

'Patriot bros', the fascist creep, and the spatial fantasies of White-Nationalist masculinity

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The radical-right and fascistic eruptions are (re)surgent in many global contexts. But the relationship between space, ideology, digital representation and rhetoric, identity and the body, is underexplored, especially with regard to networked *masculinities*. Place, the body, hyper-nationalism and white supremacism, and expressions of militarism and exaggerated masculinity (or the 'heroic man'), emerge in the form of photos, memes and #hashtags, and are negotiated and reconstituted via social media platforms such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *YouTube*. But these virtual constructions are also spatialized through produced territories, taking the forms of autonomous compounds of recreation (e.g., gym), capital accumulation (warehouses, products, crypto-mines) and local community infrastructures (homes, churches, schools). The patriot-bro, in other words, moves from online personality to spatial fixture, with implications (and perils) for democracy and community cohesion.

This chapter explores the online and offline spatial fantasies of American post-industrial white masculinity through a media analysis of the case of 'Patriot Labs', a bodybuilding and fitness supplement company with a vibrant social media presence. Through short, humorous films advertising products; Instagram 'stories' and YouTube clips, and an aesthetic of hyper-patriotism, hyper-masculinity and radical-right political signifiers, the company constructs a reactionary, white, muscular space online (media) and offline (its warehouses, gyms, and community infrastructures). The merger of online silly content, corporate values, radical-right ideologies and physical territory therefore represents a dangerous 'creep' of fascistic formation with radicalizing potential, and ripple effects that reverberate elsewhere globally.

However, through an alternative reading informed by queer theory, this chapter suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that beyond the projections, representations and veneer of exaggerated white masculinity and hyper-patriotism, there is a more dynamic, empathetic and potentially (de)radicalizing space of male vulnerability, bonding, softness, homo-sociality and homoeroticism. Through this more complex reading, the new 'heroic man' is an unstable, cartoonish, self-reflective and satirical figure, with yes, fascistic and dangerous tendencies, but also, other, less essential, dynamic, playful possibilities and alternative trajectories and stories-yet-unfolding.

Patriot-‘bros’, the fascist creep, and the spatial fantasies of White-Nationalist masculinity

I. Introduction: ‘Makin the special sauce’

The YouTube scene begins in a nondescript fitness supplement warehouse, somewhere next to a major highway in a small town in a Southern-American state. The company boss/CEO, “Dale” (name changed here for anonymity), and his assistant, “Tucker” (name changed for anonymity) are discussing plans for the weekend. “Hey, let’s go up to my paw-paw’s [dad’s] cabin”, Tucker says. Dale agrees. “We need to go up there to make the special sauce”, Tucker says.

Scene two: the two men, both hulking white bodybuilders, drive up into the mountains, sitting next to each other in a pickup truck. The camera zooms out (drone footage), and shows the truck meandering past farm fields and barns, cows and mobile homes, church steeples; a bucolic, pastoral tableau.

Scene three: the two men arrive at the cabin, a modest spot in the woods, and begin the task of “making that special sauce”, which is actually a new bodybuilding supplement product called “Frontier Boom Boom” (name altered). The idea is, they make this product through a mysterious and magic process similar to distilling whisky, or, ‘moonshine’. The two men go hunting for raw ingredients for their ‘sauce’, finding, among other things, a pineapple, and putting them into the whisky still.

Scene four: the assistant, Tucker, pulls the new supplement product out of the whisky still – a bottle of the product called “Frontier Boom Boom” (which is a pre-workout, or, a stimulant and pump-enhancer). Meanwhile, during the ‘distillation’ process, the company boss – “Dale” – has turned into an American Eagle, his bulbous arms and quads bulging out of the blue tights, head covered with an eagle-mask. This performance of drag (following Butler, 2011’s framing of drag as an ambivalent space of sometimes hyper-masculinity) then ends the short clip, with the two men – or rather, the man and the eagle-man, alone together on a mountain top.

The above vignette has played out on YouTube, as part of a recurring series of company marketing material where the boss (Dale) and his assistant (Tucker) promote the company, called “Patriot Labs” (name altered for anonymity). The company’s products, including “Frontier Boom Boom”, revolve around American-patriotic slogans, symbols and aesthetics, around which are wrapped the CEO’s personal, political, religious, and corporate values. In this case, the boss makes it known regularly, through YouTube statements, Instagram posts, shares and likes, that he supports many radical-right

ideologies and political causes, from Donald Trump's vision for America, to Covid-era vaccine and mask-resistance, anger toward perceived intrusion of "wokeness", to right-libertarian ethos of low taxes, cheap supply chains, and low regulation, including a side-business in crypto-currency called "Crypto-Patriot-Bros" (named altered). Bible quotes are interspersed with soundbites from motivational speakers and celebrities on the 'manosphere' circuit, such as the psychologist Jordan Peterson, popular with men in alt-right and libertarian online circles.

But as these clips, posts and advertisements circulate online, there are real territorial implications, and spaces/places are formed vis assemblages of built environments and infrastructures (mountain cabins and bodybuilding gyms; warehouses, global distribution and consumption networks, materials and supply chains, labor processes; trucks and ships; cyber-currencies); bodies (e.g., muscular, predominantly white, male bodies); but also community networks and institutions such as neighborhoods, schools, churches and local businesses. In other words, as the *patriot bros* sell their products online and shape their bodies, they also help discursively and symbolically configure online and, importantly, *offline* communities. Beyond, they impact the global fabric of consumption, ideology, and space. Viewers of these social medias and consumers of these products likewise are shaped (bodies, ideologies) and shape, relationally, their surrounding and intersecting communities, infrastructures and networks. In other words, the patriot-bro is viral, and the toxic impacts are real and very material. Fitness-hobbyist and related consumer cultures, represented here through the case of the patriot-bro, therefore emerges as one lens through which to explore the broader relationship between toxic masculinity, whiteness, nationalism, the accelerating fascistic creep, and online/offline spatial formations, territorializations and geographic fantasies.

The chapter that follows will periodically return to empirical examples like the opening vignette, garnered through ongoing virtual ethnography and social media analysis, in laying out three primary arguments. The first is that there is a need to spatialize, and understand in a geographic / territorial sense, the relationship between online rhetoric, imagery, radical-right ideology and local place. This remains a gap in research on the political right and a conceptual blind spot (Ince, 2019), where rising extremism and the "fascist creep", (e.g., where non-threatening activities and ordinary processes mask a seeping, insidious radicalization, by the end of which, it is too late to stop, Reid-Ross, 2018) are sometimes overlooked and obscured by dramatic events, violence, or terror. If the horror of events like the Washington, DC mob on 6th January 2021 is the end, then there are many steps, sites, and micro-interactions in-between worth exploring.

Secondly, this chapter addresses the need to better understand the mainstreaming of the radical right (and related toxic masculinities) through different 'gateways' or 'portals' offered by consumer products and advertising, hobbies and recreation, and homosocial interactions (such as, encounters in the gym, or via

bodybuilding and related affinity communities online). Radicalization is not a linear process necessarily, nor does exposure to these hobbies, products or cultures always result in radicalization. But the fact that *sometimes* they do warrants interrogation. Radicalization, and the drift for men from the banalities of daily life into rabbit holes of hate, conspiracism and violence, occurs as a relational process in the web of mainstreamed hobbies, consumer products, consumed media, and micro-interactions. Miller-Idriss (2018) identified bodybuilding and fitness cultures (and related products, brands, sites) as one, of many, ‘gateways’ into right-radicalization, through her study of young men in Germany.

The chapter’s third contribution is to trouble, softly, the essential qualities of what constitutes ‘toxic’ masculinity and, returning to the idea above, raising the possibility that radicalization can move in either direction. Utilizing an alternative reading, informed by queer theoretical frameworks, I suggest that ‘patriot bros’ are emblematic of a dynamic and evolving space of masculinity, identity, body and ideology that is always in flux, with both dangerous and hopeful potentials and trajectories. Following Marshall et al., (2020), the world of ‘patriot bros’ can also be seen as a playful masculinity, a performative masculinity; a release and a safety valve; to express an identity (e.g., a hyper-bulked body, or a hyper-patriotic American eagle) that is not possible or deemed acceptable elsewhere in life. In other words, a space of support and even supportive-softness; tenderness, and positive mental health and self-esteem. Given that male supremacist violence perpetrated by, for example, online ‘Incels’ (Kelly, DiBranco and DeCook, 2021) often results from low-self esteem and feelings of resentment (towards women or other men), perhaps a space of ‘patriot bros’ can be a checkpoint against further radicalization and toxic-creep. But I use the word ‘perhaps’ deliberately, because radicalization is a complicated process, sometimes without explanation, and a hopeful trajectory is only one of many (more troubling) possibilities.

Finally, it is not my intention to paint men involved in these cultures and spaces – specifically, white, muscular men who might consume related products, media, or ideologies as victims, or needing sympathy. Quite the contrary, given that white men remain the dominant force in a patriarchal and deeply racially and economically unjust global system of capital accumulation and power. Indeed, Kelly, DiBranco and DeCook (2021) warn not to fall back upon sympathy for, or empathy towards, the ‘begrudged’ white man, or to somehow construct this archetype as a victim of changing society and a culture that has moved-on. Violence, hate, and political weaponry are individualized and deliberate. As Oluo (2020) argues, generations in America (and beyond) have resurrected a sympathetic approach to the ‘mediocre’ white man, including electing many of them as presidents (most recently, Donald Trump, the mediocre real estate developer). It is not my intention to add to this construction by proposing that ‘patriot bros’ are hapless, goofy figurines just being boys and *making the special sauce*. Rather, I open up this space for further inquiry and suggest that categories and binaries – whether referring to politically-radical-

right or left, or, whether meaning ‘toxic’ or ‘non-toxic’ masculinity – are not stable, are blurred at the edges, and are constantly in motion, a series of stories and architectures yet-unfolding.

Structurally, I will first briefly overview the mix of methods involved in animating the examples presented in the chapter. This will lead to a critical synthesis of the recent positioning of the male body in popular culture, virtual networks, the economy and politics; specifically, the role of whiteness and hyper-muscularity. This leads to a probing of the troubling entanglement of the hyper-nationalism and the radical right, whiteness, and muscular male physiques, with implications for place and territorial community formation (beyond just online discourse). Finally, I will conclude by opening up a space of possibility – exposing, hopefully convincingly, the perilous trends toward authoritarianism and fascism that the ‘patriot bro’ represents, but correspondingly (and somewhat contradictorily), potential openings for empathy, kindness, and (de)radicalizing, (de)escalating praxis.

II. Methodological Overview

The examples presented are based on an ongoing investigation into the relationship between place (e.g., specific sites, buildings, neighborhoods); space (the networked and relational web of interactions, ideas, materials, infrastructures and encounters that happen at different scales, online and offline), and politics, but within politics as a broad field, the focus is on radicalization processes toward the far-right, or, ‘radical right’, as referred here. This has required a mix of methods that approach space and place at specific scales, with an online and offline dimension, conducted over several years.

Notably, I have utilized a critical visual analysis to approach social media platforms and content like images, clips, threads, which also involves reading the discourse of comments, reactions (*likes, dislikes*) and the text of various media shared and (re)shared, debated, denounced. Rose (2016) suggests that scholars might come from the starting point of “the interpretation of visual images must address the social effects of images: effects that images can achieve by being both meaningful and affective” (2016:xxii). This means, practically, approaching content like Instagram posts or YouTube clips with a keen eye toward meaning and the embeddedness of the content in the social, cultural and political world(s) (of which it is both a constituent part but also helping to shape). Taking some online content as a theatrical performance, for example, as described in the opening vignette, a ‘scenographic’ approach toward qualitative analysis was also employed. This goes beyond simply the images (or YouTube videos) themselves but takes into account the broader assemblage of scenery, items, techniques, landscapes, affective fields and performance styles, in a search for meaning and consequence. Frequently applied to theatrical staging, in this case, following Hann (2018), a scenographic lens is extended to virtual ‘staging’. To echo Hann’s suggestion, “scenography happens as a temporal assemblage that is

linguistically more akin to notions of ‘staging’ than ‘set’”, and that “to study scenography in the early 21st century is to study a practice that is always seeking, always implicated, within a transgression of borders” (Hann, 2018: 4).

Online qualitative analysis does not tell the full story, however. Thus, the research has been supplemented with periodic site visits to some of the places mentioned/referred to in the media (such as bodybuilding-type gyms constructed as white male imaginaries online, though, not the one mentioned in the opening vignette). A research interview was conducted with the CEO of company portrayed in the YouTube video, ‘Patriot Labs’ (name altered for anonymity) in 2020, with the intention of getting more of the story in terms of the aims / intent of the type of content that was being produced. And finally, place-analysis is extended by getting a sense of socio-demographic, economic and political characteristics of places portrayed or referenced in online content using data sets including census reports (e.g., United States Census), which provide information relating to race, ethnicity, income or education levels; and electoral data from sources such as state boards of elections, which tell a story about how specific precincts voted. Taken together, this mixed-method approach interweaving online and offline qualitative textures with some necessary quantitative context, link together ontologically the spatiality of ideology, place, and representation.

III. From the Postindustrial Male Body to Fascistic Virality: *Acceleration and Reactions*

The evolution of the male body in viral popular culture, specifically for this chapter, the hegemonic white male body in a Trans-Atlantic context (North America, Europe), has mirrored larger structural economic and socio-cultural-political shifts in late capitalism. Chow (2015, 2017) notes the rise of male physical cultures as a Victorian curiosity and theatrical performance, with the first superstar European muscle-models like the Prussian showman Eugen Sandow becoming celebrities around 1900, and concurrently, greater awareness and interest in muscularity and a toned physique as a new sort of modern, ideal man. Oluo (2020) suggests that the Fin-de-siècle era of the artistic, theatrical strong-man and physique model coincided with the construction and propagation of a muscular-white-heroic archetype, used to underpin and justify an insidious system of racial hierarchy and subjugation, with different socio-cultural and spatial impacts on both sides of the Atlantic. In a European context, the elevation of white masculinity as a muscular idyll coincided with the late colonial period, and periodic anti-colonial insurrections, whence the white hero (e.g., Kipling’s “White Mans’ Burden”) was elevated as justification for continued subjugation of (non)white populations, but also, rising nationalism and militarism and the racist pseudo-science (e.g., eugenics initiatives) which would later be deployed in Nazi and other fascist propaganda.

Muscularity and the idea of the white hero was crucial to the Nazi imaginary and representation, appropriating Nietzschean notions of the ‘superman’, or “Übermensch”. But portrayals of muscular masculinity were not limited to the fascist right: Soviet propaganda and representation also featured this caricature in its imagery and popular representation.

Through a specifically American lens, Oluo (2020) argues that a rugged, muscular (and Christian) male hegemony was created (fabricated) in order to justify the philosophy of ‘manifest destiny’: the conquering, subjugation of, and economic exploitation of, the landscapes inhabited by indigenous people, women, and racial minorities in the modern United States. Oluo (2020) gives the examples of Buffalo Bill, the cowboy and stage actor, and the president Theodore Roosevelt, as embodiments of the ways that heroic physical attributes were imposed, rather falsely, upon national male role models. In Roosevelt’s case, an effete and intellectual East-Coast aristocrat was repackaged as a tough, muscular, Western cowboy. This projection would continue, Oluo suggests, through the characters of John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and most recently, the portrayal of the elderly, overweight Donald Trump as a muscular figure on the world stage (Figure 1 below). This latest iteration correlates to the imaginary of the radical-right, authoritarian surge in which figures like Trump, Bolsonaro (in Brazil), Erdogan (in Turkey), Duterte (in the Philippines), Johnson (in Britain) and Putin (in Russia) all project, and are given by supporters, attributes of strength and masculinity, despite the reality of the physical, moral, and intellectual weakness of these men (dramatically exemplified by several catching severe cases of Covid-19 despite their veneer of toughness and heroism).

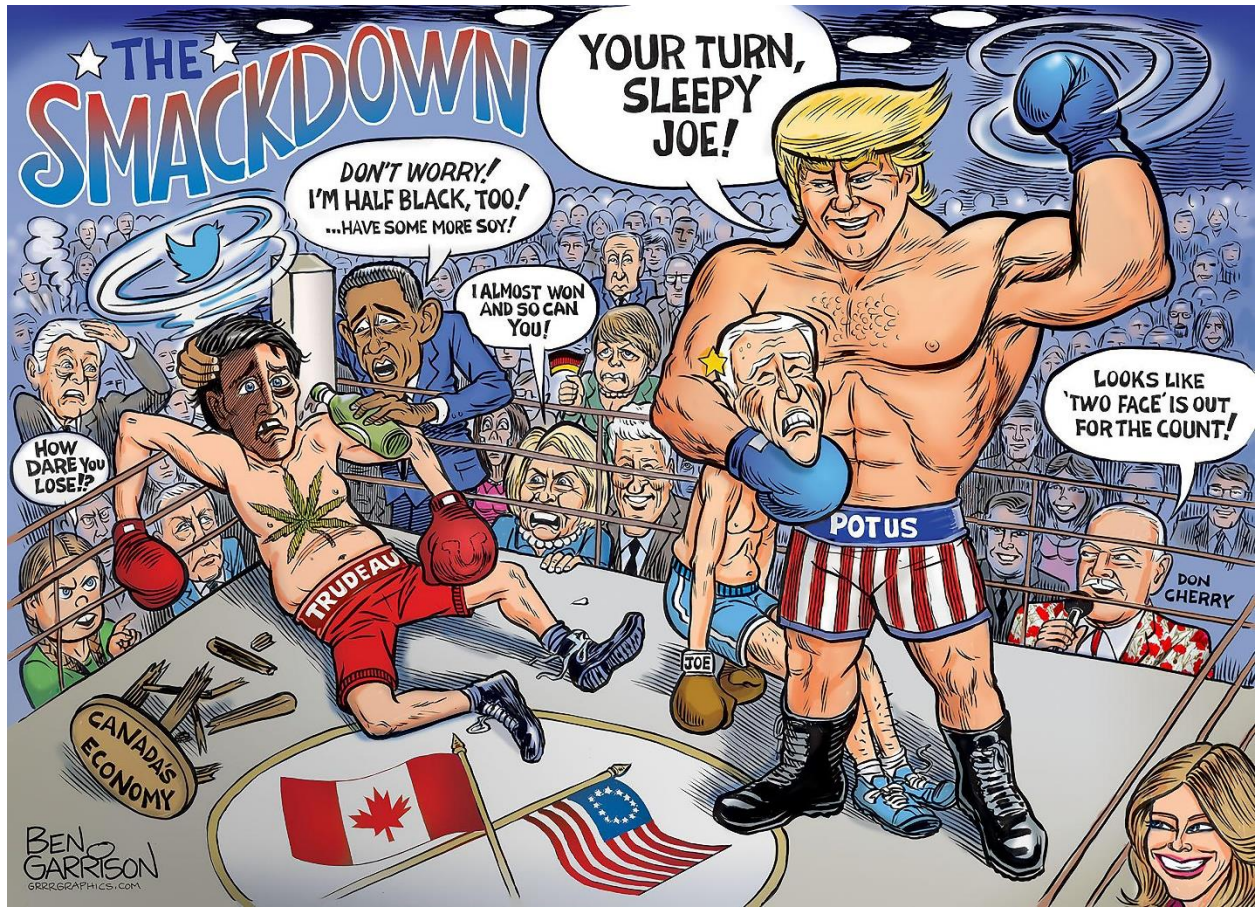


Figure 1: 'Sleepy Joe', cartoon by Ben Garrison (available via creative commons).

Recent rhetorical constructions of a crisis of masculinity, but specifically, a portrayal of a crisis of a *weakened* masculinity, have deployed via political leaders from Brazil's Bolsonaro, who said in 2011 that he'd rather his son 'die' than be gay; to the Chinese authorities, who have outlined a plan to include more gym classes for young students and barring "sissy men" from appearing on popular TV shows (Featherstone, 2021). American politicians like Missouri Senator Josh Hawley have made an unapologetic, rugged masculinity central to their election platforms: in a speech at the National Conservatism Conference in Florida on 31 October 2021, Hawley blamed the political left for driving men into a 'crisis' of mental health decline, joblessness, online gaming and pornography, which, Hawley argued, was a crisis "for the American republic" (Featherstone, 2021).

This political rhetoric mirrors, but helps to further the perpetuation of, a gradual evolution and muscular inflation of what is deemed a desired male archetypal body, particularly in Western contexts (though not limited to the West; there are examples of such an evolution in other contexts, notably South Korea –see

Holliday et al., 2012), as well as the example from China mentioned above. Shresta et al., (2017) use examples from media representation over time to the dimensions of childhood toys (figures like G.I. Joe, the army-figurine) and superhero films (where characters' dimensions are often enhanced by computer-generated imagery and/ or anabolic steroids) to explain the rise of what they call "muscle dysmorphia", or "bigorexia", a psychological disorder in which the victim feels they are not muscular enough, despite frequently being much more muscular than the general population. The rapid and viral rise of social media images, and the algorithmic selection of those more muscular torsos over less viewed favorably in some online circles, has greatly contributed to the rise of this disorder (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020), and this is especially true among online bodybuilding/fitness communities which are already slanted toward hyper-muscularity but become even more so with the absorption of constant images of an (un?)attainable muscular idyll. Marshall et al., (2020) note the formation of online bodybuilding communities (on platforms like Instagram) that echo the cultural (body) shift toward greater muscularity and give rise to eruptions of anxiety and perceived inadequacy.

The elevation of a muscular masculinity into mainstream political and popular discourse follows the changing relationship of the male body with the post-crisis economy, particularly in post-industrial contexts in the Global North and West. Giazitzoglu (2018), through an embedded ethnography, noted the intimate relationship between post-industrial landscapes and gym-networks and related hegemonies and identity formations/expressions, utilizing the (prototypical-post-industrial) case of the North-East of England. Hakim (2020) affixes the white, male, muscular body, and its (re)presentations online, as a specific outgrowth/outcome of neoliberal economic shocks like the 2008-2009 'great recession' and ongoing industrial decline in white-working class regions, but also, changing technologies like smart phones and social media platforms which have enabled new forms of bodily capital and display, dating and intimacy, along with new loci for exploitation, insecurity and competition. This has also corresponded, Hakim argues, with an inversion of traditional gender roles, that "since 2008, the digitally-mediated, sexualized male body, has been opened as a front in neoliberalism's struggle for hegemony in ways historically associated with women" (Hakim 2020:3). The loss of traditional industrial occupations and related identity-signifiers, the rise of the service economy (including the ubiquity of personal trainers and online fitness influencers), combined with the virality of social media platforms and the flooding of images of muscular physiques, has thereby set into motion new forms of masculine (bodily) capital, idylls, and intimacies. A muscled male torso has emerged out of economic crises as a new form of economic competition online and offline, which has not only brought from the margins the sort of exaggerated physique that relegated bodybuilding historically to the realm of the theatrical (Chow, 2015, 2017), but also, has re-centered and inverted historical gender roles where it is the male, not female body, garnering a fetishized sexual attention.

Phone-based dating apps, too, have increasingly put a specific form of male body into, or out of, favor. This has been true for sexualities across the spectrum; the phenomenon of ‘swiping left’ or ‘swiping right’ on phone-dating-apps has ascribed algorithmic positivity to those men deemed immediately physically attractive, and the body plays a central role to this, alongside other factors such as wealth, status, background, or personality traits. Miles (2017, 2018) and Hakim (2020) explore what this has meant for gay men as socio-spatial relations have reconfigured by and through the assemblage of (toned) body, location-based phone-app (e.g., Grindr) and place (home, rather than the club), catalyzing further space-time compression (e.g., Massey, 1991) as the body is detached from place, re-scaled and networked globally, seeking approval, intimacy, or economic gain with users circulating wherever an app is available be it Canada, Cape Town, or Seoul, through swipes, messages, likes. Zebracki and Luger (2022 forthcoming) illustrate how the accelerated virtual life-world as brought forward by the Covid-19 pandemic has further re-configured the male body as a space of networked capital, as more people were prevented from physically interacting and meeting due to public health restrictions. But an outgrowth of this has been the further-extension of (ongoing) neoliberal economic crisis processed through the male body, e.g., the proliferation of the website OnlyFans.com, notoriously a site of casual, anonymous, virtual sex-work even by those not traditionally classified as sex workers (anecdotal stories of graduate students, for example, using bodily photos on OnlyFans.com as an alternative source of income). Herein represents not only an extension into the heteronormative mainstream of male-body-as-capital, exploitation and insecurity (but also expression, performance, desired intimacy) that has been more common both for gay men (e.g., the “muscle mary” trope, see Hakim, 2015) as well as historically, the way womens’ bodies have been sexualized in the mainstream economy.

With these broader shifts and trends in mind, I now turn to the specific link between the male body and hyper masculinity/muscularity online /offline, and entanglements with the radical-right, where the male, but especially white-muscular-male body, plays an important role as a populist signifier and foci for (fascist, authoritarian) ideology and community formation. These communities in turn have spatial impacts in specific places.

IV. Spatializing the Far-Right Patriot-Bro: From the Virtual, to the Gym, to the Viking ‘Long-house’

A few miles outside of Lynchburg, Virginia, in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, is a rural compound in the woods called “Ulfheim”, which in Old Norse, translates to “home of the wolf”. Ulfheim is the chapter headquarters for a neo-Pagan tribal group known as the “Wolves of Vinland”, founded by the brothers Paul and Matthias Waggener, former Neo-Nazi skinheads from Wyoming. The Wolves of Vinland are part of the wider “Operation Werewolf” movement, which has several chapters around the

United States, including the “Cascadia” chapter in the Pacific Northwest, founded by radical-right, white and male-supremacist author and media personality Jack Donovan (who has since left the group and publicly disavowed some of its more extreme aspects). The Wolves of Vinland have been designated as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which describes it as a “neo-Volkisch” hate group.¹ The group is known for its social media presence, which frequently uses Odin-infused Norse far-right imagery mixed with occultist-Satanic, Nazi and White-Nationalist symbols, slogans and images, as well as images and rhetoric around ‘death metal’ (music); ritual violence like animal slaughter; but also, banal images and slogans around themes like masculinity; bodybuilding and fitness; making campfires; and playing with axes.

However, in Ulfheim, this ideology and social media discourse becomes territorialized. A few years ago, the group crowd-funded via their Facebook page for \$3,000 to build a traditional Viking-Style Long-House in the Virginia woods. Thus, the online rabbit hole of paganists, conspiracists, white-male supremacists and protofascists has a physical home in Virginia to act out their various fantasies.

What is notable about Ulfheim is not how extreme or fringe it is, but quite the contrary - how it is emblematic of the way that reactionary politics and right-wing, authoritarian populist ideologies are producing territories that reach deep into everyday life; via the myriad ways, offline and online, that ‘the extreme goes mainstream’ (to use the phrasing of Miller-Idriss, (2017)).

Ulfheim and the Wolves of Vinland are strangely accessible and visible – a quick Google, Facebook or Instagram search reveals their praxis. The Foothills of Virginia are not exactly a secret hideaway: Ulfheim is in a ‘Blue-State’, and within a few hours’ drive of major population centers like Washington, DC and the Southern boomtowns of Charlotte and Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. Ulfheim is, in other words, hidden in very plain sight. Its nuances and mysteries are constructed and revealed, made mythical and larger than life, on Instagram; but its praxis, textures, materiality, occur on a few acres of private land surrounded by threatening ‘keep out’ signs and barbed wire in the Virginia woods. Territory creates the virtual, the virtual creates territory, and extended between the two is the muscular body of the white-nationalist man.

I portray ‘Ulfheim’ as a more extreme example of the mountain compound portrayed in the advertising video produced by ‘Patriot Labs’ in this chapter’s opening vignette. What separates a supplement company’s silly online presence and marketing tricks and a radically-extreme-right compound like Ulfheim are just a few extra layers of radicalized ideology, but the fact remains that online ‘patriot bros’ quickly become territorial ‘patriot bros’, and these territorialized *brotopias* do not exist in vacuums. They

¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-volkisch> (Retrieved 9 Dec 2021).

are linked, in terms of physical infrastructure, social relations and political influence, into the local communities in which they are embedded. Ulfheim is a territorial force on local Virginia communities, and the ‘Patriot Lab’ manufactures not only bodybuilding supplements or larger pectoral muscles, but also, webs of local community.

Outside of Houston Texas, in the exurban community of Missouri City, is a sprawling campus of warehouses and low-slung office buildings, known as ‘Alphaland’. This is the headquarters of the ‘Alphalete’ fitness brand, which produces clothing and other products for gym-goers, and is hugely popular in many global contexts. The ‘Alphalete’ Instagram page has over 1 million followers, and features images of male and female fitness influencers, but mostly male, bodybuilders and physique models. Like Ulfheim, or “Paw Paw’s cabin”, Alphaland is a bro-imaginary and a global marketing scheme, but also a real place: both an online community with global resonance, and a banal collection of suburban buildings in Texas.

One of the key facets of the new radical right has been the positioning of masculinity, notably white masculinity, and specifically, the strong, muscular male body, as a crucial aspect of identity, culture, and ideology. Miller-Idriss (2017) observed that bodybuilding/fitness consumer cultures and imagery was a common meeting point of radicalization between mainstream and the far right for German youth. For the Wolves of Vinland, physical training and muscularity are crucial to the doctrine of Norse mythology and a return to the male-warrior-*idyll*. In the words of Jack Donovan, previously active in the ‘Operation Werewolf’ movement:

It’s about escaping to another world, not just for an hour or even a day, but for good. The wolves of Vinland are becoming barbarians. They’re leaving behind attachments to the state, to enforced egalitarianism, to desperate commercialism, to this grotesque modern world of synthetic beauty and dead gods. They’re building an autonomous zone, a community defined by face to face and fist to face connections where manliness and honor matter again. (Jack Donovan, quoted in Neel, 2018: 26).

For White Nationalist and fringe groups like the ‘Wolves’, self-improvement and physical training are linked, philosophically, to ideas of “gang masculinity,” wherein men use extreme fraternalization—building bonds through extreme behaviors such as violence—to exclude women and reinforce toxic masculinity. Bodybuilding, in particular, seems inextricably linked to the masculine radical-right, observed through specific personalities like the Swedish Bodybuilder and YouTube personality known as the ‘Golden One’, who visited and trained at Ulfheim in Virginia – but also the wider rhetoric within

bodybuilding circles around ‘freedom’, ‘control’, and the notion of the bodybuilder as a ‘lone wolf’, or ‘wolf, among sheep’.

By extension, the muscular body becomes a territory of reaction and control, an embodied territorialization; a biopolitical reaction to a seemingly uncontrollable and chaotic world. The image of a man displaying his body is ubiquitous on social media, to the point of parody, perpetuated by popular culture such as the (UK TV show) “Love Island”. There is a longer literature linking the viral proliferation of muscular-male visual / digital cultures to late neoliberalism, as a response to economic shifts and post-industrial crisis (e.g., Hakim, 2020, discussed previously). But moving beyond just a post-industrial critique; these body cultures are rife with political formation.

I now return to the case of ‘Patriot Labs’, which has recently built a new corporate headquarters complex in a Southern (US) state, called the “Patriot Coliseum” (name changed for anonymity). Over a period of two years, the company released a series of YouTube videos and related Instagram posts about the process of planning for / designing, constructing, and moving into, this new headquarters, which includes (along with a warehouse and distribution center), a gym that is open to the community, and a branch of the supplement company’s retail store. The videos - more than a dozen in total – feature aerial drone footage of the construction of the complex and an update of how the project is moving toward completion (expected 2022).

The videos detailing the coming-together of the “Patriot Coliseum” are narrated enthusiastically by the company CEO. They are very personal – they also describe the home he is building on a lake, with monthly updates (“look, they’ve dug out the three-car garage”). The home on the lake, the new gym complex and headquarters, the associated industrial infrastructures – loading docks and bays, garage doors; warehouse spaces for pallets and shelves; trucks and electrical wiring – are presented in a way that makes them seem like extensions of the CEO’s muscular body, conspicuously displayed as an assemblage of flesh, infrastructures, and place. Very central to the creation of the “Patriot Coliseum” is the idea of “creating community”. As the videos progress over time, guests appear, like a local Baptist pastor who becomes a gym-goer and friend. Thus, the bodybuilding CEO preaches patriotism and business-libertarianism; the Baptist pastor preaches similar values to his Sunday flock, and body, ideology, masculinity, whiteness and a sense of brotherhood become attached to territory in ways that are representative and profoundly material. Social media displays of business ethos, bodybuilding, faith and brotherhood relationally inscribe the story of a place, and the place is then informed and narrated by a connected web of political (and (P)olitical) actors, institutions and outcomes.

One of the CEO's Facebook posts (available for public view, not privacy-restricted – but with names and some text anonymized here) details this ethos of creating not only muscular bodies, or virally-popular consumer products and myriad web content, but also, “community”:

We wanted to create our own little slice of meathead heaven. We were hesitant at first to opening it [the new gym] to the public, but since one of our core values is building community, we knew it was the right thing to do (CEO of fitness supplement company, commenting on new headquarters complex and related community outreach, Facebook post, October 2021).

Substantively, the broader link between mainstream online/offline male-muscular body cultures (e.g., ‘Patriot-bros’, *Alphaletes* and *Gymsharks*), increasingly visible as a marker of status and popularity among those under 30; the ideologies of the radical right (e.g., the Wolves of Vinland, Ulfheim); and the textures of specific places, seems to be a mostly-unexplored nexus, but crucially important given current sociopolitical realities. Bodybuilding territories are being produced as ‘brotopias’ – compounds of white masculinity - which link to extreme politics in both obvious and less-obvious ways, sometimes borrowing directly from Norse mythology or neo-Nazi symbology; other times seemingly oblivious to the overlaps with these rhetorics and imaginaries Unifying the radical-right extreme body cultures and more mainstream, everyday exurban gym cultures, are hyper-patriotic images, symbols, and discourses of ‘freedom’.

Thus, banal gym spaces, fitness brands and adverts, and fitness-media algorithms serve as portals into deeper extremism and more extreme territorializations. These territorializations will take site-specific forms and may not physically resemble one another: the assembly of land, buildings and other infrastructures is markedly different in a context like the UK, US, Europe, or elsewhere. And the political configurations dynamically establishing themselves between these territorial sites, the bodies and minds of the men surrounding them, and the global cyber-sphere, will be informed by locally-situated issues and attitudes as well as globally-circulating ones. Still, the outcome of such territorialization processes can be dangerous and violent across space and territory. Brenton Tarrant, the terrorist who attacked a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, was active in both online and offline gym circles in Australia, part of his radicalization process². The online ‘patriot bro’ can spill over into his community in the form of a materialized radicalization; these radicalizations can spill over into riotous mobs and swarms of terror, seen with horrific evidence in episodes such as the desecration of the United States Capitol building in January 6th, 2021. But, I ask, need this be so?

² <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/16/asia/new-zealand-suspect-brenton-tarrant-about-intl/index.html>

I now conclude the chapter by opening up some alternative readings of the ‘patriot bro’ and presenting this character, and the related and entangled online/offline spaces, as a space rife with fluidity, hybridity, emergence, and surprising contradictions, perhaps not so easily demonized as always-troubling or necessarily linear in terms of the feedback loop of radicalization, mania and (dis)order.

V. **Concluding Discussion: From the Patriot Bro to the Riotous Mob – ‘Cruel Optimism’, Male Bonding, or Something Darker?**

It is tempting to read the online/offline landscapes and praxis of the ‘patriot bro’ as a problematic and deeply troubling nexus of reactionary politics; bodily insecurity; harsh policing of a toxic masculine idyll; and a vicious and insidious cycle of what Lauren Berlant (2011) called “cruel optimism”. For Berlant, “cruel optimism” was a state of being trapped in a desire for something that is actually an obstacle to an individuals’ flourishing and actualization. For the men drawn into the cycle of fitness brands, bodies and culture, this can be a trap of constantly needing more, whether in a corporeal sense, or //(and) in a capitalistic sense. But “cruel optimism’s” darker side, as Berlant suggested, was a dangerous insecurity and anxiety that catalyzes socio-cultural insecurity, upheaval, and a fascistic tendency to desire one’s repression, a concept brought forward by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) in their treatise on emergent micro-fascism, capitalism and a “schizophrenic” contemporary society. It would seem that the condition of late neoliberalism has instigated a similar eruption of buff bodies and buffoonish authoritarian leaders (returning to Trump, Bolsonaro, Duterte, etc.) with decidedly fascistic characteristics. The entanglement of consumerism with hyper nationalism and militarism, as exhibited by the ‘patriot bro’ (and the global army of *Gymsharks*, *Alphaletes*, and the like) – is linked uneasily to events like the Washington DC riot of 6th Jan 2021. The fascist creep, as Reid-Ross (2018) surmised – has crept into a sprint.

But this, perhaps, is too superficial a reading of the sort of online/offline toxic masculinity that the ‘patriot bro’ represents. Returning to the methodological practices of critical visual analysis and ‘scenographic’ readings of media and performance, it is important to be open to multiple readings and a confluence of meanings rather than to reduce to binaries or certainties or even moral markers such as ‘toxic’ or ‘non-toxic’. As Stuart Hall argued, there is “no single correct answer to the question, ‘what does this image mean?’ or ‘what is this ad saying’ ...work in this area is bound to be interpretive” (1997a:9). Therefore, there is room for an alternative reading of the ‘patriot bro’ which maintains a criticality and a moral anchor around the toxicities, but simultaneously opens the space as a dynamic one, with multiple possibilities and (un)answered questions.

Returning one last time to the cache of clips, images and threads from the ‘Patriot Labs’ company, one can find competing and contradictory narratives. On the one hand, the men featured are portraying a tough, muscular, reactionary exterior, along with tropes like homophobic banter and jokes (a frequent occurrence in the content, e.g., jokes about two men making out in hotel rooms they share; playing with each other’s penises). But on the other hand, there are examples of a fluid homo-sociality – a supportive, softer, empathic, honest and vulnerable tone and space that sometimes emerges. The men seem to genuinely love each other, and they speak candidly about the good and hard aspects of their lives—; injuries; and insecurities; divorces, financial struggles, mental health (depression, anxiety, fear). They compare notes on children; grocery stores; pets. They share photos of family parties, holidays. TheyThey intimately invite the viewer into these conversations, as a friend and confidant. At times, the homo-social seems to tread (even if lightly, carefully, and very policed) into the realm of tenderness and a love or erotic desire which may transcend the boundaries of purely ‘homosocial’. The body-worship, for example, common to (heterosexual) male bodybuilding communities, has long been a queer idiosyncrasy unique to physique sports and cultures. Marshall et al., (2020) explore the vulnerabilities, bonds, and genuine micro-moments of affection and tenderness in online bodybuilding communities which temporarily seem to put aside the radical-right politics or reactionary masculinities (also) common to these spaces. These are arrogantly heteronormative spaces and simultaneously counter-normative. It is perhaps not coincidental in this regard that Jack Donovan, the author mentioned previously advocating for the “Wolves of Vinland”, is openly gay and long-term partnered; his 2007 book ‘Androphilia’ was a manifesto for the unapologetic same-sexual attraction between muscular men.

Physical territories, too, exhibit such dualities and contradictory texts. Giazitzoglu (2018) describes how gyms and the social networks they spawn are vital for male bonding and feelings of self-worth in post-industrial communities. Mason (2021) presents the local community gym as a vital node of de-radicalisation, male physical and mental health, local support networks and mutual aid. Research from groups like ‘Hope not Hate’ (2021³), an anti-extremist organization in the UK, found that men who take part in sport activities are less likely to be drawn into radical-right-extremist groups. It may be, then, that a queer reading of the ‘patriot bro’ reveals a field of complexity and competing desires, affections/affectations, meaning, and potential outcomes, at odds with the surrounding world rather than seeking normalcy within it. The compelling and concluding questions then become, where is the line that separates the ‘patriot bro’ from the riotous mob or dangerous “incel?” And, is a global online / offline army of younger, male, ‘Gymsharks’ and ‘Alphaletes’, and the territories and places they create,

³ <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2021/11/01/building-back-resilient-strengthening-communities-through-the-covid-19-recovery/> (accessed 16 December 2021).

something to fear, or / and simply, just another cycle in late capitalism where certain bodily / masculine idylls come into and out of mainstream appeal? Such questions invite further research and deeper comparative empirical and longitudinal study.

VI. Further Reading of Related Books / Articles

Hakim, J. (2020) *Work That Body: Male Bodies in Digital Culture*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

Hakim explores the shifts in how the hegemonic male body is positioned, and positions itself, across the dramatic economic, cultural and technological changes in the decade from the great recession (2008-2009) to the current proliferation of digital bodies and right-radical politics. Hakim links late neoliberalism – the highly individualized and anxiety-ridden need to compete – with the rise of smartphones and the app-economy – to areas such as dating and intimacy; gay body insecurities; and the swapping of traditional gender roles as men increasingly use their bodies online, rather than hard industrial graft, to gain a foothold in the modern economy.

Marshall, K.; Chamberlain, K.; & Hodgetts, D. (2020) Male bodybuilders on Instagram: negotiating inclusive masculinities through hegemonic masculine bodies, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 29:5, 570-589.

Marshall et al., explore the complexities, idiosyncrasies and contradictions of the spaces of male bodybuilding on Instagram which, they suggest, is a space where easy binaries or hegemonies are difficult to distinguish. Often conceived as a space of toxicity, insecurity and even dangerous outcomes like misogyny, self-harm and even societal violence and terror, the authors find muscular men online carving out spaces of (surprising) tenderness, play and conviviality, vulnerability, candor, and softness, alongside troubling insecurity, reactionary attitudes and troubling policing of the boundaries of acceptable masculinity. These contradictions and alternative readings are interesting as researchers scramble to decipher online/offline radicalization processes and masculine mental health crises.

Miller-Idriss, C., (2018) *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Miller-Idriss, through a longitudinal ethnography, explores the linkages between mainstream youth cultures, including gym and body cultures, with shifting masculinities and the resurgent radical-right, through case studies of brands, sites, and consumers in Germany. The troubling findings include the easy blurring of retail shops, slogans and symbols, banal hobbies and daily life, and explicitly hateful rhetoric

and ideology, underpinning the rise of radical-right groups like the AFD in Germany (and similar groups elsewhere).

Oluo, I. (2020) *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male Power*. London: Basic Books.

Oluo conducts an historical analysis of the evolution of, and resiliency of, the archetypal American character of the heroic, strapping white man, who continue to command power despite their relative mediocrity. Examples are given from Buffalo Bill and Theodore Roosevelt through to white male CEOs of under-performing companies to the election of presidents like George W. Bush and Donald Trump who not only succeeded despite their mediocrity (as businesspeople, scholars, or politicians), but rather, because of it. This American paradox has resulted in the elevation of average, rather than extraordinary, white men at the expense of women, people of color and indigenous people, and Oluo suggests the legacy of this elevation is deeply engrained and continues to perpetuate from generation to generation.

Rose, G., (2016) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. London: Sage.

This seminal work by Geographer Gillian Rose takes a deep methodological dive through various ways of critically using visual qualitative methods to gain meaning and significance across a mix of medias. Rose's insights include the need to situate media data within broader socio-cultural-political worlds and contexts, and the complexity of reflexivity and positionality when approaching visual texts for analysis.

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