SCENEzine

Socio-Cultural Ethnographic Notes E-zine

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male softness & encountering violence

SCENEzine

Socio-Cultural Ethnographic Notes E-zine

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Contents

opening notes 01
Amy Mack

Unbecoming 03
Gian Marco Visconti

In Dialogue 05
Gian Marco Visconti
& Harper Paranich

"Get a pair of nuts and tell your wife where it's at!" 07
Kathleen Elizabeth Mah

earthworks/waterworks 13
Gian Marco Visconti

In Dialogue (continued) 14

Can I feel, please? 15
Elsa Bengtsson Meuller

Contents

emerge/erode **21**
Gian Marco Visconti

In Dialogue (continued) **22**

Surviving the Work **23**
Amy Mack

overworld/underworld **29**
Gian Marco Visconti

In Dialogue (continued) **30**

tree boys **31**
Harper Paranich

flight/fall **32**
Gian Marco Visconti

Contributors **33**

What is male supremacy?

Male supremacy misrepresents all women as genetically inferior,
manipulative
and stupid
and reduces them to their reproductive or sexual function
– with sex being something that
they owe men
and that can or even should
be coerced out of them.

Driven by a biological analysis of women as fundamentally inferior to men, male supremacists malign women specifically for their gender.

A thinly veiled desire
for the domination of women

and a conviction that the current system oppresses men in favor of women are the unifying tenets of the male supremacist worldview.

From the Southern Poverty Law Center website.

At GULLET, we consider male supremacy to intersect with all gender identities, because many genders are erased within the worldview of male supremacy. This also intersects with race, class, and religion.

opening notes by amy mack

When I first came to Harper about my interest in writing something for the public regarding my doctoral research on white and male supremacism, I was deep in the throws of fieldwork and all its traumatic glory. I had envisioned an edition of SCENEzine that was focused on the violence and pain of male supremacy and its intersections, and I solicited submissions from my colleagues around this theme.

Kathleen Mah's piece in this volume rose to this occasion and eloquently tackles the contradictory positioning of women, by men, in the anti-vax movement in Canada. Her work shines an important light on the intersections of privilege that buttress male supremacism and misogyny in Canada. She ends her piece with a powerful statement worth highlighting here:

> "[...] it is vital to consider their acts of rhetorical violence in conjunction with other structures of power. If we, as researchers and activists fail to do so, we run the risk of reproducing the very systems we as researchers seek to destabilize."

As a group, the scholars, artists, and poets included in this inaugural issue are committed to destabilizing systems of violence and oppression, including those that foster male supremacist violence. However, destabilizing work is inherently difficult as the system struggles violently against disruptors. Similarly, research that peels back the layers of our society and reveals the toxic systems in place is inherently traumatizing, exhausting, and upsetting.

Yet, after leaving the field and reviewing the other submissions including the works of art by Harper Paranich and Gian Marco Visconti, I have come to realize that if we are to be successful in our efforts to disrupt and expose, we must be equally vigilant in our attention to care, community, and joy.

Elsa Bengtsson Meuller's reflective piece caught me off guard in how it captures the complexity of encountering male violence—even in moments of hopelessness. Elsa shows us a research experience that allows for care, transformation, and change. The title "Can I feel, please?" is an important call for researchers, writers, and artists to attend to our emotions as we attend to the complexities of masculinity.

I am inspired by Gian Marco Visconti's attention to the complexity and nuance of masculinity, especially when viewed beyond whiteness. These themes are picked up in the poetic words of Harper Paranich in their exploration of the harsh tensions in male friendships.

To that end, my own piece explores the complex nature of a project that was incredibly harmful yet allowed for growth and creativity including this collection of work. In the spirit of 'hope' I provide a list of best practices based on my experience in the 'hopes' that future scholars will find care, softness, and vulnerability in spaces that will do their best to break us.

With its dual nature, Issue 1.1 of SCENEzine does exactly that. It is all at once about violence and healing, supremacy and vulnerability, trauma and hope.

Unbecoming

Gian Marco Visconti (2020)

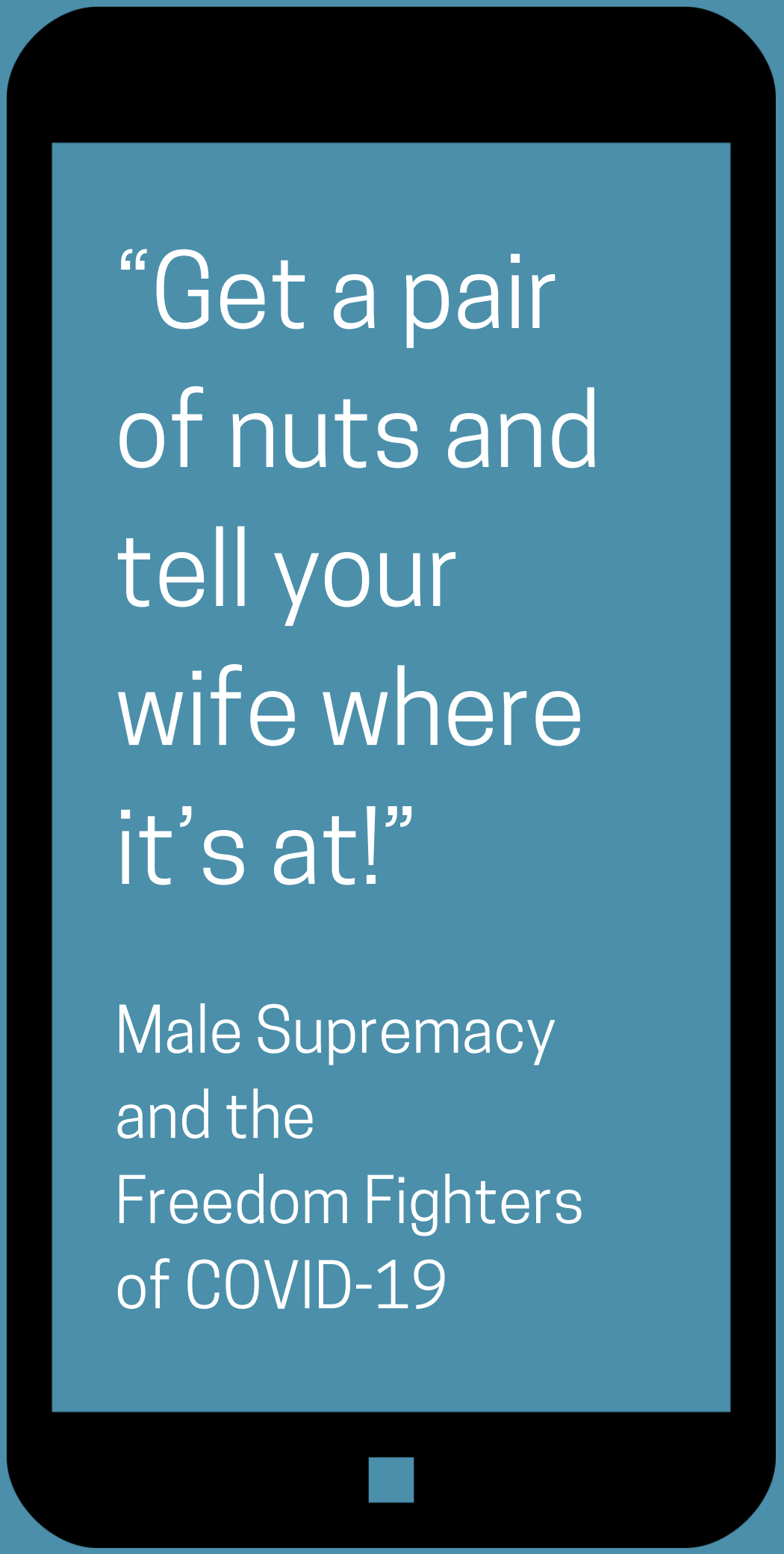
collage

in dialogue:

Gian Marco Visconti &
Harper Paranich

Harper Paranich:
The bodies of men are so often depicted with aggression or power through dominating postures. You have made a collection of men whose bodies are in positions of repose, softness, emotional vulnerability, or postures that could be called demure. Is this a purposeful contrast, or something that emerges from your artistic preferences?

Gian Marco Visconti:
In thinking about masculinity, I think I'm drawn to images of men that reflect my own own relationship to gender. As a child, I was told constantly that I didn't fit the conventions of traditional masculinity so, perhaps, I wanted to disrupt these conventions with my work. As with any gender performance, so much of traditional masculinity is predicated on how you posture for others. I wanted to explore the masculine figure in those moments in-between, when there's no one else to define himself against.



Kathleen Elizabeth Mah

"Globalist" is a term used to identify groups and individuals who are not loyal to their countries, but rather a network of elites who exert influence over the world's financial and democratic institutions for their own gain. It has anti-Semitic roots.

Paraphrased from: Yglesias, Matt (2018) "Globalists, explained." Vox

"But the men are working so women are out fighting," reads the screenshot I took during the online observation portion of my ethnographic research on the anti-mask movement, or as they refer to themselves, Freedom Fighters (FF).

I carried out this work in Canada from May 2021 to August 2021. The FF movement is a group of anti-globalist activists that gained traction due to COVID-19. The group has a small but vocal presence both online and offline. Online, they gather in private groups where they view live streams of political leaders and exchange experiences. This allows them to enhance their sense of community when they cannot connect offline. They do, however, meet offline at "freedom rallies," in which many of the leaders who are featured in live streams meet and speak to crowds ranging from fifteen to three hundred attendees.

The FF's oppose all public health policy around COVID-19 including but not limited to lockdowns, vaccines, mask usage, and social distancing. At the core of the FF movement is the belief that an unelected foreign entity, or the globalists, created the "plandemic" to force mass populations into blind submission. This would allow for citizens to become divided and more easily controlled. They vehemently oppose agendas such as sustainable development and green initiatives because they believe these are meant to strip our freedoms away and force us into a communist regime where no individuality or private property exists.

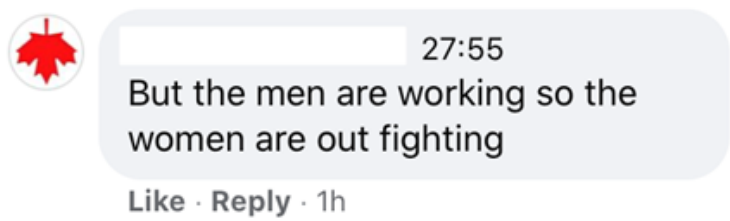


Figure 1: A comment on the livestream of prominent Freedom Fighter.

The FF movement is an extremely complex and dynamic community. However, there are clear lines of gendered division and white cis male supremacy that are especially prevalent in Alberta and Saskatchewan. This is seen in the gendered division of active participation.

The ratio of female to male active Facebook users on accounts related to the FF movement is approximately 60:40. However, men are the primary leaders and spokespeople. They fill the roles that they claim are "natural" for men to fill (1). This naturalization of gendered leadership is rooted in

two forms of sexism: both hostile and benevolent. Hostile sexism validates men's social role of dominance by idealizing women as inherently inferior (2). This showcases a deeply ingrained hierarchal system that requires domination and subordination to maintain a stable, group-wide sense of masculine identity, despite the majority participation by women.

The FF's attitudes towards women's active participation and position in the movement is a form of benevolent sexism. Their involvement and labor is substantial, but limited to specific categories that do not contradict the leadership position of men. As such, women's involvement is restricted to their capacity to be "mama bears'' and the need to fight to protect their "cubs." This is a narrative that allows women to narratively occupy a position of strength, but does not challenge male leadership.

Despite claims to empowerment, the "mama bear" role ends up reinforcing prevailing male supremacist gender ideals. Benevolent sexism seeks to maintain traditional gender inequalities while representing a relative 'positive' attitude to women from a male perspective (2). This can make women complicit in their own suppression within their communities. Benevolent sexism fulfils the need to please and belong, while cementing gendered divisions of labour.

The group does not openly admit that there is a gender-bias, although their actions and speech are often explicitly misogynistic. Despite denying a gender-based division, they do show a clear awareness of the gender-based divisions and even openly encourage it.

The comment I referenced above, "but the men are working so women are out fighting," is a prime example of this dynamic (Fig. 1). This reference to female labour is not an acknowledgement of appreciation, but serves to explain male absence in the FF movement. Pointing out the prominent participation of women functions as a call to action to recruit more men. It simultaneously criticizes the majority involvement of women, while encouraging them to continue in the movement. This comment is one of many collected in my research that demonstrates the maintenance of the traditional gender values of men's active involvement over that of the women.

The comment in Fig. 1 becomes more significant when we examine its context. It was made in response to a snippet of dialogue in a Facebook livestream by two FF prominent figures. The two white cis men are Chris, who is extremely vocal and well known in the community- often as a speaker at rallies, and James, who is slightly less prominent, often travelling with Chris to events. The two created several livestreams as they were driving across Canada. They often referred to this as a 'tour' aimed at spreading the word of rebellion and resistance in the name of "freedom." (Psuedonyms were used here to protect their identities.)

In the livestream, these men discussed why they felt that more women had been showing up to their freedom rallies than men. The dialogue included below encapsulates the FF movement's balance between encouraging women and maintaining their position below that of men.

Fig. 1 (above) is a comment made during the livestream in which Chris and James respond with the dialogue below. Note the strategic use of women as mama bears and controlling wives:

Chris: This comment says we need more men with balls. Or with parts I guess you should say.

James: No! We need more men with balls!

C: Absolutely.

J: We need more women with balls–there is actually more women with balls than there are men with balls in this fight.

C: Yeah, there are more women involved with this. That is a sad thing.

J: Cuz men's balls have been removed! We got men walking around carrying f***ing purses, we got men walking around acting like women–

C: Men wearing red shoes–

J: We have leaders of parties wearing high heels down the street for god's sake! It's no surprise, right? That there are more women standing up because you know they are mama bears, they gotta take care of their kids. They see the future and know the future doesn't look too good. So, they stand up. Men where are ya? Not to say there isn't a lot of good men in this movement, because there is. But there should be a whole lot fricken more. When you are getting dragged through the grocery store by your wife because she's scared of COVID and your head is down and you're pouting because you are wearing a mask but you're still trailing your wife in a grocery store cause you gotta listen to what she says. Get a pair of nuts and tell your wife where it's at!

In a nutshell, the conversation on this Facebook livestream event used women's positions as mama bears and protectors as an example of what they should not need to do. According to Chris and James, women are taking on positions of protection and strength because men are too weak. It is simultaneously a natural and unnatural position of women.

A defining characteristic of the FF movement is their ability to weaponize opposing arguments to prove a point or validate a position. A base architecture of their argumentation simultaneously occupies ideas and concepts that contradict each other. This strategy becomes obvious in how they view, speak about, and behave towards women, both within and outside their movement–in other words, their misogyny and their reliance on women to sustain the movement.

There are also obvious components of the conversation that specifically focus on male

supremacy. Referring to "balls" as a sign of bravery, power, and authority directly implicates biological essentialism, which is a belief that the social positions of gender are inevitable due to biological differences in men and women (3). The underlying architecture of this belief is perfectly encapsulated by the final sentence of the conversation: "Get a pair of nuts and tell your wife where it's at!"

FF misogyny and male supremacy is both an in-your-face kind of sexism and intricately nuanced. Within that belief system, women's participation indicates a failure of men. But, ostracizing these women means they lose that buy-in from membership. Women must also be given a way to feel satisfied with their position, without threatening their overarching masculine hierarchy.

This bold and nuanced, self-contradictory strategy is not a new or revolutionary way of undermining the bodies and minds of women. It is also a key component of other male supremacist movements and ideologies like Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and Pick Up Artists (PUA). Given the increasingly networked nature of male supremacist groups and the sharing of their ideologies, it is worth exploring their shared practices. Take, for example, negging.

Now, imagine you are in a crowded bar. A person that matches your sexual preference approaches you with a sly smile and drink in hand. When they arrive at your table, they say the following, "Well, don't you look great tonight! I would never have the courage to wear something that makes me look like that, but good on you for having the guts to do it."

This is negging–a common "negative feedback" pick-up technique promoted by PUAs. It is the "purposeful lowering of a woman's self-esteem to increase perceived attractiveness of the man in order to achieve sexual conquest" (4). Basically, negging is giving a backhanded compliment in order to position oneself as dominant and, more importantly, needed.

The men of the FF movement are partaking in large-scale negging to maintain a gendered hierarchy of male domination within a community that consistently has more active female members. They praise and devalue women, while establishing men as needed and essential, all in one stroke.

Negging is not the only example of sexism demonstrated by the FF movement. The FFs deploy a more direct form of sexism when speaking about women outside their movement. The complicit participation of women outside the movement is not necessary, and therefore they do not need to use any placation strategies. They mark women in government and law enforcement as being "extra snarky" as opposed to men in the same position.

On a Facebook livestream, a group of police officers gathered to give out tickets after a freedom rally in Saskatchewan. The female officer–the one policewoman present–was prodded with questions and remarks about her emotions. The FFs who received tickets repeatedly asked the female officer why she seemed so upset and grumpy. Whereas comments made to male officers revolved around their integrity and oath to serve and protect. Additionally, Deena Hinshaw, the Chief Medical Officer of Health for the province of Alberta, is often described as being "ugly" and "un-bangable."

When asked, FFs describe their disdain for all public health officials and police officers enforcing COVID19 policies in similar ways: as honourless, greedy globalists, who are snakes in the weeds of the government. However, women officials face a

different kind of backlash and are often reduced to sexual appeal or their emotional state (5, 6). By looking at how the FFs view, speak about, and behave towards public authority figures, we can see that their ideology only believes in one correct form of masculinity. At the same time, within that FF ideology, there is no adequate form of femininity that exists, because women are considered as inherently inferior.

FFs idealize a "better Canada" of the past. Through collective nostalgia, they maintain centuries-old gender roles and hierarchies that seek to uphold white cis male domination. Collective nostalgia as a "group-based emotion that reflects sentimental longing for how the ingroup used to be" (7) allows FFs to defend their collective sense of self. When they experience discomfort produced by the destabilization of patriarchal structures of power and violence, FFs use group narratives of nostalgia to reassert the moral quality of that patriarchy.

FF ideology revolves around this nostalgic sense of self, and any governmental policy that challenges this in any way, small or large, is labelled an enemy of the cause of freedom. The large-scale negging, among their various forms of sexism, serve to stabilize the FF sense of self and sense of community.

I would like to end this summary of my research to date of FF male supremacism with a key note about the sexism in the FF movement: FF ideology is an assemblage of beliefs and values that stem from white and cishetero male supremacy and the idea of white genocide.

These qualifiers to their supremacism are important for understanding movements of supremacism more broadly. FFs believe that feminists, globalists, immigrants, BIPOC, and the 2SLGTBQ+ community are threats to their way of life.

In their 2020 research paper "Nostalgia, Entitlement and Victimhood: Synergy of White Genocide and Misogyny," C. Wilson notes that "misogyny and white genocide are synergistic, their effect greater than the sum of their parts" (8). Thus, it is vital to consider the FF ideology of male supremacy in conjunction with interrelated structures of power. If we, as researchers and activists fail to do so, we run the risk of reproducing the very systems we seek to destabilize.

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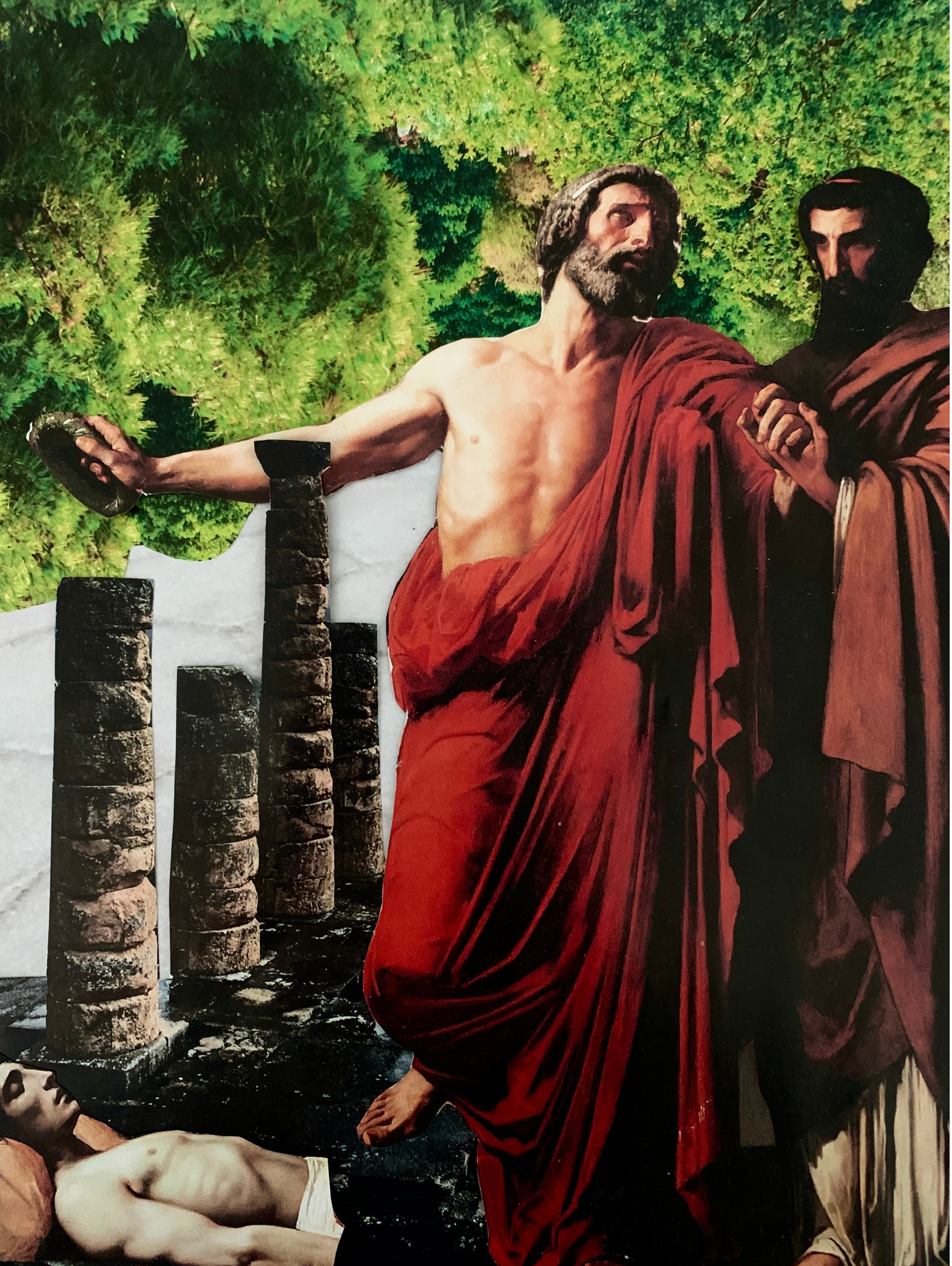

earthworks / waterworks

Gian Marco Visconti (2021)
collage

in dialogue: *Gian Marco Visconti & Harper Paranich*

Gian Marco Visconti:
I should add, while I superficially eschew images of overt aggression or power in my work, I don't know if depictions of masculinity can wholly remove themselves from narratives of dominance. Confining expressions of vulnerability to internal, private moments is often a form of self-regulation or self-dominance. And, at the end of the day, the source of strife is a power structure built largely by cis men, intended to reward as much as it grinds the psyche.

Harper Paranich:
In patriarchal systems, there are masculinities that are acceptable and then not acceptable. Considering that men perform and reinforce masculinity for each other – that this masculinity is the system, rather than just controlled by the system – femininity, is both constrained by patriarchy and able to stir resistance in itself as something apart from that patriarchy, or in opposition to it. I am left wondering what becomes of "men" outside of patriarchy, and how many people remain in those constraints because of the uncertainty outside of them. But, I am not a man, nor a woman.

So, my context and perspective is very different. I do feel like I am in the burn after a wildfire, as the cultural succession of what came before slowly struggles to take root. In the white, "Western" gender binary of man and woman, I am "not."

Can I feel, please?

. . .

Reflections on Starting My Ethnography of Male Supremacist Online Communities

Elsa Bengtsson Meuller

"Anthropological fieldwork involves living one's life in the field; research and personal life are thus interwoven in that they take place in the same domain, whether it is a shared neighborhood or city or region, or in new 21st-century shared online communities which approximate the ethnographic space of in-person fieldwork."

Carole McGranahan, 2018.
Ethnography Beyond Method: the Importance of an Ethnographic Sensibilitiy. (21)

I have spent the last few months preparing for my research fieldwork and thinking about ethics and safety – not just my safety as a researcher of contemporary male supremacist movements; but also as a non-binary person often gendered as a woman.

I have struggled with the need and expectation to ensure security. My own safety and the safety of the people in my surroundings are an immediate need, especially when considering how the people who I study (male supremacists) may react to my presence in their communities. If they were to know that I am present in their communities, harassment and online abuse aimed our way would not be too far-fetched to expect or fear (1).

I have felt this when navigating research ethics approval applications, where the emphasis has lain on protecting the institution from potential lawsuits rather than ensuring sufficient support for its personnel and students who are researching violent and harmful topics.

Even more, I have felt a greater insecurity in how I should present myself online, leading to self-censoring and second-guessing.

I have battled with feelings of inadequacy and distress. There is a certain pressure not to feel (as you are feeling it) the harm you encounter in your research. But I have at the same time also felt joy and hope. What has helped me in my pursuit for meaningful research are my encounters with feminist colleagues and mentors who also share similar feelings of frustration and hope, who are encouraging, embracing, and dealing with (one way or another) the emotions that make us invested in what we are doing.

By this, we are collectively challenging a status quo that is valorising scientific objectivity as the utmost truth, a status quo that is dismissal of "emotional subjectivity" when it comes to the making of knowledge. As it happens, the power of "scientific objectivity," in combination with pseudoscientific studies, is also picked up and used by male supremacist online groups in advancing their agendas and ideologies.

By including the connection between emotions and male supremacist structures as a part of my ethnographic research, I directly counter the supremacy rendered by "objective claims" and emphasise that feeling is also knowledge-making -

a practice I particularly embrace and learn from Black feminists and decolonial theorists such as Hill Collins (2), François Vergès (3), and Tuhiwai Smith (4).

Despite the reassurances on paper, I am still worried about what I will encounter on the way and the doubtful scrutiny that this approach may generate from more 'traditional' scholarship. One of my worries, and a common criticism of this approach, is how my ethnographic fieldwork of male supremacist online culture will desensitise me to its harms or if it will erode my own resilience to its harms in my everyday life.

At the forefront of my mind are some of the recent male supremacist happenings and their public analyses. My work and self is inseparable from the public discourse that emerges around the ways of seeking out justice and the awareness for structural oppression.

Observing and reading about male supremacy has also made me think about how my research might reinforce the very thing I aim to minimise. I strive to show the link between a common understanding of security to the structures of power that (re)create it, such as male supremacy. However, I also need to assess and critically engage with my own relationship with practices around security.

By incorporating my own feelings into my methodology, it means that my ability to engage with my topic starts with being empathically capable of engaging with different injustices and to understand their complexities. Specifically, I must be able to be self-reflective on the personal and emotional stakes it may take to write about or experience different kinds of sad and gruesome things (5, 6).

As in the tradition of feminist theory, I have come to look at visibility and invisibility to not just understand parts of my research, but also as a way of introspection.

I have, perhaps as a result of these last few months' reflections and preparations, started to think about the concept of vulnerability in my work and everyday life. But also the assigned vulnerabilities portrayed and reinforced by white supremacist and heteropatriarchal structures, which strengthen anti-feminism and male supremacism.

This aspect could be seen last year in the UK when the 'rapist as a stranger'-narrative re-emerged in public discourse after the disappearance and murder of Sarah Everard in London.

The "stranger" is an archetypal "other," who is usually racialised as brown or Black (7). This archetype of dangerous brown or Black strangers emerges from the relationship between male supremacy, white supremacy, and police brutality (8). In this case, this public narrative later somewhat deflated when people learned that the murderer was actually a white middle-aged police officer (9).

During the same period of time, a slightly older case from 2020 was picked up by the media that showed racist and misogynist police misconduct. In that incident, two to six male police officers had taken "inappropriate" photos of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, two Black women, who the police officers had found murdered in a London park (10, 11).

It was clear that, in some form or another, male supremacy was thriving in society, and also that interlocking structures of oppression played a role in reproducing each other. For Bibaa Henry and Nicole

Smallman, misogyny and racism intersected into "misogynoir," (12) – a direct production of structures of domination. Evidently, as their cases were not picked up by mainstream media until a white woman, Sarah Everard, became central to the rapist-as-a-stranger narrative.

I have tried to prepare myself for what would come when looking into gruesome things, but I end up in a loop. I let myself both entice the neoliberal idea of 'self-care' as a solution, but also critique the "self-care" rhetoric as the capitalist version of care, where one is seen as the sole producer of one's well-being (13). Consequently, this would remove the responsibility of the academic institution in shaping researchers' (view of) well-being.

Ruth Behar notes that researchers tend to create "defences" (or, as we commonly know them: "methods") to be able to cope with potentially upsetting or anxiety-inducing research. In other words, we find ways to cope with feeling like we cannot help or that one "has to" witness awful things (14). My reflections here are, and from here on, a type of "defence."

Of course, doing research and deciding on your methods of research (your "defences") are innate parts of making one's way through a career in academia. And therein lies the contradiction: our institutional methods can stop us from creating or using tools for structural change simply because they can often be part of the structural problem (15).

The inadequacy that I come to feel now-and-then is a feeling I think many can identify with. I have tried to use this feeling to enrich my making-of-knowledge. If I am feeling inadequate, or to some extent hopeless, I can at the very least identify its opposition. The "defences" we create work as a counterweight: how will I deal with the sad and gruesome things?

I believe that one of my ways of dealing with working with this is to give myself time. To live in a capitalist society, and work within an increasingly capitalist institution where so-called un-emotional/rational versions of knowledge are prioritised, the act of caring and feeling is a radical counterweight to the parts that reproduce capitalism and structures such as male supremacy (2).

As bell hooks points out, how can one care for one's research and teaching if one does not have the time to care for oneself (16)?

I think this question can be a way to identify how we make care visible or invisible, when it comes to concepts of security and vulnerability. To be visible about my feelings and my need for care will be one of my defences.

Through these reflections, I have been thinking about what we make from our research, not just the labour in itself but the ways we present it to meet the expectations of academic work. For example, the Plymouth atrocity in 2021, when a young man murdered five people, injured two more, and then killed himself (17), was very early on in the news-reporting characterised as 'Incel-violence' (18). That speedy labelling of the event made me feel uncomfortable in the way this violence was made visible, along with the encouragement of academics on social media.

Recent observations have noted that the topic of Incels can sometimes become a click-bait approach to disseminating one's story because it amplifies

the deviance of the violence committed (19). It is, perhaps, the extraction of expertise of a niche topic that generates the feeling of it all being a farce, something that is being made public or visible for a new (accepted?) audience.

At the same time, what is made public (e.g. Incel-ideology) is seldom put in contrast to its already public shapes and forms (e.g. everyday sexism and femicide) which together recreate the illusion of supremacisms as only existing in "rare" embodiments (14).

The point I am reflecting on here is that reporting research can, sometimes, feel and be inauthentic and a disservice to the cause. It may be useful to dig into the contradiction of different ways of making one's research visible for new audiences – whether it is actually new or not, asking whose knowledge is extended and elaborated (4).

Whilst I present what I have "found" or "identified," introspection is necessary to see what was already known for some but not to others. I must ask myself: who do I think is my audience? Who, and what information, is excluded?

In some instances, research becomes uncomfortable through introspection (14), and it may also obscure and reinforce things you would rather not support.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty has discussed the issue of reproducing structural oppression in the name of trying to fight it in great detail (20). We render things visible or invisible through our theorisation and practises. Mohanty asks us what is being left out of knowledge production through what its presentation excludes.

If we would start our analysis from that of the privileged community, we will be exclusionary as it risks obscuring what the privileged community is nourished by; for example, the work of the poor (20).

I will close these reflections on my fieldwork to come by emphasising that by bringing our feelings into our work we might get better at keeping our research in conversation with the injustices we and others experience. By doing so, we could decrease the harmful impact we risk making.

My hope is that this practice – or method, or defence – will help me understand the structures I am reinforcing through my work on anti-feminism and male supremacism. I hope that it can expose things that have been rendered hidden due to previous practices by myself and others.

Hopefully, I can contribute to a more caring environment.

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emerge / erode

Gian Marco Visconti (2021)
collage

in dialogue: *Gian Marco Visconti & Harper Paranich*

Harper Paranich:
Do you think about gender and masculinity in terms of belonging?

What kind of negotiations do you experience between yourself, your gender, and the social norms of what it means to be "man"?

Gian Marco Visconti:
This question is throwing me for a loop. I don't think I've ever found belonging or community in masculinity.

I feel a social responsibility in the way that my maleness is perceived and has potential to impact others but I no longer desire to match whatever social norm dictates is masculine behaviour or "being a man."

Surviving the Work

Amy Mack

"Ethnography, as a qualitative research approach, typically relies on long-term and immersive fieldwork in order to grasp the nuances of communities and cultures in our ongoing search to understand what it means to be human. As a participatory method, ethnography also demands that researchers become our methods, rendering our bodies, minds, and hearts sites of knowing.

The work was damaging."

“Do you feel supported by the university in this work?”

This was a question that a well-meaning mentor of mine asked towards the end of my dissertation journey, which had taken me deep into white and male supremacy digital spaces. I had already completed three years of non-stop, immersive digital ethnographic fieldwork, and I was deeply exhausted.

Ethnography, as a qualitative research approach, typically relies on long-term and immersive fieldwork in order to grasp the nuances of communities and cultures in our ongoing search to understand what it means to be human. As a participatory method, ethnography also demands that researchers become our methods, rendering our bodies, minds, and hearts sites of knowing. The work was damaging.

Every day, for hours on end, I worked through social media posts—short comments, long-form streams of consciousness, memes, and videos—across multiple platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, Gab, Voat, Minds, Telegram, Parler. I was stretched thin and fraying at the edges. I spent hours responding to comments, anxiously waiting for responses, and processing the violent vitriol that often came back. I had done this daily.

I had also conducted long-form interviews with the handful of people willing to talk to me. We exchanged essays back and forth over the span of weeks. Some devolved into trolling rhetoric, while others were thoughtful and highlighted legitimate concerns (e.g., the violence of neoliberalism). The complexity and contradictory nature of my interlocutors was at times too much for me to hold at once.

While they perpetrated violence (and some relished in this), they too were victims of structures of oppression. The white supremacist capitalist cishet-patriarchy spares no one.

When my mentor asked if I was supported, I laughed. I was struggling to write my dissertation as every time I sat down to write, I was confronted with the violence of my data. I found myself clicking through thousands of screenshots—memories of the field—looking for the right quote or meme for the argument I was making. Violent rhetoric flashed across my screen as I replayed three years of

fieldwork. The violence spared no one, except men who were also straight, white, conservative, and Christian.

The rhythmic clicking of my mouse would become increasingly frantic as I scrolled, trying to not pay too much attention to my data as I sought out certain snippets of their rhetoric. If I let myself read it all, read it too closely, I would crash.

And I did crash. Often.

At times, I would shake myself awake—I had not fallen asleep at my desk, but I had zoned out, temporarily escaping the here-and-now, staring at my computer without truly seeing anything. Other times I would emerge from a social media doom scroll, not remembering why I had opened the app in the first place. Returning to my computer screen, I would see a particularly triggering comment made by an interlocutor.

Oh, right.

I needed to escape.

I was frustrated because I had gotten through the last three years with the hope that writing would somehow be better, softer, safer. I thought it would be an academic exercise: a translation of my experience into something legible to a wider audience. Yet, I found it impossible to abstract away the violence and pain.

Had the university supported me?

Not really. No. Not "the University." But, my community of scholars–the people–had done their best to help me get through this project in one piece —albeit a little bruised.

We had many conversations about the impact this work has on our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

After digesting these conversations, I decided that instead of devoting this space to the violence of male supremacy, I would rather spend time working through how we can support the researchers and activists who are working to disrupt systems of oppression, like the patriarchy–people who will in turn experience the violence of these systems in response.

Find support.

For those seeking to disrupt the status quo, the most important advice is to find support.

At times, taking on systems of male supremacy felt extraordinarily alienating and isolating. Every day, I was witnessing the jarringly aggressive hostility of male supremacy. It felt diffusive, like I could not exist as separate from the stewing hatred and vitriol. It is erosive.

Typically, when I look for support, I can turn to my friends and family. Yet, sharing these experiences felt like I was settling them with an unfair burden.

After all, they were not the ones who signed up for this research. When I tried talking about this work to my academic colleagues, they understood on a theoretical and methodological level, but many worked on vastly different topics. Again, I felt like I monopolized the conversations in my search for someone who understood what this work was like.

This is not meant to be a criticism. Indeed, being honest with those closest to me was vital for maintaining good relationships. There were some

days when I was simply too tired or emotionally strained to do things I had previously agreed upon. But because my friends, family, and colleagues were aware of the toll it was taking on me, they gave me the grace and space I needed.

My suggestion, then, is to find colleagues—academics, activists, neighbors—who are actively engaged in similar work that disrupts and exposes the status quo.

Although I appreciate the support of men, it has been helpful for me to talk to other women and non-binary people about these issues, because of the direct impacts that we feel.

A lot of people think of mentorship as a relationship in which there is a power differential (e.g., a supervisor). Yet, some of the most effective mentorship has come from my lateral peers. These are people who are experiencing nearly the exact same issues that I am.

Mentorship is not an inevitable hierarchy. If anything, when we zoom out, it is an integral part of the mycorrhizal relations we make within communities. Remember that although our activist and academic elders can be great mentors, building a lateral network of supportive peers yields strength. There is wisdom between us.

Find healing.

My second suggestion is that we critically reflect on the sorts of trauma that exposure to violence can inflict, and for us to consider the appropriate healers for ourselves. We must be able to recognize what parts of our selves are being harmed. Confronting oppressive systems will bruise and even cut deeply at times, and we need to think about the medicine required to heal from these wounds.

In my case, working with a therapist has given me the tools to recognize when I need to ground myself. I began working with her–a non-Christian woman of colour and a badass human rights activist–while writing my dissertation on male supremacism. I had become derailed by the 2021 Atlanta shooting, which was an explicitly misogynistic attack fueled by white and Christian supremacy.

How was I supposed to write a chapter theorizing around how people believe that “women deserve to sexually assaulted and beaten for turning their backs on men,” when men were out in the world killing women? Every time I looked at my data my body would begin to tense up.

I would feel a tingling in my stomach, and I would inevitably shut down, zone out, or give up.

It is by no means easy, but I now recognize the signs of an old wound opening up, and I have systems and techniques in place that help me heal them over again.

Healing will look different for each individual. A devout Christian who studies the intersection of white nationalism and Christianity might find engaging with their priest or preacher to be an important part of their healing practice. Some may turn to the Elders in their respective communities for guidance and support when dealing with the vitriol aimed at them.

For many of us, this support comes from building connections of solidarity across our communities.

Know your limits.

Dr. Larry Rosenthal, a Jewish-American scholar of the far-right, gave me and a group of early career scholars a piece of advice that I repeat constantly to myself and others: We all have limits to what we can do. Sometimes these limits are due to financial or time constraints. For students, we only have so many months or years to do our work and eventually we have to accept that our work will always be partial and incomplete.

Other times, our limits are personal.

For Dr. Rosenthal, he would likely never be able to go to Auschwitz. He said that this limit was there because it was a place that was just too painful for him.

I found my limit during the self-titled "Freedom Convoy" in early 2022. Some of my kin network falls along the far-right end of the political spectrum. Maintaining the wall between my research and that part of my kin network was too much for me. There was no reprieve from the field, and to make matters worse, my community of care and support were also wrapped up in the convoy discourse as well.

The boundary? It crumbled.

I ignored all the signs that my body was giving me, and I ignored all the wisdom my therapist had shared.

I felt like I needed to do this work. I needed to be the person my friends and family and colleagues came to in order to work through the pain this convoy brought up for them. It was me who had to be the person to correct people on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This was what I had been researching (for years!), and now was the time to put my research into practice. After all, if I did not use everything that I learned to make the world better, what was the point of all the trauma?

After days of deep immersion in the field, with no boundaries nor reprieve, I shut down.

I was burned out. Again.

I was so busy trying to support everyone, and be what I thought I needed to be, that I forgot about supporting myself.

While my healing work did not stop me from reaching this breaking point, it did help heal the new wounds. Part of this was realizing that other people would do this work. It did not have to be me. It was enough that I had done my research and was well on my way to finishing my dissertation.

Know when to stop.

One of the most damaging beliefs that we hold on to is the idea that if we do not finish our project, we are failures. But sometimes walking away from a project is the best thing we can do for ourselves and our causes.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with recognizing that the trauma of researching, confronting, or disrupting male supremacism is too much at this moment in time–just as there is nothing morally superior about working ourselves until we are exhausted and broken. There are other ways that we can disrupt, dismantle, and expose—through care, and community building.

After I made a public post about my burnout from the Convoy, a colleague reached out to tell me that

she had switched her dissertation project from the violence Indigenous women face to the resilience they embodied. Using a strength-based lens allowed her to help her community heal while protecting her own wellbeing. In other words, she cared enough about herself to stop–and then redirect.

Stopping does not mean quitting. It means finding a place for your effort and energy that will not strip you of yourself.

Stopping along one direction does not have to be a permanent thing either. I took breaks during my work to travel, to be in nature, to connect meaningfully with friends and family. I was often racked with guilt–who was I to walk away from this, as a white woman, when so many cannot?–but I found that I was able to be more disruptive, creative, and hopeful after taking time away.

I pushed my limits, and I felt the repercussions. My work is not morally nor methodologically superior for that choice, although it is different because of them—I am different because of them.

To stop is to care. To stop is to not break your limits, meaning you can recuperate and begin again. To know when and where to stop, before you break, is to care about making the dismantling of male supremacism, along with its intersecting lines of oppression, a life-long commitment.

Stop.

Take a moment.

Breathe.

I leave you with an invitation:

Care enough for yourself.

Care enough for yourself to invest in your community, and recognize the benefits of being a contributing part of that network. Care enough to find healing for yourself. Care enough to recognize your limits. Care enough for yourself to stop—even for a moment—when you are overwhelmed, before you burn out.

And, above all else, find hope. Hope is powerful. Look for it where you can, even as we work to disrupt the violence we encounter.

overworld / underworld

Gian Marco Visconti (2021)
collage

in dialogue: *Gian Marco Visconti & Harper Paranich*

Gian Marco Visconti:

The way the word "man" is used often feels outside of the confines of my gender, which usually just hangs in the background of my existence.

"Man" is treated more like a title used to give and take power rather than a way of being. I think this is why I am drawn to queer expressions of masculinity (as seen in this mini documentary on Studs and Butches that I like to return to). Even as a gay man, I don't necessarily belong to these queer masculine communities, but I see a small piece of myself in them. Theirs is a masculinity that is built out of the self rather than trying to negate or humiliate someone else.

There is a fullness to it.

tree boys

Harper Paranich

there is a group in these woods.
access is by body, a very certain body.
they harvest fish. they live among themselves.
they are foresters, and tag each other
for removal,

to keep the forest sustained
in that particular way.

they are eaters
and do so with adamant ritual.
scales are not to be ingested, but
they are not to be shied from either.
grip the fish and gut it.
eating is witnessed and harshly critiqued.

they are tree boys.
their words are roots, and between
there are mycorrhizal understandings:

first, there will be cullings.

second, it could be you.

flight / fall

Gian Marco Visconti (2021)
collage

Contributors

Gian Marco Visconti
(he/him)

is an Ismaili poet from Edmonton of mixed Arbereshe [ar-ber-RESH] and South Asian ancestry. He was awarded the Glass Buffalo English Poetry Prize in 2016 and longlisted for the CBC Poetry Prize in 2018.

Kathleen Elizabeth Mah
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is a fifth year student at the University of Lethbridge with a major in Anthropology and a minor in Women and Gender Studies. Her research interests are in medical anthropology, structural violence, and Freedom movements.

Elsa Bengtsson Meuller
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is a doctoral researcher at Goldsmiths University of London in the Department of Politics and International Relations. Their research focuses on security, gender-based violence, emotions, and anti-feminist (online) cultures.

Amy Mack
(she/her)

is a digital anthropologist and the Co-Director of Research at the Canadian Institute for Far-Right Studies. In her research, she explores how ideologies of white and male supremacy contribute to violent and harmful narratives of victimization, erasure, and replacement amongst white men.

Harper Paranich
(they/them)

is a self-described mid-range poet with a few academic degrees. They are currently in the writing phase of their master's thesis, which is what they have been telling their parents for a while now.

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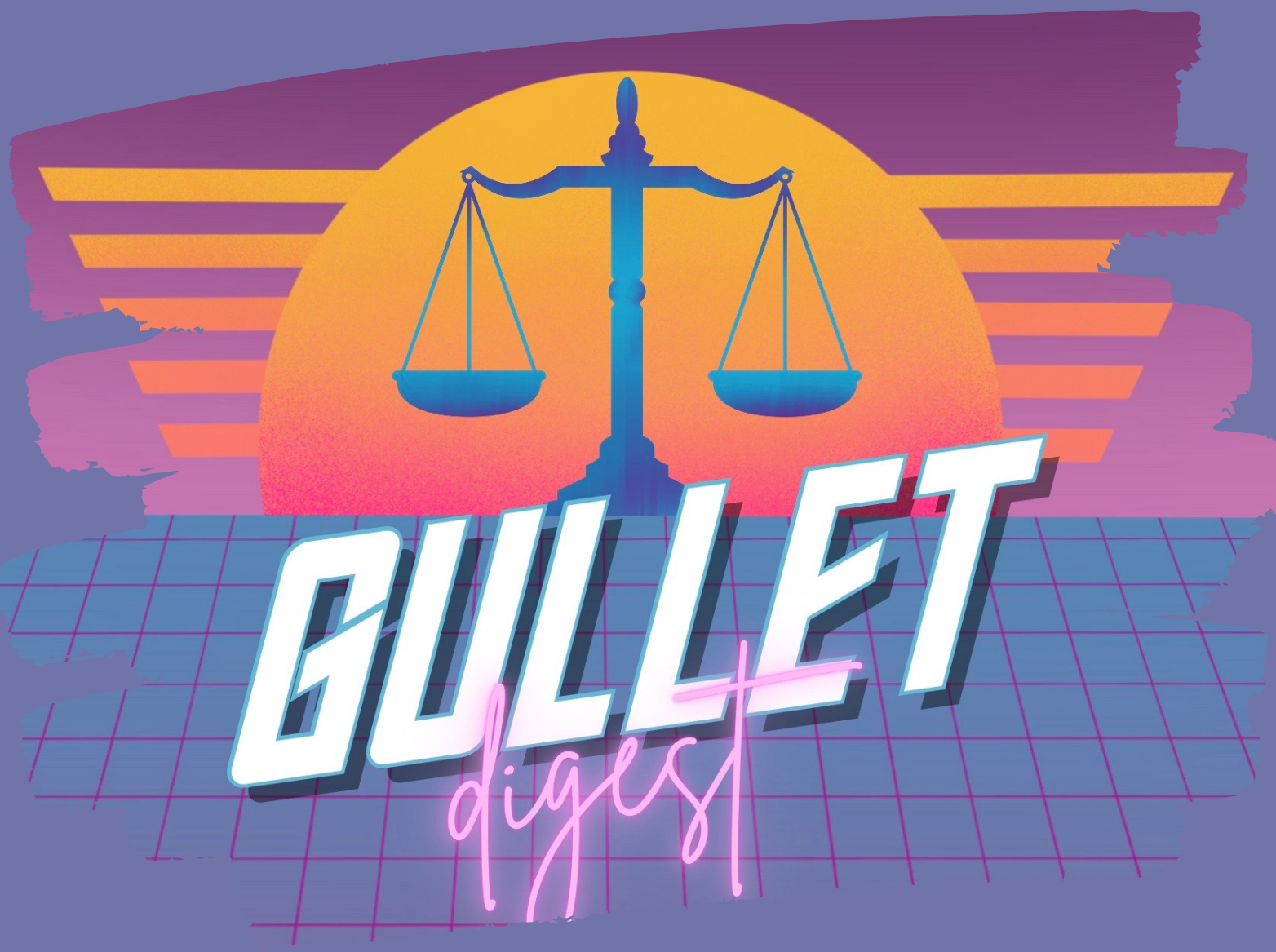

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