

Racializing misogyny: Sexuality and gender in the new online white nationalism

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This article asks how an anti-racist, feminist anthropology can help us understand the expansion of the radical right, with a focus on the online white nationalist movement. It demonstrates how homophobia and anti-feminism are two of many pathways into the online white nationalist movement. In effect, white nationalists work through online venues to racialize homophobia and anti-feminism. They articulate a view of white racialization where gender and sexuality are central to ideas about biological and cultural superiority. Through tracing the linkages between gender, sexuality, and race in different ideations of the white nationalist movement, this article shows a continuity of these core ideas to white nationalism across different manifestations of the movement, even as the expression of them has changed. An aim of this article is to demonstrate the ways an anti-racist, feminist anthropology provides tools to understand how concerns about gender animate this authoritarian movement.

Keywords Anti-racist, feminist anthropology, white nationalism, homophobia, digital cultures, racialization

Just before committing a massacre at two New Zealand mosques in March 2019, Brenton Tarrant posted on the infamous 8chan imageboard forum /pol/ (short for “Politically Incorrect”), saying he was going to carry out an “attack against the invaders.” He also shared a link to his planned video livestream, ensuring he would have an audience. Less than twenty-four hours later, with Brenton Tarrant in police custody and first responders still recovering bodies, 8chan was celebrating the murders. A popular post discussing Tarrant’s manifesto articulated a sexualized racial identity central to the white nationalist ideology that both inspired the massacre and provided a transnational public to celebrate it. The posters discussed the concept of “acceleration” found in Tarrant’s manifesto and articulated what they believe they are fighting against: “The endgame of globohomo is to make everyone a weak, mongrelized, degenerated, passive-aggressive tranny cuck worshipping the [Jew].”¹ On both 8chan and 4chan /pol/ boards, perhaps the most common form of address, and insult, is “faggot.”

In August 2019, another massacre occurred in El Paso, Texas, shortly after an anonymous manifesto was posted to 8chan. The site’s security service provider, Cloudflare, terminated its contract, and 8chan was shut down. Days later, Gab.com tweeted that it was adding 1,000 new users a day (many of them likely former 8chan users) (Paul 2019). Gab.com gained national attention in 2018, when it was revealed that a gunman who committed a massacre at a synagogue in Pittsburgh,

Pennsylvania, had frequently posted anti-Semitic messages to the site. While 8chan is now shut down, the racist and anti-Semitic ideology it cultivated is migrating to the far corners of the internet, with no signs of slowing down.

A few imageboards and chat rooms have inspired a number of high-profile mass murders in the last few years, one indicator that the online white nationalist movement is growing in membership, influence, and violence. While both racist and anti-racist political movements utilize digital media to achieve their goals, white nationalists have proven adept at using social media to amplify their message. Their expansion into what has come to be called the “manosphere” has proven particularly effective and dangerous. The manosphere is a constellation of sites where individuals gather to decry what they believe is a loss of male power and “aggrieved manhood” (Ging 2017). I argue that homophobia and anti-feminism are now central recruitment pathways into the online white nationalist movement. While these issues have been central to white nationalism for decades, the gendered politics have changed as the movement has expanded from early self-contained cybercommunities and alternative news venues into a wide variety of social media spaces. In effect, white nationalists use online venues to racialize homophobia and anti-feminism, affirming a normative white masculinity. They articulate a view of white racialization as both privileged and under attack; in this view, gender and sexuality are central to ideas about biological and cultural superiority. This provides a potent mix for both expanding the movement and inspiring outbursts of violence.

In this article, I situate the research on the gendered nature of white nationalism, exploring how the current moment allows homophobia and anti-feminism to serve as recruitment streams for racist radicalization. In doing so I lay out several potential research questions well suited for feminist anthropological analysis about the relationship between changing gender relations and various forms of recalcitrant politics (Hale, Calla, and Mullings 2017), many of which appear more focused on race or nationalism, but—as I will argue—are undergirded by gendered concerns. This is an important endeavor today, as the white nationalist movement has expanded in membership and inspired a rash of violence. This analysis also speaks to a variety of authoritarian movements that are reshaping democracies around the world, often uniting patriarchal politics with racial platforms (Bjork-James forthcoming).

Leith Mullings (2005, 669) argues that anthropology has had a contradictory relationship with the study of racism, both contributing to evolutionary theories that justified European colonial expansion, slavery, and eugenics and later challenging the very scientific racism it helped to create. While anthropology’s contribution to anti-racism over the last few decades has been, per Mullings’s description, “modest,” the possibilities for anthropological work to explore and challenge the structural production of race and its relations to broader material inequalities are great (Mullings 2005). Ethnography, including cyber-ethnography, is particularly well suited for multidisciplinary theoretical engagements that can challenge racial thought (see Brodtkin 1999). Given that racial identities are “social processes that are created and recreated by people in their daily lives” (Perry 2002, 3), ethnographers can provide important insights into the interactions between broad political changes—such as national discussions about immigration, demographic shifts, etc.—and individual identities and political positions. A feminist, anti-racist anthropology—that is, an anthropological approach that takes seriously both concerns about gender and the production of racial meaning and inequality—can serve as an important guide to understanding this movement. I begin with a history of the online white nationalist movement, and then note how it has changed in the past five years.

Gender, Sexuality, and Online White Nationalism

I have studied the online white nationalist movement since 2004, when I began researching Stormfront.org, then the largest white nationalist chat room, with the question of how participants in this online community understood whiteness. I found broad conversations about gender, sexuality, and the nuclear family (Statzel 2006). The site hosts specific forums for women and homemaking, a children's forum with games, and a dating section. A significant amount of the discussion focuses on issues of reproduction, child-rearing, gender, and sexuality. White women are frequently discussed as victims of sexual violence by men of color and Jews. I came to see whiteness in this venue as a gendered geography, where women produce children and cultivate moral values in the home, and men use strength and valor to defend that home from others seen as threats, an insight reflected in other feminist studies of this movement. As in all nationalisms, sexuality, gender, and the family figure prominently in white nationalism (Mayer 2000; McClintock 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997).

When I began studying Stormfront in 2004, it had a membership of 30,000. As of 2019, the site has well over 100,000 members and around 25,000 visitors a day. Although a number of other racist groups have established an online presence, Stormfront is unique in providing an expansive platform for various elements of the racist right to converge and share ideas and news (Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012). Today, the online white nationalist movement has expanded dramatically, largely through the growth of social media.

What unites this movement is a commitment to separate whites from the broader integrated society, focusing opposition on "intermarriage, minority population growth, growing minority crime rate, increasing immigration, and the loss of jobs to minorities" (Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997, 114; Kaplan and Weinberg 1998). Sociologist Abby Ferber (1998, 5) found that the central idea in white supremacist literature is that whiteness is threatened, and the main concern is "almost exclusively articulated as the threat of interracial sexuality." Ferber shows the meaning of the threat of miscegenation by exposing that both race and gender are based on binary social constructions that rely on "borders and boundaries." Racial categories, like gender categories, require boundary maintenance, and what secures both the race and gender binaries is heterosexuality. Thus, a racially segregated heterosexuality secures both whiteness and the masculine/feminine binary. Sociologist Jessie Daniels (1997) writes, "The highest duty and honor of a white man, according to white supremacist discourse, is to preserve the white family and with it a hierarchy of race, gender, and sexuality." Anti-Semitism, particularly a conspiracy of what is referred to as a "Zionist Occupation Government," is blended with these sexual fears by framing Jews as secretly controlling institutions throughout the West, from governments to banks to media. Jews are blamed for misogyny, feminism, and encouraging miscegenation.

In many ways, white nationalist beliefs reflect formerly hegemonic racial systems. Scholars have demonstrated the ways that race and racism are organizing devices of modern states (Goldberg 2002; Hylton 2006; Marx 1998). Anti-Black racism in particular has profoundly shaped institutions in the United States (Smith 2015; Taylor 2016) and globally (Bowen et al. 2017). Anti-Muslim sentiment, too, has come to define forms of public culture over the past two decades across North America (Razack 2007). In an essay about her study of women in white supremacist movements, Kathleen Blee (2004, 52) writes that although the "ideas that racist activists share about whiteness are more conscious, elaborated, and tightly connected to political action than those of mainstream whites ... they also reflect the views of whiteness dominant in mainstream culture."

The concerns about gender and sexuality that animate the contemporary white nationalist movement have strong historical precedent. Norms rooted in patriarchal heterosexuality have served as a central axis for the construction of European nationalism (Mosse 1988) and racial categories in both colonial America (McClintock 1997; Povinelli 2006; Stoler 2002) and post-independence United States (Dorr 2004; Jordan 1968), particularly in the form of anti-miscegenation laws (Pascoe 2009). Anne McClintock's (1995) groundbreaking work on the role of sexuality in the colonial period argues that race, gender, and class were interconnected in intimate relations, actual and represented (see also Ivekovic and Mostov 2002; Stoler 1995). In the United States, racism was most commonly justified as a protection of white sexual morality, particularly the purity of white women from a perceived threat from African American or Native American men (Collins 2004; Dorr 2004; Hartman 1997; Jordan 1968). Anti-miscegenation remained a central concern of white society throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Frederickson 1971). Given the historical coarticulation of whiteness, nationalism, and gender and sexual norms, it is no surprise that the contemporary white nationalist movement similarly focuses on these issues.

White Nationalism 2.0

Social media has dramatically changed the recruitment possibilities of organized cyber-racism, as well as its sexual politics. In *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights*, Jessie Daniels (2009) focuses less on the recruitment potential posed by white supremacist sites than on their epistemological impacts. Daniels describes as particularly effective "cloaked" white supremacist websites, sites that were designed to appear unbiased and educational but were covertly racist. Through creating web content about the civil rights movement or the Holocaust, some white supremacists learned to disguise racist propaganda as historical fact, to great success. Many cloaked sites consistently appear as top options in Google search engine results (for years, a Google search for "Martin Luther King" turned up a white supremacist site as one of the top sites) (Daniels 2009). While white nationalists sought to expand their ranks through online activity, there was little evidence of their effectiveness.

Whereas the first instantiations of online racism focused on building communities and sharing alternative news (Statzel 2008), the prevalence of social media allows for an expansive landscape to spread the movement's ideology. The reality that so many people outside of the movement spend time online, often constructing social identities, provides many potential recruitment targets for white nationalists. Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, 4chan, and Facebook were all developed primarily for social interaction, but racist activists have continued to make these sites their own.

This new media ecology has been a significant boon for the movement, which had spent decades cultivating unique cybercommunities frequented primarily by those already converted to white nationalism. While their ranks grew steadily and slowly, it wasn't until the expansion of social media that they were able to take full advantage of the internet to expand their movement. By strategically using social media, white nationalists have been able to achieve a platform that far outshines their actual numbers. A 2016 report by George Washington University's Program on Extremism found that white nationalist groups added 22,000 followers on Twitter between 2012 and 2016, about a 600 percent growth (Berger 2016).

Jessie Daniels (2018) points to the importance of internet technologies in the growing white nationalist movement, particularly the role of algorithms in facilitating the expansion of this ideology. For example, when Dylann Roof searched for "black on white crime," the search engine

algorithm directed him to a white supremacist website (Daniels 2018). This is part of a far larger problem where internet algorithms tend to perpetuate racial bias (Noble 2018).

Of all online communities, perhaps the most important to the expansion of white nationalism is the proliferating manosphere. While the men's rights movement has been growing for some time, social media provides it with a much larger audience (Hodapp 2017). Although these sites tend not to emphasize white supremacy explicitly, their focus on criticizing feminism and celebrating virile, heterosexual patriarchy provides a cohesive overlap to the gender politics of white nationalism. A backlash against feminism, particularly a critique that feminism has "gone too far" and is now victimizing men, is a central complaint in this online community (Rafail and Freitas 2019), as evidenced by the recent Twitter campaign "Him Too" that frames men as victims of false accusations of sexual assault. "Incels," men who identify as involuntarily celibate, are a large part of this community (Donnelly et al. 2010). Self-identified incels congregate on Reddit and 4chan and have generated a language culture that frames men as entitled to sex with attractive women and describes a cruel feminist movement that oppresses men, thus depriving a large population of straight men of sex. And, similarly to white nationalist social media spaces, incel sites have inspired a number of violent outbursts, including mass shootings in Isla Vista, California; Toronto, Canada; and Tallahassee, Florida. Alex DiBranco (2017) finds that male supremacism is an increasing focus of online organizing. While white women historically played important roles in racist movements (McRae 2018), this new iteration of white nationalism often inspires a militarized movement of primarily young men. Unlike Stormfront, with its forums celebrating homebirths and homeschooling and an active forum for women, white nationalism 2.0 embraces a more hostile sexism.

Other sites, like Gab.com, were developed not expressly for white supremacists but for the expression of sensitive or violent content that might be censored elsewhere; they have similarly become sites for radicalization. As Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram limit the presence of violent and racist discourse, these conversations are migrating toward sites that protect hate speech. Take, for example, 4chan, which was created in 2003 by a fifteen-year-old American as an English-language version of a Japanese anime imageboard. In 2011, a 4chan subforum called /pol/, or politically incorrect, was created. This site, along with 8chan (founded in 2013) and the Reddit forum /the Donald/ (founded during Trump's presidential campaign), became spaces where young men with various grievances came together. In observing these sites, it is clear that individuals espousing white nationalism have worked to turn these sites into white nationalist recruitment venues. In these spaces white men are taught to understand themselves in a new way: superior, hypermasculine, and under attack. Instead of a random grouping of grievances, white nationalists then unite these into a coordinated attack based on anti-Semitism. White nationalists identify Jews as the center of a conspiracy that is bent on attacking and destroying whites (Ward 2017), sometimes through immigration and sometimes through challenging heterosexuality, patriarchy, or birth rates.

Men who visit these sites due to a sense of aggrieved manhood are then introduced into a conspiracy where—so long as they are identified as white—their gender complaints are framed as a result of an anti-white conspiracy. This serves to racialize misogyny. An example is found in the language of the "red pill," a reference to the film *The Matrix*, where a red pill is offered as a way to strip delusions and make a hidden reality visible. Across the far right, to be "red pillled" means different things depending on the group using the term. On the Reddit forum Red Pill, for example, to be "red pillled" is to awaken to the reality that women are dominant in society, a belief that sees feminism as a movement focused on oppressing men. Overtly white nationalists, such as members of the group Identity Evropa, use the term to refer to adopting a belief that white people are actually

a besieged group. This meme, then, can have male supremacist or white supremacist meaning, or both, depending on the context. The ambivalent meaning of internet memes—particularly as they travel—can also have the effect of spreading ideology.

Conclusion

I propose that emphasizing homophobia and anti-feminism can have the effect of racializing young white men's discontent. This discontent can stem from anything from economic marginalization due to increasing stratification under neoliberalism (Maskovsky and Bjork-James, 2020) to frustration about being unable to find a romantic or sexual partner (as in the case with incels). The class make-up of these sites is unclear, but this discourse succeeds in minimizing ideas of class by prioritizing the view that a raced masculinity is a primary site of identity. More work is needed that takes seriously how social media facilitates the production of raced and gendered selves for various ends. Clearly, online cultures can facilitate racist or anti-racist ends; after all, #BlackLivesMatter started as a hashtag and has largely grown online (Taylor 2016), and "Black Twitter" has inspired a variety of anti-racist campaigns (Sharma 2013). Within the broader reality of race and cyber identities and ideologies, there is a need for more anti-racist, feminist analysis of the spread of white nationalism online, particularly in relation to the expanding manosphere.

Feminist anthropologists have shown in multiple contexts how attending to the meanings of gender within cultural formations often changes how they are understood. As Michelle Rosaldo (1980, 390) reminds us, "what we *can* know will be determined by the kinds of questions we learn to ask." Centering questions about gender often changes the stories we tell. Bringing such a lens to the study of contemporary racist movements helps to show how a gender ideology is often at their core. Such an analysis also reveals that a backlash to feminist and queer gains can manifest in multiple formats, including in nationalist and racist movements. More research is needed on how and why these gendered articulations remain at the center of online white nationalism, why they have changed, and how this changed gender ideology will impact the movement and its relationship to violence.

Going back to the 8chan quote at the beginning of this essay, contemporary racist online discourse articulates a conspiracy where Jews emasculate and queer white men to make them easier to control. On these sites, to claim a dominant male identity is, at least for men of European descent, also to claim a racial identity. This conspiracy shows that the expansion of LGBTQ rights and feminist cultural and political articulations can provide fodder for racist actors, as they frame these gains as attacks on white men. We need a robust feminist, anti-racist anthropology to help understand the ways a backlash against feminism and LGBTQ rights is fueling many conservative movements, including nurturing a revival in racist violence. These recalcitrant politics not only fuel an expanding white nationalist movement in the United States but are animating similar nationalisms around the world. Perhaps the clearest example is found in the 2018 ban on gender studies master's programs in Hungary, signed into law by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. A feminist, anti-racist anthropology will be critical to unraveling why concerns about gender are animating both white nationalism and authoritarian movements across the globe, and possibly in covering ways to counter their spread.

Note

¹ Accessed on 03/16/2019, the website 8chan has since been shut down.

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