

‘Winning bigly’: Sporting Fantasies of White Male Omnipotence in the Rise of Trump and Alt Right White Supremacy

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author offers a critical contextual analysis that seeks to answer Giroux’s (2015) call for scholars to map and critically examine the “cultural circuits, points of connection, internalized values, discourses and pedagogies. . . responsible for both promoting and legitimating the likes of Donald Trump” (Don’t Get Distracted by the Buffoonery section, para. 1). To this end, this essay explores how the Trump candidacy and presidency, the rise of the Alt Right, and the appeal of New England Patriots quarterback, Tom Brady, to his fans who have nicknamed him as the ‘Greatest Of All Time’ (i.e. The G.O.A.T.), are all linked by 1) the lionization of a particular performance of white masculinity as omnipotent, and 2) a desire to unapologetically revitalize white male privilege and prerogative as the unquestioned norm across American culture. The author articulates these three cultural sites together—Trump’s racial and gender performance as a politician, the alt-right’s visions of white national manhood, and cultural representations of Brady as the embodiment of white male omnipotence—to emphasize the point that the white supremacist and anti-feminist ideas expressed by Trump, his administration, and the alt-right are not just beliefs held just by a handful of white racists with ‘hate in their hearts.’ Instead, these retrogressive and anti-democratic ideas about race and gender have been circulating and cross-pollinating across American film, television, and sport media (among other cultural sites) over the past decade and have primed anxious white men to perceive the Alt Right and Trump’s efforts to revitalize white male prerogative in American civic life as reasonable.

Keywords: whiteness, masculinity, White male prerogative, popular culture, alt-right, Trumpism

INTRODUCTION

Within weeks of Donald Trump’s inauguration as the 45th President of the United States, the New England Patriots—led by quarterback, Tom Brady—staged a historic comeback over the Atlanta Falcons to win Super

Bowl LI. The comeback only reaffirmed the nickname given to Brady by his acolytes—the G.O.A.T.—an acronym for: Greatest Of All Time. At the same time Brady was leading this extraordinary comeback, Richard Spencer—the white supremacist who journalist, Sarah Posner (2016), described as “the Alt-Right’s ‘it boy’”—began sending out joyous tweets on Twitter about the Patriots’ comeback and Brady. At the time, Spencer had only recently emerged from relative obscurity to garner attention as one of the leaders of the then incipient movement of white supremacists dubbed the ‘Alt-Right.’ Spencer gained notoriety as journalists began to detect links between the Alt-Right and the Trump campaign, namely through some of the latter’s re-tweets on Twitter. Ever the opportunist, Spencer welcomed the media’s critical gaze and attempted to advance the Alt-Right’s iteration of white supremacist ideas packaged as they were in rhetoric about identitarianism and white identity politics by hitching them to Trump’s wagon. This was perhaps most evident in the days immediately following Trump’s unexpected presidential victory, Spencer was caught on video giving a rousing pro-Trump speech in the Ronald Reagan Federal Building in Washington, D.C. In one key passage, Spencer celebrated the idea that, in his view, the U.S. was once again a white country. He ended his speech provocatively by shouting: “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory” as an audience filled—not with middle-aged white-hooded Ku Klux Klan members, nor with young skinheads donning swastika tattoos, black jeans, and leather boots—with hundreds of well-dressed, clean-cut, young white men who would not look out of place in Silicon Valley or a college campus, responded with cheers and even a few, open-handed Nazi salutes. (Harkinson, 2016, Editor’s Note section, para 1).

But as the Patriots’ completed their Super Bowl LI comeback, Spencer made clear through his tweets that he saw the Tom Brady, the Patriots’ and Trump’s victories as connected to his brand of alt-right white supremacy played out in flesh and blood:

“Brady and Belichick are about to win bigly for Trump, the #AltRight, and White America!”

“Tom Brady: Aryan Avatar #superbowl”

“For the White race, it’s never over”

“I was born in Boston, Mass. I’m proud of the NFL’s Whitest team! #superbowl”

[Accompanied by a picture of Brady from Fall 2016 in front of locker with Trump ‘Make America Great Again’ red hat in locker] “#Superbowl

#NewEnglandPatriots #MakeAmericaGreatAgain” (Chabba, 2017, para. 2).

In one final tweet, Spencer drove home the connection he saw between Brady and Trump by referencing two news stories that featured pictures of Tom Brady and Donald Trump standing in almost identical poses. Both stories also highlighted the long odds each faced in winning the Super Bowl and 2016 Presidential election, respectively. Accompanying these images was one final comment from Spencer: “Nothing is written. No fate but what we [read: white men] make. #SuperBowl#Patriots” (Chabba, 2017, para. 6).

While some might dismiss Spencer’s tweets as little more than a political opportunist’s desperate attempt to be relevant, I want to use them as a starting point from which to answer Giroux’s (2015) call for scholars to map and critically examine the “cultural circuits, points of connection, internalized values, discourses and pedagogies. . . responsible for both promoting and legitimating the likes of Donald Trump” and the retrogressive ideas and conditions that enabled his political ascendancy (Don’t Get Distracted by the Buffoonery section, para. 1). Mapping these ideas across American culture forces one to reckon with the reality that the ideas that buoyed the Trump campaign and the formation of the Alt-Right—racial separatism, scientific racism, gender essentialism, anti-diversity, anti-feminism, misogyny, and reinvigorating fraternal bonds between white men—are not held just by a few white ‘racists’ with ‘hate in their hearts’ who live on the margins of American society. Instead, these ideas have been gaining prominence in contemporary American popular culture over the past decade. As King and Leonard (2014) note, although many Americans want to believe there exists a wide “geographic and ideological binary between the [White] extreme and mainstream,” in reality, “the divide. . . is tenuous at best” (p.6).

The “unexpected” rise of Trump and the online alt-right are part of a much broader cultural production of fantasies of an unapologetic, omnipotent white masculinity that have become a prominent feature of American popular culture over the past decade. This fantasy is not confined to a subculture of online chat rooms. It is part of a broader discursive formation that has been cross-pollinating across a network of cultural sites from white supremacist internet sites to Fox News and Breitbart News to sport talk-radio to sport media sites to online gaming cultures to ‘bro’/fraternity college lifestyle websites to network and post-network shows to Hollywood films and back again. In this paper, I illuminate how this fantasy of unapologetic, omnipotent white masculinity connects President Trump’s political project with the alt right and with cultural representations of New England Patriots’ quarterback, Tom Brady. In drawing these links, I argue that being

unapologetic about restoring white male prerogative in American civic life has become *the* preferred representational strategy—as opposed to white men making claims to being victimized, disadvantaged, or minoritized (Carroll, 2011; Leonard, 2017; Savran, 1998)—of this latest wave of white supremacist backlash.

WHITE MALE BACKLASH, CIRCA 2016

White male status anxieties played a crucial role in enabling Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 United States presidential election (Hochschild, 2017; Myerson, 2017). The way in which Trump won the White House—intentional scapegoating and stereotyping of racial and religious minorities, xenophobia, bullying opponents, and shamelessly stoking of racial violence—suggests we are in the midst of a significant shift in the tactics, rationalizations, and narratives used to re-produce the normativity of whiteness in American culture and society. As Kantrowitz (2000), Alexander (2008), Harris Perry (2010), and Anderson (2016) have each noted, moments of significant racial advancement in the U.S., especially for African-Americans, have often been followed by counter-waves of 'white rage' that contain, blunt, and even roll-back this progress. So perhaps we should not be surprised that yet another virulent white backlash has arisen during Barack Obama's historic interruption of elite white male rule (Feagin & Ducey, 2017) in the Oval Office.

In their book, *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party*, Hughey and Parks (2014) provide ample evidence that nativism, xenophobia, racial fatigue, and anti-black and anti-immigrant racism were growing on the Right prior to the rise of Trump. Indeed, they document the formation of a disturbing racial hysteria amongst a sizable portion of conservative whites during the Obama years in response to the idea that a black man would be “the most cherished citizen in the land—citizen president, representative, and leader” (p.5). Perhaps most telling, Hughey and Parks' foresaw and foretold the production of “a dangerous. . .white supremacist ideology and practice . . . [that] together reveal[ed] the existence of a Herrenvolk (white master race) democracy in the midst of the supposed 'post-racial' era of Barack Obama” (p. 7). So while it is tempting to cast Trump and his campaign as the origin of a decisive shift in white hegemony in 2016, it is important to recognize how the social and discursive conditions were already in place for an authoritarian, populist candidate willing to exploit growing sentiments of white anger, nativism, xenophobia, and wounded masculinity just as Trump did.

Anthropologist Jeff Maskovsky (2017) argues that Trump has ushered in “a new form of racial politics” called “white nationalist postracialism”

(p. 434). For Maskovsky, white nationalist postracialism “is a paradoxical politics of twenty-first-century white racial resentment. Its proponents seek to do two contradictory things: to reclaim the nation for white Americans while also denying an ideological investment in white supremacy” (p. 434). This mode of racial resentment is expressed by Trump and the alt-right not only through negative rhetoric directed as racial others, but through affirmative rhetoric that seeks to recover an unapologetic, omnipotent performance of white masculinity and make it a metonym of American exceptionalism and the nation itself.

This can be seen in how Trump enacts a fantasy of an all-powerful and unreformed white masculinity that seems to create a reciprocal feeling of omnipotence and vitality in his followers. It is constituted through an alchemy of social class codes: the language, attitude, and distrust of liberal elites and experts that appeals to white working folk (Williams, 2017), combined with an unabashed air of elitism, especially relative to people of color and women. This combination of a blunt, working class rhetorical style of ‘telling it how it is,’ with the ability to leverage one’s wealthy white male habitus to compel the world to bend to your will at least partially explains how Trump can appeal to whites of divergent class positions. Even further, to his followers, Trump represents a brash, guilt-free, successful, non-deferential, unconstrained, and unapologetic way of being white and male that feels good to anxious whites in an era where, according to Hochschild’s (2017) ethnographic work, the cultural norms of political correctness have left them feeling silenced, stressed, and ashamed about their investments in the values and norms of post-World War II white suburban conformity that is suspicious of (racial) otherness.

This desire to unapologetically enact an omnipotent white masculinity also appeals to those on the Far Right who identify with right-wing populism (Berlet & Lyons, 2000) and white nationalism (Swain, 2003). That these enactments of unabashed, all-powerful white masculinity increasingly appear both in mainstream American media culture and in white supremacist movements should come as no surprise to those aware of the many studies of white supremacist movements since the 1990s. These studies document how the discourses of the White Right have dovetailed considerably with mainstream American racial discourses (Berlet & Lyons, 2000; Ferber, 1998; Holling, 2014; Lyons, 2017; Swain, 2003). But what seems new with this alt-right iteration of white supremacism is its appeal with young white men who attend college and have been radicalized by the steady stream of conservative assaults on diversity initiatives that they perceive as hostile to white men and their futures. These young white men seem to prefer not to assume a victimized subjectivity in order to make a claim for rights. Instead they seem to prefer to unapologetically assert, in a

way they define as manly, the idea that white men's prerogatives and interests should unquestionably sit at the center of American civic life.

A key facet of the Trump and alt-right projects is an aggressive attempt to reassert white male prerogative as the unquestioned social norm and orienting logic of the American State and civil society (Kantrowitz, 2001). Trump's investment in this project is exemplified in his personal refusal to follow cultural or political norms, social expectations, laws, or even a shared sense of reality that gets in the way of him carrying out his interests and desires as a wealthy white man. Through social policies and executive orders Trump is attempting to dismiss or marginalize diversity logics in order to re-naturalize white male prerogative as an organizing principle in contemporary American civil society. Concrete examples of his reassertion of white male prerogative can be found in his refusal to divest from his businesses upon taking office and in casual misogyny expressed to Billy Bush during the notorious *Access Hollywood* interview, "And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything, whatever you want. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything" (Waxman, 2016, para. 6). It is there in his defense of the fundamentalist Alabama judge, Roy Moore, and White House aide, Rob Porter, amidst accusations of sexual assault and domestic abuse, respectively, when he defends both men to reporters by saying, "He says he's innocent, and I think you have to remember that" (Diamond, 2018, para. 7). It is there in Trump's selective application of the principle of 'due process' to powerful white men, but his refusal to grant it to others, especially his critics. It is there in his dismissal of critical news coverage of him or his administration as 'fake news.' Or, how he and his administration can wield the phrase to dismiss narratives and discursive frames that value and center diversity and feminist values and norms. And while this list could go on and on, it is there in his (and his administration's) criticisms of racial dissent when expressed by black sporting figures like Colin Kaepernick and Jemele Hill, but its absence when expressed by white sports figures like Steve Kerr, Dave Zirin, and Gregg Popovich.

While Trump's blatant refusal to follow widely accepted social and political norms is frequently explained as a product of his celebrity status, such an interpretation overlooks how the intersection of his race, class, and gender enabled his refusals to avoid penalty. And as we have already witnessed through the violent actions of the alt-right in Charlottesville, Virginia in the summer of 2017, Trump's embodied performance of unapologetic, omnipotent white masculinity as U.S. President not only emboldens many millions of anxious or disaffected white American men to take to the streets to reaffirm the taken-for-grantedness of white male prerogative in American civic life, but it gives license for the casual expression of bigotry and enactment of physical violence against all those that do not

share their values and vision. So, diagnosing Trump's performance of white masculinity is important not simply to note a stylistic change in how white masculinity is performed in American culture, but because it signifies a disturbing shift in how white hegemony is being re-configured in the post-Obama era.

THE ROLE OF SPORT, GAMES, AND LEISURE IN PROMOTING
UNAPOLOGETIC WHITE MALE OMNIPOTENCE IN
TRUMPISM AND THE ALT-RIGHT

Although often overlooked, the homosocial culture and fantasies of omnipotent masculinity that often get constructed through men's sport and leisure activities have been central not only to Trump's unexpected election victory, but to his project of white nationalist post racialism, and this latest wave of alt-right white supremacy.

Much like he has cultivated images of himself as a business titan and playboy, Donald Trump has long used associations with sport to reify the core idea of his brand: Trump = all-powerful white man, and to sell himself as a fantasy to American audiences. During the 2016 campaign, Trump repeatedly used stories involving sport and white sportsmen to advance his politics (Oates & Kusz, forthcoming). Trump ranted about the way the NFL's new rules to promote player protection were a symptom of the feminization of American men and society (Oates, 2017). As if a stereotypical jock in middle school, he ridiculed his opponents with emasculating nicknames—"low energy" Jeb Bush, "Lyn'" Ted Cruz, and "Little" Marco Rubio—during the Republican primary debates. And at various rallies held across the country, Trump name-dropped local sports figures like Tom Brady, Mike Ditka, NASCAR CEO Brian France, and Ben Roethlisberger to ingratiate himself with local audiences, cast himself as a populist, and associate himself with the cultural authority afforded to male athletes. Trump even reportedly wanted to stage a 'winner's evening' at the Republican Convention that featured American athletes because in his view "our country needs to see winners. . . We don't see winners anymore" (Corasaniti, 2016, para. 9).

Trump even invited controversial former college basketball coach, Bobby Knight, to introduce him at several campaign stops. In Knight, Trump chose not just a coach who symbolized 'winning sportsman' and 'manly leader' to represent his campaign, but he selected a white man whose long record of refusing to follow the norms of political correctness, feminism, and multiculturalism signified his investment in upholding white male prerogative. Indeed, Trump's embrace of Knight further exemplified the way the restoration of an unapologetic, omnipotent white masculinity is

a key part of his project to 'make America great again' (Kusz, 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

While any presidential rally aims to generate enthusiasm amongst their supporters, Trump's presidential rallies - which he has continued well into the first year of his presidency - deserve critical analysis because they function as political theater that owes much to sports. Trump's rallies have the feel of a high school pep rally for his overwhelmingly white crowds of supporters. In these spaces, Trump plays the role of the all-powerful white male coach or star quarterback who energizes the crowd and defines who is part of the American 'home team' and who is defined as 'the other.' Of course, these rallies also recall those from nearly a century ago in the age of fascism, where authoritarian strongmen defined a national body politic by cultivating fears of immigrants and refugees defined as others.

These dynamics are evident in Trump's repeated condemnation of former San Francisco 49ers' quarterback, Colin Kaepernick's protest against police brutality and continued racial injustice in the United States at his rallies. While Trump first criticized Kaepernick during his presidential campaign, he renewed his attacks as President on September 22, 2017, at a rally in Huntsville, Alabama when he criticized other African-American NFL players who participated in the growing protest. Through Trump's criticism of Kaepernick and his supporters, it becomes apparent how white nationalist post racialism and white male prerogative operate in the Trump era. In a context where unarmed black Americans are being killed by police and white vigilantes, Trump not only refuses to recognize the legitimacy of Kaepernick's protest but he transforms it into an example of African-American ungratefulness and lack of patriotism. Here, Trump not only tramples on Kaepernick's citizenship rights, but he invites him to "find a country that works better for him, let him try, it's not gonna happen" (Fox News, 2016, para. 2).

So then, the Trump rally is important for several reasons. It functions as a homosocial space and retreat for anxious whites that is a signature feature of Trumpism. It functions as a sporting-like ritual imbued with crucial political and cultural value because it enables a place for Trump to enact this fantasy of being an unapologetic, omnipotent white American man taking back *his* country. When read in this way, we can begin to see how the architecture and ideologies of these rallies share much in common with the way many white male groups associated with the alt-right also create homosocial spaces where they can establish a social world where white male prerogative and fantasies of white male omnipotence reign supreme (Watkins, 2017).

The preference of anxious white men to retreat to homosocial cultures of leisure where they can not only be free to do and say what they please,

but where they can bond with other white men over their shared investments in fantasies of masculine omnipotence is also an oft-overlooked part of the appeal and the formation of the Alt-Right online and in physical spaces like Charlottesville. According to one report, one of the key cultural events instrumental in radicalizing Richard Spencer was the national media spectacle that ensued after three members of the Duke Lacrosse team were accused of raping an African-American female stripper during a private team party in 2007 (Wiedeman, 2017). Spencer was a student at Duke University at the time and not only did he defend the accused publicly, but within a year, he quit the doctoral program he attended and began writing for conservative media, ultimately coining the term, “Alternative Right” that has given today’s generation of white supremacists their name. In his own words, Spencer said, “In this funny chain of events, the Duke lacrosse case changed the course of my career . . . My life would not have taken the direction it did absent the Duke lacrosse case” (Wiedeman, 2017, para. 4). Spencer reportedly learned from this experience that boldly and unapologetically standing up and defending white men in the face of accusations from the ‘racial Left’ could be both a winning (and career-enhancing) strategy.

Over the next few years, as he began to cultivate his white identitarian beliefs, Spencer would repeatedly return to sport in his writings. In 2010, he wrote, “White Devils: The Unbearable Whiteness of Duke Basketball,” where he praised coach, Mike Krzyzewski for creating a top-level men’s college basketball program led by a white-dominant roster (Spencer, 2015a). In another, five years later titled, “Where Have All The White Devils Gone?,” Spencer (2015b) lamented the changing racial make-up of the starting fives of the Duke Men’s basketball teams and floated the conspiratorial idea that Duke’s all-black starting fives from 2013-15 were a conciliation Coach Krzyzewski made to institutional pressure to present a diversity-friendly picture of Duke in the aftermath of the Duke Lacrosse case.

And not six months into the Trump presidency, Spencer once again embraced an opportunity to use sport to disseminate his racial ideas to broader American audiences. In a 4-part series titled, *American Race*, produced by cable network, *TNT*, Spencer was invited to sit down face-to-face with outspoken African-American former NBA star, Charles Barkley. Not only was Spencer represented as the face of the alt-right on the show, but he also appeared as a clean-cut, articulate, and excessively polite figure—what the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) calls “a suit and tie racist”—who was virtually in awe of Barkley when they first meet on camera. But, once their conversation began, Spencer explained in a plain, direct, unapologetic, and self-assured manner his beliefs of racial separatism and white superiority to Barkley, including his desire to “expand and deepen white privilege.” Throughout the interview, Spencer proves adept at being able to use a sport

media platform to carry out his political aim—to move the ‘Overton window’ so that the white supremacism of the Alt-Right could gain more exposure and acceptance within the American mainstream.

Another example of how sport and the preservation of homosocial spaces where white men can retreat and feel like all-powerful men factor into the formation of the alt-right can be seen in Neiwert’s (2017) book, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*. In a chapter detailing the events and figures that helped create the alt-right iteration of white supremacy, Neiwert identifies the Gamergate controversy as a key event. Through his discussion it becomes apparent how, like the Duke Lacrosse Case, efforts to protect homosocial leisure spaces where white men can indulge in fantasies of their own omnipotence has been a recurrent influence on the formation of the Alt-Right. For those who may not know about this controversy, Gamergate began when some young white male gamers objected to a video game created by Zoe Quinn called *Depression Quest*. They objected to the game because it made visible and challenged the “male-oriented first-person-shooter architecture that still dominates gaming” (Neiwert, 2017, p. 233). On the internet site, 4Chan, one of the sites where serious gamers went to discuss the games they played—and one of the places where the alt-right took shape online (Nagle, 2017)—rumors quickly spread that Quinn received favorable reviews for her game because her new boyfriend was a videogame journalist. Although the allegation was false, the conspiracy theory quickly mobilized white male gamers who feared a challenge from outside to their male-dominant homosocial safe-space. According to Neiwert (2017), in response to the creation of *one feminist video game*, these gamers hysterically “claimed [there] was a pro-feminist, pro-liberal, anti-white male bias growing within the computer-game industry” and they launched an all-out personal attack on Quinn via the Internet (p. 234). After criticizing the Gamergaters in an article, cultural critic, Anita Sarkeesian, like Quinn before her, was ‘doxxed’ (her home address and personal information were published online) by these white male gamers and she received thousands of rape and death threats that even forced to “flee her home” (p. 234).

Particularly interesting about the Gamergate controversy is how it began with young white male gamers reacting hysterically to what they perceived as a female threatening their homosocial safe space to play games that featured fantasies of white male omnipotence. Gamergate also reveals the extreme lengths these young white male gamers would go to protect social spaces they felt it was their prerogative to have only for themselves. In order to protect these safe spaces for themselves they were willing to express a disturbingly violent, yet casual misogyny. And, of course, they rationalized their acts as acceptable because many of them have swallowed

whole the white males in crisis narratives that circulate in conservative discourses, especially within the online right, and they imagine themselves as being under existential threat.

This desire to create homosocial spaces where young white men can create cultures with masculinizing rituals so they can feel like powerful (white) men again is a key feature of a number of groups associated with the alt-right. Take, for example, the Proud Boys, a group created by Gavin McInnes in 2016 that he describes as a “pro-Western fraternal organization” for men who “refuse to apologize for creating the modern world” (Marantz, 2017, para. 8). McInnes originally made his name as a co-founder of Vice Media and Vice Magazine, but went on to become an online media personality, who even occasionally appeared on various Fox News programs. He’s known for his hipster style combined with his right-wing political beliefs, especially his pro-men’s rights stances. While he is unapologetic about representing the Proud Boys as a fraternal organization, McInnes denies his group is founded on white supremacy. McInnes says men of color are allowed, but only so long as they “recognize that white men are not the problem,” and “they don’t whine about racism or blame it for their problems” (Disser, 2016, para. 44). Nonetheless, the *raison d’être* for the Proud Boys, according to McInnes is to provide a space, much like that of a college fraternity, where young white men can participate in activities—drinking beer or maybe even, fighting—and feel free of racial and gender guilt. An interesting part of the Proud Boys is the way they have attempted to formalize their group creating an initiation process and way of life for group members that include abstention from masturbation and watching pornography so he can become his best manly self.

The centrality of this fantasy of unapologetic white male omnipotence is also apparent in another story involving the organizing of the alt-right. On the Wednesday before the ‘Unite the Right’ rally that took place in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017, Andrew Anglin, the creator of the *Daily Stormer* white supremacist website, posted what was ostensibly a fashion guide for how alt-right members should look when they ‘hit the streets.’ In it, he reveals the importance the alt-right places on their projecting a fantasy of white male omnipotence in order to draw new members to their movement:

We are now at a magical point in history. All of the work we have done in these tubes is paying off, and the Alt-Right is ready to move off of the internet, into the real world. . .

The plan was always to build a real political movement. We now have the numbers to begin that process. . .

Our target audience is white males between the ages of 10 and 30. I include children as young as ten, because an element of this is that *we want to look like superheroes. We want to be something that boys fantasize about being a part of.* That is a core element to this. . . We have to be hip and we have to be sexy.

In fact, that is priority number one, so let me say it again, italicized: we have to be sexy.

If you say, “but I don’t care about being sexy,” then I say to you: “I don’t care about what you care about, *because all I care about is winning*”. . .

This means *we have to look good, we have to look dangerous, we have to have humor, we have to look powerful and we have to look like we are in control.*

People who see us have to want to be us. That means you have to go to the gym. . . (Anglin, 2017, para. 1, my italics added)

Anglin’s style-guide reveals how a fantasy of omnipotent white masculinity offered as an imagined solution to what they see as a cultural war against white men sits at the center of the Alt Right project. In his own words, Anglin acknowledges how part of the draw of the Alt Right for most young white men is that it offers a homosocial space where this fantasy is not only revered by all, but it is transformed into a way of life by and for white men that puts their prerogatives at the center of their social world. It’s a way of life that requires, as it venerates, manly self-control, strict discipline, and hard work in order to turn male flesh into masculine fantasy.

In the next section, I explain how various cultural representations of Tom Brady position him as a living embodiment of the fantasy of white male omnipotence that is remarkably similar to the model Anglin wishes Alt Right white men would perform in public. In pointing this out, I hope to make clear how the aspirational model of white masculinity that organizes the Alt Right imaginary shares much in common with the with the cultural appeal of the white masculinity that Brady embodies and performs in the center of American media culture. Indeed, cultural representations of Tom Brady in advertising, in sport media, and in his recent behind-the-scenes Facebook documentary titled: *Tom vs. Time* (Chopra & Emilani, 2018)—drenched as they are in long standing and quotidian signs and codes of white supremacy—are part of a cultural circuit that enables Alt Right ideas to circulate from the margins to the center of American media culture. This flow of ideas takes place not only when Spencer tweets about Brady as an ‘Aryan Avatar’ during Super Bowl LI on Twitter, but when Trump tweets about Brady as a ‘total winner,’ or when Brady appears as the embodiment

of white male omnipotence in a Hollywood film like *Ted 2* (MacFarlane, Clark, Jacobs, & Stuber, 2015) or television commercials for *Beautyrest* mattresses or *UnderArmour* athletic gear.

BRADY'S ELITIST UNAPOLOGETIC, OMNIPOTENT WHITE MASCULINITY

In his discussion of the popular appeal of strongman Eugene Sandow at the turn of the 20th century cultural historian John F. Kasson (2001) details how Sandow's muscular body and personal story became potent and complex symbols of a definition of white male perfection that served to naturalize white male privilege at a time of much social, economic, cultural, and technological change. Drawing on Kasson's interpretive framework, I contend that Brady's stellar on-the-field accomplishments and the patterned way he's portrayed off-the-field as being unapologetic about his wealth and privilege and as 'the man who has it all' have transformed him into a similarly potent and complex symbol of white male omnipotence in 2010s America, one whose racial and gender meanings are remarkably aligned with those embraced within the Alt Right. Brady's imaged identity gains these meanings not just from the U.S.' long history of white supremacy, but from contemporary discourses about white male anxiety and crisis that inform this latest wave of white supremacy stoked by Donald Trump and the Alt Right.

Tom Brady deserves special attention in this discussion of Trump, the Alt Right, and this broader contemporary white supremacist backlash not only because a red Trump 'Make America Great Again' was found in his locker in the fall of 2015, but because, in his own words, he identifies Trump as a "good friend of mine" who he's "always enjoyed his company" (Stern, 2016). Even further, Brady's performance of white masculinity deserves critical attention because he has refused to denounce Trump's xenophobia, Islamophobia, misogyny, and racial, ethnic, and religious scapegoating. In his silence, Brady, at best, exemplifies the white American who believes s/he can be neutral in our system of white supremacy. At worst, he signifies the white American who - like the alt-right white nationalist - believes racial, ethnic, and religious injustice and systemic violence and inequalities are not his problem because they happen over there, in communities of color, due to their inherent pathologies of black people (whether defined in biological or cultural terms).

Brady's relationship with Trump further deserves critical attention because, according to Brady, it began when The Donald invited him to be a judge at Miss U.S.A pageant after Brady's first Super Bowl appearance. That Brady's friendship with Trump was, by his own admission, subsequently built through time spent on private, exclusive golf courses—an elite

homosocial sporting space exclusive to wealthy white men where they too often act like boys—begs questions about Brady's own appetite and tolerance for boorish, sexist male behavior given the 'Access Hollywood' revelation about Trump's crude, demeaning way of treating and talking about women in private and his rationalization of it all as innocent 'locker room talk' (Pallotta, 2017).

It is hard to compartmentalize these incidents when Brady himself pridefully posts pictures on social media of his annual 'boys only' trips to the Kentucky Derby with teammates and friends that display similar appetites for the pleasures of fraternal bonding and 'old money' leisure. Even further, the fact that the 'boys' who feature in Brady's photos are an overwhelmingly white lot reveals a disturbing pattern when read in the context of Brady's friendship with Trump and his silence on Trump's racial statements. Brady consistently invites a group dominated by white male teammates to go on his Kentucky Derby 'boys only' trips despite the fact that he plays in a sport where 67% of the players are African-American (Leonard, 2016). And this pattern reveals more than he seems to recognize about the racial company he keeps.

Considering how carefully Brady tries to manage his public identity, these public images of Brady in private tell a more particular story of him; one he is apparently not reluctant to share. It is a vision of Brady as a wealthy, white man who unapologetically enjoys, and has even made a habit out of, spending time with other wealthy white men who treasure 'being with the boys,' choose to run in white-majority groups, and measure their masculinities by their ability to win trophies (both literal and figurative).

Interestingly, this image of Brady is not unlike the one that repeatedly emerges in advertising campaigns through which Brady chooses to construct his personal brand. Take, for example, a recent *Beautyrest* mattress commercial. In it, Brady appears as a James Bond-like figure of wealth, sophistication, exclusivity, and exceptionality. This advertising image of Brady is further reinforced by a deal Brady recently signed to endorse Bond's iconic Aston Martin sports car (a car priced at \$211,000), not to mention other upscale companies that are part of Brady's endorsement portfolio (i.e. UGGs, Tag Heuer). In each of these sites, Brady is figured as an unapologetic embodiment of upper class white exceptionality and manly omnipotence. And while these visions of Brady do not crassly express notions of white male superiority or a desire for a white-only ethno-state, they reveal a distinct pattern where Brady chooses to represent himself and his brand in class exclusive spaces where he's depicted as an elite and people of color are rarely present. In other words, through these promotional and self-representations, Brady brings to life a vision of American social

life (racially segregated and centered on fraternal relations amongst white men) not dissimilar from Trump's xenophobic America First nationalism and from the Alt Right's desire for a white American ethno-state.

This representation of Brady as a white male who's unapologetic about his wealth and privilege is further reinforced in cameos he's made in a television series like *Entourage* (Mylod & Ellin, 2009) and a film like *Ted 2* (MacFarlane, Clark, Jacobs, & Stuber, 2015). In both, Brady plays an idealized version of himself. In *Entourage*, a Brady appears as the 'man who has it all' and casually displays his masculine omnipotence palling around on the golf course with the Entourage band of bros (Mylod & Ellin, 2009). Brady is cast in this role as a star athlete unapologetically living the 'good life' defined as material comforts and an elevated social status that 99% of Americans can only dream about.

In *Ted 2*, Brady is portrayed similarly, but the idea of Brady superior status is taken even further as he is depicted as the embodiment of human perfection, literally (MacFarlane, Clark, Jacobs, & Stuber, 2015). The white everyman main character in the film (played by Mark Wahlberg) will go to almost any length to obtain Brady's sperm so his teddy bear best friend can produce a genetically superior male heir with his new wife. Through this storyline, the film invites audiences to see the white male Brady as the perfect human specimen whose genes are superior to all others. Although guised in sophomoric humor, *Ted 2*'s imagining of Brady reveals how his exceptionality becomes an avenue for the (re)activation of ideas subtly tinged with the residue of scientific racism and eugenics from a previous moment of white supremacy—a time when anti-immigrant and nativist sentiments ran amok, waves of white vigilantism terrorized African-Americans after a brief moment of racial progress, and a Gilded age of capitalists were busy building personal empires of wealth off the backs of recent American immigrants. And as other commentators have already noted, the ideas, logics, and even language of eugenics regularly roll off the tongue of Trump and his white male-dominant legion of advisors (Jones, 2017; Kirby, 2018).

Finally, the idea of Brady as an embodiment of white male omnipotence is even blurred between the promotional representations discussed above and journalistic and documentarian accounts of the real-life Brady especially in laudatory discussions of his hyper-disciplined diet, workout, and ascetic health regime—all done so he can continue playing in the NFL deep into his 40s. While Brady is often reluctant to discuss details of his private life, he has shown a proclivity for going into great detail unabashedly proselytizing to others about the virtues of his radical diet and training regimen with his controversial body coach, Alex Guerrero. And in 2017, Brady authored, *The TBI2 Method: How to Achieve A Lifetime of Sustained Peak Performance*, where he laid out the philosophy and prac-

tices that constitute his controversial lifestyle program. Through talk of his diet and training habits, Brady's success is portrayed as largely the product of his personal discipline, ascetic diet, and his masterful willpower. Through these stories, a long-standing myth long used to (re)produce white supremacy especially in its civilizing iterations is brought to life—whites possess an innate quality, or spirit, that can't be empirically located or measured in their bodies, but that explains their innate capacity to be exceptional (Dyer, 1997). It is the idea that enables Richard Spencer to see Brady as an 'Aryan avatar' and that founds his desire for a white ethno-national state. It also explains what Trump means when he calls white sportsmen 'winners' and imagines Brady and himself as ones (Oates & Kusz, forthcoming).

These stories also reveal the complicated ways that the real-life Brady is obsessed with a set of ideas—trying to stay youthful forever and trying to achieve god-like immortality through sport—that reinforce his own apparent desire to live his life as a fantasy of omnipotent white masculinity, that is, to live as: 'Tom Brady, the G.O.A.T. (The Greatest Of All Time).' Interestingly, the best evidence to support this interpretation has been provided by Brady himself through the behind-the-scenes documentary he helped produce for Facebook titled: *Tom vs. Time* (Chopra & Emilani, 2018). In the documentary, he lets viewers into his home and social world to construct an image of himself as dedicated to an all-consuming pursuit of becoming the G.O.A.T. and a Super Bowl Champion. When examined critically, *Tom vs. Time* reveals how a logic of white male prerogative organizes Brady's home and family life. He is displayed prioritizing his in-season preparation over all other family responsibilities during the season. Brady is repeatedly shown in *Tom vs. Time* alone retreating into private spaces in his home to watch game tape or to receive massages and treatment from his personal trainer, Alex Guerrero. And although Brady spends much of the documentary ruminating to viewers about his unease with sacrificing so much time he could be spent with family so that he can train and prepare to perform the omnipotent 'G.O.A.T. Brady' for as long as he can, we still see Brady choosing day after day to take time away from his family, even in the off-season, to retreat to homosocial spaces he creates in order to spend time with teammates—'his boys'—in an attempt to perfect their athletic craft and keep the fantasy of self alive for a few years more. At one point, Brady's supermodel wife, Gisele Bündchen, lamentingly jokes that she thinks he loves football and time spent with the boys more than her.

So then, through these cultural representations we see Brady as the omnipotent white male who seems to have it all—he is one of the greatest quarterbacks of all-time, he's married to a supermodel, he's abundantly wealthy, and he's got Hollywood good looks. But, not only is he cast as an

ideal model of white masculinity, but this way of performing white masculinity is coded as deserving public reverence because it is able to unapologetically enjoy having it all without any trace of racial or class related guilt. In this way, part of Brady's public appeal is that he signifies the guilt-free, omnipotent white male who unapologetically embraces the idyllic life his wealth provides. And this part of Brady's performances of white masculinity—both across his advertisements and in his self-representations in social media—shares much in common with the popular appeal of Trump's performance of white masculinity and the fantasy of white masculinity offered by many groups associated with the alt-right.

And if all of this talk of Brady as a contemporary symbol of white supremacy or the alt-right white nationalist iteration of white supremacy should sound far-fetched, one need only watch that 30-second 2015 'Rule Yourself' *UnderArmour* commercial featuring an army of thousands of simulated Tom Bradys, all clad in black and red athletic gear detailed with American stars, stripes and an Army fatigue motif, moving in perfect unison as they work toward athletic perfection. The commercial first aired five days after a Trump hat was found in Brady's locker. It was part of a broader *UnderArmour* campaign that featured basketball player, Steph Curry, golfer Jordan Spieth, and ballerina Misty Copeland. But only in Brady's commercial was the featured athletic performer cast in a red and black color scheme with militaristic sounds echoing in the background.

Upon first glance, the images of Brady in the *UnderArmour* commercial working hard 'every single day' (words he repeats throughout the commercial) might surely be read by many as just another example of a banal sport advert circulating American mythologies of individualism, hard work, and meritocracy. But, such a reading is only possible for those unfamiliar with the cultural roots of the commercial's imagery and blinded by the myths of racial colorblindness and postracialism that govern contemporary popular racial discourse. Once one realizes how this repertoire of images that constitute this vision of Brady trace back to Leni Reifenstahl's (1935) Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*, one must reckon with the way that faith in postracialism can allow for a white supremacist fantasy of Brady to be forwarded as the perfect embodied representative of the American nation (Kusz, 2017). The commercial's repetition of discipline and hard work also evinces the producerist ethos that Berlet and Lyons (2000) argue organizes so many right-wing populist and the White Right movements in the past and present. Once all this is seen, it becomes hard to un-see the alarming way Nazi aesthetics and white supremacist ideas converged within a representation of Brady where racial difference is eradicated, uniformity is celebrated, and only idealized white men matter. It is a representation of Brady that alarmingly coincides with the logics of a national vision that the

White Right fantasizes about and one that affectively fuels Trump's project to "make America great again."

CONCLUSION

In a recent interview with Teri Gross (2017) about his new book, *((Semitism))*: *Being Jewish in America in the Age of Trump*, Jonathan Weisman highlights the difficulty of how to address and counter the rise of the alt-right for progressives. Should our resistance shed a critical light on the ideas and tactics of the alt-right or is it better just to ignore them because what they desperately want more than anything is the public's attention? Obviously, in this essay, I have chosen the former. I have done so—especially in the context of writing an article for the *Journal of Hate Studies*—because too often our public discourse about white racism in 2018 still conceptualizes racial inequalities as an individual act perpetrated by those who 'have hate in their hearts.' Such an understanding of racism is problematic for at least two reasons: it allows white people not to recognize Bebout and Ladenburg's (2017) point that white supremacy is "a fundamental aspect of our country's social and political fabric" and to imagine themselves as not being complicit in reproducing racism in American institutional and cultural life (para. 2).

Additionally, others' attempts to explain the rise of the alt-right have too often explained their ideas and logics as if they originated in the obscure, isolated sites of the online right or within the wave of white nationalism that has overtaken Europe (Nagle, 2017; Neiwert, 2017). What these analyses of the alt-right fail to recognize is how the ideas and performances of unapologetic white male omnipotence and the impulse to create homosocial spaces for white men to nurture this performance of white masculinity have been circulating all across American popular culture over the past decade and are not specific to the subcultural spaces of the radical right. Consider Hugh Laurie's performance as the irascible, un-politically correct, yet medically omnipotent Gregory House in *House M.D.* (Shore & Singer, 2004); or, Will Ferrell's Ricky Bobby in the film, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (Apatow & McKay, 2006); or Ryan Gosling's phallic lothario, Jacob, guiding Steve Carell's "cuckold" Cal back to respectable manhood in *Crazy. Stupid. Love* (Carrell, DiNovi, Ficarra, & Requa, 2011). Each shares in common an affinity or longing for omnipotent performances of white masculinity and an unapologetic taste for the fraternal bonds of white manhood as an imagined solution to contemporary social conditions in the United States they perceive as compromising their ability to be properly respected manly men.

I have also tried to show how both the Alt Right and Trump advance

their politics of racial and gendered resentment by cultivating public spaces into homosocial spaces (implicitly modeled on the masculinizing relations of sport) where omnipotent performances of white masculinity and the fraternal bonds between strong, tough manly men reign supreme. Finally, I have focused on the ways that cultural representations of sports star, Tom Brady, are another site in the center of American media culture where American audiences are offered a performance of white masculinity whose appeal not only lies, at least in part, in his manly omnipotence and his refusal to apologize for his position of privilege. This white male ontology is a centripetal cultural force that draws anxious, disillusioned white men to the ideas of the Alt Right and to Trump's white nationalist postracialism (Maskovsky, 2017). This force becomes apparent when one acknowledges Trump's use of sport to advance his racial politics, including his lionization of Brady as a 'total winner' and his deep desire to connect himself to Brady, and how these connections were also made by Alt Right leader, Richard Spencer, when he saw Brady as an 'Aryan Avatar' as he led the Patriots to a dramatic comeback victory in Super Bowl LI.

So, while the agents of white hegemony want to explain the extremist ideas of the Alt Right as being unique to, and isolated within, the spaces of the online right, if our goal is to challenge the appeal of these ideologies—especially the models of white masculinity they offer anxious white men—we must recognize the extent to which they proliferate throughout American media culture over the past decade (at least) and how they have primed white men to perceive the ideas and practices of the Alt Right and Trump's efforts to revitalize white male prerogative in American civic life as reasonable. Recognizing the cultural appeal—and threat—of this performance of unapologetic, omnipotent white masculinity for anxious white men is crucial not only to formulate effective strategies and tactics to resist the Trump presidency or the normalization of the white nationalism of the Alt Right, but to at least partially explain the actions of a Dylan Roof, James Alex Fields, Michael Dunn, George Zimmerman, or Sean Urbanski whose senses of entitlement to feel omnipotent as white men was so strong it led them to take the life of (an)other in an attempt to bring it to life.

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