

Affective Economies of White Nationalism: Tracing the Right-Wing Populist Rhetoric of Brexit and Trump 2016

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Abstract: *This article builds on Sara Ahmed's (2004b) theory of affective economies and Charles W. Mills' work on the Racial Contract to examine how right-wing populist discourse circulates within affective economies of white nationalism to obscure the histories and ongoing consequences of colonialism. Using a qualitative sample of responses to a few of Donald Trump's tweets published the day after the Brexit referendum, I trace specific tropes of right-wing populist discourse implicated in the self-referential logic of white nationalism: the call to "take our country back", the claim to speak on behalf of "the people" and references to an international class of "globalists" secretly working to undermine national sovereignty. I examine how these tropes gain velocity through the design affordances of Twitter, circulating in the form of tweets, hashtags, images, memes, videos, and mantras, to bring white subjects into affective alignment with a fantasy of white nationalist identity that defines itself in opposition to non-white others. Wary of the tendency to locate the violence of postcolonial whiteness exclusively within the most belligerent strands of right-wing populist rhetoric, I conclude by considering how resistance to right-wing populism can inadvertently risk re-inscribing affective economies of white nationalism.*

Keywords: populism, white nationalism, affect, Trump, Brexit

Introduction

On June 24, 2016, the day after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, Donald Trump, the recently nominated Republican candidate for President of the United States, arrived in Scotland for the grand opening of the Trump Turnberry golf course. He immediately hailed the results of the Brexit vote a victory for the people of the United Kingdom. In his tweets, Trump highlighted the parallel between his rise to the top of the Republican

ticket and the results of the Brexit referendum by situating both events within a global resurgence of nationalist sentiment that sought to restore borders and reclaim national sovereignty:

Donald Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jun 24, 2016

Just arrived in Scotland. Place is going wild over the vote. They took their country back, just like we will take America back. No games!

Donald Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jun 24, 2016

America is proud to stand shoulder-to-shoulder w/a free & ind UK. We stand together as friends, as allies, & as a people w/a shared history. [sic]

Donald Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jun 24, 2016

Many people are equating BREXIT, and what is going on in Great Britain, with what is happening in the U.S. People want their country back!

As these examples illustrate, Trump (and users who retweet or follow him) used the occasion of the Brexit vote to circulate the promise to “take America back” (Trump 2016c, n.p.). The rhetoric of “taking our country back”, like Trump’s promise to “make America great again”, positions the nation as a lost object to appeal to what Paul Gilroy (2004) refers to as “postcolonial melancholia”, a nostalgic attachment to colonialism and empire that sanitizes and misremembers history. Gilroy’s concept of postcolonial melancholia can be read alongside Trump’s promise to “take America back” (2016c, n.p.) to locate the erasure of colonized peoples at the axes of epistemology and affect. The notion of ownership implied in the promise to “take our country back” obfuscates the crime of settler colonialism within a shifting confluence of xenophobic fears and longings.

I want to examine the trajectory of the right-wing populist rhetoric animating the general response to Donald Trump’s tweets about Brexit the day after the Brexit vote. I am interested in how white nationalism, a political imaginary that collapses the categories of whiteness and citizenship to claim the nation-state for whites, acquires affective intensity and “rhetorical velocity” (Ridolpho and DeVoss 2009, n.p.) through the design affordances of Twitter and the digital culture of right-wing populism in the US and the UK. I have sampled responses to Donald Trump’s tweets about Brexit to examine how right-wing populist discourse takes part in affective economies of white nationalism. Since only a fraction of the replies to these tweets can be accessed through the original posts, I have collected the ones I could and expanded my data-set by searching for other tweets (from the same day) that included the hashtags #Brexit and #Trump2016 to arrive at a final sample size of 560 tweets.

I have used *in vivo* coding to organise these results through Johnny Saldaña's (2009) two-cycle process, basing the codes on the exact language of the tweet during the first cycle, then adjusting the codes to cross-reference variations of the same term during the second. The goal was a qualitative sample, or "snapshot", of the fragmented, contested, and variable rhetorical terrain of Twitter, to better understand how right-wing populist rhetoric circulates within affective economies of white nationalism. I sought a general sense of the vectors that bring subjects into affective alignment with the collective fantasy of national identity, and have identified several themes or tropes of right-wing populism that seem heavily linked to the production of a racialized political imaginary: namely, the call to "take our country back", the claim to speak on behalf of "the people", and references to an international conspiracy of "corrupt globalists" secretly working to undermine the principles of national sovereignty.

Building on Sara Ahmed's (2004a; 2004b) work on affective economies and Charles W. Mills' (1997) theory of the Racial Contract, I discuss how the design affordances of Twitter have made it the platform of choice for white nationalists. Using the qualitative sample of responses to Trump's Brexit tweets, I trace how specific iterations of right-wing populist rhetoric gain affective intensity through circulation, fostering the self-referential logic of white nationalism. This logic does not exist in diametric opposition to political liberalism: both emerge against a backdrop of historical amnesia that glosses over the crime of settler colonialism to erase the originary violence of the contemporary political order. To highlight the danger of assuming right-wing populists are the only users participating in affective economies of white nationalism, I close by examining resistance to right-wing populism that risks inadvertently reproducing xenophobic associations between whiteness and citizenship.

Affective Economies of White Nationalism

White rhetoricians studying white nationalism risk the temptation to locate the violence of postcolonial whiteness in "other" white subjects – neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and segregationists, for example, who openly circulate racist doxa. Any analysis of affective economies of white nationalism should recognise the transmission of white nationalist doxa is not the unidirectional contamination of previously non-racist political liberalism but, rather, the cross-pollination of adjacent and overlapping areas of political discourse. White supremacy is the epistemological framework of postcolonial politics: "a historically shaped White racial imaginary [...] animates the geopolitical construct of the 'West'" (Deem 2019, 3194). As Alfred J. López observes, "whiteness in the postcolonial moment continues to retain much of its status and desirability, if not its overt colonial-era power" (2005, 2). The Brexit vote and Trump 2016 emerged against the backdrop of what Charles W. Mills,

playing on social contract theory, refers to as the “Racial Contract”, a series of formal and informal agreements amongst whites that designate non-white subjects as inferior. For Mills, the Racial Contract is both the organising matrix of postcolonial society and a theoretical framework that emphasises white supremacy as an epistemological and political system of global domination. White nationalism emerges as the product of a collective agreement amongst whites “to misinterpret the world” in ways that maintain white privilege and justify violence against non-white subjects (Mills 1997, 18). Non-white immigrants are framed as potential terrorists, for example, even as the state uses raids, detentions, and deportations to terrorise immigrant communities.

Mills’ emphasis on misinterpretation is not an invitation to describe racism as an unfortunate misunderstanding between nominally rational subjects. Nor is the Racial Contract a metaphor for “race relations”. It is material and “historically locatable in the series of events marking the creation of the modern world by European colonialism” (Mills 1997, 20). Mills’ work on the Racial Contract highlights the role of white subjects who actively uphold white supremacy through highly racialized ways of being and knowing in the world. “Ordinary” white subjects who do not sympathise with white nationalists or even think of themselves as “political” are still interpellated by “an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)” and ironically render them “unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997, 18). Mills’ offers a useful framework for understanding ignorance as an epistemological strategy white subjects use to conceal how they have benefitted, and continue to benefit, from colonial violence. His theory of the Racial Contract articulates white nationalism and Western liberalism as an epistemological partnership emerging from a racialised commitment to the current economic order. Through wilful ignorance, the US and the UK are positioned as victims of “illegal” immigration, rather than authors and primary beneficiaries of an economic system that produces migration by way of war, environmental destruction, and the demand for cheap labour.

However, Vincent N. Pham (2019) has cautioned against fixating on epistemology without considering the role of affect in the processes of meaning-making that situate us as racialized subjects. Writing about birtherists, Pham describes how self-identification involves “an affective attachment to a ‘truth’ that buttresses their identities as patriots and in (un)intentional service of white supremacist logics” (2019, 490). In other words, how we feel about what we know is as important as knowledge itself, especially insofar as it makes us receptive or impervious to new ways of knowing. With this in mind, I want to read Mills’ theory of the Racial Contract alongside Ahmed’s work (2004a; 2004b) on “affective economies”, a term she uses to describe how the circulation of objects and signs produces and intensifies affect. In Ahmed’s model, affect does not emerge from within the subject: “emotions do not

positively inhabit *anybody* or *anything*” (2004b, 46; emphasis in original). The subject is a node in a psychic, social, and material system of circulation and exchange. Subjects do not harbour a secret reservoir of fear and hatred that predisposes them to racist thinking. Instead, subjects are interpellated by the circulation of signs and objects, which generate and intensify fear, hatred, and longing to bind individuals to the “us/them” logic of white nationalism.

Ahmed’s observation that “emotions work as a form of capital” (2004b, 45) and Mills’ use of the word “contract” are subtle gestures to the materiality of epistemology and affect; the way they substantiate the “‘surface’ of collective bodies” (Ahmed 2004b, 46) in the service of a white political imaginary. Mills’ theory of the Racial Contract underscores how raced bodies are historically situated by colonialism in ongoing processes of racialisation that define the limits of knowledge-production. Approaching the problem in a different register, Ahmed’s work highlights what Gries and Bratta describe as the “cultural-rhetorical feedback loop” (2019, 425) of white nationalism; its tendency to affirm itself within the affective coordinates of a self-referential discourse of victimhood and grievance. If Mills understands white nationalism as an epistemological process, Ahmed’s theory of affective economies helps explain how knowledge produced by this “inverted epistemology” acquires affective intensity through the digital affordances of Twitter. Taken together, they locate white nationalism within a series of affective investments that bind white subjects to the cognitive dysfunctions and historical distortions of the Racial Contract.

Technologies of Whiteness

The rise of right-wing populists espousing white nationalism in the US and the UK emerges, in part, from the design features of social media platforms like Twitter. Jessie Daniels has described the Internet as “the biggest advance for white supremacy since the end of Jim Crow” (2017, n.p.), singling out Twitter as a platform that is particularly hospitable to right-wing populists and affective economies of white nationalism. While Twitter often presents itself as a politically neutral forum where users exercise their right to express themselves, the design affordances of the platform belie its commitment to representing a “diverse range of expressions” (Hateful Conduct Policy 2019, n.p.). Twitter is an ideal medium for disseminating white nationalist content because right-wing populists can exercise an unprecedented degree of control over their messaging and “wean parts of the audience from the traditional media” (Krämer 2017, 1303). It does not take many users to introduce white nationalist terminology, concepts, or memes into general circulation. Pepe the Frog, a popular alt-right meme with anti-Semitic connotations, “only took ten core people with another 30 or so helping occasionally to make that meme take hold” (Daniels 2017, n.p.). As Alexandra Deem has observed, terms like “white genocide”, which were fringe concepts only a few years ago, circulate with increasing intensity

and frequency in the contemporary political discourse of the US and the UK. When Twitter does move to enforce its “Hateful Conduct Policy”, white nationalists invoke the seemingly race-neutral rhetoric of “free expression” to accuse Twitter of political censorship. When Twitter began enforcing its updated hate speech policies in 2017, for example, by removing bots and banning openly violent white supremacists, right-wing populists began tweeting the hashtag “#Twitterpurge”, appropriating the language of genocide to claim the status of a victimised political minority. Despite these half-hearted enforcement efforts, many banned users were able to create new accounts within hours (Hayden 2018, n.p.).

These acts of so-called political censorship by Twitter do not prevent white nationalists from subjecting non-white users to extended campaigns of intimidation and harassment with a great degree of anonymity and little accountability. Daniels describes Twitter as an ideal platform for white supremacists because “there are two things Twitter offers that 4chan and Reddit do not: an outsize influence on the news cycle and lots of people of color to target” (Daniels 2017, n.p.). The platform’s “Hateful Conduct Policy” focuses on “combating abuse motivated by hatred, prejudice, or intolerance”, which puts the onus on the victim to prove incidents of harassment are intended to be racist or threatening, instead of embracing an explicitly antiracist policy that emphasises the consequences comments have on users who are targeted (Hateful Conduct Policy 2019, n.p.). Twitter’s policy offers no clear way to challenge “hateful conduct” that does not openly advertise itself as such, like the triple parenthesis the alt-right began using as an anti-Semitic marker to target Jewish users, or the “fake Black people” accounts secretly operated by white supremacists (Echo n.d.; Daniels 2017, n.d.). By yoking its policies to demonstrably racist or threatening intent, Twitter enables a digital culture of ambient racism that trades in dog whistle rhetoric, coded race baiting, historical amnesia, and racist conspiracy theories. According to Benjamin Krämer (2017), this creates political opportunities for right-wing populists who have realised overtly violent expressions of white nationalism might scare away potential converts. Ambiguity is a rhetorical strategy that affords what Groshek and Engelbert (2012) refer to as “double-differentiation”, the process by which right-wing populists simultaneously distinguish themselves from the corrupt political elite and more extremist factions of the white supremacist movement. It also allows right-wing populist politicians like Donald Trump to hide behind the maxim “retweets are not endorsements” when they circulate and amplify white nationalist content.

The problems with Twitter’s “Hateful Conduct Policy” are reflected and amplified by the structure of the platform. The hashtag, for example, is one of the many design affordances of Twitter implicated in affective economies of white nationalism. Johnathan C. Flowers describes the hashtag as “an orientation device which serves to direct some bodies [...] towards or away from other bodies within the material space of Twitter through the alignment

of affect” (2019, n.p.). In her analysis of Occupy Wall Street and the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Zizi Papacharissi (2015) similarly refers to hashtags as affective “framing devices” that transform crowds into “networked publics that want to tell their story collaboratively and on their own terms” (308). Papacharissi’s work on affective publics highlights how hashtags “open up and sustain discursive spaces where stories can be told” (2015, 320). I would expand this claim to argue hashtags like #BlueLivesMatter and #WhiteGenocide can also be used to shut down political discourse and supplant the narratives of non-white users. Hashtags can contribute to the creation of “echo chambers” or “feedback loops” that insulate white nationalists from information and criticism which might disrupt their worldview.

The subsequent analysis of specific iterations of right-wing populist rhetoric proceeds from the observation that Twitter is not a passive medium for the circulation of white nationalist content, but a willing collaborator and active partner in this process. The platform is designed to maximise user engagement, which often involves invoking “freedom of speech” to justify a hands-off approach to harassment that white nationalists frequently take advantage of. Daniels points out how Twitter’s “sporadic, impartial effort to systematically deal with white supremacists [...] [is] rooted in Twitter’s decision to prioritize driving traffic and its investors’ returns over everything else” (2017, n.p.). Contrary to promoting a “diverse range of expressions”, the structure of the platform enables white nationalists to harass and intimidate non-white users, disseminate misinformation and propaganda, produce new converts, whitewash history, normalise xenophobic rhetoric, isolate themselves from criticism, and strategically control their messaging to reach the widest possible audience. Daniels describes these design affordances of Twitter in affective terms: “[s]imply put, white supremacists love Twitter because it loves them back” (2017, n.p.).

“Take Our Country Back”

The design affordances of Twitter amplified Donald Trump’s assertion that the citizens of the US and the UK “want their country back” (Trump 2016b, n.p.) by circulating racialised images of national sovereignty and border security to position both countries on the same side of a global “us/them” binary. His tweets situated the US and the UK within “a shared history” (Trump 2016a, n.p.) and affirmed US support for “a free & ind UK” [sic] (Trump 2016a, n.p.). Users responding to Trump’s tweets took up his call to “take our country back” and imbued it with affective intensity:

The DREAMER @bobby990r_1 · Jun 24, 2016
Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Great news! All nations need to re-establish their national identities. #Brexit #Iondependence [sic]

BigFan @mjgbigfan · Jun 25, 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

@Meeeedge We want our country back and we want illegal immigrants out!

As these examples illustrate, the populist call to “take our country back” brings bodies into affective alignment around the signifier of the nation-state in ways that implicitly racialize citizenship at the expense of non-white subjects. The ambiguity of the implied threat to the country creates a blank space in the political imaginary, occupied by anyone who can be rhetorically situated as a threat to the nation-state, including immigrants, terrorists, “globalists”, and even specific individuals, such as Hillary Clinton or George Soros. Building on Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004b), Jenny Edbauer Rice uses the term “metonymic slide” (2008, 205) to describe how arbitrary and highly racialized chains of linguistic affiliation affectively link bodies that occupy this space at different or overlapping times:

Joxer @westpadevildog · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

The Globalist are forcing Free Trade immigration and open borders down the throats of the free world for personal profit [sic]

DefendingtheUSA @DefendingtheUSA · Jun 25, 2016

THE MAJORITY WILL NEVER allow the Mentally Ill Globalists to turn the world into a SJW and Radical Islam “SAFE SPACE” #brexit #Trump2016

These tweets conflate free trade, immigration, open borders, political corruption, mental illness, “social justice warriors”, and Islam to position Brexit and Trump 2016 as populist victories against the spectre of “globalism”, itself a term with an anti-Semitic history as a coded reference to a suppositious international Jewish conspiracy.

The interchangeability of these threats within the populist imaginary is indicative of Ahmed’s observation that affect does not exist as a positive substance within signs and bodies but, rather, circulates between signs and bodies, gaining intensity as it moves. In other words, fear constantly casts its gaze in search of an object or body to which it can attach itself. Users circulating the populist call to “take our country back” produce the borders of the nation-state through the very act of designating non-white others a threat: “fear does not involve the defense of borders that already exist; rather, fear makes those borders, by establishing objects from which the subject, in fearing,

can stand apart” (Ahmed 2004a, 128). In the “inverted epistemology” of white nationalism, the border of the nation-state designates the precise moment when the threatening proximity of their bodies repositions non-white subjects as “illegal immigrants”. Frantz Fanon describes this process in detail when he writes that, beneath the “slow construction of [the] self as a body in a spatial and temporal world”, there exists a “historical-racial schema” of colonialism, “provided not by ‘remnants of feelings and notions of the tactile, vestibular, kinesthetic, or visual nature’ but by the Other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (Fanon 1952, 91). Similarly, the threats of “globalism” and “white genocide” are produced, in part, by the circulation of doxa, memes, hashtags, mantras, and other rhetorical devices that generate the historical-racial schema superimposed on non-white bodies within affective economies of white nationalism.

While this schema is historically produced, it is neither objective nor accurate. Instead, it is grounded in what Mills refers to as “an inverted epistemology” (1997, 18) or what Gries and Bratta describe as a “cultural-rhetorical feedback loop” (2019, 425) that obscures, erases, and supplants the histories and ongoing consequences of colonialism. The call to “take our country back” is shrouded in historical amnesia. It simultaneously ignores and romanticises the “shared history” (Trump 2016a, n.p.) of the United States and the United Kingdom: six hundred years of slavery, imperialism, and settler colonialism. Like his promise to “take America back” (Trump 2016c, n.p.) and “make America great again”, Trump’s tweets expressing support for a “free & ind UK” (2016a, n.p.) appeal to what Paul Gilroy (2004) calls “postcolonial melancholia”, an affective orientation toward history that sanitises the violence of colonialism in the name of restoring a highly romanticised nationalism. Brexit and Trump 2016 are rhetorically situated as the “return” of liberty, independence, and popular sovereignty. Deem rightly concludes such “right-wing appropriation of leftist anti-imperialist discourse is articulable only with respect to histories of Western colonialism (‘White genocide’ being perhaps the most apt illustration)” (2019, 3188). I would supplement this claim with Gries and Bratta’s observation (via Althusser) that the circulation of white nationalist mantras, such as the call to “take our country back”, hails users, interpellating them within affective economies of white nationalism. Signs accrue affective intensity as they circulate, cementing “beliefs, opinions, emotions, and narratives” to create a self-referential cycle of “white supremacist *doxai* and actions” (Gries and Bratta 2019, 421). Nationalist signifiers have the potential to accumulate nostalgia as they circulate, which frequently brings white bodies into affective alignment with what CV Vitolo-Haddad (citing Steven R. Goldzwig’s definition of “symbolic realignment”) refers to as the “alternative rhetorical reality” of white nationalism, predicated on a distorted history of colonialism (2019, 285). The call to “take our country back” calls on white subjects to turn our backs on what we have taken from non-white people and

uses populist rhetoric to obscure our historical status as illegal occupants of stolen land.

“We the People”

Right-wing populism often characterises itself as coterminous with democracy, even when the actions and policies it authors are explicitly anti-democratic. Krämer (citing Matthijs Rooduijn and Margaret Canovan) identifies anti-elitism and the claim to speak on behalf of “the people” as key components of populism, and observes that “formal procedures, lengthy deliberations, checks and balances, or minority rights seem unnecessary and even illegitimate given the preexisting [...] unitary popular will” (2017, 1297). In the replies to Trump’s tweets about Brexit, users frequently referenced “the people”, a political identifier simultaneously positioned as universal and disenfranchised:

A. Edward @greencane654 · Jun 24, 2016
Replying to @realDonaldTrump

/ We the people want our voice heard. We want our freedom’s & liberties protected. We want our law’s followed.AMERICA FIRST [sic]

Coach P (Palmer) @Coach_Palmer_ · Jun 24, 2016

Take back the world!! The good people are finally tired of sitting back and hoping for the best.. #Brexit #Trump2016

Tweets such as these typify how populist appeals to the will of “the people” differentiate between the “good people” embodied by the collective “we” of the populist imaginary and the threatening “other” who must be excluded in order for this worldview to take shape. If, as Ahmed suggests, fear produces borders by locating objects of fear that can be defined in opposition to the subject, we might read appeals to “the people” alongside Giorgio Agamben’s observation that “the exception is the structure of sovereignty” (1995, 28). In this reading, notions of citizenship take shape against an “other”, whose exclusion from the political community reenacts the separation between *zoe* (biological existence) and *bios* (politically qualified life) that constitutes the originary gesture of political sovereignty.

The site of exception could be considered analogous to the aforementioned “blank space in the political imaginary”, occupied by a host of threatening non-white “others” who must be denied the rights of citizenship in order to produce the “freedom’s & liberties” [sic] of “the people”. Josue David Cisneros, writing about Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 as a “nodal point” in the white nationalist imaginary, has described how the affective and material dimensions of citizenship converge to inscribe fear and suspicion onto the racial markers of the immigrant body (2012, 139). The “illegality” of the immigrant

emerges as a “feeling” that something about the other is “not quite right”, which is then codified retroactively through the immigrant’s failure or refusal to provide identification and the violent disciplinary response of the state. Affect materialises in formal procedures of sovereignty which reduce political subjects to “bare life” (Agamben 1995, 7), those bodies who are subject to the law but are not recognised by the law as political subjects. Undocumented residents, refugees, convicted felons, non-humans, and terrorists are systemically excluded from the political considerations of personhood, instead serving as a pretext for the law’s formal suspension of itself.

As Cisneros (2012, 146) observes, the exclusion of immigrants from collective definitions of “politically qualified life” (Agamben 1995, 7) renders immigrants vulnerable to the extrajudicial violence of vigilante groups patrolling the US-Mexico border, who use the concept of citizenship to mark immigrant bodies as both threatening and disposable. However, the logic of exception is not unique to white nationalism or right-wing populism: it is the foundation of political sovereignty. Right-wing populists are merely taking advantage of the “design affordances” of democracy to maximise the scope and range of the affective economies of white nationalism that normalise the Racial Contract. The affective circulation of right-wing populist rhetoric does not produce the material conditions of immigrant detention facilities, CIA black sites, labour camps, or federal prisons, but it does seem closely tied to racialized rhetorics of belonging that bind white subjects to the exceptional logic of sovereignty.

These racialised rhetorics were on display in the days leading up to the Brexit vote, when Leave campaigner and future Prime Minister of the UK, Boris Johnson, described the referendum as a “choice between those on their side who speak of nothing but fear of the consequences of leaving the EU, and we on our side who offer hope” (Stone 2016, n.p.). While British politicians on both sides of the Brexit debate went to great lengths to assure investors that the British economy was strong, Johnson offered additional reassurance the Leave campaign had not been motivated by xenophobia, but by race-neutral nationalism:

those who voted Leave were [not] driven by anxieties about immigration. [...] the number one issue was control - a sense that British democracy was being undermined by the EU system, and that we should restore to the people that vital power: to kick out their rulers at elections, and to choose new ones. (2016, n.p.)

Johnson’s comments before and after the Brexit vote reveal affect as a contested terrain of knowledge. The meaning of Brexit is determined, in part, at the level of hope and fear, between xenophobic anti-immigrant anxiety and the desire to restore an imagined sense of control associated with borders, sovereignty, and citizenship. In the gap between former UK Prime Minister David Cameron’s

reassurance “that Britain’s economy is fundamentally strong” (2016, n.p.) and Boris Johnson’s promise that “EU citizens living in [the UK] will have their rights fully protected” (2016, n.p.), the Racial Contract establishes a “zone of indistinction” (1995, 19) where categories like “non-citizen” and “non-European” blur together to exclude non-white subjects from political consideration.

Even seemingly innocuous references to “the people” are grounded in a highly racialised political imaginary, insofar as “the referents of discourse are particulars dressed up as universals, of the white race speaking for the human race” (Leonardo 2004, 139). And even Brexit, which was frequently characterised by right-wing populists as an expression of popular sovereignty, invoked the fantasy of political homogeneity to eclipse individuals who were excluded from the vote: undocumented residents, convicted felons, people under the age of eighteen, EU citizens living in the UK (unless they were from Malta, Cyprus or the Republic of Ireland), ex-patriots who had been living abroad for more than fifteen years, and residents of British overseas territories and Crown Dependencies (such as the Isle of Man) were all ineligible to vote (BBC 2016a, n.p.; Main 2018, n.p.). Brexit only represented the opinion of 52% of the eligible voting public. This did not prevent Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK Independence Party, from describing it as “a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people” (BBC 2016b, n.p.). The implication (consistent with Agamben’s description of the exceptional logic of sovereignty and Ahmed’s observation that fear produces the “us/them” binaries that retroactively position others as threats) is that individuals against Brexit or explicitly barred from voting do not count as “real”, “ordinary”, or “decent” people and can be excluded from political consideration. This theme animated supporters of Trump 2016 responding to Donald Trump’s comments about Brexit, who often defined both the US and the UK in opposition to “dangerous” others threatening the rights and freedom of “the people”:

marybeth luther-bach @backluther · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump and @realDonaldTrump

you [Donald Trump] are not a racist,nor a fascist. The people who call you such love islamic terrorists. [sic]

Latina for Trump @Latina4Trump5 · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @NidalAlAhmadieh @realDonaldTrump and @GhassanJawad1

No, what makes America great is our FREEDOM and BILL OF RIGHTS which Islam contradicts

The claim to speak on behalf of a politically homogeneous citizenship is a distinctly white prerogative, because whiteness acts as “the unseen, normative category against which differently racialized groups are ordered and valued”

(Bonds and Inwood 2016, 717). Non-white subjects are relegated to their social location, while white subjects speak on behalf of everyone. However, as the previous tweet by @Latina4Trump5 seems to suggest, this does not mean members of non-dominant groups do not invoke references to “the people” or define citizenship in opposition to non-white others. Rather, it highlights how the general logic of exclusion undergirding the political concept of citizenship is historically determined and discursively constructed within affective economies of white nationalism.

“Corrupt Globalists”

The various threat constructs of the right-wing populist political imaginary are folded into chains of linguistic association within affective economies of white nationalism. In responses to Trump’s tweets about Brexit, the metonymic rhetoric of right-wing populism often compressed these threats under the umbrella term of “globalism” to conceal their status as arbitrary signifiers. The previous tweets by @westpadevildog (“Joxer”) and @DefendingtheUSA (“DefendingtheUSA”) illustrate how free trade, immigration, political corruption, Islam, and even individual politicians like Hillary Clinton are labelled “globalist” and positioned as rhetorically interchangeable enemies of “the people”. As Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO and National Director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) explains, “globalism” is a term that:

developed in extremist circles populated by white supremacists. It gained currency in recent years as the alt-right used their understanding of technology to spread that term into the mainstream. But make no mistake, where the term originates from is a reference to Jewish people who are seen as having allegiances not to their countries of origin, like the United States, but to some global conspiracy. (Greenblatt 2018, n.p.)

In other words, the term is a textbook example of how the design affordances of Twitter amplify the circulation of right-wing populism within affective economies of white nationalism to shift the borders of the “Overton Window”, the range of policies and concepts considered socially acceptable elements of mainstream political discourse. Terms like “globalist” offer a degree of strategic ambiguity, allowing right-wing populists to strike different affective registers with different audiences: white supremacists can use the term “globalist” to attack and harass Jewish people (including Jewish members of President Trump’s cabinet and family) while right-wing populists hide behind the general claim that anything that threatens to undermine national sovereignty can be categorised as “globalist”. Anti-Semitism appears within linguistic chains of inference that allow right-wing populists to circulate anti-Semitic tropes without alienating potential converts who might reject more overt expressions of anti-Semitism.

As the term “globalism” is increasingly applied to various policies or persons, it accrues affective intensity through increased circulation, shaping the collective surface of the white nationalist imaginary. The threat of “globalism” brings signs and bodies into affective alignment around “national” priorities, narratives, values, beliefs, and policies, like Brexit, through material and epistemological processes of removal, erasure, and displacement, which have historically converged in the crime of settler colonialism. Affective economies of white nationalism generate nostalgia and “postcolonial melancholia” that sanitise the past in self-affirming feedback loops of historical amnesia:

Brandon B @BranddonTB122 · Jun 24, 2016

Native Americans never had a unified nation. Europe didn't take anything but land being sat on by tribes.

Mr. N @ Mr_Nielsen_5309 · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @CLW1998 and @realDonaldTrump

The British Empire dam near ruled the world at one point. I'm pretty sure the UK can survive w/o globalism. [sic]

In the first example, the myth of a “unified nation” is used to dismiss a user named @ocularnervosa (“Ocular Nervosa”) who resisted Trump’s tweet by asking if the “people [who] want their country back” are Native American. National sovereignty (the very principle “corrupt globalists” are working to undermine) is invoked to justify and rationalise the displacement and attempted eradication of Indigenous people in the United States. In the second example, an “anti-globalist” worldview romanticises the British empire to gloss over the ongoing violence of British colonialism. Users like @Mr_Nielsen_5309 (“Mr. N”) do not refuse global economic systems, so long as they are organised around the racialized logic of colonialism: affective economies of white nationalism are frequently predicated on nostalgic appeals to the global British Empire, or an America restored to its former “greatness” as a colonial power. Taken together, these examples illustrate how right-wing populism keeps an affective orientation toward history that produces the “cognitive dysfunctions” of the Racial Contract to normalise the “alternative rhetorical reality” of white nationalism.

Within the epistemological horizons of this alternative reality, the spectre of “globalism” accrues affective intensity by circulating through various political contexts. The more it reappears in conversations about trade, immigration, religion, mental illness, politics, economics, and other areas of social life, the more threatening it becomes. Once again, the digital affordances of Twitter fuel the feedback loop of right-wing populism. First, hashtags can serve as “lightning rods” for coordinated harassment campaigns against specific users. Additionally, they allow the most extreme white supremacists to find one

another at the margins of political discourse. Lastly, right-wing populists can insulate themselves from criticism by producing ideological echo chambers organised around the threat of #WhiteGenocide or the promise of #AmericaFirst. The “globalist” moniker serves all three of these functions: Muslims, Jews, liberal politicians, socialists, communists, big business, the EU, immigrants, the media, and terrorists are all folded into the threat of “globalism” to target or dismiss anything that cannot be assimilated into affective economies of white nationalism:

Lermont @Lermont · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Fear-mongering Hillary talks about “economic uncertainty” to put a negative spin on #Brexit. She’s just a nasty globalist!

Robin @WhitePinkJacket · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @NeilTurner and @realDonaldTrump

Globalism muslim lovers! [sic]

These tweets (along with earlier examples from @westpadevildog and @DefendingtheUSA) are representative of how “globalism” is appropriated by the “inverted epistemology” of the Racial Contract. While he does not explicitly cite Mills, Krämer describes the epistemology of right-wing populism as “reasoning based on anecdotal evidence, conformity with stereotypes or conventional wisdom, and emotional narratives” masquerading as “populist appreciation of common sense” (2017, 1299). “Globalism” is invoked to defend nostalgic fantasies of colonialism by dismissing counter-narratives, statistics, abstract arguments, fact-checking, and other forms of evidence as lies, propaganda, mystification, sugar-coating, mind control, ideological programming, misinformation, or “fake news” propagated by corrupt “globalists”:

Seaside Beauty @livingonthebay · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Hillary’s trolls post lies about you daily just like the main stream media so corrupt & bias it will all end →/soon #imwithyou

#DemExitDeplorable (*) #Independent American**

@MiddleClazzMom · Jun 24, 2016

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

@younggopp I no longer recognise the country we’ve become! Our leaders censor, delete, lie and work against us! #Time4Trump

Objectively “natural” expressions of patriotism often become an alibi for racism, misogyny, and white nationalism:

Brandon B @BranddonTB122 · Jun 24, 2016

White nationalism? Since when is loving America and wanting America to be strong a white thing?

The user @BranddonTB122 (“Brandon B”) locates his support for Trump 2016 within a supposedly “post-racial” political framework that prioritises “loving America” and “wanting America to be strong”, despite advancing the concept of a “unified nation” to absolve Europeans of settler colonialism in another part of the same thread. Under the terms of the Racial Contract, whiteness is the invisible measuring stick of racial difference and “nationality” and “citizenship” are frequently defined at the expense of non-white subjects.

Antiracism and Resistance

The historical amnesia and exclusionary logic of right-wing populism does not go uncontested on Twitter. In my qualitative sample, users regularly disrupt or challenge affective economies of white nationalism with jokes, examples, arguments, videos, images, memes, statistics, counter-narratives, graphs, gifs, and hashtags. However, resistance is not evenly distributed across the rhetorical terrain of Twitter. An analysis of the varied responses to Trump’s tweets the day after Brexit could never capture the full range of tactics, tools, techniques, campaigns, strategies, networks, contexts, publics, and communities that mobilise against right-wing populism and white nationalism online. While an exhaustive account of scholarship examining digital resistance is beyond the scope of this essay, Ahmed’s work on affective economies has inspired a plethora of interdisciplinary scholarship examining the relationship between resistance and the circulation of affect (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Carlson et al. 2017; Lee and Chau 2018; Kuo 2018). While she does not cite Ahmed, Zizi Papacharissi’s (2015) work on the “affective publics” of Occupy Wall Street and the 2011 Egyptian revolution also highlights Twitter as a medium for resistance grounded in the movement of affect. Taken together, these scholars highlight an emergent conversation about affective dimensions of online resistance to nationalism, patriarchy, capitalism, and racism, as well as the possibility of explicitly antiracist social media interfaces, algorithms, and platform architecture.

This growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship on the antiracist affordances of social media is incredibly important, especially when it centres the efforts and voices of Black and Indigenous activists, as well as other activists of colour, or circulates counter narratives that disrupt the historical amnesia of

the right-wing populist imaginary (see Park and Kim 2014; Wilson et al. 2017; Mirzoeff and Halberstam 2018; Hinzo and Schofield Clark 2019). At the same time, we cannot lose sight of the rhetorical assemblage of racist dog-whistles, hashtags, doxa, slogans, maxims, distortions, dysfunctions, and historical omissions that accrue affective intensity through circulation, producing roiling eddies of nostalgia and fear that bolster support for right-wing populism on both sides of the Atlantic. The challenge is to situate these affective economies *against* the temptation to find the violence of postcolonial whiteness within the most bellicose strains of right-wing populism, or at the margins of political discourse. It would be naïve and dangerous to assume right-wing populists are the only users taking part in affective economies of white nationalism.

I want to conclude by briefly examining resistance that inadvertently risks re-inscribing affective economies of white nationalism: rejections of Trump 2016 or Brexit that operationalise the epistemological framework of the Racial Contract. The point is not to siphon attention from the antiracist work of users who actively disrupt the “inverted epistemology” and historical amnesia that normalise settler colonialism, but to recognise how resistance can itself be subject to the “cultural-rhetorical feedback loop” of white nationalist logic. Affective economies of white nationalism do not live at the margins of contemporary political discourse – they are coterminous with it. Right-wing populists capitalise on the ambient racism of contemporary mainstream political discourse in much the same way they take advantage of the design affordances of Twitter.

In other words, right-wing populists espousing white nationalism are not the zero-point of racist thought. As the historian Ibram X. Kendi has persuasively argued, racist thought emerges retroactively, to justify existing laws, structures, institutions, and policies designed to prioritise the material interests of a small group of wealthy, white, male subjects at the expense of everyone else (2017, 503-504). Racist assumptions originate at the centre of political discourse and migrate *toward* the margins, where they circulate and accrue affective intensity in the service of an explicitly white political imaginary. The Trump campaign’s promise to “make America great again”, for example, rebooted Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign slogan “let’s make America great again” by injecting it with nostalgia to appeal to the postcolonial melancholia of right-wing populists in the United States (“Let’s Make”, n.p.). In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party’s inability to articulate a coherent antiracist position on Brexit and its later internal struggle with anti-Semitism could likewise be read as expressions of a political culture thoroughly defined by the terms of the Racial Contract (Katz 2019, n.p.). Examining how users reject specific expressions of right-wing populism (such as Brexit or Trump 2016) within general affective economies of white nationalism illustrates how circulation brings white subjects into affective alignment with the material benefits and racial privileges of settler colonialism – with or without their knowledge.

This is not to say resistance inevitably finds itself locked in affective feedback loops of white nationalist logic. There were users who responded to Donald Trump's tweets about Brexit with critiques that named and directly challenged the epistemological processes and rhetorical devices he uses to produce objects of fear in the white nationalist imaginary:

lu @Forcexrestored · Jun 24, 2016
Replying to @realDonaldTrump

you're creating an imaginary enemy... Please elaborate on exactly who it is we're trying to 'take our country back' from.

Perhaps influenced by the design affordances of Twitter, which favour pithy and affectively charged language over close reading and critique, users who responded negatively to Trump's tweets seemed more inclined to attack his character, intellect, electability, and fitness for office, but leave the epistemological framework of white nationalism intact:

Lion Hunter Music @LionHunterMusic · Jun 25, 2016
Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Hopefully the U.S. equates BREXIT to TREXIT. Better yet, apply Twisted Trump's Mexican/Muslim policy to him. Keep him out.

Muffet @jacksonmuffet · Jun 24, 2016
Replying to @Bertsball and @realDonaldTrump

that's what I'm wondering. Who took the USA away. Tell us orangey? [sic]

I read the first tweet as both an ironic rejection of racialized constructions of citizenship and a sincere attempt to invoke the exclusionary logic of sovereignty and reposition Trump at the site of exception. The ambiguity of the tweet underscores how the production, circulation, and interpretation of content within affective economies of white nationalism works without reference to authorial intent: the affective and material consequences of racist speech are divorced from the good intentions of the speaker. The second tweet challenges the white nationalist call to "take our country back", but the epithet "orangey" (like the term "white trash") could also be interpreted as an indictment of Trump's failure to embody a particular standard of whiteness. It seems possible that at least some resistance to Trump is rooted not in opposition to his policies but in racist metonymic associations between whiteness, intelligence, and merit. As these examples illustrate, resistance to right-wing populism does not necessarily constitute antiracism, and can even reproduce the self-referential logic of white nationalism.

Conclusion

Brexit and Trump 2016 occasioned right-wing populist tropes that distort and conceal the histories and ongoing consequences of colonialism. These tropes acquire affective intensity through circulation, generating fear, hatred, love, or nostalgia to bring white subjects into affective alignment with racist fantasies of white citizenship. As the examples in this essay illustrate, right-wing populists capitalise on the design affordances of Twitter to bind white subjects to the architectures of belonging that underlie the exclusionary violence of sovereignty. Xenophobic tropes circulating metonymically within affective economies of white nationalism produce and reinforce many of the “us/them” distinctions that determine who is excluded from the category of citizenship. These affective and epistemological commitments are indexed within “zones of indistinction” (e.g. immigration detention centres, refugee camps, special ops black sites) where the law legally suspends itself to delineate between the politically qualified lives of citizens and the biological existence of immigrants and refugees. Right-wing populist rhetoric is not responsible for the material conditions of immigration detention centres and refugee camps, but it does foster allegiance to an epistemological framework that regards institutionalised racist violence as the logical, necessary, and inevitable expression of national sovereignty.

Right-wing populists are not the only people forwarding a link between whiteness and citizenship. The replies to Trump’s tweets about Brexit indicate the possibility of rejecting right-wing populism from within affective economies of white nationalism. Users who recreate the exclusionary logic of citizenship in different contexts or chastise populist leaders for failing to uphold a particular standard of whiteness recall Mills’ observation that even well-intentioned white subjects are conditioned by the Racial Contract. However, Mills’ emphasis on epistemology should not preclude a consideration of affect. As Pham (2019) reminds us, identities like “citizen” and “patriot” are about more than what we know. They are also shaped by affective investments in what we know, as well as how our feelings make us susceptible or impervious to other ways of knowing. Rational arguments will be insufficient to dismantle affective investments in white nationalism. We must also consider how white subjects are positioned in regimes of belonging that distort our ability to understand the world as we have made it. Until then, the material consequences of right-wing populism will be expressed by the violence inflicted on those who find themselves outside the affective coordinates of citizenship.

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