Thursday, September 19, 2024 / Republicans are getting raunchy

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

<SCORING IN> Tiny Yak Science Class

NOEL KING (host): The conservative war on woke has had many fronts: DEI.

*<CLIP> Morgonn: So, I’m grieving. It’s lunchtime. and we really wanted some Chick-fil-A but because they decided to hire a Diversity Equity and Inclusion corporate position and also decided to bow down to the woke lords*

NOEL: Disney.

*<CLIP DISNEY MEGAN KELLEY Iger Returns>*

*KELLY: The “woke” chief of Disney is out, didn’t stand up to any of the “woke warriors” inside.*

NOEL: Capitalism, even.

*<CLIP> Vivek Ramaswamy on Today, Explained: What woke capitalism says is no: A small group of business elites get to decide how we settle questions on climate change to racial justice instead. And I reject that vision.*

NOEL: Many fronts.

*<CLIP> Gov. DeSantis acceptance speech: We fight the woke in the schools. We fight the woke in the corporations. We will never, ever surrender to the woke mob.*

NOEL: And now! Purity. Or is it prudishness? On Today, Explained: in 2024, Republicans are fighting the war on woke by embracing raunch.

<SCORING OUT> Tiny Yak Science Class

[THEME]

NOEL: Constance Grady is a senior correspondent on Vox’s culture team. She recently wrote about two people who, she says, have come to represent the Republican War on Wokeness. Not Vivek! Not JD! Constance, who are they?

CONSTANCE: They are Sydney Sweeney, who is an actress. She's appeared on Euphoria and White Lotus and recently starred in Anyone But You and Haliey Welch, who is better known as Hawk Tuah Girl.

NOEL: What is making the right fascinated by these two women?

CONSTANCE: So Sydney Sweeney back in March hosted Saturday Night Live. She was wearing what you might call some kind of boob-centric outfits.

*<CLIP> SNL:*

*SIDNEY SWEENEY: You know, I always thought this place was the one place I feel at home. But if you don't think I belong at Hooters, I’ll go.*

*HOOTERS MASCOT: Wait!*

CONSTANCE: And almost immediately a number of right wing commenters made the claim that Sydney Sweeney's boobs would kill woke.

<SCORING IN> Pay No Attention To This Poster Of Rita Hayworth

CONSTANCE: Haliey Welch famously appeared in a viral TikTok over the summer. She very charmingly gave a pretty graphic oral sex tip.

*<CLIP> HALIEY WELCH: Aw you gotta give ‘em that “hawk, tuah.’ Just spit on that thang, know what I’m saying?*

CONSTANCE: And almost immediately her catchphrase “hawk tua” got claimed as a conservative meme. So it started to appear on lots of handmade Trump merchandise. It's something that MAGA fans shout at sports events now. It somehow very quickly became a signifier that like I am on the right: hawk tua.

NOEL: So Sydney Sweeney is an accomplished actor. She's very good. Haliey Welch is a person on Tik Tok who is capitalizing on her moment of fame and more power to her. What in particular about these two young women has made them so appealing to the right? Is it just their….is it just their breasts?

CONSTANCE: I mean, I think that's a big part of it. We're in this really bizarre moment where a lot of conservative commenters seem to be kind of obsessed with this idea that Republicans are the party of sex symbols. So when they see a hot girl and especially a blond white girl from a rural background, which is the case with these two ladies, these commenters on the right start to make this claim that the existence of these girls is a sign that Wokeness is over.

*<CLIP>*

*YOUTUBER 1: she's captivating and it's because she looks like art*

*YOUTUBER 2: she just looks happy and unbothered by all of the social issues that seem to surround the things that people are pissed off about around her, meaning her beauty, her femininity,*

<SCORING OUT> Pay No Attention To This Poster Of Rita Hayworth

CONSTANCE: So it seems like their position is there's been this sort of progressive ethos pretty prominent in pop culture over the past decade or so. This ethos, they're saying, was just fundamentally against boobs and blowjobs. So the prominence of people like Sydney Sweeney and Haliey Welch for them is a sign that the tide is turning.

NOEL: So Sydney Sweeney wears a low cut dress. And if you're in this frame of mind, you're like, that is a statement, she's making a statement about her hotness being something that is in opposition to wokeness. What have Sydney Sweeney and Haliey Welch said about this?

CONSTANCE: So neither Sydney Sweeney nor Haliey Welch has, as far as I can tell, talked about politics basically at all. But Sydney Sweeney did get photographed wearing a sweatshirt that said, “sorry for having great tits.”

*<CLIP> GLAMOUR UK:*

*SYDNEY SWEENEY: Biggest misconception about me is that I am a dumb blond with big tits. I'm naturally a brunette. I’m very different than a lot of the characters that I play.*

NOEL: All right. So we think of conservatism as  liking things the way they used to be. Looking back at the old days with nostalgia before the days maybe of plunging necklines and talking openly on social media about how you do oral sex. Is being sexually explicit now fashionable in conservative circles?

CONSTANCE: I think that it's going to depend a bit on what parts of conservative circles you're in. I've certainly seen some people on the right. Abby Shapiro, for instance, Ben Shapiro’s sister, say, you know, it's not proper for women to be so explicitly sexual. This is not the model of femininity that we should be endorsing.

*<CLIP> ABBY SHAPIRO: Embracing your femininity is not the same thing as being overtly sexual. Embracing your femininity is not about being a sex object. Embracing your femininity is about the things that make women feminine, nurturing, beauty, not sex.*

CONSTANCE: But some other figures seem to be really in favor of it. So someone like Andrea Katherine, she's a pretty prominent Trump supporter. On, on X, she posted, “The hawk tuah girl fundamentally expressed conservative values: a woman pleasing a man in a heterosexual relationship not being bitter towards men. That's why she resonated with so many people.”

<SCORING IN> WAP (instrumental)

NOEL: Hey, do you remember the 2020 election?

CONSTANCE: Man, I sure do.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Do you remember Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion dropped WAP?

CONSTANCE: Man, what a song.

SCORING CROSS FADES WITH WAP (clean)

NOEL: What a moment. What a song. Cardi endorses Joe Biden. Joe Biden is like, thank you. I appreciate that. But do you remember the response from Tucker Carlson, from Ben Shapiro?

WAP (clean) POSTS

*CARDI B: …for this wet and gushy / Give me everything you got for this…*

*<CLIP> BEN SHAPIRO: …wet ass P-word / Beat it up N-word / Catch a charge / Extra large and extra hard / Put this P-word right in your face / Swipe your nose like a credit card.*

NOEL: Ben Shapiro was like, I listened to the lyrics and these women must be suffering from some sort of medical condition.

*<CLIP> BEN SHAPIRO: These women are describing a serious gynecological condition. I mean, a bucket and a mop?*

<SCORING OUT> WAP (insrumental)

NOEL: What? Ben Shapiro, four years later, is still Ben Shapiro. Tucker Carlson, who was like, Won't somebody think of the children? They're still the same guys. What actually changed?

CONSTANCE: The first thing I want to flag is racial politics, because Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are both black women. And there's this longstanding racist trope about this idea that black women are hypersexual and this is predatory and and coarse. This racist idea makes black women celebrating their sexuality something that I think a lot of these figures on the right can perceive as threatening, in a way that doesn't seem to be the case when we're dealing with someone like Sydney Sweeney. I think the other thing that's actually quite central here is that WAP is specifically about the pleasure of women, right? That's what the chorus is about. That's what the acronym means. Whereas the joke that hawk tuah girl is making is about servicing men, and the meme of Sydney Sweeney and her little dresses is about the male gaze. So what really seems to be interesting to these commenters is this idea that women's bodies exist for men to control.

NOEL: You write in your piece for Vox that historically the left or progressives are home to LGBTQ plus rights, abortion rights, sex positivity, and the right is more home to restrictions on abortion, restrictions on contraception, a lot of anxieties about casual sex. Are conservatives changing their ideas about raunch being fun? Are they embracing it, like what accompanies this?

CONSTANCE: So I think certainly there are some people on the right who would say, I'm pro hot girls being hot. I think that it's good for there to be contraception and abortion available in service of that goal. That is a position that some of the more libertarian wings of the party do hold. But I also think that this contradiction of raunch on the one hand and a real anxiety about what kind of sex is permissible on the other hand, I think that's kind of fundamental to the sexual politics of the Republican Party. So something that we see pretty consistently in right wing politics is an interest in both this kind of raunchy, almost pornographic image of female sexuality. At the same time that there's also this intense insistence on the sexual purity of wives and mothers and daughters.

NOEL: You're saying that this is nothing new. You're saying that you can look back in time and see this marriage between purity culture and raunch culture. Look back and tell us, where do you think we see this in history?

CONSTANCE: What we're basically talking about here is a madonna/whore complex, right? And that goes…

NOEL: All the way back.

CONSTANCE: All the way back. Way back to the beginning. But I think we can also see it expressed really clearly in the 2000s, specifically in the Bush administration. That's the moment when both purity and raunch are really present in the cultural atmosphere.

*<CLIP> NBC 10: It looks like a wedding or a prom from afar. But this formal affair is really a father daughter purity balls.*

*FATHER: I choose before God to cover you as your authority and protection in the area of purity.*

*DAUGHTER: With confidence in his power to strengthen me. I make a promise this day to God. To you.*

CONSTANCE: So at that time, kids are getting abstinence-only sex education. All the Disney stars are wearing purity rings and saying that you're a slut if you won't. But at the same time, this is the era of girls gone wild.

*<CLIP> CASE IN POINT:*

*GIRLS GONE WILD: Girls gone wild! Woooo!*

*SPEAKER: When two teenage girls went wild at a Mardi Gras party with Snoop Dogg Girls Gone Wild, creator Joe Francis personally assured them that they wouldn't be featured in the risque video. They weren't. Jamie and Whitney wound up on the cover instead…*

CONSTANCE: On the Howard Stern show, he has this recurring bit where he asks his female guests to take off their clothes and then he tells them what plastic surgery they should get. You know, The Man Show’s on the air. That's that old Jimmy Kimmel show that ends every episode with girls jumping around on trampolines.

*<CLIP> THE MAN SHOW: Now, girls jumping on trampolines!*

CONSTANCE: And you can see, like, all the pop stars of this time, like Jessica Simpson and Britney Spears, they're in this totally bizarre space where they're doing these quite raunchy performances.

*<CLIP> BRITNEY SPEARS 2000 VMA PERFORMANCE*

CONSTANCE: They have these very sexualized images, and then their management teams will tell them that they have to tell everyone they're still virgins, even if they're not.

*<CLIP> ACCESS HOLLYWOOD:*

*HOST: You hope that you will remain a virgin until you get married*

*BRITNEY SPEARS: Yeah, my mom always said once you have sex with a guy that you know you're with or whatever. It's like so many more emotions are involved and everything gets like crazy and twisted.*

CONSTANCE: So it's this moment when girls are being told, you know, you have to be sexy, but you also have to be pure all at the same time. And everyone is really getting set up to fail.

<SCORING IN> Haus in Flammen

NOEL: More with Constance, coming up.

<SCORING OUT> Haus in Flammen

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: We’re back with Constance Grady, culture correspondent for Vox who was reminding us of the interplay between raunch and purity in the naughty aughties - that was the early 2000s. But, Constance, you write - that didn’t last. When did we take a more feminist turn?

CONSTANCE: I think we start to see feminism getting mainstreamed around the time of the Obama campaign.

*<CLIP> “Yes we can” - will.i.am*

CONSTANCE: So one of the things that he pulls off that is almost hard to see now because it seems so inevitable in retrospect, is he creates an alliance between his administration and liberal Hollywood.

*<CLIP> “Yes we can” - will.i.am*

CONSTANCE: He was talked about at the time as the first celebrity president. And so after he has his very successful and very star studded campaign, we do start seeing pop culture veering into this more liberal place. So probably the moment when it really becomes clear that feminism is going mainstream is 2014.

*<CLIP> BEYONCE 2014 VMA PERFORMANCE*

CONSTANCE: Beyoncé at the VMAs, she's performing and this giant word “feminist” in all caps. It appears behind her had the stage. And I remember watching that as a little baby feminist and thinking, my God, it's finally okay to say that you're a feminist.

<SCORING IN> Mono Planet 8 - Worms

NOEL: And then comes – a few years after that – comes the MeToo movement.

*<CLIP> TODAY SHOW: We have another woman this morning telling her story in graphic detail, accusing Harvey Weinstein, and adding to the list that has now grown to more than 60…*

NOEL: What impact does the MeToo movement have on the continuation of this? From purity to raunch into feminism, into something that I don't know felt a lot darker and a lot more true?

CONSTANCE: So when MeToo goes mainstream in 2017 with the Harvey Weinstein accusations, that sort of was a ripping away of the the veil in a lot of ways and moving away from this kind of more sanitized, corporate-friendly expression of feminism into this I think a lot of people experienced as both cathartic and also incredibly angering and rageful discussion of what so many women had had gone through. And one of the things that that movement ended up doing is it really did change the way that pop culture talked about women and the jokes that it became possible to make. Jimmy Kimmel hosted the Oscars the year of MeToo and made a bunch of jokes about how we need to stop harassing women.

*<CLIP> 2018 OSCARS:*

*JIMMY KIMMEL: If we are successful here, if we can work together to stop sexual harassment in the workplace, if we can do that, women will only have to deal with harassment all the time at every other place they go.*

CONSTANCE: Again, he hosted The Man Show. Fundamentally, there's this, change shift in the way that we talk about women, which I think is part of what makes it so hard to look back at the 2000s now and think, that's how we thought then. That's so weird.

<SCORING OUT> Mono Planet 8 - Worms

NOEL: Talk about a paradox: In 2016, Donald Trump wins after all Americans hear an Access Hollywood tape in which he brags about sexually assaulting women. MeToo is also gearing up, underway early in his first term. What were we seeing there with respect to raunch culture? Where was it?

CONSTANCE: Yeah, I think that one of the things a lot of people on the right like about Donald Trump is that he is kind of a throwback to eras when ranch culture was more mainstreamed. So I think for people who miss an era when you can just objectify women without any backlash, Trump really symbolizes that moment. That's part of his appeal for that demographic. There's this sense that, you know, yeah, he gets the way it's supposed to be. You're surrounded with hot women. You objectify them. You sexually degrade them. That's what a man in power is supposed to look like.

NOEL: There is something to that in 2024 that feels notable. Donald Trump is back. Donald Trump is running against a woman. Donald Trump keeps commenting on her looks. He keeps like telegraphing that he thinks Kamala Harris is hot.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: On Time magazine today, she looks like the most beautiful actress ever to live. It was a drawing and actually, she looked very much like a great first lady, Melania.*

NOEL:How is raunch culture showing up in this race other than, other than Haliey Welch? Other than Sydney Sweeney?

CONSTANCE: Yeah, I think with Kamala Harris, you're absolutely right that Trump is obsessed with the way that she looks, which I think we can certainly see as a way of pushing her back into this more sexualized sphere. I think almost more telling is this claim that's become a Republican talking point. There's this baseless rumor that she launched her career in politics through her relationship in the 1990s with Willie Brown, who was the former mayor of San Francisco. That's something that Donald Trump has claimed and it gets repeated on the right a lot. We talked earlier about this this racist trope about black women's sexuality, this idea that it's pathologized, it's considered to be too assertive and kind of threatening. That racist trope is part of what the rumor is playing on this idea that she used her sexuality not in service to men, but aggressively to further her own ambition.

NOEL: These things, as you've said, are cyclical, can be cyclical. And I wonder if you think what we're seeing now is a backsliding after the years of it being a cool thing to say you're a feminist. Or does Sydney Sweeney, in her way being like, you guys are weird and I'm not talking about it. Here's a sweatshirt. Does does it suggest that young women are thinking about this differently this time around, 20 years later?

CONSTANCE: Yeah, it's a complicated question. And I think one of the things that makes it so complicated is there is kind of a gender split on the way that people talk about this.

<SCORING IN> Dressing on the Side

CONSTANCE: Right now, younger women are dramatically more likely to be liberal than younger men are. And in part, that is a shift that some evidence shows is driven by feminism and by the way that people think about gender. There's certainly a sphere of the Internet that is very popular among young men where you see like podcasts like Joe Rogan. And that is certainly in a more reactionary mood right now. It's becoming increasingly popular to take a kind of anti-woke perspective and be anti- p.c., sort of feel like you're you're killin’ some sacred cows over there. At the same time, you're right that a lot of younger women are much less interested in entering into that sphere, which strikes me as being a big difference from the last time this reactionary mood took over the country. And I think it'll be really interesting to see how that plays out as we go through the election and see who wins.

NOEL: This episode was produced by Haleema Shah and Peter Balonon-Rosen. It was edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by Andi Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

<SCORING OUT> Dressing on the Side

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]