



## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Pornography's White Infrastructure

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#### Abstract

In preparing my talk for a panel on “Whiteness and Technoculture” for the Society for the Social Study of Science in Boston, I wanted to think about the relationship of my research on the technocultures of the online pornography industry to the events in Charlottesville, which had occurred only weeks earlier. Two trends within the online pornography industry came immediately to mind. The first is the way corporate gay pornography has at times colluded with national white supremacy. The second is the emergence of affiliate networks that aim to curate content for “unique male viewers” because the Internet is, curiously, awash in “female-focused” content. Both of these phenomena seem particularly relevant at a time when white fragility, toxic masculinity, “men’s rights,” and xenophobia have been given explicit approval by the newly elected US President, Donald Trump. These forces have long defined the United States, but they also reveal the way in which this presidency is uniquely awful and dangerous.

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Before I begin my discussion, let me briefly introduce the scale of online pornography as a media industry. Globally, pornography is a \$97 billion (USD) global media industry (Morris 2014). As the primary platform by which people interact with pornography today, online pornography companies wield enormous influence over the ways we learn about, play with, explore, and construct sexuality and sexual desire. Each day, tens of millions of people visit pornographic video streaming sites. These websites may seem like amateurish distribution services but, instead, are sophisticated technology companies that employ hundreds of technical staff to design and develop interfaces, algorithms, data mining software, data analytics software, video streaming software, and database management systems. They are part of an innovative industry engaged in the kinds of algorithmic and data science practices that drive the profits of more widely recognized industries, such as social media, online gambling, online games, search engines, and electronic commerce. Their staffs are responsible for making strategic choices about information management and the graphical organization of content that translates into large profits, innovative capitalist media techniques, and dominant modes for curating, distributing, and regulating our experience of sexual desire today.

In the weeks following the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, a number of journalists, pundits, and fashion critics commented on the new uniform of white supremacy: a polo shirt and khaki pants. The *Washington Post*’s fashion critic, Robin Givhan (2017), echoed Hannah Arendt’s phrase “banality of evil” in arguing that polo shirts and khaki pants participate in a normalization of neo-Nazis. “White nationalists,” Givhan writes, “are moving through communities cloaked in the most mundane, banal kind of fashion. Clothes that do not inspire a double-take. Clothes that are acceptable and appropriate. Clothes that make them look like they belong.” Writing for *GQ*, Cam Wolf (2017) makes a similar observation while summarizing the evolution of white supremacist outfits in the United States, from white robes to polo shirts, a shift in political strategy that articulates racism as mundane. He

writes, “For years, white supremacists dressed to set themselves apart, to hide and to scare. Charlottesville showed us that the most sinister evolution of their uniform, and the hate it symbolizes, isn't about fear and ghosts and standing apart. It's meant to achieve inclusiveness and assimilation. It means that hate doesn't need to live underground when it can blend in right next door.” In detailing the history of the polo shirt for *Teen Vogue*, Jared Michael Lowe reveals that the polo shirt had, in its inception as a tennis shirt in the 1920s, a close association with racial and class politics, before moving through a number of subcultures, from reggae to Punk to Brit Pop, and finally becoming a commonly worn piece of clothing found in most closets. He concludes that its ubiquity today represents an unspoken endorsement that goes along with it: “just like polo shirts, racism, white nationalism, and KKK rallies are as American as apple pie.”

Meanwhile, *Guardian* reporter Gavin Haynes (2017) notes that the look at the Charlottesville protest was anything but accidental. Before Charlottesville, Andrew Anglin, founder of the Daily Stormer (the American neo-Nazi and white supremacist website), urged his supporters “to be extremely conscious of what we look like, and how we present ourselves” alongside advertisements for a European Brotherhood polo shirt. Yet the contrivance of self-display among white supremacists in Charlottesville went beyond simply wearing a polo shirt and khakis. In addition, it included clean-shaven faces and short, clean haircuts. The style gives the impression not only of ordinariness and inclusion, as many commentators observed, but also a boyish look of “white innocence.”

That a number of actors and studios within the mainstream gay pornography industry “flirt” with or explicitly embrace white supremacy (and vice versa) comes as no surprise to those of us who have followed the industry over the years. Yet the relation has taken on a new prominence since Donald Trump’s campaign for President. In the run-up to the 2016 US election, a number of prominent white gay pornography performers voiced their support for Donald Trump’s campaign, including Colby Keller and Jacob Ford (Zach 2015). Meanwhile, GOProud, a

Republican gay and lesbian organization, hosted a “Gays for Trump” event at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Cleveland, Ohio, that featured anti-Muslim, anti-black, and pro-Trump speeches. The event displayed an exhibit of erotic photography of boyish, shirtless, hairless, white, clean-shaven young men wearing “Make America Great” (MAGA) baseball caps, entitled “Twinks for Trump.” (Stuart 2016). The art featured in the exhibit can be found on the pro-Trump erotic website DaddyWillSaveUs (<http://www.daddywillsaveus.com/>). Earlier this year, FraternityX, a studio known for its portrayals of white, homophobic, hyper-masculine fraternity brothers that sexually punish another young man for being “queer” or a “fag”, recently featured a scene entitled “Trump Pump,” in which the members of the fraternity wore MAGA hats while gangbangng a member of their fraternity who declined to declare his support for Trump (FraternityX, 2018). Jake Porter, another prominent performer in the gay pornography industry, revealed on Twitter that he had cultivated an onscreen look in the style of Milo Yiannopoulos, a prominent anti-Muslim speaker at the GOProud event, in order to cash in on the provocateur’s growing celebrity (Zach 2017).

For more explicit examples of white supremacy in gay pornography, one need only search the gay versions of xtube.com or Pornhub.com for “Nazi” or related terms to find professional and amateur pornography that features white, clean-shaven performers with swastika or confederate flag tattoos, or Nazi or confederate symbols in the *mis en scene* (Gremore 2017). One porn studio, Joe Schmoe Videos, specializes in portraying white twinks who have Nazi or confederate flag tattoos or symbols. (<http://www.joeschmoevideos.com/>). Writing for the Black Youth Project, Sherronda Brown (2017) reveals the way in which white supremacy itself is a sexual fantasy. Brown writes,

“Fear of the corruption of ‘white purity’— whether by non-white immigrants and citizens gaining institutional power over white nationalists or by the Black phallus gaining sexual power over white cuckolds and miscegenating with white women — is also a fear of sexual and social humiliation. Both of these fears are tied

up with the fetishization of power and power play. And these fears often result in [apocalyptic whiteness](#), a violent response to the white genocide fable.”

Less explicitly, a number of mainstream gay pornography studios, such as Helix Studios, BelAmi, BluMedia, and SeanCody, cultivate an image of the “white innocent” who has long been a consumable, stock character in gay pornography: white athletic or thin young men known as “twinks.” These studios’ performers often feature hairless bodies, tidy, short haircuts, clean-shaven faces, and “ordinary” clothes such as polo shirts and khaki pants. They rarely if ever feature performers of color, thereby cultivating a sexual fantasy of a world exclusively comprised of white bodies, a white homonationalist utopia to contrast with the white genocide fable. Many of the neo-Nazi marchers in Charlottesville bore a remarkable similarity to twink stock characters in gay pornography, while ironically chanting, “fuck you faggots” — a tableau reminiscent of a FraternityX scene. This is not to say that all portrayals of twinks in polo shirts and khaki pants or any form of race play necessarily signals white supremacy. However, the current political moment has seen the commercial industrialization of certain forms of sexual aesthetics sometimes colluding with national white supremacy.

One might argue that cultivating an image similar to a stock character in gay pornography turns fascism on its head. However, what that analysis misses is the way in which white supremacists in the United States have begun to welcome cisgender white gay men into their movement. In addition to the GOProud event at the RNC, Donna Minkowitz details the efforts by white supremacist organizations in the United States to include gay conservatives. She notes that several prominent white supremacist authors in the United States today openly identify as gay men, including James O’Meara, author of *The Homo and The Negro*, and Jack Donovan, author of *The Way of Men*, in addition to Milo Yiannopoulos. That so many white supremacist men in Charlottesville cultivated a similar image of “white innocence” found in stock characters in gay pornography points to the ways in which a

particular mode of whiteness can at times serve as a signaling function of sexual desire predicated on an anti-blackness. White nationalism and mainstream gay pornography are engaged in a cultural and aesthetic conversation with each other that circulates the desirability of “white innocence.”

There is a complicated story to tell about the politics of “white innocence” and its distribution in the increasingly dominant infrastructures of ubiquitous online pornography distribution. Part of that story is the emergence of Man's World Media (2018), one of the pornography industry's largest affiliate networks. The company's motto reads: “The internet serves all mankind but ironically underserves men in particular.” Affiliate networks are intermediary technology companies that connect publishers with merchant affiliate programs. In other words, they help retailers advertise on sites like PornHub. Advertising is one of PornHub's largest sources of revenue, along with selling browsing data to third parties, licensing software, subscription services, and the sale of content from its studios, including SeanCody. Man's World Media uses methods such as search engine optimization, browsing data, search engine marketing, and the graphical organization of content to increase revenue for both the publisher and retailer. At last year's InterNext convention, part of the Adult Entertainment Expo, Man's World Media had one of the largest booths on the convention floor. They boast over 20 million visitors and 300 million page views each month. In context, these numbers are relatively small for the pornography industry. By comparison, PornHub has more than 100 million unique viewers per day. But Man's World Media claims to be targeting a niche audience, “largely composed of professional, college-educated males between the ages of 18 and 35.” According to the company, “millions of millennial males have shifted to the web as their primary source of entertainment, only to find countless pop culture and entertainment blogs that are decidedly female-focused.” The company continues, “Finding compelling, topical content for the *unique male appetite* has become a challenging endeavor.” Their goal is to “fill this void of quality content

touchstones for the millennial male.”

In this rendering, the “millennial male” is both unique and monolithic. If one wonders what kind of male Man's World Media has in mind, their website offers a number of clues, including a quote from Marilyn Monroe: “I don’t mind being in a man’s world, as long as I can be a woman in it.” Their splash page features a black leather background and a membership card (as if a literal boy’s club) with a Man's World Media logo on it. Their twitter page, with hashtags like #bymenformen and #manosphere, features mid-century drawings of white men fixing their ties or smoking a pipe in the style of Mad Men. Their latest tweet features a video of an interview with Tommy Sotomayor, a self-described men’s rights activist, who argues that the father’s natural role in the home has been displaced by feminism, and that affirmative action policies hurt black people. A survey of Man's World Media’s self-avowed “male-centric brands” reveals that their content is almost exclusively white cismen.

On the one hand, Man's World Media is invested in a narrative about the feminization of the Internet and the need to reclaim it as a space for masculinity. On the other hand, mainstream gay porn sells consumers a site of white masculinity that cultivates a similar iconography of white supremacy. Taken together, Man's World Media and the authentication of “white innocence” might help expand our understanding of how the homosocial and homosexual deploy similar iconographies of whiteness in the service of white nationalism, toxic masculinity, and white supremacy. What role do particular modes of whiteness play in gay porn to perpetuate white supremacy and anti-feminism, and how might white supremacy take up the cultivation of the sexual desirability of wholesome white bodies or of iconographies of clean-cut mid-century toxic masculinity to further an anti-feminist and white nationalist agenda?

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## Bio

**Patrick Keilty** is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. His primary research interest is the politics of digital infrastructures in the online pornography industry. His work spans issues in visual culture, sexual politics, technology studies, media studies, information studies, critical algorithm studies, political economy, database logic, critical theory, and theories of gender, sexuality, and race.