

CONTEXTUALIZING TRUMPISM: UNDERSTANDING RACE, GENDER, RELIGIOSITY,
AND RESISTANCE IN POST-TRUTH SOCIETY

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DEDICATION

This inquiry is dedicated to anyone who feels or has been told they don't belong—you do.

ABSTRACT

From within the discipline of religion and culture studies, this thesis contextualizes the intersecting discourses surrounding race, gender, and religion underpinning “Trumpism” as an exclusionary populist rhetoric in the United States with similar trends emerging in Canada, Europe, and parts of the Global South. In the US, Trumpism represents not only the political style and rhetoric of its namesake, but the mentality of a distinct voter base compelled to “make America great again.” Pressurized by contemporary social realities and a sensationalist media culture, Trumpian rhetoric can be understood as a “whitelash” response to changes in the American social fabric enmeshed in a cultural history of (white) Christian nationalism. To better understand the cultural and political undertones embodied by Trumpism, this research project presents four Focused Cultural Examples (FCEs) to engage critical discourse/media analysis in dialogue with academic literature. Each FCE examines an event or cluster of topics at the intersections of race, gender, and religion, including antithetical political movements and counter-narratives which challenge and resist Trumpism and what it represents. The synthesis chapter includes brief Canadian comparisons and considers some strategies for building more equitable and informed communities.

Keywords: religion and culture, religion and politics, intersectionality, religiosity, narrative construction, social media, frontlash/backlash, post-truth, Trumpism

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1. CHAPTER ONE—Introductory Chapter

1.1. Position Statement

From within the academic discipline of religion and culture studies (sometimes referred to as “religious studies”), this project examines the cultural and political fractures at the intersections of race, gender, and religion bolstering Trumpism as a conspiratorial and exclusionary populist rhetoric and political commitment in the United States. “Trumpism” encapsulates the political ideologies, attitudes, rhetoric, and behaviours associated with Trump and the Trumpian voter base. However, the available political and cultural resources that would culminate in the 2016 US presidential election existed long before Trump’s political opportunism. To better contextualize these political and cultural circumstances, this research project presents and unpacks a summary definition of Trumpism. The emergence of similar populist rhetoric and demagogic political figures calling for the “return of traditionalist values” echo in Canada, Europe, and in parts of the Global South. Religion and culture studies as an academic discipline takes seriously the role religion and spirituality have in the personal and political lives of people—for better or worse—and can help facilitate fruitful multidisciplinary and multifaith discussions on these intersecting topics.¹ As a post-Christian Canadian born and raised in Saskatchewan, I am not at the centre of the key identities at play and therefore approach these topics from the periphery as an outsider. However, this perspective is far from neutral since as an outsider with an academic vocation I am privileged in my relative socio-economic status

¹ Here I evoke Elizabeth A. Pritchard’s seminal work, “Seriously, What Does ‘Taking Religion Seriously’ Mean?” (2010) where Pritchard challenges the hegemonic discourses within religious studies scholarship and academic bureaucracy more generally.

and benefit from what Beliso-De Jesús describes as the white settler-scholar archetype.² As part of larger decolonial projects, I recognize the need for critical-intersectional and decolonial scholarship within the academic discipline of religion and culture studies.³ As Nakano Glenn explains, the legacy of settler-colonialism remains a “distinct transnational formation whose political and economic projects have shaped and continue to influence race relations in first world nations [sic] that are established through settler colonialism.”⁴ Furthermore, intersectional perspectives reveal gender, sexuality, and race as co-constituted within the settler-colonial project, which necessitates the process(es) of decolonialization as integral to the pursuit of race and gender justice. Nakano Glenn argues race, gender, and religiosity are interwoven social constructs that can be used to both “predict and cause political outcomes.”⁵ Thus, to understand contemporary political dynamics, it is important to understand the intersecting histories of race, gender, and religion in the US.

From the colonial era to the present, religion has influenced the personal and political lives of those living in settler states like the US and Canada.⁶ As such, the cultural underpinnings that have ushered in “Trumpism” as a political commitment are rooted in the violent structures of

² Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities: A Meditation on Race, Feminism, and Religious Studies in Times of White Supremacy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2018): 326.

³ See Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities,” 326.

⁴ Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of US Race and Gender Formation,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, no. 1 (2014): 54. While I agree with Nakano Glenn’s framing of settler colonialism as structure, I hesitate to use the language differentiating nation-states as first, second, or third in ranking.

⁵ Dara Z. Strolovitch, Janelle S. Wong, and Andrew Proctor, “A Possessive Investment in White Heteropatriarchy? The 2016 Election and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Sexuality,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, no.2 (2017): 361.

⁶ This research project examines only a few specific avenues of religious influence and therefore only briefly sketches the religiosity of individuals living in the United States and Canada. For discussions on the influence of religion in politics, including the addition of the Establishment Clause to the First Amendment separating church and state, see Hana M. Ryman and J. Mark Alcorn, “Establishment Clause (Separation of Church and State),” *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, available at: <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/885/establishment-clause-separation-of-church-and-state>.

heteropatriarchy and white supremacy as lasting constructs of the settler-colonial experience.⁷ Recognizing the need to identify, disrupt, and dismantle hegemonic settler-colonial structures, I am ethically and intellectually obligated to contribute to the processes of decolonialization in the ways that I know best—through steady observation committed to critical yet compassionate academic scholarship. In conversation with social media and academic literature including influential thinkers such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, and Claire Colebrook, I interpret similar political and social patterns in Canada.⁸ For example, surges of right-wing populist rhetoric echoing Trump’s Make America Great Again (MAGA) campaign have adapted to the Canadian environment, specifically in oil-rich Alberta and the other prairie provinces where the footholds for this exclusionary rhetoric are embedded in a history of conservative politics.⁹ More recently, Peter McLaren describes the 2022 “Freedom Convoy” as an extension of “Trumpian gaslighting” in contemporary politics and civil spaces.¹⁰ The implications of Trump’s chaotic administration and tumultuous presidency are not yet fully understood, nor should the lasting and widespread implications of Trumpism be

⁷ Nakano Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure,” 57.

⁸ Another example of this populist influence in Canada was the short-lived “Wexit” campaign (a play on England’s Brexit) calling for the independence of Western Canada, see “Wexit Separatists Will Freeze to ‘Make Alberta Great Again,’” *VICE*, accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/884gkx/wexit-separatists-will-freeze-to-make-alberta-great-again>. For a detailed recollection of the relationship between faith and politics in the Canadian environment, see Bill Blaikie, *The Blaikie Report: An Insider’s Look at Faith and Politics*, The United Church of Canada, (2011); Clark Banack, *God’s Province: Evangelical Christianity, Political Thought, and Conservatism in Alberta*, McGill-Queen’s Press, 2016.

⁹ In 2016, the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan published a comparative review on populism and income inequality in Canada, see Dale Eisler, “Income Inequality and the Rise of US Populism: A Cautionary Tale for Canada,” *Policy Brief*, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, (University of Saskatchewan, 2016), <https://www.schoolofpublicpolicy.sk.ca/documents/research/policy-briefs/JS GS-policybriefs-Income-Inequality-FINAL-web.pdf>.

¹⁰ See Peter McLaren, “Some Thoughts on Canada’s ‘Freedom Convoy’ and the Settler Colonial State,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 7 (2022): 867-870.

underestimated.¹¹ Even with Trump out of office and decentered from formal politics the cancer of Trumpism persists within the Republican party and its conservative voter base.¹² In order to resist Trumpism as a kind of post-truth rhetoric, intersectional and interdisciplinary discussions are necessary to interpret and develop critical and self-reflective discourses within our personal, communal, and global contexts. Critical intersectional perspectives within the discipline of religious studies help develop more nuanced narratives for understanding the complexities of gender, race, and religion in contemporary contexts where global cooperation is necessary to address collective challenges such as the climate crisis and the transnational spread of disease.¹³

1.2. Contextualizing Trumpism

In the aftermath of the 2016 United States presidential election, and from within the academic discipline of religion and culture studies, I began this project by asking: what role did American religiosity play in Trump's political success and in the rise of the rhetoric of Trumpism as a political commitment? In mapping answers to these questions, this line of inquiry has proven fruitful if not infuriating at times as the consequences of Trumpian, post-truth rhetoric continues to unfold. The central assumption in this thesis is that language and discourse are political resources that contain cultural nuances. As Williams and Alexander explain,

¹¹ Stewart M. Patrick, "The WHO Is Trump's Latest Target in His COVID-19 Blame Game," *World Politics Review*, April 13, 2020, accessed August 4, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28678/the-who-is-trump-s-latest-target-in-his-covid-19-blame-game>.

¹² Certainly, the Capitol Attack on January 6th, 2021, demonstrates the volatile influence of Trumpian post-truth rhetoric, to be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.2 of this thesis. See also "GOP Strategist on the Party's Future in the Post-Trump Era," *NPR*, January 26, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/26/960855988/gop-strategist-on-the-partys-future-in-the-post-trump-era>.

¹³ See Margaret Alston, "Social Work, Climate Change and Global Cooperation." *International Social Work* 58, no. 3 (2015): 355–363, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872814556824>; for an introduction to religion and the climate crisis, see Randolph Haluza-DeLay, "Religion and Climate Change: Varieties in Viewpoints and Practices," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 5, no. 2 (2014): 261–279.

“rhetoric used by social and political movements is more than mere bricolage,” and can therefore be considered both reflective and constitutive towards political movements and belief systems.¹⁴

Within the processes of narrative construction, both religion and culture as social phenomena offer rich streams of knowledge that help to inform public and private identity and discourse.¹⁵

The consequences of Trumpism, both domestically and globally, are just beginning to unfold and should not be underestimated. As such, my research examines the origins and implications of the narratives and cultural resources which have fostered a conspiratorial pro-Trump social environment at individual, communal, and political levels in the US, Canada, and abroad.¹⁶

Leading into the 2016 presidential election conservative anxieties centered around the perception of the United States as a predominately (white) Christian nation in need of saving.¹⁷ Driven by the vehicle of right-wing populism, the conservative “religious right” at the core of the Republican party saw Trump as an to enshrine their political preferences.¹⁸ By merging Trump’s populist appeal with the agenda of the religious conservatives at the core of the Republican party, both Trump and the religious right could secure their mutual success. For evidence of this Arato and Cohen consider Trump’s conservative alt-right cabinet, which includes:

Attorney General Jeff Sessions, committed to abolishing the wall of separation between church and state as unconstitutional and known for his hostility to abortion rights; Ben Carson, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development who wants to

¹⁴ Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander, “Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1994): 1-15.

¹⁵ Jennifer Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear: The Role of Religiosity and Science in Populism and Our Shared Public Life,” in *Navigating Post-Truth and Alternative Facts: Religion and Science as Political Theology*, edited by Jennifer Baldwin, foreword by Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman, introduction by Antje Jackelén (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018): 97-111.

¹⁶ This research project presents four Focused Cultural Examples (FCEs) to explore the discourse(s) at various cultural pressure points surrounding gender, race, and religion indicative of lasting settler-colonial structures.

¹⁷ Kevin R., den Dulk, “Evangelical Populists and Their Discontents,” *Public Justice Review* 9, no. 2 (2019): 2.

¹⁸ Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, “Civil Society, Populism, and Religion,” in *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, ed. by Carlos de la Torre, (Routledge, 2018): 292.

put God back into Government; Betsy Devos, the Education Secretary with an agenda to redirect public education funds to religious schools; Tom Price, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, who joins Pence in co-sponsoring bills granting legal personhood to zygotes; and Mike Pompeo, the Director of the CIA who views America as engaged in a religious war with Islam.¹⁹

Arato and Cohen explain that Trump's appeal to the religious right and its evangelical voter base is not a religious revival but a political mobilization strategy.²⁰ This political hijacking of Christian symbolism poses a moral predicament for Christian Americans who take their faith seriously. Moreover, the rhetoric of Trumpism perpetuates "us versus them" logic devoid of even the most basic of Christian ethics and antithetical to the teachings of Jesus.²¹

A consequence of our inequitable, global neoliberal economic system, Trumpism amalgamates an authoritarian ring-wing populism with the religious conservatives at the core of the contemporary Republican party.²² Such a merger threatens not only the legitimacy of American democracy and the safety of American people, but the stability of other democracies and lives of people outside of US.²³ Among the most vulnerable are multiple marginalized and underrepresented (MMU) people including immigrants, refugees, people of color, women, and LGBTQ2+ communities—all of whom have been demonized by the Trumpian ethos and directly

¹⁹ Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society," 292.

²⁰ Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society," 290.

²¹ Arato and Cohen, "Civil Society," 291. See also Andrew F. Herrmann, "Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness: The Fracturing of Fundamentalist Evangelicalism," *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 4 (2021): 1-19.

²² Andrew Rojecki, "Trumpism and the American Politics of Insecurity," *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2016): 70.

²³ "Legitimacy narratives" are part of a long-standing accusatory culture in US politics which questions the legitimacy of American democratic institutions, see John F. Harris, "The Supreme Court is Begging for a Legitimacy Crisis," *Politico*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/29/supreme-court-begging-for-legitimacy-crisis-433573>; Sean Rameswaram, host, "The Supreme Court's Legitimacy Crisis," *Today, Explained*, Vox, podcast audio, hosted by Sean, produced by Will Reid, edited by Matt Collette, accessed November 2, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/today-explained>.

targeted by the Trump administration’s draconian legislative deregulation attempts.²⁴ To understand both the origins and implications of Trumpian logic the following sections introduce race, gender, and religion in personal/political narrative construction in the US.

1.2.1. Race, Gender, and Religion in American Politics

Popularly associated with the French Cuban-American novelist Anaïs Nin are the words, “we don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”²⁵ These words articulate how our worldviews are synthesized from our individual perspectives and experiences—I would also emphasize that where you are positioned likely determines what you are able to see and how you interpret it.²⁶ In other words, our experiences in life shape our worldviews, and our worldviews help to make sense of our experiences—both as individuals and as collectives. Ultimately, what we believe to be true significantly influences how we perceive our reality, how we live our lives, and how we interact with others. However, things are not always as they appear. Reflecting on the popularity of the epigraph attributed to Nin, Kadane and Crane stress the significance of correct attribution in Rabbinical textual learning and explain how contemporary internet users

²⁴ The surrounding academic literature unanimously suggests that the rise of Trumpism will negatively and disproportionately affect minority groups in a variety of intersecting ways, see Dana R. Fisher, Dawn M. Dow, and Rashawn Ray, “Intersectionality Takes it to the Streets: Mobilizing Across Diverse Interests for the Women’s March,” *Science Advances* 3, no. 9 (2017): 1-8; Samira Saramo, “The Meta-Violence of Trumpism,” *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017): 1-17; Bryan D. Price, “Material Memory: The Politics of Nostalgia on the Eve of MAGA,” *American Studies* 57, no. 1 (2018): 103-115; Zein Murib, “Backlash, Intersectionality, and Trumpism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 2 (2020): 295-302.

²⁵ This epigraph is found in *Seduction of the Minotaur* (1961), where Nin loosely interprets the Talmudic passage from Berakhot 55b, see Joseph Born Kadane, and Jonathan Kadane Crane, “Seeing Things: The Internet, the Talmud, and Anaïs Nin,” *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* 11, no. 2 (2008): 342-345.

²⁶ Vienne W. Lau, Michelle C. Bligh, and Jeffrey C. Kohles, “Leadership as a Reflection of Who We Are: Social Identity, Media Portrayal, and Evaluations of Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election,” *Sex Roles* (2019): 12.

often misattribute Nin's words with the words of the Talmud.²⁷ Social media in particular is an ideal conduit for the spread of misinformation and misattribution, going against long standing traditions (both oral and academic) dedicated to the accurate transmission of information and correct authorship attribution.²⁸ In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, Lau, Bligh, and Kohles expand on Nin's juxtaposition to explain leadership as a reflection of social identities including who Americans are and what they value.²⁹ Similarly, Ruth Braunstein argues that elections in the United States are just as much about differences in policy as they are about the competing stories of America and American identities.³⁰ Storytelling is an intimate part of our human experience and the stories we tell are neither bound by reality nor totally fiction, rather, they are something in between. Moreover, the stories we tell at personal, communal, and national levels have practical implications.³¹ Braunstein explains that narrative construction at the national level is the process of storytelling which borrows from a "cultural repertoire" of symbols, attitudes, and collective experiences to construct a sense of American identity, belonging, and purpose.³² Thus, during the 2016 US presidential election Trump's success was finding a campaign narrative that resonated with enough Americans to elect him, even if just barely.³³ These voters were a relatively homogenous group to whom the "Make America Great

²⁷ The Talmud is the central text in Rabbinic Judaism and offers intergenerational interpretations and discussions around Tanakh (Hebrew Bible or Miqra) stories and teachings, see Kadane and Crane, "Seeing Things," 342-343.

²⁸ Kadane and Crane, "Seeing Things," 344-345.

²⁹ Lau, Bligh and Kohles, "Leadership as a Reflection," 1.

³⁰ Ruth Braunstein, "A (More) Perfect Union? Religion, Politics, and Competing Stories of America," *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 172-175.

³¹ Verna Marina Ehret, "Contemporary Religious Changes in the US: Responses to the Fracturing of Religious Life," *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019): 1-13.

³² Braunstein, "A (More) Perfect Union? 176-178.

³³ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Doron Taussig, "Disruption, Demonization, Deliverance, and Norm Destruction: The Rhetorical Signature of Donald J. Trump," *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (2017): 623.

Again” (MAGA) narrative meant something.³⁴ The rhetoric of Trumpism appeals to many Americans because the underlying sentiments are already religiously, culturally, and politically available—an audience saw themselves in Trump’s performance and voted for him.³⁵

Early analysis in 2016 predicted that Trump would have a difficult time securing a critical mass of female voters against Democrat nominee Hillary Clinton who had come to represent a symbolic achievement for women and feminism in American politics.³⁶ At least initially, it came as a surprise when roughly 41% of women who voted in the 2016 US presidential election voted for Trump.³⁷ This significant statistic can partially be explained by virulent opposition to Clinton, which centered around negative gender stereotypes reinforced by a deeply entrenched patriarchal and misogynistic media culture.³⁸ Reflecting on this preference for Trump over Clinton, Strolovitch et al. evaluate three clusters of issues made apparent during the 2016 US election:

- 1) the consequences of anti-feminism and the naturalization of misogyny which attempts to cement women’s subordinate roles in American society;
- 2) deepening political polarization on issues at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality;
- 3) the revelation of a gender gap disaggregated by intersections of race, sexuality, marital status, and religion.³⁹

³⁴ Braunstein, “A (More) Perfect Union,” 185-187.

³⁵ Molly Worthen, “The Evangelical Roots of our Post-Truth Society,” *The New York Times* (2017); Uri Friedman, “Why Trump is Thriving in an Age of Distrust,” *The Atlantic* (2017).

³⁶ Penny Edgell, “An Agenda for Research on American Religion in Light of the 2016 Election,” *Sociology of Religion* 78, no. 1 (2017): 3; Gunn Enli, “Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election,” *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (2017): 50-61.

³⁷ Jane Junn, “The Trump Majority: White Womanhood and the Making of Female Voters in the US,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, no. 2 (2017): 343.

³⁸ Lau, Bligh, Kohles, “Leadership as a Reflection,” 13.

³⁹ Dara Z. Strolovitch, Janelle S. Wong, and Andrew Proctor, “A Possessive Investment in White Heteropatriarchy? The 2016 Election and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Sexuality,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, no.2 (2017): 354.

The issues summarized by Strolovitch et al. are not new phenomena. Through this research project I have come to understand that any initial surprise or confusion in the 2016 election outcome demonstrates a privileged view regarding the status of sexism and racism in the US, as if it has outgrown either. Rebranded and reworked into contemporary American life, Valentino, Wayne, and Oceno explain ambivalent to hostile sexist attitudes focus on denying the reality of gender discrimination, antagonizing women who threaten traditional gender norms, and resenting policies that favour women's rights and health, as well as other more generic or subtle attitudes and practices of paternalism and misogyny.⁴⁰ As Penny Edgell explains, surprise at the 2016 presidential election reveals our tendency to either oversimplify or overestimate the significance of gender in contemporary politics as sourced in the shortcomings of white middle-class liberal feminism.⁴¹

In many ways, Trumpism can be understood as a new manifestation of old habits; a strategic recycling of available cultural and political resources including language, symbols, and outdated ideals. Initially this paradoxical combination was quite shocking for me and other optimistic, social justice-oriented thinkers. However, critical scholarship underscores the conclusion that a kind of political rhetoric like Trumpism was an almost inevitable transmutation given the unique history and contemporary circumstance of the United States of America.⁴² As Henry Giroux describes, "Trumpism merges a ruthless capitalist rationality, widening inequality,

⁴⁰ Nicholas A. Valentino, Carly Wayne, and Marzia Oceno, "Mobilizing Sexism: The Interaction of Emotion and Gender Attitudes in the 2016 US Presidential Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. S1 (2018): 804. Formal discussions about the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the US Supreme Court will take place in Chapter Three and Chapter Five.

⁴¹ Edgell, "An Agenda," 3.

⁴² Reflecting on the 2016 election, I was genuinely surprised at the results which is what sparked my initial interest in this topic. During my initial literature review, I quickly learned that this surprise failed to grasp the fractures surrounding gender and race, and the history of militant, white Christian nationalism in the United States.

and a commitment to white supremacy. These cultural and political energies have deep historical roots in the United States.”⁴³ Perhaps due to my peripheral location and optimistic naiveté I initially overlooked the racial (and gendered) divisions cemented in America’s violent history which includes the attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples and a four-hundred-year involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade.⁴⁴ Driven by the imperialist spirit of “manifest destiny,” the economic and political foundations of the “New World” are built upon this extractive and exploitive history.⁴⁵ The following sections introduce settler-colonialism as structure and consider the intergenerational implications of this history in contemporary politics and culture, and as part of the larger Christian imperial projects in which Canadians share complicity.⁴⁶

1.2.2. Acknowledging the Legacy of Settler-Colonialism as Structure

Understanding contemporary social and political contexts in the US and Canada requires consideration of our shared settler-colonial history, including the intersections of race, religion, and economics. To make sense of this structure, the Reverend Dr. Katie Cannon articulates a post-colonial womanist critique to evaluate the relationship between Christian imperialism and slavery throughout US history.⁴⁷ Cannon identifies the “missiologic of imminent Parousia” and the “theologic of racialized normativity” as the central “false justification” for the conquest and

⁴³ Henry A. Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2021): 3.

⁴⁴ Claire Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence: Black Lives Matter and the 2020 Pandemic,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (2020): 495-499.

⁴⁵ Katie Geneva Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 127-128; Philip Forner, “The International Slave Trade,” in *Civil Rights Since 1787*, ed. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: NYCU Press, 2000), 10-11; Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 495-499.

⁴⁶ Nakano Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure,” 61; Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 130.

⁴⁷ Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 128.

conversion of approximately 12.5 million people from Africa who were forced into the Transatlantic slave trade.⁴⁸ In other words, Cannon attributes the eschatological logic of the impending second-coming and judgement of Christ, to which the term Parousia refers, as central to the logic of the missionaries at the forefront of Western imperial expansion in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.⁴⁹ Cannon writes,

Thus, for three centuries the missiologic of imminent Parousia served as the standard European false justification with vicious consequences for more than 12 million Africans who embarked on hellish voyages to the Americas in wretched, suffocating, demeaning conditions, shackled and chained as marketable commodities.⁵⁰

If settler-colonialism is embedded in the structure of settler-colonial states like the US and Canada, I am compelled to ask: what are the intergenerational economic, political, and social implications of this history? Pioneering scholar researching the religion of enslaved Africans and their descents in the US, Albert J. Raboteau, explains that by the time of emancipation in 1865 there were approximately 4 million enslaved people of African descent in the US out of a total population of 35.2 million people.⁵¹ By the mid-nineteenth century, 31.1% of enslaved people in the entire global human-trafficking network were located in North America.⁵² This exponential growth of slave populations in the US is significant, especially when compared to other slave holding states such as those South America and the Caribbean. Raboteau explains tropical colonies continued to import enslaved people from Africa at a higher rate because slave

⁴⁸ Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 129.

⁴⁹ David G. Embrick, J. Scott Carter, Cameron Lippard, and Bhoomi K. Thakore, “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism: Whitelash and the Politics of Oppression,” *Fast Capitalism* 17, no. 1 (2020): 208; Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 130; Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 496.

⁵⁰ Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 129.

⁵¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, (Oxford University Press, 2004): 89.

⁵² Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 87-92.

populations in these hotter climates were more likely to contract disease.⁵³ In the more temperate climates of North America disease was less decimating and slaves were encouraged to reproduce to increase slave populations, and thereby increase the slaveholders' "property" and workforce.⁵⁴ These hemispheric differences are an often overlooked piece of the US history underpinning the social and political fabric of the Americas.⁵⁵ As a result of these circumstances, slavery became an inherited condition supported and sanctioned within the legal and social structures of early America.⁵⁶

The first constitution for the original Thirteen Colonies, known as the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, made no specific claims against or in support of slavery, but the practice was largely socially accepted and religiously justified.⁵⁷ By 1789, the formal Constitution of the United States would include various proslavery positions sanctioning the ownership of people as property, granting privileges to slave owners, and protecting against the possibility of slave rebellions, which were framed as acts of domestic violence believed to pose a direct threat to free (white) citizens.⁵⁸ Reflecting on the implications of this history, both Jones and Rael underscore the link between economics and "whitelash" in the United States.⁵⁹

Whitelash refers to the specific social and political backlash generated by the white majority where Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (BIPOC) are blamed for the economic and

⁵³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 92.

⁵⁴ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 128.

⁵⁵ The cruelty and suffering endured by African slaves and their descendants for centuries is unfathomable.

⁵⁶ James Oliver Horton, *The Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America*, (Rutgers University Press, 2001), 27.

⁵⁷ Johnathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor, "Introduction: Original Sin," in *Civil Rights Since 1787*, edited by Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: NYCU Press, 2000), 7-8.

⁵⁸ Mary Frances Berry, "Slavery, the Constitution, and the Founding Fathers," in *Civil Rights Since 1787*, eds. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: NYCU Press, 2000), 17.

⁵⁹ Danielle E. Jones, "The Unknown Legacy of the 13th Amendment," *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History* (2016): 1-5.

social struggles of the white working class. To further cement the link between whitelash and economics, Jones reflects on how early whitelash rhetoric produced a particularly effective pro-abolition argument leveraging the idea that slavery was detrimental to white laborers in the South since slaves were overall less expensive to maintain than paid labourers, and thus, could be seen as infringing on the job security of white labourers.⁶⁰ Jones explains:

For Southern elites, the abolition of slavery meant the loss of a major working force, and because racism had not ended with the end of the Civil War, Southern states looked to create a system that would enable them to maintain a steady work force as they began rebuilding and industrializing their states.⁶¹

Despite the official ratification of the 13th Amendment, which formally abolished slavery in 1865, newly freed, former slaves and their descendants were considered secondary citizens and subject to a separate set of laws known as the Black Codes.⁶² Southern elites were able to maintain control by enforcing the Black Codes which essentially “criminalized Blackness” via a white-controlled policing system.⁶³ Patrick Rael explains “when liberal legal regimes destroyed slavery by defining it as a barbaric rejection of the modern, [they did so] only to then promote forms of mass incarcerations as legitimate, if unfortunate, necessities of life in ‘freedom’.”⁶⁴

During the post-abolition era, the Black Codes would pave the way for a separate set of segregation legislation known as Jim Crow.⁶⁵ Infractions with these laws would ensure a steady

⁶⁰ Jones, “Unknown Legacy,” 1-3.

⁶¹ Jones, “Unknown Legacy,” 3.

⁶² Two notable and accessible works on this topic include Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) and the Ava DuVernay’s 2016 documentary entitled *13TH* which both explore the legacy of slavery in contemporary US culture and politics, see also Rael, “Demystifying the 13th Amendment.”

⁶³ Rael, “Demystifying the 13th Amendment.”

⁶⁴ Patrick Rael, “Demystifying the 13th Amendment and its Impact on Mass Incarceration,” *African American Intellectual History Society*, December 9th, 2016, accessed September 4, 2020, <https://www.aaihs.org/demystifying-the-13th-amendment-and-its-impact-on-mass-incarceration/>.

⁶⁵ The name “Jim Crow” was derived from a racially stereotyped character in an old song and later become the name of a popular 1820’s dance before encompassing the set of segregation laws by the same name see “Jim Crow Laws and Racial Segregation,” *Social Welfare History Project* (2011), <http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/civil-war-reconstruction/jim-crow-laws-andracial-segregation/>.

flow of inmates for the convict leasing programs which were popular at the time.⁶⁶ During the late 1870s (and up until the 1930s in Southern states like Alabama) convict leasing operated legally to capitalize on the cheap labour of former slaves and their descendants. Via Jim Crow and subsequent convict leasing programs, Southern elites could ensure a “steady flow of [B]lack laborers from the prisons and out to the private companies who were participating in the program.”⁶⁷ Even with slavery officially abolished, descendants of slaves, and more broadly people of colour, continue to live with systematized racial violence and oppression encoded within the social, political, and legal structures of the US.⁶⁸ The psychological, sociological, and economic implications of this history are profound and intergenerational. Despite our dissociated tendency to think of this history as a problem of the past, human trafficking, both domestically and globally, still accounts for millions of enslaved people, most of whom are women and many of them children.⁶⁹

1.2.3. *Trumpism as a Post-Truth Rhetoric*

The implications of this history of this exploitative history are embedded in the institutional and intergenerational experiences of those living in the United States. Sourced in these interlocking conflicts sourced in race, gender, and religion embedded throughout history and foundations of United States history, it is clear Trumpism was not *creatio ex nihilo*. By sourcing contemporary challenges and trends in the broader context of settler-colonialism as structure a clearer understanding of Trumpism and the effectiveness of MAGA rhetoric amongst white Republican

⁶⁶ Jones, “Unknown Legacy,” 3; Rael, “Demystifying the 13th Amendment.”

⁶⁷ Jones, “Unknown Legacy,” 5.

⁶⁸ Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 127-128; Philip Forner, “The International Slave Trade,” in *Civil Rights Since 1787*, eds. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York: NYCU Press, 2000), 10-11.

⁶⁹ Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 134; See also Kaye Quek, “Fundamentalist Mormon Polygamy and the Traffic in Women,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 58 (September 2016): 25-33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2016.06.002>.

voters comes into view. Trumpism amalgamates not only the caricature of the former president, his dispositions, and draconian policy preferences, but describes the specific milieu that would celebrate this political rhetoric. For Giroux, Trumpism encapsulates the general “mood and state of mind” of a particular social base.⁷⁰ Seib explains that this requires us to think creatively about Trumpism as separate from its” namesake while also inherently linked.⁷¹ As Jennifer Baldwin argues, the rise of Trumpism as a political commitment can be observed as symptomatic of failing economic system and a long history of (white) Christian nationalism reinvigorated within a post-truth social context.⁷² Post-truth describes the circumstances where emotion and personal belief shape public opinions, superseding objective facts and established systems of knowledge.⁷³ As a social and political phenomenon, post-truth can fuel and be fueled by populist sentimentalities. Speed and Mannion explain that post-truth populism mirrors the ebb and flow of power dynamics in post-industrial society.⁷⁴ For example, when the political left is in power, the political right develops conspiratorial narratives about the “liberal agenda.” Alternatively, when the political right is in power, leftists conspire against the “alt-right agenda.” Both sides of the political spectrum exhibit this tendency to mistrust and critique the power dynamics, particularly if their party or political side is “losing.” Moreover, Baldwin explains that prolonged periods of social trauma and economic crisis increase the availability and effectiveness of populist sentiments—collective traumas such as war, famine, drought, economic depression, or a

⁷⁰ Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” 2.

⁷¹ Gerald F. Seib, “Separating Donald Trump from Trumpism,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2016, accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/separating-donald-trump-from-trumpism-1470678372>.

⁷² Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear,” 98.

⁷³ Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear,” 98.

⁷⁴ Ewen Speed and Russell Mannion, “The Rise of Post-truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies: Challenges for Health Policy,” *International Journal of Health Policy and Management* 6, no. 5 (2017): 249-251.

pandemic.⁷⁵ Prolonged periods of perceived crisis and the experience of collective social trauma serve to deepen the rifts of political polarization and help to create the environment for populist rhetoric to garner support from self-proclaimed “common citizens.”⁷⁶ Within this context, Trump’s authoritarian post-truth rhetoric both fuels and feeds-into a cultural history of exclusion and violence, amplifying civil distrust, social hostility, and even physical violence.⁷⁷

However, the news is not all bad. In response to the rise and relative political success of Trump and Trumpism, various social movements and political trends have mobilized to resist the dangers of Trump’s post-truth campaign and the inherent violence of Trumpism. These trends include increased political awareness and engagement with younger and more diverse demographics.⁷⁸ Some of the strongest pushback against Trumpism comes from within faith communities and across intersectional alliances. Faith-based resistance to Trumpism offers a more critical perspective for understanding the dynamics of religion and politics in the US. Moreover, anti-Trump resistance from within evangelical communities’ challenges mainstream discourses surrounding religion and politics in the US and nuances understandings of evangelical as a global, transdenominational experience.⁷⁹ Ultimately, this thesis explores this point of contention—that the historical context of the US, riddled with racism, sexism, and Christian nationalism—is met with rich histories of intersectional social and faith-based activism committed to shifting the status quo paradigms and narratives surrounding race, gender, and

⁷⁵ Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear,” 102.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear,” 103.

⁷⁷ Charles Post, “The Roots of Trumpism,” *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 1-2 (2017): 101.

⁷⁸ These trends will be further explored in the four FCEs presented in the body of this thesis project. For a comprehensive understanding of resistance to Trump, see David S. Meyer, and Sidney Tarrow, eds. *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁷⁹ The voting behaviours of white evangelical Christians in the 2016 election is discussed in the primary literature review of this project with additional commentary on faith-based resistance to Trumpism in the synthesis chapter.

religion in the US.⁸⁰ The role of social media and information sharing is central to understanding how individuals and social movements engage in identity building, narrative construction, and political organization in this contemporary context. Ultimately, the US plays a significant role in international relations in a context where global collaboration on a variety of urgent interrelated problems is indeed. These urgent problems are largely consequential of the climate crisis resulting in food and water insecurity, increased severe weather and natural disasters, and a global refugee crisis in addition to nuclear disarmament and the transnational spread of disease.⁸¹ Public education, social media literacy, and grassroots community activism are explored in this thesis project as important avenues for creating more equitable and peaceful communities.

1.3. Thesis Structure

This project is structured around the presentation of four Focused Cultural Examples (FCEs) in dialogue with scholarly literature and media analysis.⁸² Each focused study presents a theoretical opportunity or window to examine the various discourses surrounding the frontlash/backlash dynamic in civil society and interrogates a selection of media content in relation to the given intersectional theme or topic of the FCE. The thematic content of each FCE presents different aspects of structural violence surrounding gender and race, indicative of lasting

⁸⁰ For a more comprehensive understanding of Christian nationalism in the US, see Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn in and How to Talk Across the Divide*, (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2022); Philip S. Gorski, and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*, (Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁸¹ Discussions on the transnational spread of disease and Trumpism take place in chapter 5. For commentary on the important influence of the US in global international context, commentary from former Former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes on his podcast “Missing America Archives,” *Crooked Media*, 2020, <https://crooked.com/podcast-series/missing-america/>.

⁸² In conversation with my graduate supervisor Dr. Christopher Hrynkow and committee-member Dr. Cynthia Wallace, the term “Focused Cultural Example” was created as a way of structuring and presenting a brief but focused contextual study of different interrelated content or subject matter.

settler-colonial projects. In response to the rise of Trumpism, this thesis also considers the counter-hegemonic narratives which challenge, resist, and create change within these existing power dynamics, referred to more broadly as “the resistance.” In total, five Focused Cultural Examples are presented as opportunities to explore these intersecting topics in conversation with relevant scholarly literature and social media analysis. Following the introductory chapter and the primary literature review, chapter three considers gender, backlash, and social media in post-truth society and presents a contextual analysis of the rhetoric of Trumpism as it has emerged from within online Internet chatrooms, such as Reddit. Next, chapter four, “Racism, Whitelash, and Conspiracy in Post-Truth Society,” considers the cultural and religious discourses underpinning the rhetoric and relative political success of Trumpism. Chapter five examines Trumpism, transnationalism and the COVID-19 pandemic as the final Focused Cultural Example and synthesizes these trends in contemporary political activism which foster both civil and uncivil participation. Finally, chapter six will offer concluding reflections in the form of a personal narrative account.

1.4. Methodology

The methodological approach of this thesis adopts a critical and intersectional perspective from within the academic discipline of religion and culture studies supplemented with interdisciplinary theory and analysis. The following sections further unpack this theoretical framework and explain why this approach is particularly fruitful for critical, intersectional, and interdisciplinary scholarship.

1.4.1. *Intersectional Feminism in Religion and Culture Studies*

Intersectionality is a relatively modern academic framework articulated in 1989 by Black feminist and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw.⁸³ Intersectionality as a critical lens identifies the interconnected layers of discrimination which overlap and sustain patterns of racial and gendered oppression and violence.⁸⁴ Crenshaw saw these intersections especially embodied by Black women in America and sought to provide a theoretical tool for “thinking about identity and its relationship to power.”⁸⁵ Intersectionality has been foundational for the development of Critical Race Theory, helping to acknowledge the histories of oppression and patterns of power in our society. Intersectional perspectives have also helped to nuance feminist critiques of gender and sexuality by underscoring the dimensions of race and socio-economic location which compound each other in the lived experiences of different individuals. Ultimately, intersectionality as a lens encourages demographics to reflect more deeply upon our sources privilege and power, especially as scholars, educators, and conscientious citizens.⁸⁶ Yet, despite

⁸³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, (1989): 139-167.

⁸⁴ Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities,” 326.

⁸⁵ Beliso-De Jesús (326) cites Kimberlé Crenshaw’s seminal work, “Why Intersectionality Can’t Wait,” *Washington Post*, (1986).

⁸⁶ Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities,” 327.

the perspectives of intersectional scholarship, academic imperialism prevails within the structures of post-secondary institutions. Within the discipline of religious studies, academic imperialism persists in the subject-scholar distinction as remnants of romanticized archetypes produced by imperialist and orientalist scholarship. Beliso-De Jesús describes the “pious practitioner” and the “secular scholar” as archetypes rooted in the histories of colonial imperialism, ultimately obscuring the influence of white heteropatriarchy within the study of religion.⁸⁷ Therefore, my research proceeds with the recognition that much of our academic culture has been built around the performances of white-hetero masculinities embedded in the history of settler-colonialism. The academic discipline of religious studies benefits from adopting critical intersectional frameworks to address these confounded identities as more than just subjects, recognizing “the other” as autonomous and inherently worthy of respect.

1.4.2. Using Critical Discourse Analysis within Religion and Culture Studies

Bringing them into dialogue within a religion and culture studies framework, this inquiry utilizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) and media studies as tools to supplement relevant theory. CDA is a transdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach to interpreting the social analysis of discourse. The processes of signification in language, also known as semiosis, can help to reveal systems of meaning, ideology, and power within discourse.⁸⁸ In CDA, discourse (or systems of language) is understood as a type of social practice, and language (either written or oral) is encoded with orders of hegemony and hierarchy. Genres of discourse (for example, the various discourses on gender, sexuality, race, politics, and so on) represent, reflect, and create

⁸⁷ Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities,” 327.

⁸⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, 2nd ed., (Routledge: New York, 2010): 4.

meaning systems.⁸⁹ The transdisciplinary nature of CDA engages dialogue between disciplines by attempting to understand how discourse(s) “(re)construct social life in processes of social change” and, therefore, how social changes are reflected in changes in discourses and vice versa.⁹⁰ Dialectical in nature, critical discourse analysis internalizes the (de)constructive ability discourse has in reinforcing ideological power structures within a society.⁹¹ A critical discourse analysis approach helps to reveal the power dynamics reflected in the language and rhetoric of Trumpism. Borrowing these tools from CDA helps to deepen my intersectional understanding of these issues from within a religion and culture studies framework.

Merging CDA with religion and culture studies as concurrent theoretical lenses allows for a critical evaluation of the context and discourse which has brought forth the arrival of post-truth in our societies. Religious traditions offer various narratives, symbols, and semantic interpretations of our human reality, which present various opportunities for critical discourse analysis. Religiosity is a unique human experience both privately and communally experienced; religion undergirds much of our culture and ideology, which are both important elements in CDA.⁹² Religious studies as a discipline often engages in its own kind of critical discourse analysis by contributing to intersectional discussions regarding gender and social justice, including the subfields of feminism/womanism in religion and culture, and eco-theology, to name only a few of relevance.⁹³ As an interdisciplinary project, the malleable methodology of religious studies allows for a balance of “explanation and interpretation,” which facilitates

⁸⁹ Norman Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” *International Advances in Engineering and Technology* no.7 (July 2012), 176.

⁹⁰ Fairclough (2012), “Critical Discourse Analysis, 452.

⁹¹ Fairclough (2010), *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 238.

⁹² Rhys H. Williams, “Religion as Political Resource: Culture or Ideology?,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1996): 376.

⁹³ Williams, “Religion as Political Resource,” 376; John A. Hannigan, “Social Movement Theory and the Sociology of Religion: Toward a New Synthesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 4 (1991): 315.

intersectional and critical analysis of the discourses surrounding race, gender, and religion in settler colonial states like the United States and Canada.⁹⁴

1.4.2. *Media Analysis as a Medium*

This thesis presents four Focused Cultural Examples (FCEs) as an opportunity to engage critical discourse analysis with media examples and relevant academic discussion. The content presented in each FCE is selected from various moments during the years from 2016-2022 and is primarily drawn from media-based samples in dialogue with scholarly commentary. This approach maps various interconnected and contextual layers, including:

- 1) The wider historically informed societal and geographic context;
- 2) The specific socio-political context in question;
- 3) The genre, topic, and participants within the specific socio-political context;
- 4) The relevant macro-discourses and micro-discourses embedded in the specific linguistic features within each given media example.⁹⁵

This research project also considers a selection of books, articles, film, podcasts, and social media content to gain understanding and perspective on these topics. In particular, social media platforms play a significant but convoluted role in how discourses are advanced within the public imagination.⁹⁶ Social media platforms and microblogging sites like Twitter and Facebook show potential for increasing political participation by actively facilitating public discourse and information.⁹⁷ However, social media algorithms and selective media exposure fuel confirmation bias and the process of political polarization through the virtually unchecked spread of

⁹⁴ Frans Wijzen, "Editorial: Discourse Analysis in Religious Studies," *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2012): 1.

⁹⁵ These points reflect my summary of Wijzen, "Editorial: Discourse Analysis in Religious Studies," 2.

⁹⁶ Jack Delehanty, Penny Edgell, and Evan Stewart, "Christian America? Secularized Evangelical Discourse and the Boundaries of National Belonging," *Social Forces* 97, no. 3 (March 2019): 1283–1306, <https://doi-org.cyber.usask.ca/10.1093/sf/soy080>.

⁹⁷ Stefan Stieglitz and Linh Dang-Xuan, "Social Media and Political Communication: A Social Media Analytics Framework," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 3, no. 4 (2013): 1277.

misinformation.⁹⁸ Media outlets themselves hold a significant amount of power in their ability to control and monitor which questions are asked and which stories are told, thereby partially directing discourses.⁹⁹ For these reasons, I find media analysis to be a fruitful medium for engaging the intersections of race, gender, religion, and politics in post-truth society.

⁹⁸ Lau, Bligh, and Kohles, "Leadership as a Reflection," 3; Shanto Iyengar, and Kyu S. Hahn, "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use," *Journal of communication* 59, no. 1 (2009): 32.

⁹⁹ Ann Weatherall, Maria Stubbe, Jane Sunderland, and Judith Baxter, "Conversation Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis in Language and Gender Research: Approaches in Dialogue," *Femininity, Feminism and Gendered Discourse* (2010): 222.

2. CHAPTER TWO—Primary Literature Review

This primary literature review surveys interdisciplinary research on the various ways race, gender, and religion intersect and shape the personal and political lives of people living in the United States. In particular, the religiosity of the American people is a widely discussed facet of civil and academic discourse. A plethora of national studies, essays, surveys, books, and film dedicated to better understanding this intersectional nexus exists—narrowing these sources down has proved a challenging task. As such, this literature review considers only some of the relevant cultural and political narratives of the past and present that have fostered a post-truth, pro-Trump environment. According to Verna Marina Ehret, narrative construction and storytelling are important parts of how we express ourselves, create meaning systems, and carry forward tradition.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Ruth Braunstein explains that cultural narratives and public discourses reflect who we are and what we believe in, and therefore, differences in policy and political preference reflect these different stories and experiences.¹⁰¹ This is why Braunstein argues US elections are just as much about the battle between “competing stories of America” as they are about differences in policy.¹⁰² These stories compete with each other emphasizing different parts or versions of American experience.¹⁰³ For these reasons, Braunstein explains the process of collectivizing a cohesive campaign narrative has put Democrats at a disadvantage, since this party must mobilize a more diverse voter base and therefore a more diverse collection of stories.¹⁰⁴ Hence why Jamieson and Taussig argue Trump’s success was finding a campaign

¹⁰⁰ Verna Marina Ehret, “Contemporary Religious Changes in the US: Responses to the Fracturing of Religious Life,” *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019): 1-13.

¹⁰¹ Ruth Braunstein, “A (More) Perfect Union? Religion, Politics, and Competing Stories of America,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 173.

¹⁰² Braunstein, “A (More) Perfect Union?,” 173.

¹⁰³ Braunstein, “A (More) Perfect Union?,” 178.

¹⁰⁴ Braunstein “A (More) Perfect Union?,” 180.

narrative that resonated with enough Americans to elect him, even if just barely.¹⁰⁵ To better understand the roots of these underlying cultural narratives, the following sections consider the historical influence of race, gender, and American civil religion to better understand who voted for Trump in the 2016 election and why. Canadian comparisons will be made throughout the chapters of this research project with a brief synthesis in chapter six.

2.1. American Civil Religion in Historical Perspective

The following section introduces American civil religion as part of the unique social and political fabric of the US. Civil religion is used to describe the distinct religious underpinnings of civil discourse and has deep cultural and political roots throughout US history and describes the religious underpinnings of civil dynamics and discourse. In his seminal work on “Civil Religion in America,” Robert Bellah describes this national faith as selectively derived from the Christian tradition while also clearly distinct from it.¹⁰⁶ According to Bellah, the political foundations of early America were shaped by the religious beliefs and Christian sense of ethics held by the early American statesmen, founding fathers, and first three presidents in particular.¹⁰⁷ Disseminated by public theologians, social activists, and other cultural orators, civil religious rhetoric infuses the language and culture of the American people and politics. Bellah argues this civil religious influence underpins the fabric of American social life where a largely (white) Christian worldview has been accepted within this so-called secular democracy.¹⁰⁸ Drawing from the work of Bellah, Raymond Haberski describes the Christian monotheistic God as central to American

¹⁰⁵ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Doron Taussig, “Disruption, Demonization, Deliverance, and Norm Destruction: the Rhetorical Signature of Donald J. Trump,” *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (2017): 623.

¹⁰⁶ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 45.

¹⁰⁷ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 46.

¹⁰⁸ Raymond Haberski Jr., *God and War*, (Rutgers University Press, 2012): 41.

civil religion which itself is expressed in civic life through “a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals” underpinning the “whole fabric of American life, including the public sphere.”¹⁰⁹ To explain this apparent paradox, Bellah supposes the God mentioned in American civil religious discourse is neutral enough to be accepted and understood across the political spectrum regardless of church or sect. Biblical archetypes of sacrificial death and rebirth are intimately intertwined in the early republic’s self-narrative as the new promised land, “the American Israel,” and underpin the story of American exceptionalism.¹¹⁰ References to God are made in the Declaration of Independence, during inaugural addresses, as part of the national motto “In God we trust,” and oaths are sworn under God, the nation’s “ultimate sovereign,” where the freedom of expression, speech, and religion form the core of civic values.¹¹¹ The civic reference to God has become so engrained in American civil society it does not appear to violate the democratic principle of separation between church and state and further obscures the line between religion and politics.¹¹² This paradox in the American civil sphere, that it is at once secular and adherent to a civil faith, is described by Melanie Klein as “civic splitting” rooted in the Durkheimian “sacred-versus-profane” discursive structures that divide social life into meaning systems.¹¹³

In *God and War* (2012), Raymond Haberski expands on Bellah understanding of ACR to further exemplify these “pseudo-religious”/“pseudo-secular” commitments in the United States.¹¹⁴ Haberski notes Abraham Lincoln (the so-called “Great Emancipator”) was likely the first “public theologian” to leverage American civil religion, recognizing the unification between

¹⁰⁹ Haberski, *God and War*, 42.

¹¹⁰ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 45.

¹¹¹ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 42; Haberski, *God and War*, 5.

¹¹² Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 45; Haberski, *God and War*, 78-83.

¹¹³ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash: The Crisis of Solidarity and the Threat to Civil Institutions,” *Contemporary Sociology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 7.

¹¹⁴ Haberski, *God and War*, 42.

God, war, and expressions of American nationalism.¹¹⁵ Both Bellah and Haberski highlight the formative influence of Lincoln during the American Civil War period.¹¹⁶ Haberski explains that during periods of war or conflict, religious sentiments are more prominent in civil discourse.¹¹⁷ During trying times, political leaders or cultural heroes emerge to challenge and shape the collective understanding of American identity by using civil religious language and symbolism.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Haberski underscores the link between American civil religion and expressions of American nationalism, especially the story of American exceptionalism, used to rationalize the economic and military success of the United States as “destined by a higher criterion.”¹¹⁹ By drawing on Christian values, symbols, and rhetoric, American civil religion bridges the beliefs of common American citizens with the two most profound Western philosophical building blocks, Christianity and capitalism, so that the two destinies become “inextricably linked.”¹²⁰ It is important to note that American civil religion does not equal American evangelicalism, despite the borrowing of Christian language, symbols, and values. American civil religion describes the religious undertones of American civil society while remaining distinct from Christianity and the distinct traditions of evangelicalism as a transdenominational experience.¹²¹ As both evangelical traditions and civil society shift and evolve within contemporary contexts, it is unclear how the interactions between religion and politics be influenced.

¹¹⁵ Haberski, *God and War*, 8.

¹¹⁶ Bellah, “On Civil Religion in America,” 52-53; Haberski, *God and War*, 80.

¹¹⁷ Haberski, *God and War*, 6.

¹¹⁸ Haberski, *God and War*, 81.

¹¹⁹ Haberski, *God and War*, 5.

¹²⁰ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 52.

¹²¹ Further discussions on evangelicalism are forthcoming on page 36.

2.2. Trump's Populism

Understanding Trumpism through a populist lens can help make sense of Trump's political strategy and relative political success. Willis Patenaude III explains populism is often defined by form rather than ideological content.¹²² Speed and Mannion describe this form as the “performative embodiment of the habitus of ordinary folk,” offering a malleable political mobilization strategy generally understood to emerge because of economic inequality and social exclusion in post-industrial societies.¹²³ Populist rhetoric has been observed in the US since the 1900's and is antiestablishment in character appealing to disenfranchised voters.¹²⁴ Arato and Cohen explain populist political entrepreneurs like Trump take on a physical and symbolic representation of “the common man”—a trope used to generate support from the working-class population (but mostly the men) who can finally see themselves represented by a politician who is “one of them.”¹²⁵ However, populist sentiments can be found across the political spectrum (left, right, and centre) from mild to more extreme expressions.¹²⁶ Consider, for example, how both Senator Bernie Sanders and Trump used populist sentiments in 2016 primaries while positioned on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Self-described democratic socialist and longest-serving independent congressperson, Sanders demonstrates a left-wing populist approach calling for progressive tax reform and wealth redistribution.¹²⁷ Unlike Trump, Sanders' populism does not pose the same threat to American democracy. Rather, Sanders' activism and socialist ideals reinforce the need and basic tenants of democratic processes. Other examples of populism

¹²² Willis Patenaude III, “Modern American Populism: Analyzing the Economics Behind the ‘Silent Majority,’ the Tea Party, and Trumpism,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 78, no. 3 (2019): 786.

¹²³ Speed and Mannion, “The Rise of Post-truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies,” 249.

¹²⁴ Arato and Cohen, “Civil Society,” 285.

¹²⁵ Arato and Cohen identify the cornerstone of populist this “four-fold logic” in more detail (287).

¹²⁶ Arato and Cohen, “Civil Society,” 285.

¹²⁷ Arato and Cohen, “Civil Society,” 283.

at the left, right, and centre can be observed in parts of Europe, Asia, and Latin America.¹²⁸ John Postill explains the rise of theocratic populism globally calls for more nuanced understandings of the roots, ideology, and function of populist approaches in mediatized (globalized) contemporary contexts are needed.¹²⁹

Contemporary trends in populism can be better understood through contextualizing the historical and political trends and contexts that preceded them. Willis Patenaude III links modern American populism exemplified by Trumpism on the right and Sanders on the left as a resurfacing of political realignment that began during the 1960s in reaction to the civil rights era.¹³⁰ Driven by political polarization surrounding the war in Vietnam and racial anxieties regarding integration, both parties shifted further towards their left and right wings during this era.¹³¹ Similarly, Charles Post describes Trump's populism as the latest manifestation of the ongoing "culture wars" in the aftermath of the global recession and Obama's 2008 Democratic electoral win.¹³² In response to the 2008 US financial crisis, the Tea Party movement emerged from within the Republican party as a fiscally conservative and libertarian populist movement. Tea Party members were a largely white working-class demographic concerned with job security and a list of "line jumpers" including, "African Americans, Latinos, women who benefit from affirmative action, and undocumented immigrants and refugees."¹³³ Post speculates that some of the more radical populists from the Tea Party movement likely became Trump supporters,

¹²⁸ John Postill, "Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective," *Media, Culture & Society* 40, no. 5 (2018): 757-760.

¹²⁹ Postill, "Populism and Social Media," 756.

¹³⁰ Patenaude III, "Modern American Populism: Analyzing," 788.

¹³¹ John Sides, "How Did the Dramatic Election of 1968 Change U.S. Politics? This New Book Explains," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/25/how-did-the-1968-election-change-u-s-politics-so-dramatically-this-new-book-explains/>.

¹³² Charles Post, "The Roots of Trumpism," *Cultural Dynamics* 29, no. 1-2 (2017): 101

¹³³ Post, "The Roots of Trumpism," 101.

including former Alaskan governor and Tea Party member Sarah Palin.¹³⁴ Underpinned by post-truth narratives shaped by “fake news” and “alternative facts” Trump’s brand of populism (or Trumpism) represents a volatile and discriminatory political rhetoric which paradoxically serves to widen inequalities in the US.¹³⁵ The following section further evaluates Trump supporters to better understand their political motivations. Understanding the demographics and narratives underpinning support for Trump is key for developing counter-narratives and resistance to Trumpism.

2.3. Who Voted for Trump and Why?

Despite differences in policy and style amongst Republican voters, Trump supporters were a relatively homogenous group of voters to whom the MAGA narrative meant something. According to Edgell, the majority of Trump supporters were white working-class male voters from the Rust Belt and are more likely to identify as traditional Republicans and evangelical Protestants.¹³⁶ The Rust Belt refers to several key Midwestern “blue” states which swung “red” in 2016 including, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, states which were hit particularly hard by the 2008 financial crisis.¹³⁷ Similarly, McQuarrie explains this “Midwest revolt” caused Clinton to lose the 2016 election.¹³⁸ However, scholars like Kilibarda and Roithmayr reject the story of “the Rust Belt revolt” arguing:

¹³⁴ Post cites Arlie Russel Hochschild’s formative book of the Tea Party movement *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016).

¹³⁵ Speed and Mannion, “The Rise of Post-truth Populism in Pluralist Liberal Democracies,” 251.

¹³⁶ Edgell, “An Agenda,” 3.

¹³⁷ Edgell, “An Agenda,” 3; Ekins, “Five Types,” 3; Philip Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology,” In *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics*, eds. Jason L. Mast and Jeffery C. Alexander (Palgrave: Macmillan, Cham, 2019): 6.

¹³⁸ Michael McQuarrie, “The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 68, no. 1, (2017): 121.

the story of a white working-class revolt in the Rust Belt just doesn't hold up, according to the numbers. In the Rust Belt, Democrats lost 1.35 million voters. Trump picked up less than half, at 590,000. The rest stayed home or voted for someone other than the major party candidates.¹³⁹

This discrepancy in understanding Trump supporters underscores the ambiguity and mutability of statistics and further exemplifies the tendency to oversimplify and stereotype voters and their voting behaviours. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of who voted for Trump and why is needed.

Key findings presented by Emily Ekins for the *Democracy Fund Voter Study Group* reveal that those who voted for Trump did so for a variety of reasons. While there is relative homogeneity within the Republican party in general, Ekins identifies five distinct types of Trump supporters: American Preservationists (20%), Staunch Conservatives (31%), Anti-Elites (19%), Free Marketeers (25%), and the Disengaged (5%).¹⁴⁰ Ekins also classifies four main issues distinguishing Trump voters from non-Trump voters during the 2016 election, which centered around 1) negative attitudes towards Hillary Clinton; 2) negative evaluations about the economy; 3) views on illegal immigration (primarily from Mexico); and 4) views on Muslim immigration.¹⁴¹ Ekins concludes that “discussions of the 2016 election and the phenomenon that catapulted an unlikely candidate to the Oval Office should acknowledge that different types of people came to vote for Trump and not all for the same reasons.”¹⁴² However, despite some variability in education, socioeconomic status, and geographical location, pro-Trump voters did

¹³⁹ Konstantin Kilibarda and Daria Roithmayr, “The Myth of the Rust Belt Revolt,” *Slate*, December 1 (2016)

¹⁴⁰ Emily Ekins, “The Five Types of Trump Voters,” *Democracy Fund Voter Study Group* (2017): 1-39, <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/reports/2016-elections/the-five-types-trump-voters>.

¹⁴¹ Ekins, “Five Types,” 32; See also Laura Finley and Luigi Esposito, “The Immigrant as Bogeyman: Examining Donald Trump and the Right’s Anti-immigrant, Anti-PC Rhetoric,” *Humanity & Society* 44, no. 2 (2020): 178-197.

¹⁴² Ekins, “Five Types,” 32.

share a common set of attitudes underpinned by a sentiment of political disenfranchisement rooted in economic dissatisfaction, racial resentment, and deep-seated sexist stereotypes.¹⁴³

To further develop a more nuanced and intersectional understanding of who voted for Trump in the 2016 election and why, the following sections consider the historical influence of race, gender, and religion in US elections, including the origins and implications of MAGA as a political slogan.

2.4. Racism, Sexism, and Making America Great Again?

Trump's campaign slogan to "make American great again" (MAGA) resonated with a critical mass of voters in the 2016 election and the slogan became internationally associated with his political persona. In historical perspective, the MAGA sentiment is rooted in the heteronormative story of Christian dominion in the United States and reflects a nostalgic longing to re-establish an elusive moment of greatness in US history.¹⁴⁴ Trump leveraged this culturally available political slogan to gain the support of white fundamentalist Christian Religious studies scholarship offers critical insight into the origins and implications of this particularly effective political slogan.¹⁴⁵ Braunstein explains the MAGA narrative draws upon nostalgic feelings of (white) Christian nationalism, economic disenfranchisement, and longing for some idealized moment, real or imagined, when America was supposedly doing "much better."¹⁴⁶ According to this logic, the US was "doing better" before things like immigration and political correctness

¹⁴³ Ekins, "Five Types," 3.

¹⁴⁴ See Lindsay Pérez Huber, "Make America Great Again: Donald Trump, Racist Nativism and the Virulent Adherence to White Supremacy amid US Demographic Change," *Charleston Law Review* 10 (2016): 215-250.

¹⁴⁵ Braunstein, "A (More) Perfect Union," 172-173.

¹⁴⁶ Braunstein, "A (More) Perfect Union," 172-173; Gorski, "Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump," 9; Whitehead, Baker, and Perry, "Make America Christian Again," 151.

when people had “thicker skins,” before challenges to heteronormative masculinity and traditional gender binaries, and likely before the invention of the women’s pantsuit.¹⁴⁷ It should be noted that Trump himself did not invent the MAGA slogan but merely amplified this already existing and malleable rhetoric nostalgic for some greater moment in American history, but what moment was this?¹⁴⁸ The following sections consider the emotional appeal of this rhetoric in cultural and historical context to better understand who voted for Trump in 2016 and why.

A significant factor leading into the 2016 presidential election was the collective experience of white racial resentment after two full terms of Obama’s administration—what Carol Anderson calls “white rage.”¹⁴⁹ Collective anger is a successful political mobilization strategy, and white racial resentment explains a large part of support for Trump, as it has with other Republican candidates in previous US presidential elections.¹⁵⁰ Addressing this popular opinion crediting Trump’s success with his ability to mobilize angry, white working-class Republican men from the Rust Belt, Seltzer and Yanus examine the role of race and gender in predicting support for Trump in the 2016 US presidential election.¹⁵¹ In particular, Valentino, Wayne, and Ocen note that in 2016 this “collective anger” fueled hypermasculine resistance to the perceived changes in traditional gender roles, decreasing support for Hillary Clinton and helping to secure Trump’s success.¹⁵² Despite Hillary’s symbolic representation from women in

¹⁴⁷ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again,” 151; Braunstein, “A (More) Perfect Union,” 183-187; Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 9.

¹⁴⁸ Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 9; Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart, “Christian America?”

¹⁴⁹ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of our Racial Divide*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016. See also Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, *The Twitter Presidency: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of White Rage*, Routledge, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Tien, “The Racial Gap,” 652.

¹⁵¹ Mark Seltzer and Alixandra B. Yanus, “Why Did Women Vote for Donald Trump?,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 3 (2018): 532.

¹⁵² Nicholas A. Valentino, Carly Wayne, and Marzia Ocen, “Mobilizing Sexism: The Interaction of Emotion and Gender Attitudes in the 2016 US Presidential Election,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. S1 (2018): 799-821. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfy003>.

the US as the first female presidential candidate to run for a major party, white women were the second largest Trump supporting demographic.¹⁵³

In general, the voting behaviours of American women, and particularly Republican women, are grossly understudied. Since the 1980s, the gender gap has been used to discuss and explain the differences in voting behaviours between men and women.¹⁵⁴ This literature shows a growing majority of American women to prefer the Democratic presidential candidate to the Republican one which in turn associates female voters as more liberal leaning, making them a minority within the Republican party.¹⁵⁵ However, an intersectional analysis of women voters in 2016 reveals another voting gap disaggregated by race.¹⁵⁶ Statistics show that women who voted for Trump were more likely to be white, married, and evangelical Protestant.¹⁵⁷ In general, these Trump-supporting women were almost entirely white and made up the second largest group of Trump supporters, the largest being white men. Only about 4% of women of colour who voted in the 2016 election voted for Trump.¹⁵⁸ Jane Junn explains that white women have historically been considered “swing votes” who act as a buffer to protect the agendas of those in power (mostly white men).¹⁵⁹ To bring an intersectional perspective to this trend, both Junn and Frasure-Yokley evoke Mary Jackman’s analogy of “choosing the velvet glove” to explain why so many white women voted for Trump in 2016. Frasure-Yokley explains white women “choose

¹⁵³ Valentino, Wayne and Ocen, “Mobilizing Sexism,” 802-804. See also Seltzer and Yanus, “Why Did Women Vote for Donald Trump?,” 525; Lorrie Frasure-Yokley, “Choosing the Velvet Glove: Women Voters, Ambivalent Sexism, and Vote Choice in 2016,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 3, no. 1 (2018): 12; Jane Junn, “The Trump Majority: White Womanhood and the Making of Female Voters in the US,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5, no. 2 (2017): 346.

¹⁵⁴ Charles Tien, “The Racial Gap in Voting Among Women: White Women, Racial Resentment, and Support for Trump,” *New Political Science* 39, no. 4 (2017): 652-656.

¹⁵⁵ Seltzer and Yanus, “Why Did Women Vote for Donald Trump?,” 532; Tien, “The Racial Gap,” 652.

¹⁵⁶ Frasure-Yokley, “Choosing the Velvet Glove,” 12.

¹⁵⁷ Seltzer and Yanus, “Why Did Women Vote for Donald Trump?,” 525.

¹⁵⁸ Junn, “The Trump Majority: White Womanhood and the Making of Female Voters in the US,” 346.

¹⁵⁹ Junn, “Trump Majority,” 346.

the velvet glove” that covers the “iron fist of patriarchy” because, while second in sex, white women remain first in race.¹⁶⁰ Jackman’s imagery articulates an intersectional “system justification ideology” or kind of social Stockholm syndrome where subordinate groups help to maintain the social hierarchies in place because they perceive some benefit or protection from the status quo, usually at the expense of another subordinate group.¹⁶¹ Strolovitch, Wong, and Proctor refer to the historical commitment to the white-status quo as America’s “possessive investment in white-heteropatriarchy.”¹⁶² Thus as Valentino, Wayne and Ocenio explain, white women voters held similar motivations as the men who voted for Trump in 2016—they both held racially resentful and sexist attitudes.¹⁶³

Shortly after the 2016 presidential election, exit poll surveys by Pew Research Centre cited 81% of white evangelicals voted for Trump.¹⁶⁴ Despite amendments and a more detailed follow-up report by Pew, the “81% of evangelicals” statistic became widely popularized both within social media and scholarly discourse. Indeed, my own initial interpretation was shocked at what appear to be almost unanimous evangelical support for Trump. However, scholars such as Medhurst, Joustra, Gasaway, and Ayris add nuance to this perhaps misleading statistic and call for a “new narrative” around evangelicalism in the US. Intersectional perspectives add nuance to otherwise static and abstract statistical data. Without the depth of intersectional perspectives, current rhetoric in academic and popular discourses often assume religious belief itself as one of the most primary factors influencing voting behaviors, political affiliation, and social attitudes.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Frasure-Yokley, “Choosing the Velvet Glove,” 9; Junn, “Trump Majority,” 344.

¹⁶¹ Frasure-Yokley, “Choosing the Velvet Glove,” 9.

¹⁶² Strolovitch, Wong, and Proctor (354) borrow this terminology of George Lipsitz.

¹⁶³ Valentino, Wayne and Ocenio, “Mobilizing Sexism,” 802-804.

¹⁶⁴ Gregory A. Smith, and Jessica Martinez, “How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis,” *Pew Research Center* 9 (2016).

¹⁶⁵ Edgell, “An Agenda,” 1.

But while religious belief and affiliation undoubtedly influence the political lives of people, a deeper evaluation of religious voters in the 2016 election splinters at the nexus of race, gender, and social location. At this intersectional nexus, Penny Edgell contends the success of MAGA was made possible by the white, conservative Christians at the center of the Republican party.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, Trump's disposition, behaviour, and policy preferences did little to deter many religious voters who had to ignore contradictions between their faith-based values and their presidential nominee.¹⁶⁷ And while the white evangelical population of the United States formed a large basis of Trump's voting demographic, people of color belonging to these traditions overwhelmingly did not vote for Trump.¹⁶⁸ Thus, as den Dulk suggests that the cultural roots of pro-Trump evangelicalism are primarily political.¹⁶⁹ This is because many evangelicals who voted for Trump were fundamentalist Christians with white nationalist impulses, a category within the conservative Republican voter-base to be future unpacked below.

Whitehead, Perry, and Baker explain how (white) Christian nationalist attitudes were significant in predicting who voted for Trump, whose presidency was seen as a "symbolic defence of the United States' perceived Christian heritage."¹⁷⁰ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker see Christian nationalism as the strongest independent factor in predicting support for Trump.¹⁷¹ Similarly, Philip Gorski writes that when white evangelicals voted for Trump, they did so to

¹⁶⁶ Edgell, "An Agenda," 1.

¹⁶⁷ See Jim Wallis' critique of evangelical support of Trump: "Resistance is Patriotic—And Christian," *Sojourners*, January 5, 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/resistance-patriotic-and-christian>.

¹⁶⁸ Gregory A. Smith, and Jessica Martinez, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," *Pew Research Center* 9 (2016); Edgell, "An Agenda," 1.

¹⁶⁹ Kevin R., den Dulk, "Evangelical Populists and Their Discontents," *Public Justice Review* 9, no. 2 (2019): 3.

¹⁷⁰ Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 165.

¹⁷¹ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, "Make American Christian Again," 164.

make America “Christian” again.¹⁷² On why religious voters chose Trump, Gorski speculates that some white evangelical voters did so based on the opinion that Trump was the lesser of two evils.¹⁷³ However, Darrius Hill goes so far to say that, “for the White, evangelical base that supported his populist, authoritarian platform, President Trump also embodies messianic hope.”¹⁷⁴ Indeed for many MAGA voters, Trump would be their champion that would return America to its “greatness”— or white-Christianness.¹⁷⁵ Overall, Trump’s ability to capture white Christian voters parallels historical trends which demonstrate white, conservative, fundamentalist evangelicals as more likely to vote for the Republican candidate in attempt to enshrine their conservative views on a variety of cultural issues including immigration, abortion access, gay marriage, and transgender rights.¹⁷⁶ For these voters, the pull of Christian nationalist attitudes was stronger than their adherence to some of the most basic of Christian teachings such as fidelity, temperance, and loving thy neighbour, to draw upon only a few examples.¹⁷⁷ Thus, Whitehead, Perry, and Baker explain Christian nationalism should not be thought of as merely a “proxy for evangelical Protestant affiliation, traditionalist religiosity, or political conservatism,” but as a concrete and pervasive merger of Christian and Republican identity and membership.¹⁷⁸ Other factors commonly cited as pro-Trump indicators are inherently associated with Christian nationalist attitudes including: racism (namely white supremacy in the form of Islamophobia and

¹⁷² Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again,” 147; Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 2.

¹⁷³ Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 2.

¹⁷⁴ Darrius Hills, “Back to a White Future: White Religious Loss, Donald Trump, and the Problem of Belonging,” *Black Theology* 16, no. 1 (2018): 38-52. For further discussions of political messianism Robert Bernasconi, “Different Styles of Eschatology: Derrida’s Take on Levinas’ Political Messianism,” *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 3-19.

¹⁷⁵ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again,” 147.

¹⁷⁶ For a critical account of the contested ethno-religious label, see Jessica Joustra, “What is an Evangelical? Examining the Politics, History, and Theology of a Contested Label,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2019): 7-19.

¹⁷⁷ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again,” 147.

¹⁷⁸ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again,” 165.

anti-Black prejudice), ambivalent and hostile sexism, traditional (heteronormative) values, and concern for the moral decline of America.¹⁷⁹ However, in perhaps its most extreme trajectory, Gorski views the exclusionary MAGA rhetoric as embodying an authoritarian white Christian nationalism, to be unpacked in more detail below.¹⁸⁰

To contextualize the merging of American identity with White Christian Nationalism (WCN), Gorski formulates a four-fold theory of WCN in American politics. The pillars of this theory are described by Gorski as: (1) racism, which in the context of the 2016 election took the shape of Islamophobia, hostility towards Mexican illegal immigrants (characterized as “drug deals, criminals, and rapists”¹⁸¹) along with more general anti-immigrant sentiments; (2) sacrificialism, which Gorski links to patriotism and blood purity in (white) nationalist narratives; (3) end-times apocalyptic anxiety; and (4) the nostalgic longing for a mythologized past where, according to these hyper-masculine and heteronormative narrative, America was “winning.”¹⁸² Underpinning this four-fold theory of WCN, Gorski identifies two main biblical themes: conquest narratives and premillennial apocalypticism.¹⁸³ These themes mirror what Rev. Dr. Katie Cannon describes as the “missiologic of imminent Parousia” and the “theologic of racialized normativity” used to justify Christian imperial expansion and the transatlantic slave

¹⁷⁹ Data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey (2017-BRS, Values and Beliefs of the American Public) provides a variety of information on cultural and political attitudes correlated with pro-Trump support. See also David Norman Smith and Eric Hanley, “The Anger Games: Who Voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Election, and Why?,” *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 2 (2018): 195-212; Ekins, “Five Types.”

¹⁷⁹ Martin Medhurst, “The Religious Rhetoric of Anti-Trump Evangelicals in the 2016 US Presidential Elections,” *Res Rhetorica* 4, no. 2 (2017): 2; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make American Christian Again,” 154.

¹⁸⁰ Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 6; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make American Christian Again,” 154.

¹⁸¹ Michelle Ye, “Donald Trump’s False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime,” *Washington Post* (April 12, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>.

¹⁸² Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 2.

¹⁸³ Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 3.

trade.¹⁸⁴ By drawing on the ethno-religious discourse of conquest, purity, and exceptionalism, Gorski explains political entrepreneurs even long before Trump capitalize on the anxieties and political motivations of white, conservative Christian voters.¹⁸⁵ Therefore in this context, Andrew Herrmann argues,

Trump is useful to the Christian nationalist program. Appointing conservative judges, including on the Supreme Court to overturn *Roe V. Wade*, is one aspect. His policies promote unabashed capitalism and deregulation, including environmental deregulation, which will assist in furthering the coming of Armageddon.¹⁸⁶

Here, Herrmann links the literal interpretation of the Book of Revelations with conservative Republican political commitments and overarching fundamentalist evangelical support for Trump. Herrmann is a self-described “exvangelical” and is a part of a kind of exodus of evangelicals in the wake of Trump’s presidency pushing back on the association between their faith tradition and white nationalism.¹⁸⁷ Herrmann explains the term “exvangelical” was coined by Blake Chastain to describe a trend within evangelical communities where “non-fundamentalist, non-white, non-hetero Christians” are abandoning the evangelical community all together. Although the decline of fundamentalism been observable since the 1990’s, Herrmann notes 2016 as a significant tipping point for many Christians at odds with the fundamentalist/Republican conflation.¹⁸⁸ Herrmann explains that the literal interpretation of scripture is distinct to fundamentalist traditions within evangelical Protestantism, alongside a

¹⁸⁴ Cannon’s womanist critique of Christian conquest and conversion narratives is introduced in section 1.2.2, see also Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” 129.

¹⁸⁵ Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 3.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew F. Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness: The Fracturing of Fundamentalist Evangelicalism,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 4 (2021): 417.

¹⁸⁷ Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 415.

¹⁸⁸ Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 424.

penchant for authoritarian all-powerful leaders, and an eager anticipation for the end-times apocalypse and second-coming of Christ.¹⁸⁹

However, many Christians are pushing back on the conflation between their faith tradition, white nationalism, and ubiquitous support for Trump. While it is true that many white fundamentalist evangelicals have sought political alignment with the more conservative ideology of the Republican party Gasaway argues the dominating American fundamentalist narrative fails to “capture the nuance and diversity of American evangelicals’ political engagement,” and Christianity more globally.¹⁹⁰ In this sense, fundamentalism has “cannibalized” evangelicalism in American media and public consciousness.¹⁹¹ This conflation obscures the traditions’ broader global commitments and, according to many Christians, strays from the spiritual wisdom found in the teachings of Jesus.¹⁹² Moreover, Alex Ayris explains the limitation of Pew’s exit poll data and argues for a new narrative regarding white evangelical support for Trump.¹⁹³ Many Christians’ outside of the traditional, mainline evangelical Protestant movement including Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witness, and other Christian communities may consider themselves “born again” while not identifying with the broader tradition of evangelicalism.¹⁹⁴ Ayris explains this nuance can get lost in the collection of exit poll data. Moreover, Ayris argues

¹⁸⁹ Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 415.

¹⁹⁰ Gasaway, “Making Evangelicals Great Again?” 293. See also, Jim Wallis’ critique of evangelical support of Trump: “Resistance is Patriotic—And Christian,” *Sojourners*, January 5, 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/resistance-patriotic-and-christian>; den Dulk, “Evangelical Populists,” 2; Joustra, “What is an Evangelical?,” 8; Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, “Make America Christian Again,” 165.

¹⁹¹ This framing is quoted from external examiner Dr. Mary Ann Beavis, August 15th, 2023, St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan.

¹⁹² See Alex Ayris, “‘They’d Vote Against Jesus Christ Himself’: Trump’s ‘White Evangelicals,’ the Construction of a Contested Identity, and the Need for a New Narrative,” *Journal of Church and State* 63, no. 4 (2021): 648-670.

¹⁹³ Alex Ayris, “‘They’d Vote Against Jesus Christ Himself’: Trump’s ‘White Evangelicals,’ the Construction of a Contested Identity, and the Need for a New Narrative,” *Journal of Church and State* 63, no. 4 (2021): 648-670.

¹⁹⁴ Ayris, “Trump’s ‘White Evangelicals,’” 656.

that “any perfect comparison of white evangelical voting in 2016 to previous elections is impossible” since the formatting and categorization of exit poll surveys change with each election.¹⁹⁵

Scholars such as Ayris, Gorski, den Dulk, and Arato and Cohen also call into question the moral and spiritual depth of Trump’s usage of religious tropes and discourse. Gorski cites Peter Wehner who describes Trump’s “theology” as Nietzschean rather than Christian.¹⁹⁶ Similarly, Arato and Cohen view Trump’s appeal to the religious right as a political mobilization strategy—a kind of political hijacking merging conservative discourse and fundamentalist worldviews.¹⁹⁷ Den Dulk goes so far as to argue that pro-Trump evangelicals ultimately obscure the tradition’s broader theological and global commitments.¹⁹⁸ To better understand this dynamic, the following sections offer an summary definition of evangelicalism.

A more thorough understanding of evangelicalism is needed to better understand the dynamics of religion and politics in the US. Jessica Joustra examines the politics, history, and theology of evangelicalism as a “contested label” and asks: what does it mean to be an evangelical? The standard academic definition known as the Bebbington Quadrilateral outlines the central theological cornerstones of evangelicalism as: (1) conversionism, (2) activism, (3) biblicism, and (4) cruciscentrism.¹⁹⁹ However, this leaves a rather thin ideological framework open for theological interpretation which has led to a variety of diversity within evangelical traditions.²⁰⁰ For Joustra, the term “evangelical” has splintered from a specific set of theological

¹⁹⁵ Ayris, “Trump’s ‘White Evangelicals,’” 649.

¹⁹⁶ Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump,” 2.

¹⁹⁷ Arato and Cohen, “Civil Society,” 290.

¹⁹⁸ den Dulk, “Evangelical Populists,” 2; Brantley W. Gasaway, “Making Evangelicals Great Again? American Evangelicals in the Age of Trump,” in *Evangelical Review of Theology: A Global Forum* 43, no. 4 (2019): 293.

¹⁹⁹ Joustra, “What is an Evangelical?,” 9.

²⁰⁰ Joustra, “What is an Evangelical?,” 9.

beliefs into an ethno-religious political identity and theo-political brand.²⁰¹ Joustra explains that the main challenge in defining evangelicalism is capturing its diversity:

Within evangelicalism there are many ecclesial traditions, political postures, and social locations. Evangelicals can be found in many major traditions and denominations: Presbyterian, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, and more. Given the diversity, especially, the theological diversity, one may rightly ask how evangelicalism could be understood as a unified movement at all.²⁰²

Thus, Joustra argues evangelicalism should be understood as a “transdenominational” experience; a revival within existing traditions, forming new movement(s) to spread “the good news” of the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁰³ Within the broader evangelical context, fundamentalism is a distinct tradition which has merged itself with Republican values, separatist ideology, and a literalist interpretation of the Bible.²⁰⁴ Herrmann describes fundamental traditions as hyper-fixed on the end-of-times through a literalist interpretation of the Book of Revelations making.²⁰⁵ In the story of the Rapture, only Christians will ascend into heaven and be saved by the Second Coming of Christ (Parousia) from the Battle of Armageddon.²⁰⁶ Thus, to hasten this reunification with their saviour Jesus Christ, Herrmann explains fundamental Christians embrace the period of tribulation that signals the impending Second Coming, and tend prefer authoritarian leaders who will contribute to their cause including the maintenance of traditionalist, heteronormative gender roles, and patriarchal values.²⁰⁷ Similarly, scholars like Medhurst and Joustra consider the transdenominational experience of evangelicalism and push back Christian

²⁰¹ Joustra, “What is an Evangelical?,” 7-11.

²⁰² Joustra, “What is an Evangelical?,” 9.

²⁰³ Joustra, “What is an Evangelical?,” 10.

²⁰⁴ Separatist ideology in fundamental traditions argues that Christians should not engage with anyone outside of the fundamentalist church, see “Evangelicals v. Fundamentalists: the Jesus Factor,” Frontline, Pbs.org, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/evangelicals/vs.html>.

²⁰⁵ Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 415.

²⁰⁶ Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 418.

²⁰⁷ Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 416.

nationalist attitudes as at odds with the broader scope of evangelicalism within Christian traditions.²⁰⁸ Anti-Trump evangelicals call for a renewal of their tradition, one “more faithful to its roots and more representative of the larger evangelical world,” which is statistically made up of mostly non-white, non-American people living outside of the United States.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Martin Medhurst, “The Religious Rhetoric of Anti-Trump Evangelicals in the 2016 US Presidential Elections,” *Res Rhetorica* 4, no. 2 (2017): 2; den Dulk, “Evangelical Populists,” 2.

²⁰⁹ Medhurst “The Religious Rhetoric of Anti-Trump Evangelicals,” 11.

3. CHAPTER THREE—Gender Backlash and Social-Media in Post-Truth Society

Considering the unique historical and cultural context of the United States, Trump’s populism can be considered “‘sociologically normal’ to the ongoing dynamics of civil spheres.”²¹⁰ According to Yale sociologist Jeffery C. Alexander, the dynamics of civil society are driven by the frontlash/backlash dialectic generated by the push/pull movement of social change. Forward-thinking frontlash groups challenge societal norms, while backlash groups resist changes to social and political structures to protect that status quo.²¹¹ Frontlash inherently disrupts social norms and triggers backlash emotions of anxiety and resentment often fueled by a nostalgic longing to “return” or restore the more favourable status quo conditions that benefit this demographic.²¹² Backlash groups are resistant to changes to the status quo, not necessarily because they are bigoted or anti-progressive, but rather because they “belong” to the status quo group and therefore relish its’ maintenance.²¹³ But when backlash takes a more extreme form, “conservative ideology becomes not moderately anti-radical but revolutionary: from agonism to antagonism, from persuasion to violence, from civil sphere to civil war, and from democracy to authoritarianism.”²¹⁴ In this way, we can understand Trumpism as a kind of backlash response to ongoing dynamics of social change and as a response to “frontlash achievements of decades before.”²¹⁵ After two full terms of Obama white Republican voters were “pushing back” against the perceived changes to the social structuring around race, gender, and political power in the

²¹⁰ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash: The Crisis of Solidarity and the Threat to Civil Institutions.” *Contemporary Sociology* 48, no. 1 (2019): 5.

²¹¹ Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash,” 6.

²¹² Murib, “Backlash, Intersectionality, and Trumpism,” 296.

²¹³ Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash,” 8-9.

²¹⁴ Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash,” 7.

²¹⁵ Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash,” 7.

US.²¹⁶ Articulated in the nostalgic MAGA slogan, conservative white voters wanted a “domineering and intolerant leader who would put their prejudices into practice.”²¹⁷

The follow sections present two of four Focused Cultural Examples (FCEs) exploring the cultural and political trends surrounding Trumpism through media analysis and relevant scholarly discussion. Specifically, FCE 3.1 and 3.2 begin to map the discursive trends that preceded Trumpian rhetoric. These FCEs also emphasizes the role of social media in developing and mobilizing these discourses to political action and/or counter action. Trump’s own “celebrity persona” and political campaign relied heavily on the use of social media platforms.²¹⁸ Thus, it is necessary to better understand the role of virtual internet communities and social media platforms in creating subcultures of both conspiracy and activism at various grassroots locations across the political spectrum.²¹⁹ The basic premise of this inquiry is that social media usage can be active, passive, and uncivil in encouraging political participation, including peaceful political resistance and acts of violence.²²⁰ Focused Cultural Example 3.1—Tracing Online Rhetoric to the Political Mainstage—examines the role of social media in facilitating “alt-right, anti-women, pro-Trump” rhetoric online.²²¹ Focused Cultural Example 3.2—Pussyhats and Issues in Contemporary Activism—further interrogates the dynamics of gender, race, and political

²¹⁶ David Norman Smith, and Eric Hanley, “The Anger Games: Who Voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 Election, and Why?,” *Critical Sociology* 44, no. 2 (2018): 207.

²¹⁷ Smith and Hanley, “The Anger Games,” 203.

²¹⁸ Massachs, et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 5.

²¹⁹ Section 1.4.2. provides further detail for using critical discourse analysis in religious studies. See also Norman Fairclough, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” *International Advances in Engineering and Technology* no.7 (July 2012), 452.

²²⁰ Jacob Groshek, and Karolina Koc-Michalska, “Helping Populism Win? Social Media Use, Filter Bubbles, and Support for Populist Presidential Candidates in the 2016 US Election Campaign,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1390-99.

²²¹ Pierce Alexander Dignam and Deana A. Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online: How the Red Pill Helped Elect Trump,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 3 (2019): 590.

resistance against Trumpism. Final comparisons are synthesized in chapter five.

3.1. Focused Cultural Example—From Online Chatrooms to the Political Mainstage

Since the turn of the millennia, social media platforms and news aggregate sites have become popular venues for identity building, political engagement, civil discourse, and debate.²²²

Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, 4chan/8chan, Discord, and other social media applications (apps) are increasingly used to share information and connect like-minded individuals who use these platforms to explore a broad range of topics from politics to personal life.²²³ These virtual venues allow for the anonymous exchange of ideologically infused and opinion-based discourse that might otherwise be unacceptable in mainstream civil settings.

According to Dignam and Rohlinger, internet chatrooms and online discussion forums have become the “territory of choice” for extremist discourse.²²⁴ Similarly, Jarvis and Eddington describe Reddit as a “hotbed for antifeminist discourses.”²²⁵ Utilizing a technique called web mining, social researchers are able to map user data and proxy-interests on sites like Reddit to help better understand emerging internet subcultures and interpret “online” semantic dialects.²²⁶

The movement and manifestation of virtual communities into political bodies is worth speculating and has already begun to take shape. Mapping extremist discourse, including misogynistic and white supremacist rhetoric online, is an essential task for addressing

²²² See section 1.4.3. for discussions on media analysis within religion and culture studies. and religious studies. For reflections on the role of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic see section 5.1.

²²³ Joan Massachs, Corrado Monti, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, and Francesco Bonchi, “Roots of Trumpism: Homophily and Social Feedback in Donald Trump Support on Reddit,” in *12th ACM Conference on Web Science*, (2020): 4.

²²⁴ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 591.

²²⁵ Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 100.

²²⁶ Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 100.

mis/disinformation on social media platforms and mobilizing effective resistance strategies to counter Trumpism.

Reddit is a one of the most popular social media news aggregate platforms where users can scroll a curated news feed according to their likes and interests. In 2016, Reddit was the seventh most visited website in the United States.²²⁷ Social researchers have emphasized Reddit as a popular virtual venue where users can ask questions, share information, have ideological discussions, and participate in personal and collective identity building.²²⁸ Reddit users, also called Redditors, can participate in the anonymous exchange of ideas and discuss a variety of topics. For example, r/AskReddit is a question-and-answer forum with 31.6 million subscribers. Another popular forum, r/NatureIsFuckingLit has 2.5 million subscribers, and highlights both the beautiful and brutal reality of nature. Essentially any and every topic or theme can have a corresponding Reddit form, including a list of “quarantined” or banned forums deemed inappropriate.²²⁹ The platform utilizes a simple ranking system involving upvotes (thumbs up = I like this) and downvotes (thumbs down = I don’t like this) to communicate their approval or disapproval. Conversations or threads with a lot of upvotes are pushed to the top of the forum where they receive more views and more ratings. Controversial and salacious topics sometimes called “clickbait” thrive with the help of this simplistic ranking system and algorithm. While Redditors are likely guided by their pre-existing beliefs and interests they can also utilize the platform to discover a wealth of new and even useful information, not to mention a sense of

²²⁷ Caitlyn M. Jarvis and Sean M. Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes: Alternative Organizing in Antifeminist Online Spaces,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2021): 96-97.

²²⁸ Massachs et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 2.

²²⁹ Massachs et al. “Homophily and Social Feed,” 4; see also “Controversial Reddit Communities,” Wikipedia (Wikimedia Foundation, July 12, 2022), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversial_Reddit_communities.

community. When enough Redditors convene over a certain topic a forum or “subreddit” community can be created to facilitate more focused discussions.²³⁰ Subreddit forums can also be made private where administrators (referred to as admins) monitor content and group membership. In general, Reddit users can “choose their own adventure” when it comes to what subreddits they follow and how invested they are within these virtual communities.

Shrouded in the anonymity of an internet chatroom, a subreddit group called The Red Pill (r/theredpill) first appeared in 2012 promoting the demise of feminism and the protection of men’s rights.²³¹ New Hampshire Republican lawmaker Robert Fisher would be later confirmed as one of the founders or admins of the original r/theredpill group.²³² What would become the Red Pill Network (RPN) began online out of the correspondence between like-minded social media users who shared a particular conservative, hyper-masculine, and misogynistic worldview and continues to grow as an outspoken, alt-right community even after the forum’s permanent quarantine from Reddit.²³³ The “red pill” is a reference to the 1999 science-fiction film *The Matrix* where the protagonist (played by Keanu Reeves) is faced with a choice between two pills: a blue pill (symbolizing ignorance), or a red pill (to reveal the truth).²³⁴ In the last decade, this term is now used to describe the transformation of consciousness (from ignorance to truth) when an individual becomes aware of some sort of conspiracy taking place. On platforms like Reddit and 4chan “taking the red pill” became internet slang for “choosing to realize feminism is

²³⁰ “Swallowing the Red Pill: A Journey to the Heart of Modern Misogyny,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>.

²³¹ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 590.

²³² Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 595.

²³³ Simon Copland, “Reddit Quarantined: Can Changing Platform Affordances Reduce Hateful Material Online?,” *Internet Policy Review* 9, no. 4 (2020): 1-26.

²³⁴ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 595.

destroying society.”²³⁵ The slang has since been adopted in popular culture to reference ideological shifts or so-called awakenings to the realities of society. Largely, the phrase is used by conservative audiences as a critique of the “liberal agenda” and feeds into conspiratorial and post-truth rhetoric.²³⁶

The Red Pill Network reinforces conservative ideology and traditional gender binaries. Both men and women have embraced the anti-feminist and hypermasculine Red Pill ideology underpinned by alpha/beta archetypes and traditionalist gender roles. Alphas are the socially and sexually dominant males; the kingpin of the Red Pill realm.²³⁷ Subreddit forums (r/redpillwomen and r/redpillwives) were created for women to discuss their personal motivations for “taking down feminism” and how to best support the alphas of their community in their subordinate role as wives and mothers.²³⁸ In their analysis of r/redpillwomen discourse online, Jarvis and Eddington note RPW use a postfeminist logic to defend antifeminist discourses.²³⁹ According to postfeminist logic, feminism has been “successful” and is no longer necessary.²⁴⁰ Summarizing from Jess Butler, Jarvis and Eddington explain postfeminist logic reinforces heteronormative (traditional) gendered and racial boundaries while borrowing the language of “women’s empowerment” and “choice”.²⁴¹ Accordingly to Dignam and Rohlinger, this flawed logic fuels the alt-right vision of feminism as detrimental, vowing to protect (white) manhood, restore male

²³⁵ Kaitlyn Tiffany, “The Alt-Right Has Lost Control of ‘Redpill’,” *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2021, accessed September 10, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/04/red-pill-meme-alt-right-twitter/618577/>.

²³⁶ See “The Extremist Medicine Cabinet: A Guide to Online ‘Pills,’” *Anti Defamation League*, 2019, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/extremist-medicine-cabinet-guide-online-pills>.

²³⁷ “Swallowing the Red Pill: A Journey to the Heart of Modern Misogyny,” *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/14/the-red-pill-reddit-modern-misogyny-manosphere-men>.

²³⁸ “Swallowing the Red Pill: A Journey to the Heart of Modern Misogyny.”

²³⁹ Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 97-100.

²⁴⁰ Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 114.

²⁴¹ Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 98.

dominance, and usurp women’s social, economic, and political power made possible through feminist advocacy.²⁴² Dignam and Rohlinger place the emergence of “men’s rights” advocacy amongst an array of far-right backlash in recent decades.²⁴³ Symptomatic of a fractured sociopolitical context and a deep misunderstanding of feminism, the emergence of antifeminist discourse online demonstrates a backlash attempt to preserve conservative, heteronormative, and ultimately white supremacist ideology in both virtual and physical civil spaces. Trump merely amplified this rhetoric, bringing it from the margins of obscure internet chatrooms to the center stage of American news and politics.

Shortly after Trump announced his 2016 presidential campaign a new subreddit group called r/The_Donald surfaced online, surpassing over 800 thousand subscribers—one of the largest Reddit communities to date and “one of the main hubs for Trump supporters.”²⁴⁴ In their research, Massachs et al. utilize a technique called web mining to map and analyze the participation features and proxy interests of r/The_Donald subreddit followers to predict patterns of interests and attitudes.²⁴⁵ With this data, the authors code for homophily and social-feedback cues to track and predict which Reddit users exhibit pro-Trump characteristics.²⁴⁶ Homophily characterizes the tendency of people to seek out others who are similar to them and helps to explain the social and ideological linking mechanisms that bring like-minded individuals together. For Massachs et al., homophily underpins their social hypothesis and in part explains why individuals with similar ideas and interests are more likely to belong to similar virtual

²⁴² Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 590.

²⁴³ Dignam and Rohlinger explain, “the alt-right positions itself as (white) men’s salvation, promising to reclaim their natural manhood and usurp women’s social, political, and economic power,” (598).

²⁴⁴ Massachs, et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 1.

²⁴⁵ Massachs, et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 1.

²⁴⁶ Massachs, et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 2.

communities, or subreddits.²⁴⁷ By mining Reddit-user data, Massachs et al. describe the characteristics of the “pro-Trump persona” on Reddit as someone with more conservative and libertarian worldviews and are more likely to hold conspiratorial belief and reject “political correctness.”²⁴⁸ Each of these characteristics are noted by Massachs et al. to correlate with specific subreddits relating to these topics. Massachs et al. explain conservative and libertarian subreddits show the most correlation with support for Trump including topics like r/conspiracy, or the subreddit r/ImGoingtoHellForThis dedicated to vitriolic humour and what is more aptly characterized as a sociopathic hyper-fixation on grotesque violence.²⁴⁹ Additionally, pro-Trump support also correlates with the subreddits r/Catholicism and r/TrueChristianity while apparently anti-correlated with Trump support was the subreddit r/TrueAthesim.²⁵⁰ Massachs et al. summarize the central role of religion in shaping the pro-Trump persona as “consistent with the idea that, for many Americans, Trump was “a symbolic defense of the United States perceived Christian heritage.””²⁵¹ These findings underscore a similar conclusion made elsewhere by Whitehead, Perry, and Baker who discuss Christian nationalism as a significant motivator for Trump supporters, or what Philip Gorski describes as “White Christian Nationalism.”²⁵² By contrast, subreddits which were not correlated with support for Trump included those dedicated to cooking and cuisine, DIY projects, homebrewing, literature, comic books, and science fiction.²⁵³ While some of these correlations may be arbitrary, it is interesting to place the

²⁴⁷ Massachs, et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 6.

²⁴⁸ Massachs et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 2.

²⁴⁹ Massachs et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 7.

²⁵⁰ Massachs et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 7.

²⁵¹ Massachs et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 8.

²⁵² See Chapter Two—Literature Review for initial discussions on Whitehead, Perry, and Baker (2018), as well as Gorski (2019).

²⁵³ Massachs et al., “Homophily and Social Feed,” 6.

interests and ideologies of online groups while considering the influence of homophily and ongoing social tensions regarding race and gender in the US.

In general, social media can speed up the process of information sharing and create a sense of connectedness. Dignam and Rohlinger speculate that members of r/theredpill and r/The_Donald were most likely drawn to sites like Reddit and 4chan not only for entertainment purposes but to also experience the cathartic release one receives when “surrounded” by like-minded thinkers in an identity-affirming space.²⁵⁴ In this sense, Dignam and Rohlinger explain the r/theredpill phenomenon as a kind of online “grassroots” approach to men’s rights advocacy. However, there is an irreconcilable paradox in this analogy, Dignam and Rohlinger write:

the young white men who populate these forums are not oppressed and, in fact, benefit from the dominant system [and] they use these virtual spaces to cultivate their patriarchal resistance and detail the specific sexist, racist, and transphobic behaviours that correspond with this ideology.²⁵⁵

In this context, patriarchal resistance does not evoke the spirit of resisting patriarchy but rather refers to the cultivation of misogyny and preservation of patriarchal power structures. As such, these virtual chatrooms create a space for backlash conversations to take place and for “oppositional consciousness” to grow.²⁵⁶ Dignam and Rohlinger describe oppositional consciousness as the “subjective roots of social protest” and involves the process of collective identity building, typically among oppressed groups, before collectivizing to social action, or resistance.²⁵⁷ However, the RPN inverts in the case of the RPN inverts this paradox inverts

²⁵⁴ Dignam and Rohlinger (597) catalogue a list of terminology and discourse commonly used in Red Pill forums.

²⁵⁵ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 592.

²⁵⁶ The authors make note in the application of this term that of course these groups are not actually oppressed but resentful to changes in the status quo as a threat to heteronormative masculinity.

²⁵⁷ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 592; see also Jane J. Mansbridge, and Aldon Morris, eds., *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

reality in a kind a post-truth resistance against feminism by claiming a heteronormative and patriarchal worldview.

As the Red Pill backlash rhetoric gained popularity online via virtual upvotes the group developed a more public audience and political voice. Dignam and Rohlinger note the leap from “oppositional consciousness to politicized collective identity” takes place only after Trump’s presidential candidacy was confirmed.²⁵⁸ Red Pill users identified Donald Trump Sr. as a legitimate opportunity to enshrine their alt-right views in contemporary politics and Dignam and Rohlinger note a distinct shift from online forum community to a politically motivated group in 2016.²⁵⁹ Up until this point, the RPN group had overtly opposed mainstream political involvement, a sentiment rooted in r/theredpill’s anti-establishment commitments. In 2016, members of the RPN would come to officially endorse Trump who was seen as a “natural extension of their own ideology” and a chance to “re-establish” white hetero-masculine dominance once again in American political and social life, as if it had been displaced.²⁶⁰ Members of the RPN believed that Hillary Clinton’s presidency would be “cataclysmically emasculating insofar as it would irreversibly entrench feminism into American politics.”²⁶¹

The quick ascendance of men’s rights from marginal spaces on the internet to legitimate venues like the White House in a matter of years is indicative of virulent antifeminism, misogyny, and white supremacist ideation not only online but “on the ground” and brings with it an array of violent consequences.²⁶² Jarvis and Eddington discuss the virility of antifeminist networks online, dubbed the “Manosphere”, as a backlash attempt to preserve traditional values

²⁵⁸ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 594.

²⁵⁹ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 590.

²⁶⁰ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 604.

²⁶¹ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 605.

²⁶² Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 590.

and white-heteronormative norms.²⁶³ In general, the Mansphere espouses and reinforces a heteronormative and misogynistic worldview. Perhaps more alarming are the deeper and darker folds of the Manosphere emerging and mobilizing to more obscure social media platforms where content moderation is nearly impossible and an actual physical or political threat more probable. For example, the CBC podcast *Boys Like Me* introduces a smaller segment within the Red Pill virtual community dubbed “the black pill” denoting a nihilistic subculture even more entrenched in misogynistic and extremist views, including the “incel” ideology. “Incel” stands for the “involuntary celibacy” movement popularized by r/braincels on Reddit. Self-proclaimed incels blame feminism, and more generally women, for their perceived loss of social status as white men and their inability to “procure” a suitable sexual or romantic partner due to their “beta status” as less competent or attractive males.²⁶⁴ The subreddits /theredpill and r/braincels, which have since been banned on Reddit, were found to have extremely hateful and misogynistic material linked to mass public attacks such as the 2018 Toronto van attack, resulting in their quarantine and permanent removal from the platform Reddit.²⁶⁵ However, Copland explains these groups have simply taken their ideology and discussions to more obscure internet platforms, ones even more encrypted than Discord or 4chan, making monitorization of these groups all the more challenging.²⁶⁶ Thus, online rhetoric can or does mirror political and civil discourse, perhaps even vice versa at times. But without the ability to map or monitor online trends and rhetoric, which is both complicated and controversial, it is unclear what trends or

²⁶³ Jarvis and Eddington, “Disentangling Antifeminist Paradoxes,” 104.

²⁶⁴ Ellen Cholë Bateman, host, “Episode 5: Welcome to the Manosphere,” *Boys Like Me*, CBC Podcasts, Podcast, MP3 audio, accessed December 13, 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/1035-boys-like-me?cmp=DM_SEM_Listen_Titles.

²⁶⁵ Copland, “Reddit Quarantined,” 15.

²⁶⁶ Copland, “Reddit Quarantined,” 16.

developments might be taking place and online rhetoric might continue to influence or respond to political trends.

From the anonymous origins of internet discussion forums to the centre of conservative political discourse, the misogynistic discourse of the r/theredpill subreddit group demonstrates a kind of anti-feminist pushback/backlash against ongoing changes to traditional gender roles—a pre-cursor to Trump’s popularity in the United States. Social media and microblogging sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit have the potential to increase political participation in a mostly unchecked and self-policed environment.²⁶⁷ These virtual venues extrapolate the process of political polarization and facilitate the spread of alt-right-misogynist discourse not otherwise acceptable in public settings.²⁶⁸ Trump’s own persona and political campaign(s) have relied heavily on the sensationalist social media culture. The relatively hands-off approach to content moderation on platforms like Reddit and Twitter presents significant challenges to the spread of misinformation and the cause of social justice and equity. According to Copland, strategies to reduce the spread misinformation online include intersectional education, content monitoring, and mental health and de-radicalization supports for extreme cases.²⁶⁹ Parents and caregivers have a role to play in educating and moderating internet usage of minors, too. Continued monitorization, research, and education are possible remedies to address mis/disinformation online. Balancing the right to free speech and self-actualization with the real-life consequences of hateful and misconstrued information online is important for addressing the rise of misinformation and violence via online information channels. The internet has the tremendous

²⁶⁷ Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, “Social Media and Political Communication,” 1277; See also section 1.4.3. *Media Analysis as a Medium* for my discussions regarding the role of social media in contemporary politics.

²⁶⁸ Dignam and Rohlinger, “Misogynistic Men Online,” 602.

²⁶⁹ Copland, “Reddit Quarantined,” 16; Bateman, host, “Episode 5: Welcome to the Manosphere,” *Boys Like Me*.

ability to connect and inform instantaneously, and is, for better or for worse, not going anywhere. The essential task remains to minimize mis/disinformation online, increase education, and establish healthy relationships with both social media and community. To further illustrate the dialectical relationship of frontlash/backlash in civil society and the convoluted role of social media in shaping political discourses and social activism, “Focused Cultural Example 3.2—Pussyhats and Issues with Contemporary Social Activism” considers anti-Trump resistance narratives online and at the grassroots level.²⁷⁰

3.2. Focused Cultural Example—Pussyhats and Issues in Contemporary Social Activism

The day after Trump’s inauguration (January 21st, 2017) the first official Women’s March on Washington was documented as one of the “largest single-day demonstrations in US history.”²⁷¹ Coordinated largely online, the response and scale of the protest was aided by the quick accessibility and shareability of a Facebook invite.²⁷² What began as a localized Facebook event would inspire other Women’s Marches in cities across the US, Canada, and abroad.²⁷³ The Women’s March was an extraordinary display of civil-solidarity and nonviolent political resistance in protest of Trump’s inauguration. The role of social media was significant in coordinating hundreds of “sister” marches symbolically uniting women around the world in

²⁷⁰ Wijssen, “Discourse Analysis in Religious Studies,” 2.

²⁷¹ Marie Berrie and Erica Chenoweth, “Who Made the Women’s March?,” in *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement*, eds. David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow (Oxford University Press, 2018): 88.

²⁷² Anemona Hartocollis and Yamiche Alcindor, “Women’s March Highlights as Huge Crowds Protest Trump: ‘We’re Not Going Away’,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/womens-march.html>.

²⁷³ For the original Facebook event, see: “Women’s March on Washington,” January 21, 2017, 9am CST-4pm CST, Location: Independence Ave & Third Street SW, Washington, D.C., accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/events/2169332969958991/>.

solidarity.²⁷⁴ In the weeks leading up to the Women’s March(es), a PDF template was distributed online containing the simple pattern instructions for a wool hat design. On the day of the March, a sea of pink hats flooded the streets of Washington, D.C as tens of thousands of women took to the streets to advocate for gender equity and women’s rights. Easily customizable and accessible to a range of skill levels, the knitted or crocheted pink hats were given the “pussyhat” moniker due to their catlike resemblance and stereotypical feminine colour. The quirky hats quickly became a symbol of feminist resistance for the Women’s March but not without a hotbed of relevant cultural nuances in need of further unpacking in the sections below.²⁷⁵

According to The Pussyhat Project™, the hat was created as a symbol representing support and solidarity for women’s rights.²⁷⁶ The template for the hat design was originally created by Kat Coyle, one of the Pussyhat Project’s founders, and pays a vulgar homage to Trump’s grotesque comments in the now infamous Hollywood Access interview.²⁷⁷ In her article entitled “Love Trumps Hate,” theologian and researcher Donna Bowman interviews some of the women involved in the Pussyhat Project which began out of a need to find some “unifying wearable for the day of the Women’s March,” as the story goes.²⁷⁸ Coordinated largely online,

²⁷⁴ Dana R. Fisher, Dawn M. Dow, and Rashawn Ray, “Intersectionality Takes it to the Streets: Mobilizing Across Diverse Interests for the Women’s March,” *Science Advances* 3, no. 9 (2017): 1-8.

²⁷⁵ In January 2017, I was finishing up my undergraduate degree and observed several of these pink hats in my hometown of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, demonstrating the transnational range of this symbolic resistance.

²⁷⁶ “The Pussyhat Story,” PUSSYHAT PROJECT™, accessed April 16, 2021. <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/our-story>.

²⁷⁷ In the audio recording, Trump claims that men in positions of power, like himself, can ‘do anything’ including sexually assault a woman by ‘grabbing them by the pussy’ seemingly without consequence, see Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” 117.

²⁷⁸ Donna Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” in *Taking It to the Streets: Public Theologies of Activism and Resistance*, edited by Jennifer Baldwin, (London: The Rowan and Littlefield Publishing Group. Inc., 2019): 115-127.

Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman are the original co-creators and co-founders of The Pussyhat Project, see, “The Pussyhat Story,” PUSSYHAT PROJECT™, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/our-story>.

thousands of handmade knitted or crocheted hats in various pinkish shades were worn on the day of the Women’s March.²⁷⁹ Although pink woolen hats have “no obvious or intentional theological significance,” Donna Bowman considers the symbol a successful tool for public theological engagement.²⁸⁰ Bowman explains that the act of caring for others—feeding them, clothing them, and standing in solidarity with those who suffer—draws upon central theological ethics.²⁸¹ Notably, the Women’s March was a profound display of collective organization, political love, and civil solidarity in stark contrast with Trump’s general attitude of social hostility and “us versus them” mentality. Moreover, the underlying vision and performance of the Women’s March provides contemporary audiences an example of nonviolent political resistance and civil solidarity while power of social media activism.

In the prairie provinces of Canada, we call this woolen winter essential a toque (also spelled tuque or touque).²⁸² If you grew up in Saskatchewan, like me, it is likely at some point you have received a knitted set with matching mittens as a gift from an older relative, perhaps as a gift from your grandmother or someone’s great-aunt. According to traditional binary gender roles, the stereotypical holders of this knowledge and givers of knitted garb are usually women. Once taught in Home Economics class, and before that by mothers, aunties, and grandmothers, the practical art of needlework is traditionally passed on through matrilineal instruction. The survival of hobbyist knitting, quilting, and cross-stitching in contemporary culture is a testament to the strength of these lineages for the passing down of this skill. Nowadays, the repetitious and

²⁷⁹ Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” 117.

²⁸⁰ Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” 116.

²⁸¹ Hall and Taussig, “Disruption, Demonization, Deliverance, and Norm Destruction: the Rhetorical Signature of Donald J. Trump,” *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 4 (2017): 619-651.

²⁸² Named after the Quebecois municipality of La Tuque, it is not uncommon for Canadian cities to lend their name to a physical object or symbol, or vice versa (consider Nanaimo bars, Montreal smoked meat, or Moose Jaw as examples). See also, “Tuque,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, June 11, 2019, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/tuque>.

meditative movement of needle and thread is a therapeutic hobby and a tangible articulation of concentration, connection, protection, and tradition.²⁸³ Reflecting on the Women’s March, Bowman describes the act of clothing someone, especially someone in need, and in particular hand-making an item intended to keep someone warm during the winter months, demonstrates a profound display of love and care.²⁸⁴ Precisely, the profoundness of this display of political love is the antithesis of the hateful and exclusionary rhetoric of Trumpism.²⁸⁵

Yet despite the powerful imagery of a sea of pink flooding the streets of the Capitol the day after Trump’s inauguration, the pinkness of the hats, while well-intended, underscores the shortcomings of white liberal feminism as a by-product of the specific racial and gendered dynamics of the United States. Consider how the respondents Bowman interviewed at the Women’s March were overwhelming white, cisgender, college-educated, middle-class women.²⁸⁶ Bowman writes that out of all her hat-making interviewees only one identified as male.²⁸⁷ According to Gökariksel and Smith, the pussyhat ultimately fails as an intersectional metaphor against sexual violence by equating “pussy grabbing as an assault on femininity only rather than an assault on humanity.”²⁸⁸ Moreover, Gökariksel and Smith argue that stereotypical feminine colour and cute, kitten-like appearance of the pussyhat not only infantilizes women but reduces the intersectional depth of the Women’s March as a feminist critique by failing to consider the diverse experiences of womanhood. As, Gökariksel and Smith explain, “not all

²⁸³ Perri Klass, “In a Stressful Time, Knitting for Calm and Connection,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2020, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/02/well/family/pandemic-knitting-election-stress.html>.

²⁸⁴ Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” 117.

²⁸⁵ Jamieson and Taussig, “Disruption, Demonization, Deliverance, and Norm Destruction,” 620.

²⁸⁶ Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” 116-117.

²⁸⁷ Bowman, “Love Trumps Hate,” 117-118.

²⁸⁸ Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith, “Intersectional Feminism Beyond US Flag Hijab and Pussy Hats in Trump’s America,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (2017): 635.

pussies are pink” and not everyone who identifies as a woman will have a vulva, essentially excluding the existence and experience of transwomen and other non-binary folk.²⁸⁹ Gökariksel and Smith argue to recenter the conversation around a broader cluster of issues concerning womxn, members of the LGBTQ+2 community, women of color, immigrant women, women denied entry at US borders and forcibly separated from their children, and women left without basic reproductive rights or access to family planning and abortion services, both across the US and internationally.²⁹⁰ In their view, Gökariksel and Smith see the pussyhat as a problematic symbol for intersectional feminist resistance since it fails to represent a broader scope of people directly targeted by Trump’s violent anti-women, anti-family, anti-immigration, and anti-social welfare rhetoric and policy preferences.²⁹¹ To their point, intersectional interpretations underscore our societal tendency to ignore, underestimate, and conflate the nuanced ways that “women and their allies are differently positioned in relation to the state and face different choices that hold different risks.”²⁹² Similarly, Manigault-Bryant calls into question the performative “lean-in” style of social media activism typical of our shallow consumerist culture.²⁹³ Thus, more nuanced evaluations of the Women’s March are needed to highlight the shortcomings of liberal white feminism and the broader tendency to overshadow the experiences of racialized and transwomen specifically. However, Bowman’s view of the pussyhat as a tool for public theological engagement also still stands. The Women’s March as a collectivized nonviolent act of resistance to Trumpism should be emphasized and celebrated while opening

²⁸⁹ Gökariksel and Smith, “Intersectional Feminism Beyond,” 636.

²⁹⁰ Dawn L. Rothe and Victoria E. Collins, “Turning Back the Clock? Violence against Women and the Trump Administration,” *Victims & Offenders* 14, no. 8 (2019): 965-967.

²⁹¹ Gökariksel and Smith, “Intersectional Feminism Beyond,” 637.

²⁹² Gökariksel and Smith, “Intersectional Feminism Beyond,” 638.

²⁹³ Rhon Manigault-Bryant, “An Open Letter to White Liberal Feminists,” *African American Intellectual History Society*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.aaihs.org/an-open-letter-to-white-liberal-feminists/>.

conversations to more nuanced understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. Gökariksel and Smith criticisms demonstrate how intersectional perspectives enrich our understanding of the entanglements of power and privilege around race and gender and create space for these critical conversations to take place. Ultimately, intersectional solidarity among multiple marginalized and underrepresented groups, despite inevitable differences, embraces plurality and can strengthen resistance to Trumpism.²⁹⁴ Trump and his allies have continued to perpetuate violence against women, LGBTQ communities, and other historically underserved and minoritized groups. Under Trump's administration federal funding for family planning was actively suppressed and barriers for reproductive health services were increased including changes to the federal grant program Title X, the Family Planning Program which provides essential sexual-health related services globally.²⁹⁵ The Trump administration has also rolled back legislation on mandatory birth control coverages by insurance companies and the reinstatement of Reagan's "Mexico City Policy" referred to by critics as the "global gag rule" which forbids any NGO receiving US funding from providing abortion services or referrals.²⁹⁶ The US has been one of the largest contributors for HIV and AIDs research and prevention, and many NGOs who do this important research as well as provide abortion and birth control access rely on US federal

²⁹⁴ "LibGuides: Multiply Marginalized & Underrepresented Scholars: MMU Scholars," *Utah State University*, 2022, <https://libguides.usu.edu/mmuscholars#:~:text=MMU%20stands%20for%20multiply%20marginalized,in%20their%20field%20of%20study>.

²⁹⁵ Sarah McCammon, "Planned Parenthood Withdraws from Title X Program Over Trump Abortion Rule," *NPR*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/19/752438119/planned-parenthood-out-of-title-x-over-trump-rule>.

²⁹⁶ In essence, the gag rule forces these NGOs to comply with the policy and forgo comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care and education to continue to receive US funding. See "Global Gag Rule: How US Aid Is Threatening Health and Speech Worldwide," *Open Society Foundations*, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/what-global-gag-rule>; "Prescribing Chaos in Global Health: The Global Gag Rule from 1984-2018," *Change: Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights for All*, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://srhrforall.org/prescribing-chaos-in-global-health-the-global-gag-rule-from1984-2018/>.

supports to provide their services in the Global South.²⁹⁷ Ultimately, the result of these legislative rollbacks directly targets already marginalized groups who will continue to suffer for years to come in the absence of these essential healthcare services, especially socio-economically disadvantaged individuals and those living in the Global South.

Even with Trump out of office many of his conservative appointees continue their crusade against women's rights and equality.²⁹⁸ The Supreme Court's 6-3 vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade* was a major win for conservative Republicans many years in the baking and denying the constitutional right to abortion care.²⁹⁹ Without constitutional protection, the ruling delegates abortion policies to the individual state level.³⁰⁰ By decreasing the accessibility of abortion healthcare and family planning services these policies (or lack thereof) are likely to result in higher rates of unintended pregnancies and higher rates of infant and maternal mortality while increasing the number of unsafe abortions. Without access to medical abortion maternal mortality rates are estimated to increase by over 20%, in addition to higher neonatal death rates particularly in states with more restrictive abortion laws.³⁰¹ Moreover, banning safe access to abortion will entrench many, mostly already marginalized folks, into the cycle of poverty,

²⁹⁷ "Global Gag Rule: How US. Aid Is Threatening Health and Speech Worldwide."

²⁹⁸ Namely the three Supreme Court nominees appointed by Trump, which include: Neil Gorsuch in 2017, Brett Kavanaugh in 2018, and Amy Coney Barrett in 2020. See John Gramlich, "How Trump Compares with Other Recent Presidents in Appointing Federal Judges," Pew Research Center, January 13, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/13/how-trump-compares-with-other-recent-presidents-in-appointing-federal-judges/>.

²⁹⁹ Erin Spencer Sairam, "How the Supreme Court's Ruling on Dobbs Compares to the Leaked Draft," *Forbes*, June 27, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erinspencer1/2022/06/24/how-the-supreme-courts-ruling-on-dobbs-compares-to-the-leaked-draft/?sh=7f8c966d6ff5>.

³⁰⁰ As a result, states like Arkansas, Missouri, South Dakota, and Wisconsin with "trigger laws" in place have essentially banned access to abortion immediately, see "Abortion-Rights Advocates in the 13 Trigger Law States Refuse to Give up Post-Roe," *NPR*, July 2022, accessed August 1, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/01/1107662821/abortion-rights-advocates-in-the-13-trigger-law-states-refuse-to-give-up-post-roe>.

³⁰¹ Sarah Compton and Scott L. Greer, "What Overturning *Roe v. Wade* Means for the United States," *British Medical Journal* 377 (2022): 1-2.

particularly in the absence of pregnancy and parental supports such as paid parental leave, healthcare coverage, and childcare support.³⁰²

In response to Trump's presidency, many women have engaged in more active political resistance, as evidence in the Women's March discussed in FCE 3.2. Another significant stream of resistance emerging in response to Trumpism includes a robust wave of female political representatives from a diverse collection of backgrounds and social locations.³⁰³ Figures include the youngest women to serve Congress, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, known by her initials AOC. Much like her nemesis, Donald Trump, AOC became a household name seemingly overnight with the help of social media, namely Twitter. Social media fandom is a growing trend where political figures are transformed into cultural celebrities or icons, roles which have more traditionally been occupied by fictional superhero characters and sports teams.³⁰⁴ Rodriguez and Goretti explain, "the political fandom of Ocasio-Cortez signals a sociopolitical shift in political fandom in which fans' affective identification is intrinsically tied to power, resistance, and within-party hierarchies."³⁰⁵ Rodriguez and Goretti critique this phenomenon of political fandom which turns "politicians into celebrities and celebrities into politicians." As seen with Trump, this leads to superficial and dangerously underqualified political entrepreneurs who use their celebrity clout to gain political popularity. Ultimately, political fandom in the age of social media is perhaps an inevitable dynamic of democratic processes since social media occupies a dual role in the facilitation of post-truth conspiratorial rhetoric while also increasing political engagement and social activism more broadly. Social justice-minded individuals can participate in resistance

³⁰² Compton and Greer, "What Overturning Roe v. Wade Means," 1.

³⁰³ David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 4-17.

³⁰⁴ Nathian Shae Rodriguez and Nadia Goretti, "From Hoops to Hope: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Political Fandom on Twitter," *International Journal of Communication* 16 (2022): 67.

³⁰⁵ Rodriguez and Goretti, "From Hoops to Hope," 78.

movement-building by staying involved their communities and even perhaps run for office, planting the seeds of change at the grassroots level themselves. Both scholarship and activism can help nurture the traditions of social activism and resistance as they continue to grow on a scalar model.

4. CHAPTER FOUR – Whitelash and Conspiracy in Post-Truth Society

Voter data analysis and academic commentary continue to underscore the “whiteness” of Trumpism as a backlash reaction to perceived changes to the US social fabric at individual, institutional, and structural levels. To better articulate this nuance, Embrick et al. offer the term “whitelash” to help clarify Trumpism as a specific kind of backlash generated by the white status quo.³⁰⁶ Whitelash as a collective emotional response is “predicated on the notion that white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchal structures are part of the very fabric of American society—that racism, classism, and sexism are firmly embedded in its structural foundations.”³⁰⁷ Embrick et al. explain the implications of whitelash in the United States can be observed on at least three distinct but interconnected levels: (1) structural, (2) institutional, and (3) individual.³⁰⁸ Structurally, the exploitative ideology of Christian imperialism encapsulated by the cultural slogan “manifest destiny” molded the ethos of early America and therein, the early foundations of the confederacy.³⁰⁹ Subsequently, the imperialist spirit of this exploitive history has influenced the institutional frameworks of the US, encoding white heteronormative supremacy, structural racism, sexism, and violence towards non-whites and marginalized others.³¹⁰ At the individual level, the trickledown effects of structurally violent institutions implicate virtually every person contained within its system(s), albeit in many different ways.

³⁰⁶ Embrick, et al., “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism,” 203.

³⁰⁷ Embrick et al., “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism,” 206.

³⁰⁸ Embrick et al., “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism,” 203.

³⁰⁹ Katie Geneva Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and The Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 127-128; Forner, “The International Slave Trade,” 10-11.

³¹⁰ “Others” include anyone outside of the white, heteronormative status quo including a long list of political enemies including Muslims, Mexicans, and other immigrants, see Mahmoud Samaie and Bahareh Malmir, “US News Media Portrayal of Islam and Muslims: A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49 no.14: 1351–1366, doi:10.1080/00131857.2017.1281789.

In historical perspective, Claire Colebrook explains whiteness mirrors the “politics of oppression” linked to the ebb and flow of global neoliberal capitalism.³¹¹ Similarly, Embrick et al. explain, “when white Americans feel economically and politically threatened by various racial and ethnic groups, then whiteness has often been deployed to restore the social, economic, and political order of white dominance.”³¹² Trumpism encapsulates several whiteness ideological sentiments that grow from a Marxist alienation, not from the means of production, but rather from a kind of racial alienation where “whites feel alienated from the valued resources (e.g., jobs) being unfairly ‘taken’ by underserving non-white immigrants.”³¹³ Trump’s ability to fuel whiteness reinforces white supremacist sentiments embedded in U.S politics and society. Symptomatic of the violent structures of settler-colonialism, the ever-changing subtle and unsubtle manifestations of whiteness work to maintain white privilege and hetero-masculine norms within US society. The following sections present FCE 4.1 and 4.2, which examine and compare historical and contemporary examples of whiteness in US politics and society. Due to the upsetting nature and recent memory of some of the events documented in this chapter, including the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the attempted insurrection on the US capitol on January 6th, 2021, the following sections come with a trigger warning and readers are advised to take care.

4.1. Focused Cultural Example–The Bible and Black Lives Matter

On June 1st, 2020, several months into the COVID-19 pandemic and nearing the end of his fourth year in office, Trump addressed the public from the White House Rose Garden for the

³¹¹ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 495-499.

³¹² Embrick et al., “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism,” 206.

³¹³ Embrick et al., “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism,” 209.

first time regarding the ongoing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests.³¹⁴ Protests had been ongoing worldwide since the tragic and untimely death of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020 and would continue for weeks.³¹⁵ Floyd was unarmed Black man who had allegedly used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill and died from asphyxiation after being pinned to the ground by Minneapolis police officers for nine and a half agonizing minutes.³¹⁶ Footage of Floyd's inhumane death circulated widely, igniting mass social media campaigns and prompting formal responses from celebrities, public figures, and politicians worldwide.³¹⁷ Calls to defund the police echoed internationally and protesters across the globe took to the streets despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.³¹⁸ Unfortunately, Floyd's wrongful death at the hands of American law enforcement was just one amongst many in the year 2020 alone. According to *Al Jazeera's* interactive digital project entitled Know Their Names, "between the years 2014 and 2020, police in the United States killed as many as 7680 people."³¹⁹ The Know Their Names project seeks to highlight the problem of police violence and how it disproportionately effects

³¹⁴ "READ: President Trump's Rose Garden Speech on Protests," *CNN*, June 2, 2020, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/politics/read-trumps-rose-garden-remarks/index.html>.

³¹⁵ Brendan O'Brien, "Ex-Cop Derek Chauvin, Convicted in Murder of George Floyd, Asks Judge for New Trial," in *Reuters*, Global News World, *Global News*, May 5, 2021, accessed December 20, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7834360/derek-chauvin-seeks-new-trial/#:~:text=Former%20Minneapolis%20police%20officer%20Derek%20Chauvin%20asked%20a%20Minneapolis%20judge,the%20killing%20of%20George%20Floyd.>

³¹⁶ "Police Body Camera Footage Shows Full Arrest, Struggle Leading to George Floyd's Death," *CBC News*, August 11, 2020, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/george-floyd-police-body-cam-video-1.5682285>.

³¹⁷ Aleem Maqbool, "Black Lives Matter: From Social Media Post to Global Movement," *BBC News*, July 9, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53273381>.

³¹⁸ Defunding the police means refers to the reshuffling of government funding to better support marginalized populations, rather than towards policing them, see Scottie Andrew, "There's a Growing Call to Defund the Police. Here's What it Means," *CNN*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/us/what-is-defund-police-trnd/index.html>; "Police Body Camera Footage Shows Full Arrest, Struggle Leading to George Floyd's Death," *CBC News*, August 11, 2020, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/george-floyd-police-body-cam-video-1.5682285>.

³¹⁹ Alia Chughtai, "Know Their Names: Black People Killed by the Police in the US," *Al Jazeera*, April 18, 2021, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html>.

people of colour living in the United States and has helped to inform the following sections.³²⁰

Discussions surrounding police violence should continue to understand police harm and racism in America's criminal justice system as a public health issue, if not a crisis.³²¹

The BLM protests took place throughout the country for weeks, inspiring international protests in solidarity.³²² In Washington, D.C., crowds of people gathered peacefully but with an increased police presence tension inevitably overboiled. Police used teargas and rubber bullets on unarmed civilians who were, perhaps too ironically, protesting police brutality.³²³ When BLM protestors gathered outside the White House, Trump was allegedly rushed to an underground bunker, a measure typically reserved for only the most extreme situations such as a terrorist attack or bomb threat.³²⁴ After being publicly chastised for this brash move the Trump administration denied it, naturally, insisting the visit to the bunk house was a mere inspection and had nothing to do with the ongoing riots.³²⁵ Finally, almost a week after the BLM protesting began, Trump addressed the public from the White House Rose Garden for the first time regarding the ongoing civil unrest with a clear message—stop the protesting, or else.³²⁶

Anticipating a formal address regarding Floyd's death and the ongoing protests, media pundits accurately speculated that Trump's message to BLM protestors was not likely to be one of unity

³²⁰ The authors clarify how police violence disproportionately affects Black Americans, and while White American experience police violence, they do so not as, frequently or as harshly, see Ana Sandoiu, "Police Violence: Physical and Mental Health Impacts on Black Americans," ed. Jasmin Collier, *Medical News Today*, MediLexicon International, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/police-violence-physical-and-mental-health-impacts-on-black-americans>.

³²¹ Sandoiu, "Police Violence: Physical and Mental Health Impacts on Black Americans."

³²² Maqbool, "From Social Media Post to Global Movement."

³²³ Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman, "As Protests and Violence Spill Over, Trump Shrinks Back," *The New York Times*, May 31, 2020, access June 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/politics/trump-protests-george-floyd.html>.

³²⁴ Baker and Haberman, "As Protests and Violence Spill Over, Trump Shrinks Back."

³²⁵ "George Floyd Death: Archbishop Attacks Trump as US Unrest Continues," *BBC News*, June 2, 2020, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52897303>.

³²⁶ "READ: President Trump's Rose Garden Speech on Protests."

or peace, however, the address was far more obscure and militaristic than expected. During the address, Trump acknowledged he would consider bringing in armed forces to “handle” the situation, a textbook example of authoritarianism.³²⁷ To conclude the address Trump announced, “and now I am going to pay my respects to a very, very special place,”³²⁸ and proceeded to walk from the Rose Garden to the Ashburton Parish House at St. John’s Episcopal Church dubbed “the Church of the President” due to its history and proximal location to the White House.³²⁹ The Ashburton House had been damaged the previous evening during the BLM protests and members of the public had gathered outside of the church, including priests and members of the Diocese, and were forcefully removed to prepare for Trump’s media brigade.³³⁰ In front of the boarded-up church Trump stopped to pose for the cameras while awkwardly holding a bible.³³¹ A strategic placement and prop, this distasteful symbolic gesture was intended to demonstrate his administrations supposed solidarity with the Church, the Bible, and most importantly, his evangelical voter base. Media outlets and religious communities were quick to identify the propaganda stunt for what it was. In the following sections, I interpret some of the interfaith responses to this mediatized spectacle with considerations regarding race and religion in US history.

³²⁷ Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash,” 7.

³²⁸ Zac Davis, “The President is Dragging the Church into a Culture War. We Shouldn’t Let Him,” *America Magazine*, June 2, 2020, accessed August 22, 2021, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/06/02/trump-bible-church-catholic-culture-war-protests-police?utm_source=piano; “READ: President Trump’s Rose Garden Speech on Protests.”

³²⁹ Mario Koran and Helen Sullivan, “Bishop ‘Outraged’ over Trump’s Church Photo Op During George Floyd Protests,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2020, accessed, August 22, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/02/outrageous-christian-leaders-reject-trump-use-of-church-as-prop-during-george-floyd-protests>.

³³⁰ Davis, “The President is Dragging the Church into a Culture War.”

³³¹ Davis, “The President is Dragging the Church into a Culture War.”

In response to Trump’s photo-op, members belonging to the St. John’s community were understandably outraged. The tone of Trump’s speech was not only divisive and ignorant about the ongoing context and history of US race relations, but he also intentionally leveraged the most sacred text within the Christian tradition as a source of political authority.³³² Members of the community were quick to clarify that Trump’s message did not align with Episcopalian tradition or the teachings of Christ.³³³ And nor did his actions—Trump did not enter the church or stop for prayer, and no one from Trump’s staff even bothered to call in advance to announce the planned photo-op.³³⁴ During the spectacle a member of the press asked, “Is that your bible?,” to which the former president retorted, “It’s a bible,” perhaps forgetting he has previously mentioned the Bible as being one of his “favourite” books.³³⁵

The Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde of St. John’s parish and the Bishop of D.C.’s Episcopal Dioceses denounced Trump’s photo-op and questioned the message behind his Rose Garden speech amidst the ongoing social and health crises, that is, both the Black Lives Matter protests and the 2020 pandemic. In an interview with the Washington Post, the Reverend Bishop Budde firmly clarified the situation with her statement:

Let me be clear, the president just used a Bible, the most sacred text of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and one of the churches of my diocese, without my permission, as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. Everything he has said and

³³² Again, while the political usage of the bible as source for political authority in out of context in the US, context is everything, see “READ: President Trump’s Rose Garden Speech on Protests.”

³³³ Koran and Sullivan, “Bishop Outraged.”

³³⁴ Michelle Boorstein and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Episcopal Bishop on President Trump: ‘Everything He Has Said and Done is to Inflammate Violence,’” *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2020, accessed August 4, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/bishop-budde-trump-church/2020/06/01/20ca70f8-a466-11ea-b619-3f9133bbb482_story.html.

³³⁵ Jonathan Merritt, “Trump’s Bible Fail,” *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2016, accessed August 4, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/04/trumps-bible-fail/478425/>; Brandon Gates, “All the Times Trump Used the Bible — His ‘Favorite’ Book — as a Prop,” *Courier*, June 5, 2020, Courier Newsroom, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://archive.couriernewsroom.com/2020/06/05/watch-all-the-times-trump-used-the-bible-his-favorite-book-as-a-prop/>.

done is to inflame violence. We need moral leadership, and he has done everything to divide us.³³⁶

Budde was quick to expunge her dioceses of any involvement with Trump's distasteful media spectacle and clarified the predicament faithful Americans find themselves in. Trump's message, tone, and symbolic gesture was on the wrong side of history, amid an unprecedented moment in contemporary race relations and a global health emergency. Similarly, the hostility of Trump's divisive message is antithetical to the Gospel teachings on peace and love, Budde and others remind us.³³⁷ As if sensing the trajectory of his authoritarian tendencies, Bishop Rev. Budde acts in good character to condemn Trump's photo-op and political hijacking of a sacred religious scripture. In this same article for the Washington Post, sociologist Andrew Whitehead echoes Rev. Budde by describing Trump's bible spectacle as a strategic political ploy to "promote the idea of America as a distinctly Christian nation after his [Trump's] Rose Garden speech."³³⁸ Whitehead continues to describe the Rose Garden speech as a definitively authoritarian "signal to the people" followed by a staged photo-op demonstrating Trump's solidarity to be with "white, mostly Protestant America."³³⁹ Taken for face value, it is not all that uncommon for a president of the United States to evoke the Christian bible as a source of political or moral authority.³⁴⁰ In fact, a preliminary web search of images shows various American presidents holding bibles in different political and public settings.³⁴¹ However, this instance was different and during one of the most pivotal moments in US race relations since the civil rights era.

³³⁶ Boorstein and Bailey, "Episcopal Bishop on President Trump."

³³⁷ Davis, "The President is Dragging the Church into a Culture War,"; Herzfeld, "Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd."

³³⁸ Boorstein and Bailey, "Episcopal Bishop on President Trump,"; Whitehead, Baker, and Perry, "Make America Christian Again," 151. See also section 2.2 of my literature review on white Christian nationalism and Trumpism.

³³⁹ Boorstein and Bailey, "Episcopal Bishop on President Trump."

³⁴⁰ Haberski, *God and War*, 78.

³⁴¹ See Chapter 2.1.1 of literature review for discussions of on American civil religion.

Reflecting on Trump’s bible spectacle, Noreen L. Herzfeld considers how conscientious US citizens and people of faith ought to interpret this political performance.³⁴² Herzfeld is a professor of theology and computer science at St. John’s University in Minnesota, the state where George Floyd was murdered. Herzfeld evokes the spirit of ecumenism calling for collective action against Trumpism across denominational lines.³⁴³ Herzfeld explains Christian folks have been appalled to see their most sacred religious text hijacked for what was clearly a politically motivated self-serving act, regardless of their prior political or denominational affiliations.³⁴⁴ Moreover, the political usage of a sacred religious text, staged or not, comes across as outlandishly bigoted given the history of US race relations and context of growing civil unrest under the stress of the ongoing pandemic. To make sense of this politicized media spectacle, Herzfeld draws upon the life and work of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose martyrdom and posthumous influence are significant within the Lutheran and Protestant traditions.³⁴⁵ Born in Prussia in 1906, Bonhoeffer became a fervent anti-Nazi dissident and opposed the Nazi-supported the Deutsche Christen Church, the nationalist German Christian Church backed by Hitler. Bonhoeffer’s life and written works demonstrate his “ability to combine deep learning with a passion for Christian discipleship; and his willingness to turn theological conviction into political action when circumstances demanded.”³⁴⁶ Similarly, Stephan Hayes explains that what makes Bonhoeffer “continually relevant was his courage to

³⁴² Noreen L. Herzfeld, “‘I Can’t Breathe’: Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd,” *Avon Hills Salon*, June 8, 2020, accessed July 9, 2020,

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=reuter_pubs.

³⁴³ Herzfeld, “Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd,” 1.

³⁴⁴ Andrew, “There’s a Growing Call to Defund the Police.”; Davis, “The President is Dragging the Church into a Culture War.”; Herzfeld, “‘Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd.’”

³⁴⁵ Herzfeld, “Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd,” 2.

³⁴⁶ Stephen R. Haynes, “Does Dietrich Bonhoeffer Have Any Relevance for Today?,” *openDemocracy*, April 16, 2020, accessed July, 8, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/does-dietrich-bonhoeffer-have-any-relevance-today/>.

speak out as a Christian and encourage resistance against Nazism and attempts to “Nazify” the church.”³⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer was falsely accused of being involved in the failed 20 July Plot (also called Operation Valkyrie) to assassinate Hitler and was consequently executed by hanging on April 9th, 1945, as a prisoner of war at Flossenbürg, just days before the camp would be liberated by American troops.³⁴⁸ It is worth pointing out here that Hitler was first appointed chancellor after a series of legitimate electoral wins by the German president Hindenburg in 1933 when Germany was still a democracy.³⁴⁹ Following Hindenburg’s death in 1934, Hitler declared himself the “Führer of the German People” plunging Germany into a state of totalitarianism.³⁵⁰ Hitler and the Nazi party are responsible for the deaths of over six million Jews, roughly six million Soviets, and thousands more civilians and people deemed “subhuman” including the Roma, convicted of homosexuals, and people with mental or physical disabilities.³⁵¹ Despite different historical and geographical contexts, both Bonhoeffer and George Floyd were killed at the hands of government officials who found it their duty to protect the status quo.³⁵² If anything, Bohoeffler reminds us that the story of “democracy to dictatorship” is not new, and we cannot ignore the “echoes of a fascist past made apparent under Trump’s regime.”³⁵³ Moreover, it remains our responsibility to learn from our mistakes, both collectively and individually, by remembering the past patterns and trajectories of violence.

³⁴⁷ Haynes, “Does Dietrich Bonhoeffer Have Any Relevance for Today?.”

³⁴⁸ Haynes, “Does Dietrich Bonhoeffer Have Any Relevance for Today?.”

³⁴⁹ “Adolf Hitler,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2017, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/adolf-hitler>.

³⁵⁰ “Germany 1933: From Democracy to Dictatorship,” *Anne Frank Website*, January 13, 2020, accessed October 13, 2021, <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/germany-1933-democracy-dictatorship/>.

³⁵¹ “Germany 1933: From Democracy to Dictatorship.”

³⁵² Herzfeld, “Bonhoeffer, the Bible, and the Death of George Floyd,” 2-3; Haynes, “Does Dietrich Bonhoeffer Have Any Relevance for Today?.”

³⁵³ Henry A. Giroux, “White Nationalism, Armed Culture and State Violence in the Age of Donald Trump,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 43, no. 9 (2017): 888.

4.2. Focused Cultural Example—The “Toxic Roots” of the Capitol Attack

The violence of Trumpism as a whitelash political rhetoric was epitomized on January 6, 2021, (referred to colloquially as Jan. 6th or 1/6) when a group of (mostly white) protestors turned insurrectionists stormed Capitol Hill after attending Trump’s Stop the Steal rally in denial of President Joe Biden’s win in the 2020 election.³⁵⁴ Video footage of the scene was pure chaos and an international audience, myself included, collectively held our breath while watching the events unfold.³⁵⁵ For Giroux, the attempted coup represents “Trumpism in full bloom, with all of its ignorance, hatred, and penchant for lawlessness on full display.”³⁵⁶ This attack on the US Capitol was part of a long string of civil uprisings on both sides of the political spectrum instigated by Trump’s manufactured post-truth (un)reality.³⁵⁷ Considering both the Jan. 6th attack in 2021 and the BLM protests in 2020, Hawkins and Simon-Roberts describe the racialized differences between the treatment of Jan. 6th insurrections and BLM protestors a few months prior.³⁵⁸ The majority white pro-Trump mob of insurrectionists was met with relatively little force in stark contrast to the hostile treatment of BLM protestors following the brutal death of George Floyd in May of 2020.³⁵⁹ Hawkins and Simon-Roberts link this paradox to the history of racialized privilege in US history and draw attention to the importance of slave insurrections in Black liberation.³⁶⁰ Seeped in conspiracy and entitlement, Jan. 6th events add to the list of white-

³⁵⁴ “The Capitol Siege: The Cases Behind the Biggest Criminal Investigation in U.S. History,” *NPR*, October 15, 2021, accessed November 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/09/965472049/the-capitol-siege-the-arrested-and-their-stories>.

³⁵⁵ Becky Little, “A History of Attacks at the US Capitol,” *History*, January 7, 2021, A&E Television Networks, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/us-capitol-building-violence-fires>.

³⁵⁶ Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” 1.

³⁵⁷ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 37.

³⁵⁸ Deion Hawkins and Sharifa Simon-Roberts, “Privilege and the Legacy of an Insurrection: Critical Race Theory, January 6th, and Preserving Black Resistance,” *American Behavioral Scientist* (2022): 1-18.

³⁵⁹ See FME 4.1 for an account of Trump’s Bible spectacle in response to BLM protestors.

³⁶⁰ Hawkins and Simon-Roberts, “Privilege and the Legacy of an Insurrection,” 4-7.

washed appropriation of justified Black resistance throughout US history.³⁶¹ The following sections discuss the events and context of the attempted insurrection as whitelash rooted in the history of race relations in the US and within a context of misinformation and social distrust heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. A visual timeline created by Tan and Shin from the Washington Post has helped to inform my own comprehension of the day's events, in addition to ongoing investigations and academic commentary, to be further discussed below.³⁶²

Allegations that the 2020 election would be “stolen” began in the weeks and months before the election would even take place without any evidence of voter fraud and would continue after Biden's presidential win was officially confirmed.³⁶³ On the morning of Jan. 6th Trump spoke at the “Stop the Steal” rally at the Ellipse near the White House and continued to perpetuate claims about corruption and voter fraud in the 2020 election. Trump repeatedly mislead his audience by telling them to never give up, to never concede:

All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they're doing. And stolen by the fake news media. That's what they've done and what they're doing. We will never give up; we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved.³⁶⁴

To concede means to admit that something is true or valid after first denying or resisting it; it can also mean to surrender or yield to an opponent by admitting defeat.³⁶⁵ Certainly Trump, the sorest of sore losers, would never admit his defeat. Repeatedly during his Stop the Steal speech

³⁶¹ Hawkins and Simon-Roberts, “Privilege and the Legacy of an Insurrection,” 3.

³⁶² Shelly Tan and Youjin Shin, “How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol,” ed. Danielle Rindler, *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 9, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/capitol-insurrection-visual-timeline/>.

³⁶³ Bill Blaikie, “Tracing the Toxic Roots of the Capitol Attack,” *rabble.ca*, January 27, 2021. <https://rabble.ca/columnists/2021/01/tracing-toxic-roots-capitol-attack>.

³⁶⁴ Brian Naylor, “Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, a Key Part of Impeachment Trial,” *NPR*, February 10, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>; Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” 1.

³⁶⁵ “Concede,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concede>.

Trump told his audience, “And I’ll be there with you, we’re going to walk down, we’re going to walk down,” to the Capitol complex, that is, where he explained they could ‘peacefully and patriotically’ express their refusal to concede.³⁶⁶ Shortly before concluding his speech and in typical nonsensical fashion, Trump rambled, “So... we’re going to, we’re going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue [sic]. I love Pennsylvania Avenue. And we’re going to the Capitol, and we’re going to try and give.³⁶⁷ Try and give what, exactly? Try and give the Capitol police “hugs and kisses”?”³⁶⁸ After Trump concluded this speech hundreds of his supporters marched from the Ellipse away from the White House and towards Capitol Hill, following Constitution Avenue, not Pennsylvania Ave.³⁶⁹ By mid-afternoon, a smaller group (of about 800 people) breached the Capitol Complex, rappelling from smashed windows and ransacking as government officials and staff were evacuated.³⁷⁰ By the end of the day Trump’s social media accounts were disabled resulting in his permanent ban from major social media platforms leading to the establishment of his own social media platform called Truth Social.³⁷¹ In the aftermath of the attempted insurrection five individuals died, hundreds were injured or experience lingering post-traumatic stress, including four responding D.C Metropolitan police officers who have since taken their own lives.³⁷²

³⁶⁶ Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech.”

³⁶⁷ Naylor, “Read Trump’s Jan. 6 Speech.”

³⁶⁸ This question is deliberately facetious and plays on Trump’s own description of the Capitol riot on January 6th as ‘all hugs and kiss’, see CNN, “Trump Praises US Capitol Rioters ‘Hugging and Kissing’ Police,” *YouTube*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTM9uqeDFqM>; Robert Evans, host, “Episode 6: Hugs and Kisses,” December 7, 2021, in *Assault on America*, produced by iHeartMedia, podcast audio: <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-the-assault-on-america-89951738/episode/episode-6-hugs-and-kisses-90220750/>.

³⁶⁹ Tan and Shin, “One of America’s Ugliest Days.”

³⁷⁰ Tan and Shin, “One of America’s Ugliest Days.”

³⁷¹ “What the Truth Social Flop Says about Trump,” *POLITICO*, September 10, 2022, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/09/10/truth-social-flop-says-about-trump-00055977>; Tan and Shin, “One of America’s Ugliest Days.”

³⁷² “Capitol Attack: the Five People Who Died,” *The Guardian*, January 8, 2021, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/08/capitol-attack-police-officer-five-deaths>; Peter

The conflict on Jan. 6th was anticipated, albeit poorly strategized in terms of both execution and prevention.³⁷³ Trump openly invited his supporters to attend the #StoptheSteal rally in D.C and thousands obeyed, demonstrating some degree of organizational planning to at least attend the rally.³⁷⁴ Furthermore, some of the individuals who stormed the Capitol were equipped with knives, bear mace, poles, bludgeons, and other weaponry indicating an element of premeditation, or at least the anticipation of conflict.³⁷⁵ Suspicious packages containing pipe bombs were found at both Republican and Democrat National Committee headquarters and government representatives and staff were evacuated from state capitols and government buildings across the country as threats pooled in.³⁷⁶ Despite the anticipated conflict in part fueled by Trump's explicit encouragement of conspiratorial rhetoric and resistance, Capitol police were underprepared and understaffed on Jan.6 and were no match for the angry mob numbering in the thousands.³⁷⁷

Hermann, "'Some Are Still Suffering': Months After Capitol Riot, Police Who Fought the Mob Contend with Physical, Psychological Pain," *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2021, accessed October 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/capitol-riot-police-injuries-trauma/2021/07/23/e008f0f0-d8d8-11eb-9bbb-37c30dcf9363_story.html.

³⁷³ Parmar, "Trump's Coup and Insurrection," 36.

³⁷⁴ Atlantic Council's DFRLab, "#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection," *Just Security*, February 10, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>.

³⁷⁵ Marshall Cohen, Eric Hall, and Brianna Keilar, "Guns, Knives, Bombs and Bear Spray: Here Are the Weapons Trump Supporters Brought to DC on the Day of the Capitol Attack," *CNN*, February 17, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/17/politics/capitol-insurrection-weapons-ron-johnson/index.html>.

³⁷⁶ Tan and Shin, "One of America's Ugliest Days."

³⁷⁷ Betsy Woodruff Swan and Daniel Lippman, "New Capitol Police Document Shows How Unprepared They Were for Jan. 6 Riots," *POLITICO*, October 29, 2021, accessed July 20, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/29/capitol-police-documents-unprepared-jan-6-riots-517478>.

Regardless of explicit incitement or not, the pro-Trump mob believed the 2020 election was “rigged” and that they had Trump’s “blessing” to resist concession.³⁷⁸ This resistance was encouraged by Trump’s own rhetoric denying the election results, not to mention his political tendencies and disregard for democratic processes throughout his four years in office.³⁷⁹ Underscored by a long list of false claims and defamatory comments, Trump’s political rhetoric helped to foster a culture of violence, distrust, and rejection of scientific standards and objective truths.³⁸⁰ Despite his political trajectory towards authoritarianism and direct/indirect involvement in mobilizing a violent mob of would-be insurrectionists, Trump would ultimately be acquitted of “incitement of insurrection” during his second impeachment trial, although other criminal and civil investigations are ongoing.³⁸¹

Ultimately, Trump was not alone in creating the pretext which would not only allow but encourage this violence to ensue.³⁸² The ideation for this attempted coup was prepped by whitelash rhetoric generated by Trump and his supporters in the weeks, months, and even years leading up to it. Moreover, within the GOP itself there are “a number of Republican politicians who actively promoted conspiracy theories and dangerous propaganda in order to invalidate the Biden election.”³⁸³ Leading into the 2020 election cycle, Trump and his supporters accused Biden of voter suppression and fraud and claimed they would only accept the election results if

³⁷⁸ David McRaney, “197: Conspiratorial Thinking,” January 10, 2021, in *You are Not So Smart*, YANSS production by David McRaney, podcast MP3 audio, <https://youarenotsosmart.com/2021/01/29/yanss-197-steven-novella-and-jesse-walker-discuss-the-history-and-psychology-of-conspiracy-theories-2/>.

³⁷⁹ “Tracing the Toxic Roots of the Capitol Attack,” *rabble.ca*, January 27, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://rabble.ca/columnists/2021/01/tracing-toxic-roots-capitol-attack>.

³⁸⁰ McGranahan, “An Anthropology of Lying,” 244.

³⁸¹ Erin Blakemore, “In a Historic First, a US. President Has Been Impeached Twice. Here’s What Happens Next,” *National Geographic*, May 3, 2021, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-quickly-can-congress-impeach-president-how-it-could-work>.

³⁸² Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” 1.

³⁸³ Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” 1.

they were in Trump’s favor.³⁸⁴ Conservative media personas like Steve Bannon’s *War Room* podcast and the now banned Reddit forum r/The_Donald discussed in FCE 3.1 echoed this hostile and misguided denial of Biden’s victory, calling for the arrest and even the execution of their adversaries.³⁸⁵ Bannon has since been charged with contempt of Congress for failing to comply during ongoing investigations into the Stop the Steal rally and Capitol breach.³⁸⁶ The select committee has identified several key agitators or far-right “agent provocateurs” involved in the “content creation frenzy” leading up to the events on Jan. 6th including the rally organizer, far-right activist and conspiracy theorist Ali Alexander.³⁸⁷ However, the overwhelming majority of individuals involved in the Capitol riot were not affiliated with far-right militias or white-nationalist gangs but were “unaffiliated citizens.”³⁸⁸ Embolden by mob mentality and radicalized by conspiracy rhetoric, Pape and Ruby explain that, “unlike the stereotypical extremist, many of the alleged participants in the Capitol riot have a lot to lose. They work as CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists, and accountants.”³⁸⁹ This distinction is significant considering what these individuals were willing to risk by participating in an attempted coup d’état. Moreover, the fact that many rioters on Jan. 6th were not your “stereotypical extremist” demonstrates how deeply persuasive and pervasive post-truth rhetoric is within the United States.

³⁸⁴ Sam Sanders, “Donald Trump Says He’ll Accept the Results of the Election... If He Wins,” *NPR*, October 20, 2016, accessed April 1, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2016/10/20/498713509/donald-trump-says-hell-accept-the-results-of-the-election-if-he-wins>; Aamer Madhani, Colleen Long And Will Weissert, “Trump Won’t Say If He’ll Accept 2020 Presidential Election Results,” *Global News*, July 19, 2020, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7194444/trump-2020-presidential-election-acceptance/>.

³⁸⁵ Giroux, “Trumpism and the Challenge of Critical Education,” 1.

³⁸⁶ Kyle Cheney and Josh Gerstein, “House Hopes to Defy History in Criminal Contempt Case against Bannon,” *POLITICO*, October 21, 2021, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/10/19/jan-6-commission-steve-bannon-criminal-contempt-516233>.

³⁸⁷ Robert Evans, host, “Episode 2: Stop the Steal,” December 7, 2021, in *Assault on America*, produced by iHeartMedia, podcast, MP3 audio: <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-the-assault-on-america-89951738/episode/episode-2-stop-the-steal-90220755/>.

³⁸⁸ Pape and Ruby, “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists.”

³⁸⁹ Pape and Ruby, “The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists.”

Following the attack Trump supporters “doubled down” on their conspiracy rhetoric by claiming that the insurrectionists were not actual Trump supporters but were actors or implants from left-wing anti-fascist groups like Antifa, Black Lives Matter, or some other Republican adversary.³⁹⁰ All such claims were debunked by the FBI, Rutgers University, and other fact-checking networks including the House Select Committee investigating the events that took place on Jan. 6th.³⁹¹ However when objective truth, scientific consensus, and other fact-checking methods are similarly rejected by those participating in a post-truth reality, any attempt at rational argumentation, logic making, or fact checking is moot. This inversion of reality and factuality are central to post-truth logics where established systems of knowledge and fact-checking are rejected, and truth becomes a matter of personal belief and emotion.³⁹²

Canadian United Church Minister and former long serving member of parliament Bill Blaikie reflects that the “big lie” that the 2020 election was stolen was merely the final catalyst for this already paranoid audience.³⁹³ Indeed, fake news, conspiracy rhetoric, and the rejection of evidence-based science are integral parts of Trump’s personal and political strategy, and are formative building blocks for “Trumpism” the rhetoric and mobilized body of voters.³⁹⁴ To help make sense of this thread in light of Jan. 6th, David McRaney, host of the podcast *You Are Not So*

³⁹⁰ Meg Anderson, “Antifa Didn’t Storm the Capitol. Just Ask the Rioters,” *NPR*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/02/972564176/antifa-didnt-storm-the-capitol-just-ask-the-rioters>; “Fact Check: Men Who Stormed Capitol Identified by Reuters Are Not Undercover Antifa as Posts Claim,” *Reuters*, January 9, 2021, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-capitol-mob-antifa-undercov-idUSKBN29E0QO>.

³⁹¹ See Mary B. McCord, “Expert Statement House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol,” *Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection*, Georgetown University Law Centre, (2022): 1-47.

³⁹² Baldwin, “Knowledge, Power, and Fear,” 99.

³⁹³ Bill Blaikie, “Tracing the Toxic Roots of the Capitol Attack,” *rabble.ca*, January 27, 2021, accessed February 10, 2021, <https://rabble.ca/columnists/2021/01/tracing-toxic-roots-capitol-attack>; Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 37.

³⁹⁴ James P. Pfiffner, “The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy,” in *Presidential Leadership and the Trump Presidency*, eds. Charles M. Lamb and Jacob R. Neiheisel (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 17-40; Rojecki, “Trumpism and the American Politics of Insecurity,” 76.

Smart, examines conspiratorial thinking not as a new phenomenon but as part of a human-social dynamic.³⁹⁵ McRaney interviews three academics who study conspiracies as part of our human psychology and as a reflexive practice on the partisan spectrum within power asymmetries.³⁹⁶ Indicative of the frontlash/backlash dynamic in civil society fringe ideas circulate amongst like-minded individuals before amalgamating into an ideology or belief system. When a fringe idea gains believers and momentum it becomes an ideology and can then become fuel for political mobilization, or even an attempted coup.³⁹⁷ Conspiratorial rhetoric is common in US vernacular discourse and social media extrapolates conspiracy ideation and the spread of misinformation.³⁹⁸ However, conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon. Major conspiratorial narratives surround JFK's assassination, the death of Princess Diana, the 9/11 attacks, and Obama's birth certificate.³⁹⁹ Following the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks in 2001 public attention diverted to a foreign enemy narrative and conservative commentary was quick to frame Muslims as "anti-American" others.⁴⁰⁰ A variety of other "Truther" conspiracies surrounding 9/11 still circulate and the subsequent "Global War on Terrorism" (GWOT) initiated by then President George W. Bush.⁴⁰¹ Furthermore, Jan. 6th was not the first time Trump himself has perpetuated outright lies echoing the anxieties of white nationalist and racists extremists.⁴⁰² For example, during Obama's

³⁹⁵ David McRaney, "197: Conspiratorial Thinking," January 29, 2021, *You are Not So Smart*, YANSS production by David McRaney, podcast, <https://youarenotsmart.com/2021/01/29/yanss-197-steven-novella-and-jesse-walker-discuss-the-history-and-psychology-of-conspiracy-theories-2/>.

³⁹⁶ McRaney, "197: Conspiratorial Thinking," January 29, 2021, YANSS.

³⁹⁷ McRaney, "197: Conspiratorial Thinking," January 29, 2021, YANSS.

³⁹⁸ Karen M. Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turkey Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, and Farzin Deravi, "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology* 40 (2019): 3-35.

³⁹⁹ Douglas, et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," 5.

⁴⁰⁰ Ruth Braunstein, "Muslims as Outsiders, Enemies, and Others: The 2016 Presidential Election and the Politics of Religious Exclusion," in *Politics of Meaning/Meaning of Politics*, eds. Jason L. Mast and Jeffery C. Alexander (Palgrave, Macmillan, Cham, 2019): 186.

⁴⁰¹ Douglas et al., "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," 16.

⁴⁰² "Politifact- In Context: Donald Trump's 'Very Fine People on Both Sides' Remarks (Transcript)," *Politifact*, April 26, 2019, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.politifact.com/article/2019/apr/26/context->

presidential campaign in 2008, Trump was an active proponent of the “Birther” conspiracy which claimed Obama’s birth certificate was forged and that he was actually a Muslim born in Kenya.⁴⁰³ The birther movement was ultimately a baseless witch-hunt rooted in Islamophobia and intended to distract from Obama’s victory by drawing on feelings of white disenfranchisement and notions of Christian nationalism.⁴⁰⁴ Ruth Braunstein explains Islamophobic rhetoric resurfaced during the 2016 election directed towards an influx of Syrian refugees, resulting in Trump attempting to ban immigration from Muslim majority countries like Iran, Iraq, and Syria.⁴⁰⁵ At the centre of this tension between civic version ethnic nationalism, Jews, Catholics, and Muslims have all been prosecuted by white Christian nationalist who view these “outsiders” as subjects of an “illiberal foreign authority” like the Vatican, Mecca, or the Holy Land of Israel.⁴⁰⁶ However, contrary to this foreign enemy narrative, domestic white supremacist violence is described by the FBI as the single most persistent threat of terrorism in the US.⁴⁰⁷

Investigations into the events on Jan. 6th have identified the involvement of several known (and some previously unknown) white nationalist militia groups charged with a far-right

trumps-very-fine-people-both-sides-remarks/; Pfiffner, “The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy,” 17-35.

⁴⁰³ Samira Saramo, “The Meta-violence of Trumpism,” *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2017): 5; Pfiffner, “The Lies of Donald Trump: A Taxonomy,” 28.

⁴⁰⁴ Adam Serwer, “Birtherism of a Nation,” *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2020, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/birtherism-and-trump/610978/>; See also, Douglas M. Johnston, “Combating Islamophobia,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 2 (2016): 165-173.

⁴⁰⁵ In the 2016 primaries two Republican candidates, Jeb Bush and Ted Cruz, echoed these fears when they argued that the United States should be a safe-haven for Syrian Christians fleeing religious prosecution, whereas Muslim refugees should be resettled in Muslim-majority countries, see Braunstein, “Muslims as Outsiders, Enemies, and Others,” 191.

⁴⁰⁶ Braunstein, “Muslims as Outsiders, Enemies, and Others,” 191; Johnston, “Combating Islamophobia,” 163.

⁴⁰⁷ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 38.

agenda and fueled by lies of a stolen election and other volatile whitelash conspiracy rhetoric.⁴⁰⁸ Militia groups have a long history imbedded in the story of armed conflict in the US.⁴⁰⁹ Well-known groups include the Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Patriot Front, Three Percenters, The Base, and the Montana Freeman, an openly “anti-government Christian patriot” movement.⁴¹⁰ These militia groups are known to disband and reform under new names, bolstered by their apparent impunity when it comes to promoting hateful ideology and public acts of violence. Public attacks associated with far-right militia groups stretch back to the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and including more recent attacks such as the Charleston Church shooting, the El Paso Walmart shooting, the Charlottesville car attack, and the 2011 attacks in Norway, all of which have been linked to white-nationalist ideology.⁴¹¹

Utilizing the connecting power of social media and news platforms, far-right militia groups have been on the rise in the last two decades and have begun to network with international partners including the ultranationalist Russian Imperial Movement (RIM).⁴¹² In 2020, RIM was ranked a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity, the first to be

⁴⁰⁸ Robert Evans, host, “Episode 2: Stop the Steal,” December 7, 2021, in *Assault on America*, produced by iHeartMedia, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-the-assault-on-america-89951738/episode/episode-2-stop-the-steal-90220755/>.

⁴⁰⁹ McCord, “Expert Statement House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack,” 7.

⁴¹⁰ “Examining Extremism: The Militia Movement,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 28, 2021, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-militia-movement>; Michelle Shepard, host, “Episode 1: Save Your Race, Join the Base,” October 26, 2021, in *White Hot Hate*, CBC, podcast, MP3 audio, 37:42, <https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/1031-white-hot-hate/episode/15874619-episode-1-save-your-race-join-the-base>.

⁴¹¹ Vera Bergengruen and W.J Hennigan, “‘We Are Being Eaten from Within,’ Why America is Losing the Battle Against White Nationalist Terrorism,” *Time*, August 8, 2019, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://time.com/5647304/white-nationalist-terrorism-united-states/>.

⁴¹² Natasha Del Toro, host, “Episode Two: The Russian,” January 31, 2022, on *Verified: The Next Threat*, produced by E.W Scripps, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://www.verifiedpod.com/season-3/episode-two-the-russian>.

delineated a white supremacist extremist (WSE) organization.⁴¹³ This novel delineation made by the US Department of State is the first of its kind and an attempt to quell the influence of this particular ultraconservative group whose goal is to “consolidate traditionalist and conservative forces globally.”⁴¹⁴ RIM allegedly offers paramilitary training with ties to the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Leaders of RIM have been in communications with the fascist European Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF) as well as with other US-based white nationalist groups.⁴¹⁵ In Russia, RIM operates legally with strong ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, but is inherently against the current Russian government as the WSE organization openly advocates for a pre-Bolshevik style monarchy.⁴¹⁶ A 2020 publication from the International Center for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) explains, “if a conflict erupts between Russia and a NATO country, it is possible that Russia would take a more hands-on approach to training WSEs throughout organizations like RIM and using them to fracture and destabilize the West.”⁴¹⁷ Researchers emphasize the integral role of the internet and social media in disseminating the ideology of far-right and facilitating the growth of transnational extremist networks.⁴¹⁸ Continued investigations into WSE organizations such as RIM will be crucial for social reserachers and state/international security agencie , particularly now that Putin has

⁴¹³ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Samuel Hodgson, and Colin P. Clarke, “The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and Its Links to the Transnational White Supremacist Extremist Movement,” *International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT)*, May 14, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-russian-imperial-movement-rim-and-its-links-to-the-transnational-white-supremacist-extremist-movement/>.

⁴¹⁴ Natasha Del Toro, host, “Episode Three: The Network,” February 7, 2022, on *Verified: The Next Threat*, produced by E.W Scripps, podcast, MP3 audio, <https://www.verifiedpod.com/season-3/episode-three-the-network>.

⁴¹⁵ Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

⁴¹⁶ Anna Kruglova, “For God, for Tsar and for the Nation: Authenticity in the Russian Imperial Movement’s Propaganda,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (October 19, 2021): 1-23.

⁴¹⁷ Gartenstein-Ross, Hodgson, and Clarke, “Russian Imperial Movement.”

⁴¹⁸ Kruglova, “For God, for Tsar and for the Nation,” 1.

advanced an aggressive military attack against Ukraine in April 2022.⁴¹⁹ Understanding Russian media disinformation influence is a necessary part of future security strategies for the future.

Reflecting on the Jan. 6th circumstances within the context of the 2020 pandemic Parmar writes, “there is no ‘return to normalcy’ the country craves without reforms to a system that advantages the politics of extremism in the Republican Party.”⁴²⁰ It is clear there is a need to address the structural and institutional gaps which has rendered the United States democracy vulnerable to such multilateral attacks—at the grassroots and from within the Republican party itself. Large swathes of Republicans have actively enabled Trump’s behaviour and policies to fester, fostered by a culture of armed militantism and white Christian nationalism.⁴²¹ The failed bid to overturn the 2020 election results was sparked by the controversial junior senator of Missouri Josh Hawley who has distinguished himself as a Trump-ally, if not perhaps a more refined and problematic politician with a deep resentment towards women’s rights, pluralism, and Islam.⁴²² On the morning of January 6th, Sen. Hawley infamously gave the crowd at the Capital a proud fist in solidarity just hours before the protestors would breach the building complex and Hawley would vote against the certification of Joe Biden.⁴²³ Hawley was not alone in promoting this narrative; in the aftermath of the Capitol attack and 2020 election, two-thirds of Republican representatives would vote against the certification of Joe Biden, while only ten Republican representatives total would vote to impeach Trump during his second impeachment

⁴¹⁹ John Psaropoulos, “Timeline: Week 23 of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” *Al Jazeera*, August 4, 2022, accessed August 5, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/4/timeline-week-23-of-russias-war-in-ukraine>.

⁴²⁰ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 36.

⁴²¹ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 46.

⁴²² Blaikie, “Tracing the Toxic Roots of the Capitol Attack.

⁴²³ Robert Evans, host, “Episode 5: The Inside Man,” December 7, 2021, in *The Assault on America*, produced by iHeartMedia, podcast, MP3 audio: <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-the-assault-on-america-89951738/episode/episode-5-the-inside-man-90220751/>.

trial.⁴²⁴ Chris Edelson explains that Trump’s ability to stay in office for one full term and despite two impeachment attempts demonstrates the constitutional inadequacies and reveals the need for a new constitution to save the republic and strengthen liberal democracy in the US before it’s too late.⁴²⁵ Ultimately, as of September 2023, Trump faces four felony counts for conspiracy for his efforts to overturn the 2020 election, 13 criminal counts for racketeering, 40 felony counts for mishandling/hoarding classified documents, and 34 felony accounts in connection with hush money payments.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁴ Blakemore, “In a Historic First, a US President Has Been Impeached Twice. Here’s What Happens Next.”

⁴²⁵ Chris Edelson, “How to Keep the Republic (Before It’s too Late): Why a New Constitution is Necessary to Strengthen Liberal Democracy in the United States,” in *Presidential Leadership and the Trump Presidency*, eds. Charles M. Lamb and Jacob R. Neihsel (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020) 121-149.

⁴²⁶ Gareth Evans, “How Big Are Donald Trump’s Legal Problems?,” *BBC News* (BBC News, September 5, 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61084161>.

5. CHAPTER FIVE–Summary and Synthesis

A critical and contextual reading of the implications of Trumpism and Trumpian rhetoric in a post-truth political environment should also consider the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in early 2020, what would be the final few months of the Trump administration. The president Trump’s initial denial and subsequent slow response to the international warnings of a possible pandemic reflect not only Trump’s general incompetency as political leader but demonstrate the actual life-and-death consequences of Trumpian post-truth political rhetoric. With the onset of the pandemic, concern about mental and physical wellness are compounded by social isolation, economic uncertainty, and general anxiety about various unknowns, not to mention the grief of losing a loved one.⁴²⁷

The transnational spread of disease is just one of the consequences of globalization, and the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare our transnational reality.⁴²⁸ Moreover, the pandemic underscores the racial and class-based injustices of an unequally distributed economic system and the comorbidities that put equity deserving groups and the poor at higher-risk of infection and death.⁴²⁹ And yet, during the first year of the pandemic alone, the 651 American billionaires of the so-called “billionaire network” have increased their collective wealth from 1 trillion to 4 trillion USD.⁴³⁰ Thus, the pandemic also presents several opportunities for mediations on race, gender, and economic justice at the intersections of our transnational entanglement, and as we

⁴²⁷ I would like to add a personal acknowledgement remembering my beloved grandfather David Alan Wilton, who died September 26th, 2021, isolated in a hospital COVID-19 ward after a (relatively swift) two-week battle against the virus.

⁴²⁸ Joseph E. Stiglitz, “Plagued by Trumpism,” *Project Syndicate* 9 (2020): 1-2.

⁴²⁹ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 3.

⁴³⁰ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 37-38.

near the tipping point of our human-driven environmental crisis.⁴³¹ These final sections will synthesize this web of co-dependency and controversy as it pertains to the orientation of this project.

5.1. Focused Cultural Example–Trumpism, Transnationalism, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus or COVID-19) is a novel zoonotic disease first reported in Wuhan, China, sometime in late 2019.⁴³² According to Hao et al., the exact origins and transmission of the virus from an animal to human remain unclear.⁴³³ The onset of the pandemic was both dramatic and unevenly experienced. Lockdowns disrupted daily life as governments scrambled to contain the spread of the disease while frontline workers were mandated to work with little information and unclear safety protocols, at times even lacking personal protective equipment (PPE).⁴³⁴ Media outlets quickly characterized the pandemic as an “unprecedented” moment and rhetoric of a “new normal” was slowly accepted as billions of people across the globe were plunged into social isolation, economic uncertainty, and a variety of other anxiety inducing unknowns.⁴³⁵ Social distrust and conspiracy-talk were made more pronounced with confusing and inconsistent government regulations including face-masking and vaccines

⁴³¹ Matt McGrath, “Climate Change: IPCC Report Is ‘Code Red for Humanity’,” *BBC News*, August 9, 2021, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-58130705>.

⁴³² Lawrence O. Gostin, Eric A. Friedman, and Sarah A. Wetter, “Responding to COVID-19: How to Navigate a Public Health Emergency Legally and Ethically,” *Hastings Center Report* 50, no. 2 (2020): 8.

⁴³³ Ying-Jian Hao, Yu-Lan Wang, Mei-Yue Wang, Lan Zhou, Jian-Yun Shi, Ji-Min Cao, and De-Ping Wang, “The Origins of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Brief Overview,” *Transboundary and Emerging Diseases* 69, no. 6 (October 20, 2022): 3181–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tbed.14732>.

⁴³⁴ “COVID: Top 10 Current Conspiracy Theories,” *Alliance for Science*, accessed June 15, 2021, <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories/>.

⁴³⁵ The framing of “unprecedented times” and embracing our “new normal” were commonly used during the initial onset of the pandemic by government officials and the media prior to being adopted colloquially. These phrases help to capture the processes of collective meaning-making during this global experience which was, indeed, largely unprecedented, see Salma Daoudi, “The War on Covid-19: The 9/11 of Health Security?,” *Africa Portal: Policy Centre for the New South*, April 8, 2020, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/war-covid-19-911-health-security/>.

mandates, among other restrictions and regulations.⁴³⁶ To further complicate things, the exact origins of the first animal-to-human transmission of the virus remains unclear and ongoing investigations into the origins of the virus conducted by the WHO and international representatives could take years.⁴³⁷ This ambiguity surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 virus merely adds to growing social-distrust in governments across the partisan spectrum. Proponents of misinformation conspired against 5G cell towers, Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Chinese government, while others denied the existence of the virus entirely.⁴³⁸ Regardless of partisan placement on the political spectrum, the pandemic reveals how what we believe to be true, or how we perceive our reality, significantly influences our public and private attitudes and behaviours—faith, spirituality, science, conspiracy, experience, and social conformity influence our belief-systems and help to shape the perceptions of our reality in a kind of information feedback loop.

From an intersectional perspective, the lasting psychological, social, and economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic are profound and not yet fully comprehensible. Thus, it is worth considering the uneven experience of the pandemic at the intersections of race, gender, and socio-economic location. Claire Colebrook argues that such discussions about the pandemic “cannot be divorced from the problem, pace, and spectacle of race.”⁴³⁹ For Colebrook, the pandemic presents several opportunities for mediations at the intersections of the “climate of

⁴³⁶ Sander Van der Linden, Costas Panagopoulos, Flávio Azevedo, and John T. Jost, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking,” *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2021): 23.

⁴³⁷ Amy Maxmen and Smriti Mallapaty, “The COVID Lab-Leak Hypothesis: What Scientists Do and Don’t Know,” *Nature* 594, no. 7863 (June 8, 2021): 313–15, <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-01529-3>.

⁴³⁸ “COVID: Top 10 Current Conspiracy Theories.”

⁴³⁹ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 2-5.

racial injustice” with the “climate of the planet.”⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, Dennis Zhang explains how the geographical origins of the virus to feed into deeper Sinophobic attitudes and racialized “disease-related imaginaries” consistent throughout US history.⁴⁴¹ Zhang connects the COVID-19 blame-game with historical “yellow peril” narratives with a larger tendency to scapegoat ethnic groups for the spread of disease along with the other woes of the status quo, such as the perceived “loss of jobs” and increases in crime or violence.⁴⁴² Trump, who initially denied international warnings of a pandemic and then ridiculed the WHO for their slow response to contain the virus, ultimately blamed China for the spread of the disease, referring to the initial SARS-COV2 variant as the “Chinese virus” or “Kung-flu.”⁴⁴³ Such deeply racist statements made by the former president not only obscure the facts of the virus but translate to increased prejudice and actualized violence towards Chinese Americans, or those perceived to be of Asian descent.⁴⁴⁴ Considering the discussions presented in the literature review of this project on who voted for Trump and why, one can only assume Trump’s voter base embraced this racist framing which only serves to perpetuate divisiveness, exclusion, and violence in American society.

While reflecting on the intersectional challenges heightened by the pandemic, Salma Daoudi points out that it is worth considering how social distancing and isolation measures are “only effective insofar as the entire society can afford to withdraw from or suspend its economic activity.”⁴⁴⁵ In other words, those who experience economic privilege are less likely to suffer

⁴⁴⁰ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 1.

⁴⁴¹ Dennis Zhang, “Sinophobic Epidemics in America: Historical Discontinuity in Disease-related Yellow Peril Imaginaries of the Past and Present,” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 42, no. 1 (2021): 74.

⁴⁴² Zhang, “Sinophobic Epidemics in America,”

⁴⁴³ Bruce Y. Lee, “Trump Once Again Calls Covid-19 Coronavirus the ‘Kung Flu’,” *Forbes*, June 25, 2020, accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2020/06/24/trump-once-again-calls-covid-19-coronavirus-the-kung-flu/?sh=3ef54d41f59a>.

⁴⁴⁴ Discussions and details on the Capitol attack are covered in FCE 4.2; See also Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure,” 66.

⁴⁴⁵ Daoudi, “The War on COVID-19.”

during in the pandemic. Research by Oxfam confirms that the rich did indeed get richer during the pandemic while the poor, particularly of the Global South, are more likely to suffer pandemic related harms and death.⁴⁴⁶ According to the Migration Data Portal, among the most vulnerable and the least protected populations are non-insured migrant workers who are forced to wage the risk of the disease with income insecurity and the threat of imprisonment or deportation.⁴⁴⁷ Similarly, work-from-home orders may not be an option for lower-income workers, many of whom are racially marginalized and in lower-paid positions involving manual labour.⁴⁴⁸ Physical distancing is also made more challenging for lower-income families, multi-generation homes, apartment complexes, long-term care homes, and homeless shelters, which are all considered higher risk environments where social distancing is next to impossible.⁴⁴⁹ With school closures, already under-served children who might rely on lunch programs go hungry and those in unhealthy or abusive living situations are left to fend for themselves without the reprieve of school during the day.⁴⁵⁰ Hybrid approaches (for both work and school) inadequately support the social and learning needs of students, educators, and employees alike, especially for twice-exceptional kids and neurodivergent folk.⁴⁵¹ Moreover, online learning (and work) requires a functioning computer, stable internet access, and, ideally, a quiet and private space to work from.⁴⁵² Thus, the pandemic further reveals the implicit and explicit social stratification of our

⁴⁴⁶ “Ten Richest Men Double Their Fortunes in Pandemic While Incomes of 99 Percent of Humanity Fall,” *Oxfam International*, January 17, 2022, accessed July 1, 2023, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/ten-richest-men-double-their-fortunes-pandemic-while-incomes-99-percent-humanity>.

⁴⁴⁷ “Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Migration Data Portal*, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/migration-data-relevant-covid-19-pandemic>.

⁴⁴⁸ Gostin, Friedman, and Wetter, “Responding to COVID-19,” 10.

⁴⁴⁹ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 10.

⁴⁵⁰ Mary Kathryn Poole, Sheila E. Fleischhacker, and Sara N. Bleich, “Addressing Child Hunger When School is Closed—Considerations During the Pandemic and Beyond,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 384, no. 10 (2021): 1-3.

⁴⁵¹ “Twice-Exceptional Kids: Both Gifted and Challenged,” *Child Mind Institute*, April 14, 2023, <https://childmind.org/article/twice-exceptional-kids-both-gifted-and-challenged/>.

⁴⁵² Poole, Fleishhacker, Bleich, “Addressing Child Hunger.”

neoliberal economic model as it accumulates “more and more individuals and groups to the register of repression, disposability, and social death.”⁴⁵³

To contextualize the “problem, pace, and spectacle of race” within the context of the pandemic, Colebrook builds on Rob Nixon’s conceptualization of “slow violence” to differentiate the pace of violence in its different manifestations. Nixon’s conceptualization of “fast versus slow violence” is most commonly applied when discussing environmental degradation and the inherent oppression and exploitation of the poor, particularly in the Global South.⁴⁵⁴ Colebrook expands Nixon’s application to consider the pace of violence in the Anthropocene, our current geological time period defined by anthropological (human) impact on Earth’s ecosystems.⁴⁵⁵ Of this truly unprecedented context, Colebrook explains, “at a certain point in geological history, a species can have geological impact, and at a certain point in human history, the Earth’s geological time enters the political imaginary.”⁴⁵⁶ Ultimately, Colebrook connects the Anthropocene with the history of colonialism. Colebrook explains:

The intrusion of geological forces into the experience of being human was only possible because some humans—slaves, mostly from Africa— were regarded as energy to be extracted, torn from the ground of existence, and rendered into nothing more than matter for the sake of human progress.⁴⁵⁷

Experiencing the pandemic as a living “Focused Cultural Example” has provided a contextual grounding for much of the theoretical reflections considered in this inquiry. The stress of the pandemic reveals not only our transnational interconnectedness, but the fragile, uneven, and inequitable experience of global neoliberalism rooted in the history of colonial oppression and

⁴⁵³ Giroux, “White Nationalism, Armed Culture and State Violence,” 889.

⁴⁵⁴ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 1.

⁴⁵⁵ Marco Caracciolo, “Being Moved by Nature in the Anthropocene: On the Limits of the Ecological Sublime,” *Emotion Review*, 2021: 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 1.

⁴⁵⁷ Colebrook, “Fast Violence, Revolutionary Violence,” 2.

violence. The economic and social problems experienced today are direct consequences of this history and the choices made by well-connected, wealthy, and mostly white, male elites in power.⁴⁵⁸ As part of this backdrop, and within the Republican party, Trumpism merges the toxic streams of white Christian nationalism with funding from “the billionaire network.”⁴⁵⁹ The so-called American “billionaire network” includes the Koch brothers and DeVos family, amongst others, whose companies benefit from Trump’s limited government, low taxes, and loose corporate welfare policies.⁴⁶⁰ Similarly, Parmar explains, “the most significant driver in the development of right-wing populism arises from specific initiatives of billionaire right-wing donor networks.”⁴⁶¹ These donor networks are seeped with corruption and economic injustice underpinning the systemic racism of the US tax structuring. Within this system, economic inequality in the US is sourced in non-progressive tax system which perpetuates racialized wealth disparities, perpetuating “white advantage and Black disadvantage.”⁴⁶² Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand explain, “the structure of US tax systems perpetuates, and even exacerbates, racial wealth disparities, representing yet another government institution creating and sustaining white advantage.”⁴⁶³ As Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand argue, current “upside-down tax break,” disproportionately benefit white, higher-income households whom already benefit from higher rates of college education, home ownership, more secure employment, and retirement saving plans. Thus, Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand advocate for anti-racist tax restructuring in the US to

⁴⁵⁸ Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand, “U.S. Tax Systems Need Anti-Racist Restructuring,” 857.

⁴⁵⁹ Blaikie, “Tracing the Toxic Roots of the Capitol Attack.”; Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 37.

⁴⁶⁰ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 39; Saramo, “The Meta-violence of Trumpism,” 5-6.

⁴⁶¹ Parmar, “Trump’s Coup and Insurrection,” 39.

⁴⁶² Francine J. Lipman, Nicholas A. Mirkay, and Palma Joy Strand, “U.S. Tax Systems Need Anti-Racist Restructuring,” *Tax Notes Federal* 168, no. 5, University of Hawai’i Richardson School of Law Research, August 3, 2020: 856.

⁴⁶³ Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand, “U.S. Tax Systems Need Anti-Racist Restructuring,” 857.

re-evaluate “federal, state, and local tax expenditures.”⁴⁶⁴ As avenues towards economic and racial justice, Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand propose several strategies including progressive policies regarding wealth transfer, increasing taxes on capital gains, and education investment and reform (particularly to support historically underserved and multiply marginalized communities).⁴⁶⁵

To map and better understand the emergence of Trumpism in the US, this project contextualizes various historical, cultural, and political dynamics that underpin our contemporary contexts. Addressing the structural inequities rooted in the history of US race relations is long overdue and reveals the strategic efforts to enshrine white advantage and thwart Black success. Hudson and Aburawa conclude that until enough of the status quo majority experience the disparities of neoliberal capitalism, meaningful changes to the economic, social, and political structures are unlikely, and would presumably be met with strong backlash.⁴⁶⁶ In light of these conclusions and other scholarly conversations explored in this research project, I have synthesized some of the potential pathways or trends that may continue to emerge as economic disparities and social inequalities deepen. This brief list is my own summarization of the topics explore in this research project, with relevant sources cited:

- A. De-colonial critiques and scalar adjustments to current neoliberal capitalist models.⁴⁶⁷
- B. Consumer-based shifts towards more sustainable alternatives in the manufacturing and food commodification industries, including alternatives to fossil fuels, plastics, and other synthetics in addition to advancing renewable resource development, more robust recycling programs, and food security/sovereignty.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁴ Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand, “U.S. Tax Systems Need Anti-Racist Restructuring,” 861.

⁴⁶⁵ Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand, “U.S. Tax Systems Need Anti-Racist Restructuring,” 861.

⁴⁶⁶ In-light of the “pending ecological debacle” Hudson and Aburawa forewarn the status quo is leading towards catastrophe, see Hudson and Aburawa, “Pathological and Ineffective Activism,” 177.

⁴⁶⁷ See Lipman, Mirkay, and Strand, “U.S. Tax Systems Need Anti-Racist Restructuring,” 857.

⁴⁶⁸ See João SC Viera, Mônica RC Marques, Monick Cruz Nazareth, Paula Christine Jimenez, and Ítalo Braga Castro, “On Replacing Single-Use Plastic with So-Called Biodegradable Ones: The Case with Straws,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 106 (2020): 178-180.

- C. A more general trend of “whitelash” rhetoric and the continued racialized scapegoating of perceived others, such as refugees, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQ+2 community.⁴⁶⁹
- D. Some combination of the above, or other, on some scale or spectrum of intensity.

The following section briefly discusses faith-inspired resistance to Trumpism and other trends in contemporary social activism, including strategies for creating more equitable and sustainable communities.

5.2. Resistance to Trumpism

The mediatized events presented in the above five Focused Cultural Examples (FCE) spans the years 2016-2022 and examines the consequences of and responses to Trumpism as a post-truth “whitelash” in the United States. Each FCE considers a topic or cluster of topics to better understand the cultural underpinnings of Trumpism and how frontlash/backlash underpins the push/pull dynamics of social and political change. As backlash discourses resist changes to the status quo, frontlash pushes progress forward disrupting status quo structures and norms.

Backlash groups can be resistant to change because these groups typically occupy the status quo and therefore benefit from its maintenance.⁴⁷⁰ Whitelash can be understood as a specific kind of social and political backlash generated from a white, heteronormative, and patriarchal status quo. Moreover, the institutional and cultural structures that sustain the status quo are rooted in settler-colonialism which, as a social, economic, and political paradigm, precedes our globalized neoliberal context.⁴⁷¹ In settler-colonial states like the US and Canada, this history has undeniably shaped the current social and economic contexts, including the dynamics of race,

⁴⁶⁹ See Brian Steensland, and Eric L. Wright, “American Evangelicals and Conservative Politics: Past, Present, and Future,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 6 (2014): 705–717. doi:10.1111/soc4.12175.

⁴⁷⁰ Alexander, “Frontlash/Backlash,” 6.

⁴⁷¹ Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure,” 54-74

gender, and sexuality.⁴⁷² Critical perspectives are particularly helpful to identify the lasting structures of settler-colonialism ubiquitous within contemporary political, social, and economic structures. Thus, to fully understand the emergence of Trumpism in the US, evaluations of preceding historical political and social contexts have been necessary to inform the topics and discussions presented in this research project.

Underscoring the overlapping intersections of race, gender, and religion in contemporary civil dynamics, strategic partnerships, and intersectional coalitions across a multitude of advocacy groups and demographics are both the key and the main challenge for critical, decolonial, and justice-oriented scholarship and social activism.⁴⁷³ Some of the more positive outcomes to emerge in response to Trumpism in the US are increases in political engagement and social activism across younger and more diverse demographics.⁴⁷⁴ The final sections of this research project briefly summarize resistance to Trumpism more broadly, and introduce faith-based resistance as an important avenue for challenging Christian nationalism in the US.

A crucial demographic of resistance against post-truth narratives, and Trumpism in particular, is the movement dubbed the “religious left” which includes small but significant pockets of anti-Trump evangelicals.⁴⁷⁵ These demographics include those espousing a strong anti-Trump critique from within the broader evangelical faith tradition and challenge the affiliation between white, conservative evangelicals and Trump in the United States.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure,” 54

⁴⁷³ Liz Jackson, “‘The Best Education Ever’: Trumpism, Brexit, and New Social Learning,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50, no. 5 (2018): 442.

⁴⁷⁴ These trends will be further explored in the four FCEs presented in the body of this thesis project. For a comprehensive understanding of resistance to Trump, see David S. Meyer, and Sidney Tarrow, eds. *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁴⁷⁵ Joseph O. Baker and Gerardo Martí, “Is the Religious Left Resurgent?,” *Sociology of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2020): 131-141.

⁴⁷⁶ Arato and Cohen, “Civil Society, Populism, and Religion,” 293.

Braunstein argues that it is unlikely that a “religious left” can generate a serious electoral counter to this more well-established “religious right.”⁴⁷⁷ However, anti-Trump evangelicals and other liberal-leaning religious affiliates provide important critiques and alternatives to how religion and politics are understood and studied in the United States.⁴⁷⁸

Bringing together the perspectives from different scholars in their edited volume, *The Resistance* (2018), Meyer and Tarrow sketch the widespread emergence of grassroots anti-Trump movements with a focus on increasing civil participation, political movement-building, and sustainable social activism.⁴⁷⁹ The authors consider the main challenges of anti-Trump movements, dubbed “the resistance,” and consider several strategies for bolstering these intersectional collaborations against right-wing extremism.⁴⁸⁰ One notable example of resistance highlighted by Meyer and Tarrow is the Women’s March and feminist political engagement more broadly, discussed extensively in FCE 3.2.⁴⁸¹ Similarly, Fisher, Dow, and Ray argue the Women’s March was in part successful because women and their allies were able to mobilize around their collective concerns regarding the dangers of Trumpism.⁴⁸² Historically, mobilization of diverse voting groups is challenging, particularly for Democrats in the US. Previously an impediment towards collective mobilization, the diversity of Democrat voter demographics may help to increase political literacy and compassion for intersectional issues.⁴⁸³ As introduced in the primary literature review of this research project, the scholarship at this nexus regards

⁴⁷⁷ Braunstein “A (More) Perfect Union?” 181.

⁴⁷⁸ Meyer and Tarrow, *The Resistance*, 4-17.

⁴⁷⁹ David S. Meyer, and Sidney Tarrow, eds. *The Resistance: The Dawn of the Anti-Trump Opposition Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁴⁸⁰ Sidney Tarrow, and David S. Meyer, “Challenges of the Anti-Trump Movement,” *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 11, no. 3 (2019): 614-645.

⁴⁸¹ Meyer and Tarrow, *The Resistance*,

⁴⁸² Fisher, Dow, and Ray, “Intersectionality Takes it to the Streets,” 2.

⁴⁸³ Fisher, Dow, and Ray, “Intersectionality Takes it to the Streets,” 5.

Republican voters as a more homogenous group in comparison to Democrat voters.⁴⁸⁴ This is because Democrat voters are much more diverse in race, gender, and social location. Thus, finding a cohesive mobilizing political narrative is more difficult.⁴⁸⁵ Therefore, while the diversity of the Democrat party might increase compassion for intersectional issues, it does not guarantee it.⁴⁸⁶ Braunstein explains that Democrats have been divided by two competing narratives: the moral perfectionist story and a secularist-pluralist story of radical political revolution.⁴⁸⁷ A recent example of the latter socialist populism was Bernie Sanders' campaign narrative in 2016, calling for revolutionary social reform, referred to as Sandersism.⁴⁸⁸ Distinct left-wing moral-perfection narratives like this have been successful for political mobilization during the civil rights movement, utilized by the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Not unscathed by scandal, Dr. King is the most notable figure to utilize left-wing religious narratives to mobilize nonviolent political resistance and civil rights advocacy.⁴⁸⁹ Other more recent examples of public orators utilizing left-wing social activist strategies include former President Barak Obama and the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II.⁴⁹⁰ Notably, resistance to Trumpism is an opportunity to collaborate across intersectional issues and amplify the traditions of social activism that have been a significant part of America's political history, including the Black Church and traditions of Black Liberation Theology in the US.⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁴ See section 2.2 and 2.3 of this research project.

⁴⁸⁵ Braunstein "A (More) Perfect Union?" 173.

⁴⁸⁶ Fisher, Dow, and Ray, "Intersectionality Takes it to the Streets," 2.

⁴⁸⁷ The radical socialist-populist rhetoric that Senator Bernie Sanders is known for is often referred to as Sandersism and is in direct contrast with Trumpism.

⁴⁸⁸ Braunstein "A (More) Perfect Union?" 173.

⁴⁸⁹ Embrick et al., "Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism," 275.

⁴⁹⁰ Braunstein "A (More) Perfect Union?" 181.

⁴⁹¹ Earle J. Fischer, "Black Liberation Theology and the Movement for Black Lives: A Match Made in Heaven," *Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs*, (Georgetown University 2022), <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/black-liberation-theology-and-the-movement-for-black-lives-a-match-made-in-heaven>.

Considering some of the reasons why resistance fails can help to shed light on where attention and action is needed, and perhaps even what mistakes to avoid. On this topic, Olli-Pekka Vainio introduces the work of Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski who offers a critical humanist interpretation of Marxism with insights as profound as his contemporary Hannah Arendt.⁴⁹² Reflecting on the writings of Kolakowski, Vainio articulates some reasons why resistance fails. Below I summarize Vainio’s discussions with relevant clarification pertaining to this project:

- 1) ‘Us versus Them’ Mentality: Strained or hostile intrapersonal/societal relationships are perpetuated if the logic of othering is not addressed and dismantled. For example, it is easy to attribute everything that is wrong with the world to some evil or common enemy which perpetuates this cycle of othering. This logic tends towards ideological purity with little room for pluralism or compromise. In other words, this logic is rigid and not set towards meta-cognitive development or growth.⁴⁹³
- 2) Not Answering the Critics: Criticism should invite discussion and dialogue, not shame, retort, or violence.⁴⁹⁴ Criticism and critical perspectives are a valuable and revealing tool particularly for intersectional perspectives, since criticism offers a counter-narrative and signals potential gaps or grey areas within power structures. Thus, individuals, communities, and scholarship welcome criticism and acknowledge ideological pluralism to expand a more inclusive politic and rhetoric.
- 3) Oversimplification: Oversimplification of complex and interrelated issues and using a one-size-fix all approach to problems and people is inherently problematic and can tend towards pacification, paternalism, and inaccuracy.
- 4) On Truth and Ideology: Facetiously, Vainio writes, “Truth is one and totally in our possession. Within our ranks there exists no disagreement, or different interpretations. Ideological purity is guarded to the extreme. If disagreement is voiced, this is evidence that the person has joined the enemy.”⁴⁹⁵ Ideological purism perpetuates the cycle of othering. The singularity of such logic is a slippery slope to unreality and nihilism—resistance must mediate somewhere between post-truth and ideological purity.

Engaging critical and intersectional discourses is key for developing effective strategies of resistance and for offering counterhegemonic narratives at individual, communal, and

⁴⁹² Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Why Resistance Fails?,” in *Taking It to the Streets: Public Theologies of Activism and Resistance*, ed. Jennifer Baldwin (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018): 149 161.

⁴⁹³ These are my personal reflections which reflect my interest in narrative construction.

⁴⁹⁴ My reflections and summary of Vainio, “Why Resistance Fails?,” 154.

⁴⁹⁵ Vainio, “Why Resistance Fails?,” 153.

institutional levels.⁴⁹⁶ This requires us a strategic political mobilization to movement-building, which encompasses education reform and anti-racist structural policy changes.

5.3. Issues with/in Intersectional Scholarship

Although social media proves an effective tool towards increased political engagement and the coordination of large-scale marches, meetings, rallies, and petitions, social media platforms are also plagued with misinformation fueled by unregulated algorithms and for-profit advertisement.⁴⁹⁷ In particular, online social activism typically lacks substance and fails to have tangible long-term goals and meaningful impact. Therefore, the irony of contemporary social activism is that it is often inactive. In the edited book *Emergent Possibilities for Global Sustainability*, authors Mark Hudson and Arwa Aburawa critique this shallow culture of social media activism and emphasize movement-building versus mobilization.⁴⁹⁸ Political mobilization amongst a certain demographic or towards a particular issue can be acutely successful but this success is usually unsustainable as momentum wanes and other issues emerge and counter-mobilize. Thus, meaningful change requires movement-building because movement-building seek to change (or maintain) political and social structures or systems. Trumpism, as a political and social movement to preserve white, heteronormative structures in the US through Christian nationalist commitments, demonstrates the power of collective movement-building over the course of several decades or generations. Movement-building requires careful identification of issues, structural adjustments, and cooperative commitment to long-term measurable goals or

⁴⁹⁶ Glenn, “Settler Colonialism as Structure,” 54-74; Embrick et al., “Capitalism, Racism, and Trumpism,” 207.

⁴⁹⁷ Mark Hudson and Arwa Aburawa, “Pathological and Ineffective Activism—What is to be Done?,” in *Emergent Possibilities for Global Sustainability: Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender*, eds. Phoebe Godfrey and Denise Torres (Routledge, 2016) 163-177.

⁴⁹⁸ Hudson and Aburawa, “Pathological and Ineffective Activism,” 165.

ideals. By contrast, Hudson and Aburawa point out online activism tends to focus on friendship networking and self-congratulating with little to show for in terms of creating meaningful change, often resulting in “oversimplification and pacification” on a topic or issue.⁴⁹⁹

Similarly, qualitative research such as the information presented in this thesis is limited in its highly theoretical and reflective approach based on the observations and interpretations of others. While extremely useful, if incomprehensive, statistical information can be misleading and easily manipulated. However, reliable statistical information can assist social researchers and intersectional scholarship in identifying knowledge gaps, patterns, opportunities for comparative inquiry, analysis, and advocacy. As we work to expand the boundaries of a world dominated by statistics, binaries, and the status quo, intersectional scholarship and contemporary social movements may be challenged to avoid exclusive membership in their research and advocacy. This “othering logic” reinforces “us versus them” thinking embedded in Trumpian post-truth rhetoric. Intersectional thinkers are not immune to this categorization impulse. Indeed, intersectional scholarship and activism can contribute to the fuss of “identity politics (...) at the expense of broader political claims.”⁵⁰⁰ Pragmatically speaking, exclusion is part of the process of identity building which forms our political spectrum. Even for progressive social activism, for example, the very task of organizing a protest, a charity, or a non-profit involves the processes of exclusion by giving a voice to a particular issue or a particular shared experience. Thus, the pursuit of intersectional scholarship and contemporary activism should continue to emphasize

⁴⁹⁹ Hudson and Aburawa explain the #savetheturtles Twitter hashtag that began trending after an emotional video of a plastic straw being removed from a turtles’ nostril circulated on the Internet and spurred a consumer driven shift to ban single-use plastic straws in restaurants, pubs, and fast-food industry. Plastic straws themselves are rather insignificant in the grand scheme of single-use plastic polymers and fossil fuels, the social media driven movement initiated the expansion of recycling programs, new legislation, and an industry push towards biodegradable alternatives.

⁵⁰⁰ Fisher, Dow, and Ray, “Intersectionality Takes it to the Streets,” 1.

community building, dialogue, and self-reflection. Moreover, it is important to recognize that intersectional scholarship and advocacy will never reach a point of completion or perfection. Progress-orientated narratives that strive for perfectionism are illusive and indicative of our colonial history and imperialist, neo-liberal worldview.⁵⁰¹ Therefore, perfection and progress narratives contradict the very nature of de-colonial scholarship which seeks to dismantle hegemonic narratives and develop counterhegemonic narratives. Intersectional scholarship and advocacy benefits from a fluid and expansive scope that continues to bring intersectional depth to academic scholarship and bridge new coalitions within public activism while helping to expand our comprehension of the political history of oppression and bolster de-colonial perspectives.

Another issue emerges when considering the rhetoric which surrounds majoritarian versus minoritarian narratives. Trump's populism feeds a "majoritarian narrative" and claims to represent the "politics of the people." However, in both 2016 and 2020, Trump failed to capture majority of the popular vote.⁵⁰² During his term as president, Trump also managed to push forth a variety of unpopular policies which perhaps were supported by a majority of Republican voters but not the majority population overall. For example, consider the federal court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* despite many Americans supporting the constitutional protection of women's bodily autonomy.⁵⁰³ Thus, a contradiction emerges in the language we use to

⁵⁰¹ Whitney Bauman, "Religion and Science as Critical Discourse: Postmodern as Contextual Thinking, Not Post-Truth," in *Navigating Post-Truth and Alternative Facts: Religion and Science as Political Theology*, edited by Jennifer Baldwin; foreword by Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman; introduction by Antje Jackelén (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018):129-143.

⁵⁰² "Donald Trump Lost the Popular Vote, Was Impeached and Then Lost Re-Election. How Many Times Has This Happened Before?," *ABC News*, November 23, 2020, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-24/trump-joins-one-term-us-president-club/12868382>.

⁵⁰³ "Exclusive: Supreme Court Has Voted to Overturn Abortion Rights, Draft Opinion Shows," *Politico*, May 2, 2022, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/02/supreme-court-abortion-draft-opinion-00029473>; see also Chapter 3.2 for discussions on the intersections of gender, race, and religion

categorize and describe political trends as they might appear. Characterizing Trumpism as a primarily populist political style is perhaps misleading, since the demographic this rhetoric is “popular” essentially only amongst white conservative demographics. In a similar vein, categorizing “Sanderism” as a left-wing populism may be problematic too, since populist trends in a global perspective remain volatile and tend towards more right-wing expressions.⁵⁰⁴ Thus, as Postill argues, more nuanced understandings of the roots, ideology, and function of populism in a global, mediatized perspective are needed.⁵⁰⁵ These understanding would also benefit from an evaluation of the religious rhetoric underpinning global right-wing populism.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁴ For a compressive overview of global populist trends, see, Carlos De la Torre, ed. *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*. (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁵⁰⁵ Postill, “Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective,” 756.

⁵⁰⁶ For an analysis on the role of religion in global populist trends, see Nadia Marzouki, “Populism and Religion,” in *The Populism Interviews*, edited by Luca Manucci (Routledge, 2022): 152-158.

6. CHAPTER SIX–Epilogue

The impetus for this project began in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election to better understand the influence of gender, race, and religion in this contemporary socio-political context. What has resulted from this initial inquiry is a longitudinal descriptive study of the unfolding consequences of post-truth logic manifest in the rise of Trumpism as a political commitment and rhetoric in the United States with similar populist ‘strong man’ politicians emerging in Canada and Europe.⁵⁰⁷ Academic discourse and critical scholarship plays a crucial role in developing policy, public education, and social narratives. Specifically, intersectional scholarship, educational pedagogy, and advocacy are strategic pillars in developing resistance to post-truth rhetoric like ‘Trumpism’ and other authoritarian populist ‘strongman’ politicians rooted in white (Christian) nationalism.⁵⁰⁸ Understanding the historical socio-political context which would foster this contemporary context was essential to this task.

6.1. Canadian Comparisons

During the summer of 2021, after pandemic related government restrictions were lifted, I visited Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park in Southern Saskatchewan.⁵⁰⁹ I find the title “interprovincial” a mild understatement, considering the history and significance of the area which spans across geological time periods and contemporary borders. Before it was called

⁵⁰⁷ For discussion of populism, see Chapter 2.2. For Canadian comparisons, see Peter McLaren, “Some Thoughts on Canada’s Freedom Convoy and the Settler Colonial State,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 7 (2022): 867-870.

⁵⁰⁸ Previously (white) Christian-Nationalism was used as a frame of reference for understanding this socio-political phenomenon manifested in Trumpism. With deeper clarity of the broader Christian context, this new placement of parenthesis shows this shift in understanding and problematizes the association of between Christianity and white nationalism.

⁵⁰⁹ “Facilities and Services,” *Government of Canada Parks Canada Agency*, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/sk/walsh/visit/services>.

Fort Walsh, subterranean swamps and melting ice sheets left from the last Ice Age flooded and shaped the Cypress Hills valley into a series of deep folds and plateaus leaving behind a rugged and expansive landscape that is at once both lush and barren, traumatized and resilient. Locals and visitors of the Cypress Valley can appreciate how this unique biome lives up to such a paradox—during the summer months the prairie landscape is impressively hot and dry (with temperatures over +30°C) while the winter months are long, dark, and frigid with temperatures as low as -40°C, plus the windchill. On a hot summer hike, the only noise to be heard is the buzzing of grasshoppers and crickets humming in the heat and echoing off the hills. The vast valley is covered with rough low vegetation with bursts of lush green shrubbery and the occasional oasis of lodgepole pine trees nestled in the landscapes many coulees and dips. Historically, these lodgepole pines were essential for Indigenous groups native to the Plains who used the trunks of the tall thin trees as supporting structures for their teepees and transforming them into sleds for effective transportation during the snowy winter months.⁵¹⁰

Triangulated among the contemporary borders of present-day Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Montana, what is now Fort Walsh was a significant stronghold in the Northwest Territories before officially becoming Canada in 1870. Before these ‘imaginary borders’ went up, the Cypress Valley area was an important meeting place for various Indigenous groups who would follow the herds of Plains bison, before they were overhunted to ecological extinction, mostly by settlers who lacked the basic understanding of the balance of nature and principle of reciprocity.⁵¹¹ When settlers and traders first came to this area their relationship with Indigenous

⁵¹⁰ Jason Surkan, “Community: Cypress Hills,” *The Métis Architect...(?)*, June 11, 2018, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://metisarchitect.com/2018/05/11/community-cypress-hills/>.

⁵¹¹ J. Weston Phippen, ““Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead is an Indian Gone,”” *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2016, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349/>.

groups was somewhat amicable. At least initially, settlers and traders recognized the valuable knowledge and skill held by Indigenous peoples who knew how to survive the desolate winter months by hunting bison for their pelts and to make pemmican, a protein rich and calorically dense preserved meat essential for surviving the winter months.⁵¹² By 1870, the plains bison were almost completely eradicated due to ruthless over-hunting by non-Indigenous hunters which slowly forced Indigenous leaders to either sign treaties and move to reservations, or starve.⁵¹³

Just outside what is now Fort Walsh, on June 1st, 1873, somewhere between 15 to 300 Nakoda people (Assiniboine) were brutally killed by a group of American wolfers during what is now known as the Cypress Hills Massacre.⁵¹⁴ According to written records and native oral traditions, the incident was fueled by alcohol and began over a misunderstanding over some missing horses. The belligerent American wolfers accused the Nakoda of the crime, and planned an ambush attack on a nearby Nakoda encampment where unarmed men, women, and children were sleeping.⁵¹⁵ Nakoda oral tradition retells 300 members of their clan were killed in the attack, and at least one American wolver.⁵¹⁶ However, archival records and written literature

⁵¹² Sophie Hicks, “Eating History: An Experiential Examination of Pemmican,” *Active History*, July 15, 2019, accessed September 3, 2021, <http://activehistory.ca/2019/07/eating-history-an-experiential-examination-of-pemmican/>.

⁵¹³ Phippen, ““Kill Every Buffalo You Can!”

⁵¹⁴ The ambiguities in Canadian government documentation regarding their treatment of Indigenous groups is deeply problematic, see “Why No One Knows How Many Children Died inside Canada’s Residential Schools,” *PressProgress*, June 24, 2021, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://pressprogress.ca/why-no-one-knows-how-many-children-died-inside-canadas-residential-schools/>; Craig Baird, “The Cypress Hills Massacre,” *Canadian History Ehx*, July 10, 2021, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://canadaehx.com/2021/07/10/the-cypress-hills-massacre/>.

⁵¹⁵ Bill Graveland, “Cypress Hills Massacre Little-Known Dark Point in Canadian History,” *Global News*, September 8, 2015, accessed September 3, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/2206968/cypress-hills-massacre-little-known-dark-point-in-canadian-history/>.

⁵¹⁶ This information was orally recounted by a descendent of the Nakoda people who worked at the Fort Walsh Interpreters Centre during my visit in 2021. Many discrepancies exist between First Nation oral traditions and Canadian archival records, perhaps in an attempt by the latter to minimize Canadian culpability.

on this history are more ambiguous on the actual number of Assiniboine's killed over such pettiness.⁵¹⁷ This discrepancy between written and oral reports is reflective of the deeper issue regarding Canada's ambiguity in accounting for the maltreatment of Indigenous peoples, including an unknown number of children put into the Residential School system, those involved in the 'Sixties Scoop', and an unsettling number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.⁵¹⁸ After the Massacre of 1873, Fort Walsh was established to 'keep the peace' as one of the most western strongholds for the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP), the precursor for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).⁵¹⁹ Canada's history of cultural and ethno-genocide of Indigenous people over the last few hundred years continues to have an intergenerational impact on the lives of Indigenous people and their descendants in Canada today, who continue to suffer under the legal system formed during this insidious history. While Indigenous peoples make up 3% of the overall population in Canada, they are grossly overrepresented within the adult correctional system, accounting for approximately 26% (or 1 in 4) of incarcerated admissions.⁵²⁰

As a child I spent a lot of time in the Cypress Hills area with my grandparents who helped homeschool my older sister and me, hiking and visiting Fort Walsh, Chimney Coulee, and the Frenchman River. We would visit my grandmother's family home in the homesteader town of Eastend, Saskatchewan. I remember my grandfather teaching us about river systems and

⁵¹⁷ During my time at the Interpreters Centre at Fort Walsh in August 2021, a descendant of some of the survivors and victims of the massacre spoke on behalf of his ancestors and was able to provide the oral versions of this history, see "Facilities and Services," Government of Canada Parks Canada Agency.

⁵¹⁸ "Final Report: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls," National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, accessed June 1, 2020, https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf.

⁵¹⁹ Edward Butts, "North-West Mounted Police," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/north-west-mounted-police>.

⁵²⁰ Jamil Malakieh, "Adult and Youth Correctional Statistics in Canada, 2018/2019," *Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics*, (December 2020): 5.

explaining how the Frenchman River was a tributary of the larger Missouri River, connected to other river system, and how they flow into ocean at the mouth of river. how they were all connected. Only later would I come to understand how significant these river systems were for the expansion of settlers into Canada, and later for the success of the Underground Railroad.⁵²¹ I cherish these homeschooling years and credit this experience with my life-long desire to learn. It was during these years, tucked in the back of a minivan with my copy of Anne Frank's diary for our homeschooling novel study, bobbing down the hilly gravel roads deep in the Cypress Valley, I began wondering why things were the way they were. As a preteen, I was deeply moved reading Anne's diary and wondered how things could have spiralled out of control so badly—how so much hate could be directed towards a group of people just because of their beliefs or the colour of their skin. These questions would continue to unsettle me as I worked towards my bachelor's degree from the University of Saskatoon in Religion and Culture Studies with a minor area of focus on Critical Perspectives in Social Justice and the Common Good. During my undergraduate degree, I found myself deeply distressed by rise of exclusionary rhetoric manifest by the outcome of the 2016 US election and felt compelled to better understand the confluence of factors which enabled such a bizarre spectacle. Like many other equality-minded citizens, I grieved this perceived loss and was fearful as to what might come next. Still hopeful for a better world, I began my Master of Arts thesis research in 2018, seeking to better understand the role of religion and politics in the United States and Canada. As I began to map answers to my questions, I quickly came to realize how naïve my initial surprise at the 2016 election outcome

⁵²¹ Tiya Miles, "Of Waterways and Runaways: Reflections on the Great Lakes in Underground Railroad History," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (October 11, 2011), <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mqr/2011/10/of-waterways-and-runaways-reflections-on-the-great-lakes-in-underground-railroad-history/>.

had been and how inevitable a transmutation of civil religious and populist discourse like Trumpism was in the socio-political climate of the United States.

With similar fascist waves emerging in Canada, Europe, Asia, and Latin America, the trends of authoritarian populism are already unfolding amidst an array of global crisis' in need of global cooperation and collaboration.⁵²² Populist agitators and billionaire demagogues threaten to impede efforts towards global cooperation and democratic values.⁵²³ Both figuratively in terms of our current cultural moment, and literally in terms of this research project, the end of one chapter signals the beginning of a new, uncertain one. As witnessed in the rise of Trumpism as a whitelash political rhetoric, ambiguity, distrust, and hostility plague the subtext of our contemporary social and political context. However, equity and beauty are also possible when diversity, pluralism, and democracy are valued.⁵²⁴

6.2. Suggestions for Future Research

This research underscores the need for decolonial restructuring from the top-down and bottom-up. Thus, I recognize the significant power communities and community members have in addressing these issues “on the ground” at the grassroots level. Moving forward, I want to shift my attention and energy to activities within my community to help inform and bridge inequitable gaps surrounding race, gender and social location made apparent with this inquiry. Below I introduce three examples of community-based activities or projects I have been involved in as a

⁵²² McLaren, “Some Thoughts on Canada’s Freedom Convoy and the Settler Colonial State,” 867-870; Postill, “Populism and Social Media: A Global Perspective,” 756.

⁵²³ See Colin Crouch, “Post-democracy and Populism,” *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. S1 (2019): 124-137.

⁵²⁴ See Russ Castronovo, *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009); Kimberly K. Smith, “Mere Taste: Democracy and the Politics of Beauty,” *Wisconsin Environmental Law Journal* 7 (2000): 151-196.

graduate student and serve as living examples of how the above research has informed and inspired community engagement, promotion of anti-racism, and mental health and wellness education and advocacy.

During my time as a graduate student research this topic, I was contracted to conduct a post-pandemic mental health and wellness (MH&W) environmental scan for St. Thomas More College (STM), a Catholic liberal arts college affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan and home of the Department of Religion and Culture Studies. For this research, I co-facilitated Focus Groups with different groups of students, faculty, and staff at STM to generate discussion and feedback regarding mental health at the post-secondary level after social distancing and stay-home measures were lifted. During these Focus Groups, participants described the need for community post-pandemic and the challenges in navigating an unpredictable landscape. These conversations also discerned the unique needs of specific demographics of students, particularly international and Indigenous students, who may be uniquely isolated from their culture and community.⁵²⁵ Creating safe and inclusive spaces to resume social connectivity is necessary for post-pandemic reconnections.

As a tutor and workshop facilitator at the University of Saskatchewan (USask) Library Writing Help Center, I worked to provide academic writing support to undergraduate students. One-on-one tutoring sessions allowed me to practice my own craft of writing and revision while providing feedback to a diverse demographic of university students. This experience enhanced my own writing. In this role I collaborated to co-create and facilitate a writing workshop titled “Practicing Anti-Racist Writing,” offered twice each term for undergraduate, graduate students,

⁵²⁵ Brette Kristoff, “Mental Health and Wellness Strategy and Standard,” St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan, June 15, 2022.

faculty, and staff.⁵²⁶ This workshop introduces best practice for anti-racist writing and encourages individuals to consider the perspectives, peoples, and groups that might be excluded or harmed through word choice.⁵²⁷ In addition to this, I also facilitated the workshop “Dealing with Writing Anxiety,” which discusses perfectionism and imposter syndrome in academic writing and promote Student Wellness resources.⁵²⁸ These workshops have allowed me to transform my theoretical post-colonial critique into practical and accessible practices to engage and promote anti-racism, gender justice, and mental health and wellness through writing and dialogue. These workshops also cover stylist recommendations and required comprehensive understanding of various citation styles including Chicago Manual of Style, Modern Language Association, and American Psychological Association. Notably, my understating of post-colonial and feminist critiques of language and discourse were particularly useful for a variety of disciplines and writing assignments—from the humanities to Earth systems science.

Lastly, I direct a barrier-free children’s choir called Tomorrow’s Voices. This is a non-audition choir group for children ages 7-17 and creates opportunities for youth to expand their musical knowledge, perform on stage, and build community. In a human evolutionary perspective, our human musical ability is inherently unique and has the tremendous capacity to connect, communicate, and heal.⁵²⁹ Recently I had a passing moment with a young singer that caused me to pause and reflect after I greeted my exuberant group of with, “Alright guys, let’s go!” intended as an enthusiastic rally, to which one adolescent singer retorted, “Hey! I am not a

⁵²⁶ Brette Kristoff and Brigitte Lim, “Writing Help: Practicing Anti-Racist Writing,” Writing Center Workshop, (University of Saskatchewan, February 1, 2023).

⁵²⁷ See also section 1.4.2 for discussions on critical discourse analysis.

⁵²⁸ Brette Kristoff and Jordana Lalonde, “Writing Help: Dealing with Writing Anxiety,” Writing Center Workshop, (University of Saskatchewan, September 20, 2022).

⁵²⁹ Claudius Conrad, “Music for Healing: From Magic to Medicine,” *The Lancet* 376, no. 9757 (2010): 1980–1981.

guy!” Our exchange continued as I explained, without much thought, that it this was “just a figure of speech,”—an impulsive excuse which I immediately regretted. I continued to ponder this exchange for days afterwards which served as a reminder how deeply entrenched patriarchal structures (and misogynistic impulses) are in our culture, language, and ideas. Even as someone who has spent years learning to identify and critique heteronormative patriarchal structures, ideology, and language, this internalized perspective prevails. Like many other moments during this project, I felt a flash of embarrassment—I should know and do better, I thought. However, the above exchange illuminated by an 11-year-old also serves to remind me that hope too prevails in our . Children are our future and working with them gives me hope in our sometimes-hopeless world while also challenging me in new ways. By this I mean, how do I embody what I have learned to a new audience, that is, to school-aged children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds? As an educator I am continuously challenged to rethink my own biases, language, and reactions when working with young learners—a challenging yet joyous opportunity.

The rise of Trumpism is among a string of populist, authoritarian political figures in Europe, Latin American, and parts of Asia.⁵³⁰ The rise of authoritarian governments globally is underpinned by a variety of transnational issues requiring transnational collaboration. These issues include issues of collective concern such as the climate crisis, the transnational spread of disease, and nuclear disarmament. Suggestions for further research include the following intersecting topics:

- Comparative analysis of populism and “majoritarian” politics in Canada with particular emphasis on the Prairie provinces as no such comprehensive study exists at this present moment. Research should consider the paradox presented in populist rhetoric which embraces “popular” sentimentalities while echoing far-right, exclusionary voices in US and abroad.

⁵³⁰ See Berch Berberoglu, ed., *The Global Rise of Authoritarianism in the 21st Century: Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization and the Nationalist Response*, (Routledge, 2020).

- Conspiracy, religiosity, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Research should consider the paradox of conspiratorial rhetoric which accurately brings attention to structural inequalities and corruption while echoing the sentiments of far-right, conservative, and often white nationalist narratives.⁵³¹
- The rise of “Exvangelicism” as a new social movement: historical trends, patterns, and predictions in the United States and similar demographics in Canada.⁵³²
- To further illustrate the malleability of populist political rhetoric across the partisan spectrum, future research should examine Sandersism as an expression of left-wing populism. Future research might also consider the future of socialism and democracy in North America and other populist expression across the political spectrum.⁵³³
- Further research on education reform and critical educational pedagogy, including protecting Critical Race theory as pedagogy in US/Canadian education systems is needed.
- Research on criminal justice reform, restorative justice, and alternatives to prison sentences, plea bargains, and corruption within policing structures. Structural changes are needed to address the historical origins of contemporary policing and criminal justice structures as rooted in the settler-colonial-slave experience in the US, Canada, and elsewhere.⁵³⁴

⁵³¹ See Ryan Neville-Shepard, “Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World: On the Conspiracy Rhetoric of Donald Trump,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 55, no. 3 (2019): 175-193.

⁵³² Herrmann, “Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness,” 10.

⁵³³ See Michael J. Jensen, and Henrik P. Bang, “Populism and Connectivism: An Analysis of the Sanders and Trump Nomination Campaigns,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 16, no. 3-4 (2017): 343-364.

⁵³⁴ See Sarah Marie Wiebe, “‘Just’ Stories or ‘Just Stories’? Mixed Media Storytelling as a Prism for Environmental Justice and Decolonial Futures,” *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community-Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning* 5, no. 2 (2019): 19-35.

Appendix A: Acronyms and Abbreviations

2017- BRS: Baylor Religion Survey (2017)

AAIHS: African American Intellectual History Society

ACR: American Civil Religion

ANES: American National Election Study

AOC: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

APF: Alliance for Peace and Freedom

ASI: Ambivalent Sexism Inventory

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CDPT: Critical Discourse for Post-Truth

CDA: Critical Media Analysis

CITF: Critical Intersectional Transnational Feminism

FCE: Focused Cultural Example

FLOTUS: First Lady of the United States

GOP: the Republican Party or “Grand Old Party”

GWOT: Global War on Terrorism

ICCT: International Center for Counter Terrorism

IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change

LGBTQ2+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Two-spirited, plus all other sexual orientations not expressed in with these acronyms, including asexuality and nonbinary.

MAGA: Make America Great Again

MAP: Modern American Populism

MMU: Multiply Marginalized and Underrepresented

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NWMP: North-West Mounted Police

POTUS: President of the United States

PPE: Personal Protective Equipment

RCMP: Royal Canadian Mounted Police

RIM: Russian Imperial Movement

RPN: Red Pill Network

RPW: Red Pill Women

USask: University of Saskatchewan

WHO: World Health Organization

WSE: White Supremacist Extremist

SARS-CoV-2: COVID-19/Coronavirus 2

SED: Secular Evangelical Discourse

SDGT: Specially Designated Global Terrorist

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