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## My year with digital supremacists

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# MY YEAR WITH DIGITAL SUPREMACISTS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa

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This Study by: Nick Baur

Entitled: My Year with Digital Supremacists

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Date      Dr. Caroline Ledeboer, Honors Thesis Advisor

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Date      Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

## Authors Note

“I see the poets, who will write the songs of insurrection generations unborn  
will read or hear a century from now, words that make them wonder  
how we could have lived or died this way”

- Martín Espada, “How We Could Have Lived or Died this Way”

I embarked on this creative literary enterprise in the late months of 2020, capping off one of the most memorable years I have ever had. Life felt as though it was coming apart at the seams, people were out of work, economic class divides were deepening in an election year, society was leaning ever harder on the internet, and it looked as though the United States may actually have a genuine reckoning with its long history of racial injustice and white supremacy. The sitting president was flooding the fire of racial tensions practically by the day while people were sick and dying.

But despite the widespread societal stress, I was cautiously optimistic about the condition of this nation. I thought, “It is always darkest just before the day dawneth” right? “When the going gets tough the tough get going” right?” Or some other pompous cliché told to the youth.

Sadly, though not entirely unsurprisingly, as I write this, almost a year later, life here in the United States is in a state of contradictions. Things may be progressing back to “normal” (if there is such a thing), but so much upheaval remains. Back to in-person events but still hung up on masking. Vaccines being disrupted for anyone who wants it but not enough takers to reach herd immunity. The fervor for fighting white supremacy once seen in such large numbers a year before has dwindled as Tucker Carlson floats

“The Great Replacement Theory” on cable television in April. Momentum built for worthy causes consistently meets staunch resistance fueled by disinformation and contrarian politics. People are still getting sick, and still dying.

And here I am, a skinny white kid stuck at a mid-sized university in Iowa, writing for a word count in class after class. Obsessed with the internet since my earliest years, growing up online, and seeing some of the darkest parts of humanity partitioned to this digital world. I have seen the white anger, in person and online, over the past year in retaliation to the Black Lives Matter movement, nothing necessarily new but nonetheless continually infuriating. I watched the insurrection of January 6th in real time with disbelief that absolutely no one with authority could have seen this coming. Had they not seen the tweets from sitting officials of the government, the countless online posts foreshadowing the events which played out the entire day, spurred on by white supremacy groups who congregated and organized online? Like many, I felt compelled to do something as a result of so much ignorance.

I do not believe I am uniquely equipped to tackle or report on the institution of white supremacy, but to an extent, this is part of the point I am trying to accentuate. All my actions and interactions with white supremacy described in these essays are easily replicable, open to anyone with the willingness to discover the soul crushing realities of contemporary right-wing discourse and organizations on the Internet. On the flip side of the same coin, it is important to remember that not all may act with the same amount of detachment. Some do as I have and stay, perpetually locked in these rooms of hatemongering. Ah, but I am getting a bit ahead of myself here.

Truly, I wanted this creation to give a feel for the history of white supremacy in this moment, with its cast of characters, backgrounds, and sheer insanity it amounts to - - the beginnings of a book that people may actually read and glean something from, an updated depiction of a long-running stereotype, typically characterized as a forgone relic. I wanted to show that these white supremacists are still alive and well, thriving over the past several years in the outer reaches of the Internet, still exerting their influence with even more communicative tools at their disposal. From podcasts, to web forums, entire social media sites, or even online news outlets, the reach for white supremacist groups has never been larger.

Because these white supremacists are not just racial supremacists, they never have been and never will be confined to this singular identity. There are so many other specific guidelines within these ideologies and groups that aim to exclude, or even eradicate, any person who is not white, heterosexual, cisgender, or a born citizen of the United States. Such people are leading the charge to crater any chance of a multicultural society. It is an ideological sponge absorbing some of the most vicious parts of humanity. And I wanted to show the innerworkings, the guts of this machine cannibalizing my home, the belly of the digital beast. If you don't see the institution of white supremacy as plague on the peoples of this nation it is, this may not be the selection for you. But, to those who do wish to face these harsh realities, strap in because this journey will be going down quite the white supremacist rabbit hole.

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## My Year with Digital Supremacists

“The Internet gives millions access to the truth that many didn’t even know existed. Never in the history of man can powerful information travel so fast and so far. I believe that the Internet will begin a chain reaction of racial enlightenment that will shake the world by the speed of its intellectual conquest.” - David Duke

I dusted off my laptop, fighting it’s painful whines of the worn fans as I cracked open its smudged, but familiar, digital screen. The hour was late, a few minutes past the stroke of two on a wicked cold winter day. I was sitting alone without a light in my living room; it always felt more appropriate to dive into these seedy, backwards places online with the darkness of night cocooning my spirits. I sipped on my black tea, mentally preparing myself to descend into this digital world that I had become rather intimate with over the past several months. Dropping every sense of shared reality and any preconceived notion of Truth, I set my eyes on Google Chrome. This was essential for my sanity, I thought to myself, *you cannot just waltz into the online white supremacist world thinking you are going to be on the same page, it will drive you mad.*

I zipped over to Gab.com, my practiced keystrokes playing a symphony to an empty crowd. Gab has become a new favorite place for those feeling spurned by the recent crackdown on hate speech across mainstream online discourse platforms. After the well-documented online disaster on January 6th, media conglomerates employed half-hearted measures to clean up the mean streets of Facebook and Twitter. Yet, anyone with the willingness and internet know-how could pull up their favorite unfiltered

search engine- my personal favorite being DuckDuckGo, a search engine which emphasizes protecting searchers' privacy while helping to avoid the filtering of personalized search results- and find whichever hate group or conspiracy center which their heart desired. Patriot Front, a splinter cell of white supremacists spawning from the fallout of the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, is the first link after you type the words Patriot and Front. National Vanguard, a white supremacist “news” site with articles titled, “Five Top Tips for Jews on Making Your Hate-Hoax a Big Success” among others? Sure thing, it's on the first page. Trying to find the latest, greatest Qanon conspiracy? Don't worry, coupling “Qanon” and “website” will get you to several places brimming with questionable content in a few clicks.

But for today, I settled on Gab, a relatively new crossroad of all things alt-right. Launched in 2016, Gab is a seemingly unmoderated social media site growing in popularity and currently being crowdfunded to fight against “Big Tech” censorship. With roughly 100,000 users, Gab primarily houses the kaleidoscope of different archetypes related to alt-right ideologies. From “Only Trump” Republicans to Neo-Nazis to QAnon fanatics, conspiracy enthusiasts, and Christian evangelicals, Gab took these people in and gave them a home after the more “woke” places online became too hostile and more group specific forums kicked them out. Essentially, if a group or individual's rhetoric becomes too “red-pilled”, a *Matrix* homage to detail a far-right group's dramatically transformative political perspective, for the larger online discussions areas such as Facebook or Twitter, they now have a place to unload their thoughts on Gab.

Ironically enough, I had only discovered the site (among others) through a handful of DuckDuckGo searches which contained a litany of articles detailing the digital



hot spots for white supremacists. I was able to find a place rife with politically unsavory folks in less time than it takes for me to boil a pot of salted water. As well-intentioned as DuckDuckGo and my fellow writers may be, the front door access to these hate groups continuously startled me.

But as I logged into the account I had created to snoop around this place, and prepared to check out the list of groups I had been monitoring on the platform, it occurred to me how important this day had become. It had been a pivotal day in the far-right online political scene. Rush Limbaugh had died- to the great dismay of those not following his well documented infestation of lung cancer. While many like myself read the news with barely contained glee, I should have known the ripples this would make across the United States

I grew up within his propaganda sphere, hearing small segments and sound bites from his show on Radio 1040 WHO whenever my father neglected to turn the radio off after the daily crop report. It always began with those cheesy radio intros that made it sound like he was on the forefront of the hottest, most controversial news. Then *Boom!* Rush, true to his namesake, would vocally slide through in a fluster to give you everything you wanted to hear and think.

I remember how much he appealed to rural and blue collar communities- many of the people I had grown up around. His gruff voice giving long monologs disparaging the 'violent' cities full of Black people that plagued the nation he so dearly loved. He railed against gay folks and academia with long winded fervor. Pushing Birtherism and trickle down economics, he was the goddamn Michael Jordan of bombastic bigotry for white republicans in Iowa. Every day, for three hours, radio listeners got to hear his sermons

from their cars, workplaces, and homes. His anger was always palpable, sitting right on the edge of antagonism and dismay. People I knew felt as if he “gave it to them straight” and “didn’t give a damn what people thought”.

But he was dead now, and with every comment, heartfelt appreciation post and grief-stricken paragraph, the influence of a single media personality bubbled to the surface. Users relayed their conversion stories with a written zeal that high school English teachers could only hope to get out of their students. Users on the front page of Gab created idealized murals and portraits immortalizing the man who had given them so much.

I had taken interest in a group self-titled “Iowa Patriots”, populated at a progressively growing 150+ people to help localize my efforts to survey this wide ranging network of far-right content. Now, Iowa Patriots was an ideal group to showcase the spectrum of white supremacy, especially those on Gab. While not explicitly white supremacist, as in openly stating it in the group description, the group surely flirted with the classification. One day I even opened the group’s homepage to a startling image announcing, “Make Slavery Great Again” posted in a riff on the classic MAGA slogan. It was removed by the next day. Yet, one can still see the gathered users taking great delight in hounding minorities at any turn and constantly spinning birtherism in an ode to Rush Limbaugh at numerous elected leaders.

I scrolled through the day’s posts slowly, noting the comadary and fraternity fostered by the death of one man and being astounded by his influence. There are real life deities in the “alt-right” and white supremacist communities, and they had just lost one of the trailblazers of their movement. His rhetoric and personality helped to bridge

the gap between hardcore Neo-Nazi types, even if he was a bit too liberal for their tastes, and the more sheltered, but still sympathetic run-of-the-mill Republicans. It was an official passing of the biogitous torch, with Limbaugh leaving an enduring legacy of the weaponization of unconventional media tactics to further the broadening cause of white supremacy. A singular man with a radio show deeply changed so many of these Iowa Patriots.

After scoping out Gab and all of its contents, I set my laptop down with mild annoyance. I didn't expect to read so much Rush Limbaugh fan fiction that day. I got up to get something to eat but felt an addictive pull back towards my computer. I wanted to know and see more. I wondered if this is how the Gabbers felt when they logged off, a sense of longing for more information at the tip of their fingers. I sat back down, my digital palate not yet satiated.

Back to Google Chrome and DuckDuckGo, but this time, I figured I would venture a bit deeper into the white supremacist online landscape. These are the places where things got real wacky and you must forsake everything you know to even begin to understand how the dynamic operates. Up is down, right is left, and at the end of the day - Jews control everything.

I clicked over to the forums of the National Socialist Movement (NSM) at the address of [www.nsm88.org](http://www.nsm88.org). This was getting much farther along the white supremacist spectrum, well past the Tucker Carlsons, the casual Gabbers, and only slightly farther than the Qanon fanatics. These were not hobbyists, they were professional racists, complete with the Nazi regalia, here is where you can find more racial slurs than complete sentences. The NSM posters were saddened, but far more resolved than

grief-stricken. Most days they talk of racial revolution, instituting Christian theocracy, and murmur of civil war. Today was similar, though many acknowledged the passing of Limbaugh, they used it as further motivation for their cause. As much as they lost one of their own, there has been a distinct tone of contained excitement over the past year as societal structures began to deteriorate in light of the pandemic. I sifted through the posts, but one can only read so many theses on the animalistic nature of Black folks and the impending rapture which will save the white race.

I leaned back in my seat, acknowledging how discombobulating a place these intensely white supremacist areas were. Conscious of the images of the crucially influential Rush Limbaugh fresh in my head, I felt a sense of deep recognition, a memory bubbled inside of me from a far more innocent time in my life. One of crushed naivety and stark realism that sticks as tightly to your consciousness as a blood-sucking tick.

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### How I Slipped and Fell into a British Hate Rally

“The Truth, when you finally chase it down, is almost always far worse than your darkest visions and fears” - Hunter S. Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear*

Over the past several years, I have found myself recounting one of weirdest, and most unexpected, days of my life to many of my peers, family members, and acquaintances. It was a day spent in London, England. With the current political climate

within the United States, as I have described previously throughout this thesis, my day in London, England felt pertinent adding to the ongoing discussion around white supremacy.

The year was 2018, and I had recently graduated that May from high school in Winterset, Iowa. Practically a year removed from the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina, the United States was still grappling with the reality of a Donald Trump presidency and the steady rise of white supremacy in both conventional and unconventional politics. Hardly anyone outside of hardcore internet geeks knew what Qanon was, and to this anxious teen living in the heart of Iowa, it looked like Trump might sail to reelection on the back of a rebounding economy despite his obvious popularity among domestic hate groups. By no means was it a “simpler time” in 2018, no matter how nostalgics might spin it. But, I was young and quickly became politically awakened once I could finally vote. I had a brimming optimism so characteristic of young progressives.

At the behest of my parents, I traveled to Europe in the first week of June to visit my brother who had been living abroad in Spain. We had agreed to meet in Amsterdam and then travel by train through Belgium, then France, and eventually under the English Channel until we finally arrived in London. We arrived in a gloomy overcast London on June 8th and settled into our hotel that night- ready to see the next day what my high school history teacher repeatedly told me was, “the greatest city on Earth”.

The morning of June 9th came quickly. In spite of my many groggily conveyed protests to my brother, the two of us embarked on our touristic mission in the early morning. We stepped out of the hotel with the sun glaring upon our eyes with an

intensity I never would have associated with the stereotypically gloomy England we arrived in a day earlier. We found our way to a touring bus stop because my brother assured me this would be the best way to see the sprawling metropolis. We boarded the double-decker bus with youthful zeal, ready to embrace a place so vastly different from home. The bus ride did not last very long. When we arrived at the Tower of London, I prompted my brother to get out with me to see the Tower of London and walk across the Thames on the iconic Tower Bridge to the Globe Theater- knocking out some important stops on our tourist checklist.

Shortly after traversing the Tower Bridge, we walked up to the Globe Theater, admiring one of the remaining vestiges of the British Empire. I babbled on about Shakespeare and his literary importance to the very patient ears of my brother during our stop at the Globe. Much to our chagrin, The Shard, an impressive creation of modern architecture, shot out of the background of our view, thoroughly dwarfing the size and significance of the Globe Theater.

Inspired but mildly amused by the visit to the Globe theater, my brother and I walked parallel to the historic Thames river, as he slowly grew more and more annoyed with my lukewarm takes on the most renowned English writer of all time. Our walk lasted quite some time until we came upon the next crossing over the Thames, Westminster Bridge.

We crossed the Thames on Westminster Bridge, and we admired the very lackluster Big Ben in the midst of renovation. My brother and I then set upon navigating to Westminster Palace. Both of us were eager to see the British Houses of government- feeling as though it were necessary to see all London had to offer. He was in charge of

navigating while we walked due to being the only one with cell reception in this foreign land. However, as soon as he had the directions on his phone, I directed his attention to a large crowd gathered in front of what I would later learn as Whitehall, a broad road and area of commerce in the City of Westminster. Here, where Whitehall road merges with a larger more populated road, a large mass of Brits were segregated by metal fencing with one side clad in purple while the other was dressed in white and red. We both thought that this must be close to Westminster Palace, and that this contest between groups would surely be political in nature.

As we neared the commotion, we could plainly see that the counter protesters far outnumbered the meandering crowd of what I had assumed were right-wing British Nationalists. (This assumption would later be proved correct, but on account of their vigorous waving of the flag of England, their surprisingly color coordinated outfit choices, and the general debaucherous behavior, it wasn't really a difficult conclusion to draw). The size difference between the competing groups was initially none too shocking to my naive eighteen year-old self. In righteous thought, it made sense that there would be a stronger response to such a public display of right-wing politics.

It seemed that this was almost a weekly event, like a football match, where they get all boozed up and yell at political rivals to get their rocks off- practically a tailgate with politically sinister twists. There was a certain levity, almost mirth, of the red shirt protesters that was not displayed by their fierce opposition. It was less of a fight for them, but rather more of a hobby to do with their friends- a weirdly terrifying sight for this young American.

We walked past, eyes glued to a scene we had only seen on television screens, taking in all the altercations: bald muscular men shouting at an opposing protestors, out of shape white guys dressed in football (soccer) jerseys drinking pints and shouting from a pub, police trying to keep some high-minded semblance of order.

My brother and I situated ourselves by a series being erected in the middle of the street behind the British Nationalist protestors, sitting upon a concrete railing raised above the sidewalk. This gave us a prime view of the proceedings stretched out in a panoramic picture of political conflict as laborers milled around with various barriers and equipment.

I darkly commented to my brother, "This is it? We aren't even going to see a riot?".

He muttered back, "Can't say I'm too surprised. Everything really is bigger in the U.S.".

We turned our attention back to the crowd as the two sides continued to scream over each other, hoping to drown out each other's hatred. One particularly vocal woman on the side of the counter-protestors stuck out to us. Showing a fervor that made me quell from several feet away, her fiery demeanor also garnered her special attention from the British Nationalists. Pushed up as close against the metal barrier as she could, she was engaged in close quarters with a bald muscular man we saw galavanting loudly earlier, exchanging strong words lost in the clamor of the morning. As the conversation grew more heated, with both parties raising their volume, her next words would echo across the commotion, punching through the hysteria,



“My father didn’t die fighting the Nazis so that I would have to deal with scum like you!”

It could have been a line from a movie, her voice hauntingly strained to barely contain her emotions. Other protestors attempted to retrain her as she yelled at the jeering man. My brother and I watched with mouths wide open.

Growing restless and hungry as we viewed the altercations between conflicting sides of the British political spectrum, we set off to grab some food and visit some other sights London had to offer. We began walking past the stage in an effort to find our bearings in the mess of protesters, police officers, and day laborers in the middle of Whitehall.

Turning down a side street, we became acutely aware of the lack of other pedestrians. We both figured a place like Westminster would be practically overflowing with tourists and residents alike. Not only the location of the Houses of government, Westminster was an area of commerce with businesses lining the streets. Yet, as we observed our surroundings and the thinly packed streets, we began to realize the only other bodys we shared the streets with were police officers. Donning large tactical vests and with truncheons hanging from their hips, my brother and I began doing an informal headcount of the street we were walking down. We were outnumbered by cops by an unbelievably huge margin.

Knowing that London has often been criticized for being an incredibly policed state, we chalked up this massive police presence to an overreaction to the very small conflict we had just left. Therefore, we continued on our quest for food with the brief

political sideshow in the very backs of our minds, filed away as a quirky abnormality in a far away land.

Unbeknownst to us, despite the very obvious circle we were making, we turned back onto Whitehall after a brief walk parallel, with the broad street opening up to us. We heard them before we saw them as we rounded the corner, expecting the same empty streets, we were smacked in the face with a screeching red mob (reportedly around ten thousand), jammed from sidewalk to sidewalk. They were moving and

Our little demonstration earlier was certainly not the headliner of the day. The smattering of purple and red protestors from before was completely overshadowed by the sheer volume of people packed into the streets of Whitehall in front of us. They were marching and chanting in loose unison, "Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, Tommy Robinson!".

The chanting, I quickly learned through a few Google searches, blasted support for, at the time, one of the most controversial figures in England's political atmosphere. If given the benefit of the doubt, Tommy Robinson is a far-right British Nationalist akin to a British iteration of Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA. His general message of "preserving" the "West" and largely online platforms are very comparable. More accurately though, and including my extreme hatred for the reductive use of the term "white nationalist", Robinson is a racist, xenophobe whose sole job was, and still is, to incite racial hatred within the British populace, and more specifically white men. Though absent from the rally he was, the constant chanting and praise of his name carried his hateful spirit throughout the streets of Whitehall. (Robinson would later be released in August of the same year due to procedural errors allowing him to post bail.

In 2021, Robinson would declare bankruptcy after being on the losing end of several lawsuits related to his public comments.).

We walked along the edges of the slowly devolving crowd- taken in by the flowing tides of people and back towards the earlier skirmish we saw earlier. As we approached the stage set for the rally, the crowd became more unruly, uncorking all of the tension from the march through London. Flares were being lit and marchers were becoming violent with police officers. An Indian family was watching the march intensely, a man and woman with two young children no older than six, huddling closely together on the edge of the sidewalk. Similarly shocked at the sudden rush of people as the two of us, the family certainly did not appear to plan for this occurrence.

Intermittently, white men would streak by the family, heads full of steam and high off their own ignorance, shouting in their faces, "Go home" and "We don't want you here" with more explicit epithets.

The terrifying reality was the completely powerless situation these men put the family in. These men overwhelmingly outnumbered any person of color in the general vicinity and quite simply, were looking for a fight. The family was at the mercy of the chaos on Whitehall.

But the mob kept moving as my brother and I attempted to make heads and tails of what was happening while we were rushed along with the flow of marchers. In the heat of the morning, the mass of humans tore through the street of Whitehall, sweat glistening off the foreheads of the men, and the occasional woman, marching to free Tommy Robinson. Pushed alongside the others we found ourselves at the very stage in which we began viewing these happenings.

We retook our previous perch, once again perfectly set up for the viewing of ongoing affairs behind the assembled rally stage. After attempting to settle down the mob and command those who were lighting flares to quit, a man began introducing a series of speakers as I hurriedly googled each unfamiliar name.

Notably, the only woman on the speech docket, Anne Marie Waters, represented the weirdest contradiction of the gathered political demagogues. A former Labor Party affiliate, Waters underwent an incredibly seismic political rebirth as the founder and leader of the anti-Islam party For Britain. She is also the director of Sharia Watch UK, an organization launched in April 2014. Later, in August of 2019, at a conference for white supremacist group GI (Generation Identity), Anne Waters would publicly support the conspiracy of “The Great Replacement” or “white genocide”, an incredibly common theory presented in white supremacist rhetoric across the United States and other predominantly white European countries.

But the main attraction and keynote speaker of the morning, greeted with resounding cheers from the gathered crowd, was far-right European and political provocateur, Geert Wilders, closely flanked by over fifteen bodyguards. Branded “EuroTrump” in a recent documentary available on streaming services, Wilders is a radically xenophobic Dutch politician whose inflammatory rhetoric gained him infamous status across Europe. His long frame and trademark crop of blonde-white hair loped across the pavement less than fifty yards away from us. After hearing his introduction and the resulting crowd reaction, my brother and I could feel the gravitas and magnetism of his arrival. It was as if a teenage heartthrob walked into a high school

cafeteria. This was the face of racism and xenophobia in Europe and everyone in the surrounding area knew it.

We listened to Waters, Wilders, and a handful of other speeches supporting Robinson and pushing anti-islamic and xenophobic rhetoric. But I had heard these speeches many times before. Watching the president's rallies, stumbling upon YouTube videos, and sitting through long winded lectures about the evils of "immigrants" from people I knew growing up, the overall sentiment was the same. White good and nonwhite bad. So we got up to leave, hopping on the nearest bus to finish our sight seeing tour.

As we got on the top of the bus, I fell into a bit of a stupor, my mind processing the events of the past few hours. I looked at, but didn't see, the many landmarks and cultural oddities of London. It was the Queen's birthday and there were nude cyclists in the streets to mark the occasion, but my mind kept replaying on loop, scene after scene of our unexpected encounter.

Unsurprisingly, from an outside perspective, my brother and I could not have been more obviously not from this land, with our unkempt looks, American branded clothing, mystified looks and general air of confusion. Newcomers to this land- like those within the mob and public speakers so easily and vehemently hurled vitriol at. We could have been as much immigrants as the brown skinned families who bore the brunt of mob's slurs and hateful messages. Yet, on account of our white skin, we were spared any type of verbal or physical harassment. Rather, individuals in the mob were open and warm to us, aggressively handing us pamphlets on the *heinous* persecution of their golden boy Tommy Robinson, taking any opportunity to tell us how much they love

Donald Trump and encouraging us to vote for him in the next election, as well as attempting to spur us into marching and chanting with them. It was not my first introduction to the concept of “white privilege”, but it was by far the most public and glaringly obvious one in my relatively short life at that point.

While much of the march and subsequent speeches were intensely focused on shaming immigrants and demonizing the religion of Islam and its followers, these words would build the facade around the true meaning of the inflammatory rhetoric. Any observer with some sense would realize that it was not simply a rally to public denounce Islam but an attempted reinforcement of white superiority within England and the British Isles. Islam and immigrants just happened to be the latest enemy to rally against.

They are the exact same motivations behind the white supremacist movements which perpetually rend on the soul of the United States and have nestled themselves within the cultural fabric of the nation. The faces, the names, and the specific targets for this demonstration were wholly different, but the bigotry, the ancient hatred, and clearly defined racial lines remained so intensely familiar to the white supremacist movements seen across the United States.

What astounded me on that day, and should cause great alarm, is the increasing interconnectedness of these movements. Despite always being nationalistic in nature, therefore valuing your specific group of white people over all others, the white supremacist movements share symbols, rhetoric, and tactics for debasing relationships with nonwhite communities. These were the same creatures I saw on television in Charlottesville, just with funny accents and different chants. Both used vast online

networks to broadcast their messages to like-minded individuals and gather cohesively for a display of force.

I got off the bus with my brother, tired from jet lag and the whirlwind of the day we had. I gazed across the London skyline, the rally on my mind and the air around me becoming increasingly colder, seeing something so unfamiliar but with a strange feeling like I was back at home, I shuddered and walked into our hotel.

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“Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as deeply as they do here, and become as joyless as they have become. It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult” - James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

I awoke with a start in my dimly lit and musty bedroom with a throbbing headache. I quickly glanced at my clock, it showed me the time was 2:20 p.m, my favorite time to wake up. Then an important memory flooded back to me, I only had just under ten minutes to make it to my COVID-19 vaccination appointment at the Cedar Falls branch of CVS pharmacy. Quite simply, I had overslept. It was not necessarily abnormal for myself but still presented an obvious problem. I channeled my

grandmother, who has been duped “the fastest dresser in the West” and trundled down the stairs with mismatching socks and my mind on a singular mission. I was not missing this appointment

I raced out the door into the rather chill spring air. It was Saturday May 15th, just a week after the end of the spring semester and I had been enjoying the time off a bit too much. The briskness awoke me as I shoved my keys into the steering column and ripped into the street desperately trying to be punctual for once in my life.

I skidded into the CVS parking lot at 2:35 p.m., springing out of my car practically breathless. Frankly, I was excited but this excitement felt weird in a way. I was only there to receive a simple shot, one given to countless others from across the world before me. There was nothing especially thrilling or overtly exhilarating about the experience. I was not rushing to save a bleeding person in distress, nor was I attacking a complex challenge. I was going to walk into a building and sit down for less than five minutes to get jabbed in the arm with a vaccine.

Yet, as I stepped out of my car putting my favorite mask on, I felt as though I would finally have a modicum of peace about the possibility of spreading a contagious pathogen. After witnessing over a year of widespread global suffering, I saw the vaccine as a key to unlock the nervous shackles that have been ever present in my mind over the past year. Perhaps this simple, ridiculously easy action would save a life. It may not be the most heroic situation to take place in this CVS pharmacy, but one singular, hypothetical person saved, to me, was worth some excitement.

The automatic doors welcomed me into the pharmacy and I strutted through the aisles with the enthusiasm of a child who had just had their first sugar rush. I made my



way to the desk and was greeted by a team of women looking busy, backdropped by an air of stress that one could only find in healthcare professions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I continued my strut up to the pharmacy desk where a woman occupied a computer. She patiently took all of my information as I hurriedly spilled out all the necessary requirements, hoping they wouldn't mind my lateness. She directed me to a chair as she instructed another woman to gather the necessary supplies for my vaccination.

Lounging in the chair, I scrolled through my phone absently with nervousness I always experienced before dealing with any needles. I forced myself to relax, knowing that if I would tense up with anxiousness it would only make it more uncomfortable. The woman with the vaccination supplies weaved her way gradually over to me. She crouched over, swabbing my arm and preparing the various equipment for the injection as we made casual conversation.

During our chat, I caught her eye for a moment, the bags under her eyes pronounced, and I glimpsed a smatter of what I could only describe as creeping melancholy and sadness.

She eventually asked me with restrained fatigue, "Are you gonna still wear a mask once you get this vaccine if it is not required?".

I replied simply, "If they recommend it, probably so, but if not, I might not. I'm just kinda going to go with the flow, ya know?". I had never been posed this question up until this point and I really hadn't made much of a decision. I hoped my off-the-cuff response would have been neutral enough to get me by. I had met staunchly anti-vax individuals

in medical professions in my days as a call center employee before, and I figured such an answer would not trigger a lecture if she were of a similar persuasion.

Much to my surprise, my meandering reply caused her face to light up with a big smile. I was taken aback by such an explosion of glee.

She replied, "Wow! I really like that. Going with the flow! I wish we had a little more of that attitude going around." She turned to her coworkers and exclaimed, "Did you hear that? Maybe we wouldn't be here if we had some more of that."

I laughed, appreciative of her genuine kindness and lightly saddened that my lukewarm response would inspire such hope. I understood that she may have just been good-natured, but I could not shake this drastic change in her demeanor.

I waited the requisite amount of time, thirty minutes, then slid back over to the woman at the computer for my long awaited prize. The woman handed me my oversized vaccination card with warm smiles, bidding me farewell as I repeatedly thanked them, and I turned to make the walk out of the store. I heard over my shoulder, "Keep going with the flow!" from the woman who gave me the vaccination and I smiled widely under my mask as I threw a fist up behind me in solidarity.

I began examining the card itself, feeling the edges, the stock of paper, making sure information was correct, and wondering how the hell I was going to carry this thing around that was too big for my wallet. Much to my dismay they had spelled my name Bauer instead of Baur, a common and reasonable mistake, but I thought to myself, "Gee, I sure hope that doesn't cause me any problems in the future."

As I made my return to my car, vaccination card triumphantly clutched in my hands, I passed an unmasked man in a camo shirt and jeans who had just emerged

from a large truck. Now, at this time, the mask mandate within Cedar Falls was in its twilight, expiring only a few days after I received my vaccine. So it was notable to see such a brazen skirting of the typically followed rules.

I met this man at the automatic doors while he plodded into the CVS pharmacy in a huff. The discontent radiated off him like the stench of fresh manure. I made eye contact with him over my mask as I walked past. He looked at me then glanced down at my hands which carried a vaccination card and back up again at my mask. He said under his breath, "You gotta be fucking kidding me... fucking bullshit."

I slouched into the couch as I returned home, waiting for the inevitable unwellness I had heard was associated with the vaccination process. As the day wore on, I began to feel a tad feverish and nauseous. I figured now would be as good of a time as any to take a trip back into the online world of white supremacy. I brewed some black tea and scrambled to find my laptop.

Quite possibly the largest topic of conversation over the last year, one which still dominates online discussion regardless of political ideology, is the issue of vaccination against COVID-19. Initially, mask mandates caused the most uproar with the vast network of the alt-right but as the country slowly began administering vaccinations and mask mandates were lifted or banned, groups found on the sites I frequented took a turn.

Long before any alt-right news and activist outlets such as Fox News, Turning Point USA, and PragerU took up the vaccine "skepticism" banner, the genesis of many of these lines of disingenuous inquiry into the various COVID-19 vaccines originated on the internet in places such as thegreatawakening.win, the original hub of Qanon

conspiracy theories banned from Reddit in 2018. Part of a larger list of forums deemed too radical for mainstream internet alcoves such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook, thegreatawakening.win is just one of the 20+ message boards housed within the communities.win network. The topics of each forum can range from “Animals” and “Gaming” to “Guns”, “Christianity”, “The Donald” or even “TuckerCarlson”. Political discourse is not necessary for existence on communities.win, but the majority of the forums contain a ‘anything left of Rush Limbaugh is a communist’ flavor. There were certainly reasons these online spaces were kicked off the main street of the internet in the darker, less noticeable back alleyways of the internet.

I started viewing The Donald, the online continuously updated shrine to the former president. The top posts were all about vaccines with a few posts about the “stolen” election pockmarking the feed. I surfed through few posts and started taking notes about the general discussions.

A notable abnormality in rhetoric becomes apparent from multiple months of observation of the .win communities. Before the widespread inoculation of the American population, when the United States was still engaged in contentious debate over mask mandates and the closure of nonessential businesses, places like thegreatawakening.win and TheDonald were not vehemently against the vaccine for COVID-19.

In a post linking a Fox News youtube video on March 16th, 2020 which shows Dr. Anthony Fauci announcing “phase one coronavirus vaccine trial has started today - 65 days - fastest ever - from getting the sequence of the virus to human trial”, one user

writes, “why are we not blasting GOOD news like this instead of new infection cases and death numbers?” while another comments, “American ingenuity.”.

Anti-vaccine attitudes before widespread vaccination efforts were largely relegated to less popular threads of discussion and were met with, ironically, overall skepticism. Once again in TheDonald at the very preliminary stages of vaccine talk, with a post titled, “Bill Gates ‘chip’ IT'S A NANO-CHIP THAT IS CONTAINED IN THE VACCINE ITSELF”, one user gushes “That's right... you get one of his vaccs, you have received the chip everyone is hollering about. It is not a seperate chip they want to put in you like your pet's chip in case it gets lost..... For God's sake, to your fricken research about where your vaccs come from before you get any new one. You may have to dig deeply for the bottom line, too.”. But as previously mentioned, some users took issue with such audacious claims retorting, “gunna need the sauce on this one” or even “Jesus I hope this isn't real... Do you want anti-vaxxers to have a leg to stand on? Because that's how you give anti-vaxxers a leg to stand on.”. In places like those hosted by communit.es.win, pushback on even the most outlandish ideas can be incredibly sparse and usually is followed by a swarm of like-minded individuals swooping to the aid of the original poster. To me, it appeared like the majority of users were putting their eggs in the vaccine basket while rebuking infection mitigation measures such as mask mandates, nonessential business closures, and social distancing. They were not lowly anti-vaxers yet.

But like the weather in Iowa, the sentiment surrounding vaccines changed slowly and then all at once. Anti-mask became anti-vax when the vaccines became less a product of the Trump administration and more a staple of the Biden administration.

Even more so, it eventually became a way for these individuals to “fight the power” or establish their conception of freedom. It was a relatively drastic shift that perfectly highlights the ever changing, constantly evolving, and contrarian nature of these white supremacist online realms.

Longtime anti-vaxxers came out of the woodwork. In a TheDonald thread titled “<-- This many Patriots say FUCK YOUR VACCINE“, with an arrow towards the amount of “upvotes” or “likes” the post has, which was well into the thousands, a proud user shares with their compatriots, “Folks, I do not even take the Flu Shot....and that is not some new-fangled mRNA thingamajig. No, I will pass.”. Another commenter took issue declaring, “Look, don't just act like you're too fucking stupid to understand vaccinations as a reason why you're getting it. There are tons of legitimate reasons not to get the vaccine, but not, ‘Durrrrrrr, mRNA is confusing.’”.

Remember the aforementioned response to pushback? Where users would often crowd to the aid of even the wildest statements but it did not previously happen in regards to being anti-vax? Now those in favor of the vaccine began experiencing a similar treatment from their peers as that experienced by some of the oldest anti-vax members. Those admitting to getting vaccinated are flooded with sources on the life-changing risks of the vaccine and soundly denounced, beaten back by lines of rehearsed responses.

“Do your research” would become a common line given not only by those in these far-right digital spheres, but by ranges of high profile individuals from United States House Representatives, media personalities, musicians, and even professional athletes. Things like “My body, my choice”, typically used in reference to movements

centered around abortion and women's health became twisted into monikers to showcase the support for those forgoing the COVID-19 vaccine. It is places like communities.win where phrases, thoughts, and talking points like these which would be coined and propagated. Beginning in places online but seeping into the larger political dialogue.

Naturally, you may ask how all of this plays into the wider theme of white supremacy and related online discourse. The online platform afforded to white supremacist groups housed in places on communities.win and other online sites is integral to the current unwillingness within a subsection of the population to accept the COVID-19 vaccine, which has recently become the deadliest pandemic in United States history. They amplify and spread conspiracies at an incredible rate, so much so it can be hard to keep track of. So too can one see how quickly COVID-19 discussion devolves into topics about race and anti-Semitic rants. Grand assertions that the pandemic was broadly orchestrated by (((them))) litter the message boards. The triple parentheses is an online standard anti-Semitic symbol to highlight individuals of Jewish backgrounds, also known as the (((echo))). The (((echo))) becomes just one of a litany of group vernacular to not only foster unity and target harassment on Jewish people, but it also serves as a way to dodge online automatic censors.

As such, the institution of white supremacy provides a foundation and launching pad for so many of the ideas and conspiracies discussed on these forums. It brings together people of the same persuasion in a collective effort to push back against attacks on the status quo. Similarly, the subsequent hemorrhaging of these notions into mainstream political discourse offers an inextricable link between the seedy, unsavory

parts of the internet where white supremacists and similar ideologues lurk and the wider apparatus of conventional politics. One may go into places like these looking for vaccine information or favorable news, but they come out with a wealth of knowledge concerning the superiority of the white race.

I shut my laptop, feeling more nauseous than I began. I thought back to the lovely women at CVS who were steadfastly devoting effort to get us out of this long-suffering mess. The fight they should not be fighting yet inevitably were. I thought of the man so obviously bothered by a mild inconvenience at the pharmacy.

Yes, I had done my small part by getting the vaccine, but following my excursion into communities.win, it did not feel as meaningful. There were just so many people! Some may be ingenuine or not real, but for every possible bot or troll there were numerous others who were quite real. I became angry, wishing I could shout sense through my computer but knowing this would only strengthen their resolve. I took a long, hot shower, hoping to wash away the filth I had experienced as I thought of the friends and family members who have so needlessly lost their lives, and knowing there will be even worse to come.