far Right-wing groups like the Proud Boys.

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<sup>15</sup> We can certainly continue to critique the American Right for their rejection of critical discourses about race, gender, and class. We can continue to connect the dots between points in history that reflect their contemporary behavior. One of their goals is clearly to suppress the free flow of information by denying educators the tools they need to teach future generations about how prejudice has, time and time again, resulted in the dehumanization and eradication of human lives deemed inhuman or unredeemable. Time and time again such efforts demonstrate that, in spite of reaching enthusiastically towards rationality to characterize Western civilization, the marketplace of ideas is only as free as they *feel* it should be. Their resistance to critical conversations about class was made visible during Occupy Wall Street and their sustained efforts to equate socialism and Marxist theory with the apocalyptically existential threat of Stalinism. Their resistance to critical conversations about race is being made clearer with their campaigns against critical race theory, which has resulted in banning books that teach children about the Trail of Tears, Holocaust, and Civil Rights Movement. Simultaneously their moral crusade against critical race theory has once again demonstrated their resistance to critical conversations about sex and gender as they are also banning books that educate children about puberty and gender identity. Book burning is once again in fashion. Their contemporary rage against critique is palpable:

Those who make their way into the public spaces of antiracism are not simply responding to discourses that essentialize whiteness and elevate it as an inherently moral essence. They are and have always been constituted by the very terms of those discourses. The Proud Boys seek to whiten the world through spreading the civilizational standards devised by White men of the past. Black and Brown folk are welcome to come along and participate, as long as they, explicitly or not, recognize that Western civilization is a White invention and its morals and ethics the crowning achievement of White people and the pinnacle of humanity. Antiracism seeks to de-whiten the world through revealing the inherent volatility of White people, past and present. White people are welcome to come along and participate, as long as they explicitly recognize that Western civilization is a White invention and its morals and ethics the corrupted outcome of their own whiteness that is the most significant existential threat to humanity. Men who make their way into the warm embrace of the Proud Boys are not simply responding to the discourses that essentialize whiteness by critiquing it as an inherently immoral essence. They are and have always been constituted by the very terms of those discourses. The Proud Boys, in turn, serve as a mirror. They are a slip-in by which to juxtapose the two extremes of racial essentialism we are witnessing today in the United States.

Following Shoshan's (2016) exploration of Right-wing extremists in Germany, perhaps the sweeping critique of whiteness by antiracism and their promise to be able to address its oppressiveness suggests that groups like the Proud Boys must always exist to validate the existence of antiracism. When whiteness feeds on unequal and oppressive relationships, as long as there are relationships that can be called unequal or oppressive, antiracism will always have a force to rally against. Antiracism, then, becomes a project whose existence is validated even when racism is not

readily apparent. Whiteness is sexism and classism, homophobia and xenophobia, militancy and war. Whiteness is a collection of dispositions, sensibilities, sentiments, perspectives, and practices. Whiteness is a collective consciousness. Whiteness is power. Whiteness is privilege. Whiteness is oppression. Whiteness is hate. As long as bigotry and violence persists so too does the moralizing imperative of antiracism in its ability reveal the truth that each is but a manifestation of whiteness.

This antiracist turn in anthropology, while troubling, is quite unsurprising. It fits snugly into the discipline's history as scholars are constantly grappling with the discipline's historical and contemporary intellectual, moral, and ethical deficits while occasionally attempting to reorient the field (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Price 2016). Only a decade ago the ontological turn aimed to unify a disparate discipline by rejecting Western dichotomies of nature/culture and appealing to the radical alterity of anthropology's others (Hage 2012; Kohn 2013; Sahlins 2013; Viveiros de Castro et al 2014; Bessire and Bond 2014). However, while proponents of the importance of ontology for anthropological analysis wanted to see the discipline shift the terms of analyses onto the radical potentiality of its subject's alternative futures, which were meant to act as foils for extant unequal power structures, this latest emergence of antiracism within the discipline proponents seek to shift the terms of analyses onto objective realities of unequal power structures that have resulted from White supremacy. The antiracist turn is performing a similar exercise that sets it against apocalyptic potentials inherent to the discipline.

Apocalyptic appeals are always undergirded by wider debates over social injustices, such as racism and sexism. "Trauma has become the idiom of citizenship, self-help groups, and liberation movements" (Stewart and Harding 1999:298). And academics are not invulnerable to, but rather

are, intimately involved with apocalypticism through debates that question the stability of categories and the potentiality of transgression. Today, we see that American apocalypticism is alive and well within both Left and Right discourses over the future of the nation.

Each side sees the future that the other is offering and they do not see themselves in it. For the Proud Boys, antiracism as it has been taken up by popular literature should not exist. And for those scholars who write this antiracism, the Proud Boys should not exist either. This does not mean that I am claiming they literally want to kill each other. Instead, it is a realization that the White subject cannot be absolutely moral and liberatory while simultaneously being immoral and oppressive. Western civilization cannot be the pinnacle of human freedom while also being fundamentally racist. This paradoxical duality defies all logic. Instead of each one cancelling out the other, they actually feed one another. For one to exist so must the other. For the sanctity of White civilization to be defended it must be attacked. For the oppressiveness of whiteness to be fought then there must people who embody that oppressiveness.

Antiracism was neither created by nor created the Proud Boys but as it has been taken up by the likes of Kendi and DiAngelo, it will never be an effective project to combat the hate of groups like the Proud Boys. This is because this strand of antiracism relies on its own racial essentialism that reduces complex social/economic/political relationships, experiences, and histories into a singularly stable and immutable core of racial oppression. Following a cyclical logic, it can both dismiss peoples' struggles while blaming their struggles on the oppressiveness of their own whiteness. It is no surprise then that DiAngelo can so confidently point to hostility of White people enrolled in her diversity seminars as evidence of them lacking racial stamina. Once a critique



against her notion of whiteness is lodged it can be immediately dismissed as an inability for White people to see the error of their ways. The person critiquing is wrong. They are so thoroughly oppressed by their own whiteness that they cannot even see the true reality. Scholars can claim that whiteness is not an essentialization of racial essence because, after all, look at all of the different ways in which whiteness continues to exceed the bounds of any singular racial identity. However, there is a continual reduction of all of these attributes of whiteness as being firmly planted within White people.

Let me ask you this: can a White person ever escape their white skin privilege? And what does the answer to that question mean for our debate about social justice, equity, and democracy? Let us return to my dear friend Joseph, whose life has since gotten worse. In the matter of a year he has been arrested half a dozen times for petty larceny, trespassing, drug possession, and public intoxication. Last time I saw him it was after my neighbor called to ask me if I knew the man pacing back and forth in socks on the corner of our street just days before Christmas. Has Joseph escaped his white skin privilege? Let's ask his rotten teeth, calloused feet, and novella-length rap sheet. It would be rather difficult to get a sensible answer as he is constantly living in a state of psychosis from all the meth and he drones on and on about being tracked by the government, military, and law enforcement. White cars mean they area from California. Black cars mean they are from the Norman Police Department. Yellow cars are a bit difficult to tell but you can suss them out with enough experience. Has Joseph escaped his white skin privilege?

In their fight against oppression, popular antiracist scholarship has become a handmaiden to an essentializing discourse that dismisses the struggles of people like Robert and Joseph because of

their white skin privilege while placing the onus on them to resolve its broader implications. In the process, as McWhorter posited, this strain infantilizes Black people by appealing to the White Man's Burden while trivializing the struggles persons of color face because of their racialized identities. If what they say is true, then identity is only as fluid and dynamic as its relationship with whiteness. That goes for everyone—not just people who present with white skin. Under this rubric, dignity is contingent upon the absence and rejection of whiteness.

In the face of Antiracism's appeal to essentialism I am forced to take a step back and reconsider my own social and political commitments. While Antiracism is unabashedly critical, it has unfortunately become complacent. If that what binds Antiracism together and validates its existence is the inescapable oppressiveness of whiteness as a force that defines all social relationships and the value of all identities, then I must reject the essentialist thinking of Antiracism as the path forward by which to build a better future. It may be easy for many of us to see how the very human emotions of anxiety and fear can be coopted by and channeled into essentializing enterprises. And those who identify themselves as Antiracist are just as susceptible to the allure of essentialist thinking that proclaims an ability to make sense out of the senselessness of oppression.

Essentialist thinking is an epistemological activity. The sense of comfort, safety, and security that it provides comes from its ability to absolutely and unequivocally reveal the underlying truths about the world. Those truths, however, are always contingent. The lines we draw in the sand to make sense of our world have always been provisional. Their thresholds continually redrawn. With each new draft we become only as pure, orderly, and rational as our positions on the sides of each line allow us to be. But these borders are not what define us because they do not precede us. They

are and have always been determined by us in the wake of changing sensibilities, sentiments, relationships, histories, and material realities. Every time the lines move with the shifting sand we get closer to and further from making sense of the human condition. On one hand, we acknowledge the fragility of our humanity while reaffirming its strengths. The redrawing of lines demonstrates our dynamism and ability to adapt and improve. On the other, when the world is bifurcated between the dichotomies of good/evil, pure/impure, order/disorder, rational/irrational, and coherent/incoherent, people are inevitably essentialized along those very terms.

When we make sense squarely along Manichean lines we become complicit in the very violence we wish to no longer plague humanity. Perhaps our social and intellectual pursuits should leave those ambiguities intact. As Taussig writes, “Before there can be a science of man there has to be the long awaited demythification and reenchantment of Western man in a quite different confluence of self and otherness” (1987:135). This does not mean that we cannot or should not make sense of our world. On the contrary, we should passionately continue our epistemological activities. However, our goal should not be to reveal the false truths of essentialism just to supplant them with our own more truly true truths. The point is not to simply swap out a flawed version of reality with the *real* reality. This is precisely the kind of activity that Proud Boys and popular antiracist scholars are both engaged in. It is a form of “agribusiness writing” that presumes an ability to provide order through a process of destruction and rebirth, a demystification without reenchantment (Taussig 2010). We must counter the curse of their essentialist concoctions with a magic of our own. We must simultaneously dispel their hex cast upon the human while conjuring up a human imbued with its own magnificent and unbounded potential.

This is precisely the kind of epistemological endeavor anthropology is well equipped to pursue. An anti-essentializing anthropology is always critical and never complacent. It always seeks to disturb the taken-for-granted distinctions between true and false and fact and fiction, not because of an indiscriminate desire to rebel, but out of necessity. Human beings always exceed any singular or essential notions of them. When we cease to be critical of our sense-making strategies and the underlying assumptions which they are built upon we can fall prey to their violent potentials. The radically liberatory and humanizing potential of an anti-essentializing anthropology is that it is open for anyone who desires to work within the spaces of ambiguity and contradiction. Those practicing it, however, are never immune to its often unsettling and uncomfortable insights. Despite the many times I have found myself questioning my allegiance to the discipline after a failure, I have always returned to it. My experience with anthropology may be much like those who strengthen their social bonds by falling out of faith. Perhaps that is part of its appeal and one of its strengths. But, as with everything else we come to identify with, there is contingency—it demands that you reciprocate. You must always be as open to it as it is to you. While we may not always want to see the spectacular beauty that is the human, by its own terms, anti-essentialist anthropology refuses to see us in any other way.

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IF YOU LOVE something or someone you should work to make that thing or person better off than when you found them. But we must always be careful about how we approach such a chore. I never intended to use my friend Joseph as a character when I first began writing. In my earliest drafts of this essay I added in his vignette largely to fill space. While I now see Joseph's story as

being more closely in dialogue with that of Robert's, I initially believed Joseph's narrative would serve as a critique to Tommy's dogmatic adherence to personal responsibility. Joseph was to show how there are forces outside of our control that come to affect our lives in profound ways and are all but impossible to overcome when we continue to live under the terms of those forces. My friend Joseph, time and time again, has tried to escape. Each and every time he has failed and been failed. He gets arrested for public intoxication and petty larceny to be released the next day. He gets admitted into a hospital for dehydration, meth induced psychosis, or suicidal ideation just to be released the next day. He voluntarily admits himself into rehabilitation to then relapse and be kicked to the curb for a choice that addicts are always expected to make.

But Joseph is certainly not innocent. He continues to make poor decisions. He could quit smoking meth. But after years of being victimized by the oppressive indifference of a system that neither punishes nor heals him, his choices are not surprising. While Joseph may have been the central character of his vignette, it was never actually about him. It was about me and my anxieties, my fears, my anger. The anxiety I felt at the sight of Joseph walking barefoot down my street high on meth while he was being followed by invisible specters yelling at him. The fear I felt at the thought of him never receiving the help he needs and forever being haunted. The anger I felt at the realization of my inability to change his life for the better. All I seem to be able to do is toe the line between avoiding him and enabling him as I continually try to patch up the violence inflicted upon his body with my limited Bandaid-like acts of charity.

Oppression belongs to no one and to everyone. It is a human invention that requires no explicit source beyond its contingent boundedness within the human. Oppression does not just dehumanize

the oppressed, it also dehumanizes the oppressor. When we dehumanize others we dehumanize ourselves. Oppression begets oppression. Perhaps *the powers that be* are oppression incarnate, the embodiment of the very oppressiveness we seek to eradicate but so far have been unable to, for any considerable length of time, exceed. Humanity is not fundamentally oppressive, but oppression is fundamentally human. The power of oppression is located within the fissure formed by this contradiction. It defies all notions of rationality. Oppression is a power that can simply *be*. It exists as an ever present potential, one that any of us can become.

My appeal to the universality of our common humanity and reject essentialist thinking will undoubtedly be characterized by some as naïve, futile, and unoriginal. I am not the first one to make such an appeals but I certainly won't be the last. Just because these appeals have so far led to seemingly little tangibly positive results, that does not mean that they will never. It is painfully obvious that essentialist thinking dehumanizes. If that kind of logic is around then so too must we combat that violence with our own reaffirmations of human dignity. The appeal seems to be a starting point, one that has yet to take off because here we are in 2022 still fighting against bigotry. We must continue to reaffirm our common humanity and seek to understand and challenge oppressive enterprises that strategically cordon off and limit the potentials of the human.

In her exploration of the abortion debate in the United States, Faye Ginsburg (1998) used ethnography and made a remarkable discovery. Contrary to liberal or progressive notions on abortion, anti-abortion activists did not simply represent an unfortunate cultural repugnancy. In fact, just as women who stood in favor of abortion, women who stood in opposition to it were participating in their own feminist politics. In a similar fashion, women opposed to abortion were

engaging in agentful acts of self-determination. They were both challenging power structures they perceived to be imposing their own notion vision of femininity and formed communities across gendered solidarities without recognizing the opposing side as participating in a similar kind of act. And this is a potentially liberatory space opened up by ethnographic inquiry.

In their own way the Proud Boys are performing a classed politics. Although not all of them are poor or working-class, there is a powerful energy among them that, in a contradictory way, rejects structural problems, such as capitalist inequality, while they seek to improve their own class positions. They reject the structural problems they perform. Proud Boys foster their masculinity in a way that transgresses racial differences among members. Perhaps that is the opening of a fertile field to sow the seeds for future solidarities. Solidarities that may never sprout, certainly not with their present organizational doctrines. Nonetheless they are there and intrinsically linked to oppressive structures of power.

Ethnography afforded me a privileged position to witness how the Proud Boys find meaning in being a Proud Boy. In the process it demonstrated how a popular strand of whiteness discourse forecloses the very possibilities that ethnography opened up for me. The concept of whiteness as an analytical register is warranted, though by focusing on racial identity to the exclusion of class and gender identity we will surely miss the mark. By now it should be no surprise that people who perceive themselves to be living on the margins of society build communities through their sense of being cast aside. But if we are going to challenge oppressive enterprises we must thoroughly engage with their appeal. Ethnography is precisely the tool for this job.

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