



Temporalization and the Digital Vigilante: Past Presencing, Un/Doing Futures and “Jewish Revenge” as Affective Justice in Talia Lavin’s *Culture Warlords*

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the figure of the hate-fighting digital vigilante as embodied through Aryan Queen, an online persona developed and depicted by self-proclaimed antifa member Talia Lavin in her book Culture Warlords. One chapter in the 2020 memoir relays Lavin’s pursuits to elicit and make known identifying information of Der Stürmer, an anonymous white supremacist online hater. I first locate Lavin’s undertaking in the porous policy landscape regulating online hate transnationally to make a case for its value as an entry into the navigation of hate on Telegram, a platform that has become a popular enclave for hate, and one that remains otherwise impenetrable to state efforts at formal governance. I then introduce the digital vigilante as a cultural figure that has become increasingly distinguished from, but developed in relation to, the classical or analogue vigilante in academic literature, albeit with only limited attention paid to the seemingly boundless temporality that constitutes the virtual sphere. Attending to processes of temporalization, I argue, can well serve an analysis of the moral universe within which the digital vigilante operates, thereby enabling a critical engagement with the motivations, methods, and intentions of her justice pursuits online. With the support of anthropological theories of temporalization – namely, past presencing, un/doing futures, and affective justice – I show that justice pursuits by way of digital vigilantism for Lavin are entangled with an affective longing for revenge, and manifest a complex intermingling of open wounds from injustices that emerge from and produce entanglements of the past, present, and future.*

KEYWORDS temporalization; hate speech; digital vigilante; justice; affect; figuration

In 2019, the journalist and writer Talia Lavin penetrated a Europe-based neo-Nazi Telegram chat group called the Vorherrschaft (Supremacy) Division as part of a year-long expedition across a myriad of white-supremacist online spaces. Under the alias Aryan Queen, she seduced a fellow chat group member

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named Der Stürmer – a username inspired by an early 20th century German tabloid newspaper propagating Nazi ideology – into providing Lavin with photos of his face. Named Ashleigh Grant in her chat, Lavin first asked Der Stürmer to furnish visual proof that he is not Jewish. He offered to send a picture of his foreskin, but she insisted on a picture of his nose instead. The intent was not to send the picture to law enforcement agents, who one cannot trust because they sympathize with or are themselves often white supremacists, but rather to other antifascists and like-minded journalists. A second photo included Der Stürmer’s license plate number, enabling the retrieval of further identifying information, all of which was sent to the open-source website Bellingcat, known to track the far right in Eastern Europe. Connecting the two was a recent Bellingcat investigation about the Ukrainian translation of a white supremacist manifesto written by Brenton Tarrant, the man responsible for the 2019 New Zealand Christchurch mosque shootings. Der Stürmer, Lavin discovers, authored the criminal manifesto translation, and is named David Kolomiets, a 22-year-old Ukrainian moderator of the telegram channel Brenton Tarrant’s Lads – among the largest Ukrainian-language far-right extremist channels on the internet.

In this paper, I draw attention to a discrete figure from the broader landscape of criminalization transnationally, focusing here on online hate, a sphere of crime that is highly porous in that it is less contained by national or regional borders, policies and regulatory bodies. In the words of Fraser (2009), it is hence a space “of flows” rather than “of places” (p. 23). In particular, I analyze the chapter from which the above vignette emerges in the 2020 memoir by Talia Lavin, *Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy*, as core material to further expand upon the figure of the hate-fighting digital vigilante, who, here, takes it upon herself to disguise her identity, infiltrate white supremacist online spaces, and elicit identifying information about the increasingly criminalized online hater (Loveluck, 2020, pp. 223-227; Milbrandt, 2020). This latter figure has been presumed to be all the more nefarious due to its apparent anonymity, and the affiliated obstacles for accountability and the enactment of justice (Brindle, 2016, pp. 31-32; Citron, 2014, pp. 58-60). Thought-provoking, moreover, is Lavin’s goading invitation to readers, given her stated misgivings of the police, to protect each other ourselves. Lavin as digital vigilante hereby embodies a universalizing disavowal of formalized law enforcement and crime regulation agencies and as an alternative, calls for explicit investments in community accountability, the antifascist movement, and selected strands of like-minded journalism.

In existing analyses of the contours of the digital vigilante, scholars have remarked on the import of the obviation of temporal boundaries online for vigilante undertakings, but until now have focused primarily on what I analyze below to be the seemingly paradoxical *elongation* and *erosion* of time through the vigilante figure (Trottier, 2017; Milbrandt, 2020). Expanding on that literature, I argue in this paper that Lavin as a particular iteration of the digital vigilante productively exposes the instability of boundaries between temporal

moments in history. The analyzed chapters of *Culture Warlords* were selected as data for this study due to their unusual biographical and analytical qualities, and their rich connecting of both virtual and physical manifestations of hate, and also of forms of hate across a variety of times and spaces. In what follows, I offer an analysis of selected forms of temporalization that occur in Lavin's book and that help to better appreciate the role of time in the gathering of legitimacy and direction for taking justice into one's own hands – here, through deceptive online engagements and a sort of detective work and virtual and incalculable sentencing. I first identified, coded, and analyzed key temporal markers in *Culture Warlords*, including temporally inflected language, dates, chronologies, and temporal overlaps in its narrative. Special attention was given to understanding the temporal dynamics surrounding the identification and exposure of Der Stürmer, including especially the motivations and justifications explicitly or implicitly guiding Lavin's actions. Careful attention to processes of temporalization, I argue, can serve an analysis of the moral universe within which the digital vigilante operates, thereby enabling a critical engagement with the motivations, methods, and intentions of her justice pursuits online.

To this end, I first locate Lavin's undertaking in the broader policy landscape regulating online hate to make a case for its value as an entry into the navigation of hate on Telegram, a platform that has become a popular enclave for hate, and one that remains otherwise impenetrable to state efforts at formal governance. Informed by a review of the literature aimed at gleaning foundational insights into the emergence of the digital vigilante figure, capturing trends and gaps in its discussion, and accounting for the theoretical frameworks through which it is grasped, I then introduce the digital vigilante as a figure that has become increasingly distinguished from, but developed in relation to, the classical or analogue vigilante in the social sciences and humanities. With the analytical support of anthropological theories of temporalization – namely, past presencing, un/doing futures, and affective justice – I ultimately show that justice pursuits by way of digital vigilantism for Lavin are entangled with an affective longing for revenge, and manifest a complex intermingling of open wounds from injustices that emerge from and produce entanglements of the past, present, and future.

The Porous Criminalization of Online Hate

From the perspective of state governance, the mode and means of regulating verbal articulations of hate, both online and offline, vary greatly from country to country. In the literature, comparisons are often made between the United States and Germany (e.g., Haupt, 2005; Milbrandt, 2020, p. 232). While laws do exist in the US that regulate certain forms of verbalized hate, such as harassment and the incitement to violence, the US does not have a general law banning group-targeted hate speech online or offline. Instead, the US Supreme

Court has held that speech is protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution unless it falls under certain exceptions, such as “true threats” or the incitement to imminent lawless action (Aswad, 2021, pp. 87-88). Not only is hate speech illegal in Germany, but so too is providing an unregulated platform for its appearance and dissemination, and both can lead to criminal charges, fines, or imprisonment (Horten & Gräber, 2020). In particular, Germany’s NetzDG law, first passed in 2017, requires social media platforms to hastily remove illegal hate speech, including hateful language targeting particular social groups, explicit calls to violence, and the denial of other crimes or instances of genocide. It also obliges platforms with more than two million registered users to take up a number of responsibilities designed to facilitate state monitoring and punishment of online crime, which includes the spreading of group-specific hate (Bundesjustizamt, 2018).

Following a slew of violent hate-infused attacks over the past five years in countries including Belgium, France, and Germany, governments across Europe, including at the level of the European Union (Peršak, 2022), have fortified or adopted policies that criminalize or otherwise punish online hate and mandate varying forms of platform participation in related law enforcement practices. One compelling criticism of these shifts is that they risk pushing hateful postings into less visible virtual spaces where they are less likely to be questioned or critically discussed. Indeed, one of the key particularities of digital vigilantism is the role of social media platforms in facilitating and shaping these practices. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram provide the tools and infrastructure enabling individuals and groups to engage in digital vigilantism, and they also shape the norms and values that underpin these practices. For example, the algorithms used by social media platforms to prioritize and amplify certain types of content can help to fuel and sustain online vigilantism, while the platforms’ policies and rules around hate speech and harassment can provide a framework for these practices. Especially in light of the hodgepodge of frameworks and norms that exist for grasping and responding to discursive manifestations of hate through national and international law, the imposed norms and activities of these hosting platforms take on heightened importance.

At the intersection of social media network and personal chat platform, Telegram, the chat platform utilized by Lavin from the vignette opening this article, constitutes one such space with little oversight or formalized route for user intervention. Telegram is owned and run by Russian-Ukrainian tech entrepreneur, Pavel Durov, forced to leave Moscow after he refused the Kremlin’s demands to access the data of users from Vkontakte, a Telegram-like platform Durov had previously founded in Russia (Hakim, 2014). It is against this background of experiences that his absolute privileging of privacy on Telegram has emerged. Evidencing its hardline approach, the German Federal Justice Office in October 2022 issued a fine of more than five million euros against Telegram, based in Dubai, for not providing users with the means to report illegal content, and for failing to provide the government with the

contact information of a German-based corporate representative as it is obliged to do under law (Bundesjustizamt, 2022). To the extent that, even in hardline countries like Germany, government efforts have proven largely ineffective at enabling the identification and pursuit of potentially criminal messages posted to the platform, Lavin's incognito probing and subsequent reporting enable a singular but no less informative glimpse into the methods, logics and forms of subjectivity users can come to take on in their attempts to fill this gap in governance. In her writing, moreover, she contributes, through a narration of her own intentions, actions and feelings, to the ongoing formation of a particular iteration of what has been called the digital vigilante.

The Emergence of the Digital Vigilante

Academic explorations of the contemporary vigilante figure's emergence offer a variety of contributing factors, especially the growing sense of responsabilization that has followed from a reduction of the state's role in providing social welfare and support, neoliberalism's promotion of privatization and self-sufficiency (Atreyee & Pratton, 2007; Favarel-Garrigues, 2020, p. 314; Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020, p. 189), and a decline of trust in the state and its criminal justice institutions (Abrahams, 1998). These processes have particular resonance on the internet, where online communities function by way of voluntary participation, self-exposure and -regulation, institute more or less formalized norms of expected behavior, and privilege horizontal, person-to-person forms of conflict resolution (Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020; Loveluck, 2020, pp. 215-216; Powell, 2015). As a realm in which "material, spatial and temporal barriers are obviated" (Trottier, 2017, p. 58; Milbrandt, 2020, p. 230), online networks are said to further facilitate the enactment of justice outside of established legal channels, even as the operation and complexity of time without barriers remains largely underexplored in the literature.

What has alternatively been called the *internet* (Powell, 2015), *online* (Kasra, 2017, p. 178), *cyber* (Abrahams, 1998, p. 5; Smallridge et al., 2016), or, more commonly, *digital* vigilante (Loveluck, 2017, 2020), also referred to as *digilante* (Jane, 2017; Powell et al., 2017) or *vigilante 2.0* (Tanner & Campana, 2020), has consolidated as a distinct figure only in the last 10 years, largely through its framing as an object of analysis in the fields of media studies (Huang, 2021, 2023; Starbird et al., 2014; Trottier, 2017, 2020), criminology (Tanner et al., 2020), sociology (Loveluck, 2020) and political science (Tanner & Campana, 2020). Trottier (2017) defines digital vigilantism as "a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and respond through coordinated retaliation on digital media, including mobile devices and social media platforms" (p. 56). Central to his understanding is the notion of doxing, illustrated in the opening vignette, or the sharing online of someone's personal information, including a person's home address, work details, or

medical information. This “naming and shaming” type of visibility, which Trottier (2017) also refers to as “weaponised visibility” (p. 56), he further characterizes as (1) unwanted, because unsolicited, (2) intense, because easy to share, and – most critical to the analysis on temporalization below – (3) enduring, because subsequently vulnerable to internet searches, including under the target’s name.

The use of time in *Culture Warlords* largely reflects the ways in which time has been used broadly by the figure of the digital vigilante in existing literature, including among other hate-fighting vigilantes (e.g., Milbrandt, 2020). Whether it be compared with the bureaucratic, often sluggish, pace of legislative shifts and invention, or the slow rate of movement of court proceedings, deliberations, and judgement, the temporal shortening enabled by justice through the internet provides the figure of the digital vigilante with a tempting alternative temporality through which to fight perceived wrong doings (Jane, 2017; Linton, 2020). Vigilantism, from this perspective, is viewed as desirable to the digital vigilante on account of its *eroding of time*, regardless of whether it is premeditated or spontaneous (Favarel-Garrigues, 2020, p. 307; Trottier, 2017, p. 58), such as with the erosion of time-consuming, state-initiated investigations or due processes (Loveluck, 2020, p. 227). At one point in chapter eight of her book, Lavin (2020) tells the reader, “the operation takes five months” (p. 188), referring to the amount of time it took her to unearth the legal identity of Der Stürmer – including “his name, his face, his license plate, his email, the city he lives in” (p. 192). The Bellingcat publication making widely known this information, the title of which was quoted in the book as “Revealed: The Ukrainian [sic] Man Who Runs a Neo-Nazi Telegram Channel” (Lavin, 2020, p. 193), appeared the day after Lavin wrote Der Stürmer with the news of her true identity and intentions – said to have taken place “on March 18, 2020, just after midnight” (p. 193); “i’m [sic] an anti-fascist and you’re about to be exposed” we are told she pronounced to him (p. 193).

With the anxious but unpredictable affective force of that which is imminent or impending, her *about to be* in that sentence – a twist of time that locates Lavin’s knowledge of his anticipated demise in the future, whereas Der Stürmer’s frame of reference remains naively in the unknowing present – likely contributed to the “mixture of loathing and fear and glee” she proclaims to have felt with her revelation (Lavin, 2020, p. 193). Moreover, the politics of this *about to be* – including not just its temporality, but also the affective force of its claim to power, punishment, and authority – well captures the attractiveness of the erosion of time in pursuits of justice online for the figure of the digital vigilante.

At the same time, Trottier (2017) is not the only scholar to qualify the temporality of visibility weaponized by the digital vigilante as *enduring* (Loveluck, 2020, p. 215; Milbrandt, 2020, p. 230), pointing to a potential for temporal elongation by such figures, both in the use of digital material for shaming or as evidence (Kasra, 2017, pp. 185-186) and in efforts to sustain

vigilante membership and engagements (Tanner & Campana, 2020, pp. 274-275). Although the reader is never informed of the ultimate becomings of Der Stürmer, we are told that he “dropped out of public view entirely – but not before pretending to be his own mother on Twitter and email, begging Bellingcat to unpublish the story, and offering monetary bribes to the journalists to take his name out of circulation” (Lavin, 2020, p. 194). It is hence also and above all the *continuity* of exposure that manifests as punishment, and not just the act of exposure in-and-of-itself. The reader is told, moreover, that Der Stürmer deleted all of his social-media pages – vectors for his continued presence, activities, and also vulnerability online – and was expelled from the chat room through which the two had met. While it is the swiftness of the pursuit of justice that commonly appeals to the figure of the digital vigilante, the lasting impacts of their actions can hence be a reward, but they can also be a source of threat: and so, for example, Lavin (2020) too is forced to take down her profile on account of the death threats she received following the Bellingcat publication: ““Just tell me your name,”” one man is reported to have written her in Russian, ““Your house. Your address. I’ll show up. I have a gun”” (p. 195).

Time is hence manipulated, compressed, and elongated for the figure of the digital vigilante – rendering a paradoxical blending of temporalities including both immediacy and endurance. The figure thereby exists within a complex temporal landscape, where the allure of swiftness clashes with the weight of consequence, revealing an intricate relationship between justice and time in the digital age. This paradox speaks to the importance of processes of temporalization by and through the digital vigilante, referring to the contingent and contested production of time in their vigilante practices, motivations, and senses of self (Munn, 1992; Ringel, 2016). By focusing primarily on themes of immediacy and endurance, however, the literature engaging with this figure largely takes for granted time’s linear directionality, and hence presumes a strict division between the past, present, and future. This is especially surprising given that the vigilante, digital or otherwise, has often been conceptualized as embedded within movements of populist nationalism, which typically embrace – rather than notions of social justice – overtly racist, misogynist, anti-queer and anti-trans logics of action (e.g., Blee & Latif, 2019; Huang, 2023), and have thereby been widely analyzed as guided by, and hence also to produce, myths about the past and longings of the future through the activities of the present. Given that a defining feature of the digital vigilante is their extra-normative decision to take the law into their own hands, deeper analyses of the temporal imaginaries and narratives embedded in the motivations, methods, and intentions of their actions could help to better appreciate the respective moral universe within which they operate.

Past Presenting

Take, for instance, Lavin's (2020) narration of her own biography, and the links it establishes between both her broader endeavors with the book and the particular story of the chapter in question. Writing from the subject position of a woman and "a shlubby, bisexual Jew" (p. 1) – i.e., intersecting positionalities amongst those groups most often explicitly targeted with hate by the far-right – Lavin's book presents temporal entanglements that write the past from the context of the book, and hence with particular meaning. In chapter two, titled "The Jews," she notes:

Every element of my upbringing was steeped not just in biblical and Talmudic precepts but in the lessons of Jewish history. Such lessons were slanted through a school system whose project was to raise and sustain devout Orthodox Jews by evoking the tragedies of our history ... I learned in excruciating detail how the long and complex and illustrious history of the Jews in Europe had dissolved in blood and gas and human ash. It wasn't just in school, either: The Holocaust had shaped not just Jewry more broadly, but my own family. My whole life was shaped by anti-Semitism, at a generation's remove. (pp. 13-14)

This quote highlights the significant role of temporal narratives and felt historical legacies in shaping cultural identities within the context of Jewish history. The educational system, in particular, with its intention to foster devout Orthodox Jews, is understood to have leveraged the tragedies of Jewish history to impart a sense of collective memory and heritage. The Holocaust emerges here as a defining moment that not only affected the broader Jewish community and the author's own family, but the weight of antisemitism from the historical genocide of the Jews is also said to have shaped Lavin's life "at a generation's remove." While this term "remove" emphasizes the temporal and emotional gap between Lavin and the Holocaust, the perception that it nonetheless shaped her whole life illustrates how the passage of time and the stories from and of preceding generations can continue to shape an individual's worldview and self-perception. Feeling "at a generation's remove," as will become increasingly clear, is hence based on lived and inherited experience, to be sure, but also on the multiply indirect and conjured affect of stories and nightmares. Lavin (2020) herself writes that she never heard the story of her grandparents' survival from them directly: "What I heard were suggestive snatches of what had already become family legend" (p. 14).

The above extended quotation, moreover, demonstrates how the past is actively produced through the upbringing and educational system described, but also through the author's own narration of that education and the history upon which it focuses as well as the perceived role that history has played on her life and family. As Lavin notes, her immersion in Talmudic teachings and the lessons from Jewish history contributed to the construction of a collective historical narrative. Mindful of the horrific atrocities of the Holocaust and its aftermath, it is helpful to note that the school system's deliberate centering on

the tragedies of Jewish history for the purposes of producing a particular relationship to the Jewish faith highlights a type of intentional shaping of cultural memory and historically-rooted sense of self and community. However, the author's personal understanding of the dissolution of European Jewish communities and the profound impact of both the Holocaust and the antisemitism behind it on Jewry broadly, and on her own life and family, further illustrate the production of the past in the book's narration through the lens of trans-generational lived experiences and inherited narratives. Not a mere prelude to the current moment or a product of social or cultural construction, the past here is selectively recalled and used within the present. Viewed from the lens of this memoir and the lived daily experience it documents and depicts, this use of the past is hence evocative of what Macdonald (2012) refers to as past presencing, or "the ways in which people variously draw on, experience, negotiate, reconstruct, and perform the past in their ongoing lives" (p. 234). In another example of digitally-mediated weaponized visibility around the spreading of hate, Milbrandt (2020) analyzed that the past can come to bear social consequences that "spilled into the future" for attendees of the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, USA, hence disrupting any expectation among rally-goers of what she calls "temporal boundedness" (p. 230). Through past presencing, alternatively, such as I am trying to argue here for Lavin, community histories make themselves felt within localities, thereby transforming pasts into a means for establishing particular frameworks or contexts for action – referring here in particular to Lavin's digital detective and identity exposing pursuits.

In a subsequent part of chapter two, Lavin goes on to recount part of family legend about how her Holocaust-surviving grandparents migrated to the United States from a town in modern-day Ukraine, presenting a selection of surviving family stories that detail the friends and family members her grandparents lost, their survival in the forests of Poland, and the nightmares that continued beyond their escape to the United States. Embedded within a book about online white supremacy of the current moment, the presencing of this family history becomes legible through consideration of other chapters in the book. Through his moniker's unequivocal allusion to Nazi-era antisemitism, but also through his explicit embracing of the racist and antisemitic tropes that have been used to naturalize the genocidal ambitions of the Holocaust, *Der Stürmer*, it might be said, comes to embody the perpetrator from both the past and present of Lavin's story. This can be read not only from *Der Stürmer*'s presencing of the Nazi past by way of his day-to-day moniker, idols, and prejudices. It is also evident in Lavin's perceived experiences with antisemitism.

For example, Lavin (2020) observes, with regard to her grandparents, that "the war had never left them entirely" (p. 14). The haunting memories of her grandfather, plagued by the traumas of the past, are revealed through his recurrent nocturnal outbursts, repeatedly screaming the German word for "police" in the night. These distressing episodes included him gathering his daughters on the streets of Brooklyn, driven by an unyielding need for safety

and protection. When Lavin's grandparents moved from their Brooklyn home, the reader learns, relatives found a trove of checks and bonds under the floorboards, understood by Lavin (2020) to suggest that they "had always been ready to run. The fear of slaughter because they were Jews never left them" (p. 14). Her grandparents' lived continuity of antisemitism from the Holocaust is then contrasted with Lavin's own experiences. While growing up in the United States, she suggests that her life was largely shielded from the specter of antisemitism. Lavin (2020) notes, "The haunting reality of the severed branches from my ancestral tree cruelly bore witness to the existence of anti-Semitism ... yet it occupied a profoundly distant space within my consciousness" (p. 15). This observation lays bare the paradoxical coexistence of historical collective trauma and the relative safety she understood herself to have experienced in her immediate surroundings. Moreover, as Lavin (2020) delves deeper into her introspection, she suggests that the lamentations borne by her grandparents and passed down through her mother appeared to merge into a fascinating interweaving of a bygone era – one she emerged from, "ready to triumph in a country that held no threat for me" (p. 15).

While spending a year in Ukraine, the author sought to dig deeper into her family's past to learn about the presumed "love and creativity and tradition and passion" (Lavin, 2020, p. 16) that sustained them over generations – "and the hatred that cut it short" (p. 16). Even there, she notes, "no one sought to expel me" (p.16). She twice visited the town from where her grandparents migrated, and each time she sought out the oldest person in the village; on both occasions, she was met, not with expulsion or discrimination, but with melancholy and reverence: "What had happened during the war and after hung between us;" she wrote, "in the words of one old woman, 'a time of calamity'" (p. 16). "Until my adulthood," she summarized succinctly in an earlier part of the chapter, "anti-Semitism was largely an abstract concept ... I lived a life secure in the assumed privilege of full whiteness, both in the way I passed physically through the world and in the way I found my identity as a Jew to be perceived by those I interacted with" (p. 15). Upon returning to the US, Lavin took a job as editorial intern at the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, an organization tasked with supplying news to Jewish newspapers around the world. Among her responsibilities was moderating the site's comments and web traffic. It was through this job that she first encountered anonymized internet users expressing a desire for the "murder, dismemberment, torture" of fellow staff members (Lavin, 2020, p. 17). After years of failed attempts to engage firsthand with remnants of Holocaust-era antisemitism, "There they were, the anti-Semites, in real time. They weren't in Poland; they weren't lost in the mists of decades past. They were telling me what they wanted to do to my coworkers—right now" (p. 17).

The internet hence acts as a conduit and motor of affect, intertwining the perpetrators of antisemitism from both the past and present into a single virtual space. The anonymous users she encounters in her work, and then through her research for the book, represent a convergence of the past and present, as they

are understood to echo – and, indeed, continue – the vile sentiments expressed by antisemites during the Holocaust. Affect functions here as economy, and not just psychology (Ahmed, 2004, p. 201), accumulating value through the convergence of moments in time – including, as discussed above, the added labor of being moved at “a generation’s remove.” The internet, for Lavin, with its vast reach and immediacy, transcends temporal boundaries, allowing for the interplay of historical and present-day antisemitism to coexist and influence one another, especially given that the geographic home of *Der Stürmer* overlaps with the home from which her ancestors were murdered and forced to flee. From this perspective, the broken Ukrainian displayed in excerpts from Lavin’s chats with *Der Stürmer* can be read to symbolize a familial and community relation to the past that was broken by the Holocaust. By navigating this treacherous online terrain, Lavin confronts a stark reality: the antisemites she encountered are not mere remnants of a closed and completed cultural past dating back to the Holocaust, but living individuals seen to perpetuate the same vitriol and hostility as their historical counterparts. For Lavin, moreover, this realization highlights the enduring nature of antisemitism, and it both produces and justifies a felt urgency to confront its persistence, especially in the virtual realm. “The moment I saw it,” she concludes, referring to this online form of antisemitism, “I knew this was a battle I had to wage” (Lavin, 2020, p. 17). This felt urgency, it seems to me, and the pasts brought into the present through its narration and framing, function as implicit but powerful justification for Lavin’s courageous but nonetheless unambiguously deceptive actions, and, in chapter eight, for the ultimate revelation of the identity of her chat companion against his wishes. It is, among other factors, the past and its implicit continuity in the present that are brought into play in framing the ethics of her digital vigilante actions and their unknown bearings on the future.

Un/Doing Futures

By embedding their actions within temporalized narratives, cultural accounts of the digital vigilante hence not only stress their pursuit of a rapid form of justice through continuous exposure, but they can also contribute to shaping collective memory, subjective relations to the past, and meanings of history. Beyond and often interconnected with these modes of temporalization, the figure of the digital vigilante can reflect, and influence, possible future trajectories and threatening or idealized imaginaries of society and the movements they speak to and embody (Tanner & Campana, 2020, p. 273). After all, pursuits of justice, generally grounded in ethical principles, are typically driven by claims of inequality and a striving towards fairness, and motivated by an aspiration to create a more equitable society for all. As such, they might be perceived as reflections of a moral universe, which inevitably include imaginings of a threatening or ideal future. In the case of Lavin, her applied forms of what Chakkalakal and Ren (2022) refer to as “un/doing

future” (p. 848), or the ways in which the future is both imagined or renounced, can be analyzed from the type of justice that she pursues, and also from the route through which she pursues it. The analytical focus on both *doing* and *undoing* helps bring to light how digital vigilante narratives attempt alternate visions of justice, challenging or reconfiguring dominant structures and constellations of social order. In the narratives, actions, and strategies of digital vigilante figures like Lavin, both the past and the future become fertile grounds through which the meaning, mode, and means of justice are negotiated and contested.

Lavin is emphatic about her felt need to pursue a form of justice that differs from a normative investment in established law enforcement structures. Remaining relatively vague about specific referents, Lavin (2020), in the book, states that law enforcement actors have not been immune to far-right ideologies, citing a “documented propensity of law enforcement to be sympathetic to white-nationalist groups – and the frequency with which police officers and soldiers have surfaced as hate-group members” (pp. 201-202). This then becomes the context out of which she makes a plea for the broad embracing of strategies for defending oneself and one’s communities from hate and violence: “Which leaves the question of who can protect us from this threat if the police cannot” (p. 202), she concludes at the end of chapter eight. “Or can we rely on something else entirely – each other?” (p. 202). In subsequent chapters, she locates this approach broadly within what she defines as antifascism, or, for short, the antifa: “a leaderless, loosely organized movement whose primary purpose is to block, outmaneuver, and dismantle far-right and fascist organizing” (p. 203). In addition to counter-protesting at fascist or far-right events, sometimes collectively donned in black and wearing facemasks, the movement is also prone to other activities, we are told, most notably the same tactics mobilized by Lavin (2020) in chapter eight of the book: “identifying and publicizing the real names of far-right activists” and “infiltrating far-right groups and attempting to sabotage from within” (p. 203), both with the intent to ensure that there is, “above all else, a social cost to fascism, racism, and virulent homophobia and transphobia” (p. 224). The weaponized visibility wielded in response to online white supremacists by the digital vigilante is hence not necessarily to enhance pursuit of “social esteem under fair conditions of equal opportunity” (Fraser, 2001, p. 28), as recognition has been framed in the literature on social justice by the philosopher Nancy Fraser, but also to allow for a *loss* of esteem when conditions of visibility, and therefore also recognition, are more evenly distributed.

This vision of the future, given shape in the depicted practices and Lavin’s discursive appeals and argumentation, has been explicitly developed as antidote to a future that is considered continuous with the norms of the past and present. Given the perceived inadequacies of law enforcement structures in addressing the rise of far-right ideologies and their impacts on society, Lavin proposes and embodies an alternative approach to justice, one that emphasizes a need for communities to defend themselves against hate and violence. As

such, she promotes an active, defensive, and protectionist sense of community, emphasizing alternatives to depending solely on state-sponsored law enforcement structures and the biopolitical orders they are understood to normalize and enforce. As communities disproportionately impacted by far-right and police violence seek alternative modes of survival and routes for the pursuit of justice, this vision emerges out of the shortcomings and biases of law enforcement agents and structures, and may indeed prevent the spread and impact of extremist ideologies. However, it may simultaneously or alternatively include unintended dimensions not yet addressed in Lavin's book, such as a lack of accountability or due process, and might also escalate, rather than only reduce, division, polarization, and conflict. In an era characterized by mounting scrutiny of conventional law enforcement structures, this iteration of the digital vigilante hence introduces questions about how to maneuver towards a future that harmonizes the imperatives of community empowerment and ethical practice, while confronting the perceived deficiencies engrained in past and present law enforcement structures.

Here one might also dwell on Lavin's (2020) proclaimed disavowal of government agencies of law enforcement and regulation by antifa members – described in one section as “a particularly antagonistic relationship” (p. 225) – and consider how her role as journalist, and her selective embracing of like-minded journalistic platforms as prized route through which to pursue justice and punishment, can entail biases and consequences that may not align with her aim of building a safe world for all. While journalism offers a powerful route through which to initiate or enliven public discussions, expose injustices, and hold persons and entities accountable, evidentiary standards and data gathering procedures in the field may lack adequate oversight or transparency, amplifying the likelihood or severity of a myriad of possible incalculable consequences, such as a lack of accountability, misrepresentation, or incomprehensiveness in reporting. Without codified and agreed upon standards of due process, it is also difficult to ensure that ethical measures are safeguarded, which includes a presumption of innocence or the right to a fair trial (Favarel-Garrigues et al., 2020, p. 191; Loveluck, 2020, p. 227). Moreover, the punitive consequences that follow from journalistic reporting lack mechanisms of accountability and may not adequately align consequences with the severity of transgressions committed. Lavin (2020) may well be aware of these risks, subsuming or sidestepping most of them by describing antifa as “a way of looking at the complex relationship between extremists, their opponents, and the state that doesn't necessarily mesh with a comfortable liberal worldview” (p. 216). If liberalism is bound to fall short in its striving for justice and equality, an analysis of Lavin as digital vigilante opens questions about a key paradox of justice as enacted in her practice: how to balance the imperative for safety cognizant of or beyond the limitations of liberalism with the potential ethical implications inherent in wielding journalism and media consumers as judge and jury.

In thinking Lavin's book through the juxtaposition embedded in the notion un/doing future, which is to say, again, through the contrasts that emerge in appreciating the distinction between the *imagining* and *renouncing* of futures, it is thus helpful to think not only about how the figure of the digital vigilante produces futures that are distinct or different from each other, but also about how futures that are contrasted for being sought after and rejected can include unacknowledged convivialities, overlaps, and interdependencies. Ambivalences become apparent, for example, when one considers the documented overlaps between vigilante and law enforcement dynamics, and how traditional law enforcement actors have since taken up Lavin's strategy of anonymization and deception in their own efforts to pursue illegal forms of online hate and violence. In Germany, for example, media reports suggest that selected members of the police and agents of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) also now create fake social media profiles explicitly meant to infiltrate and investigate far-right virtual spaces similar to those depicted and analyzed in *Culture Warlords* (Steinke, 2022). As with Lavin, these efforts include affirming and asserting hateful, at times criminalised, positions to gain access and trust. As such, the digital vigilante and law enforcement agents not only utilize similar surveillance technologies and digital platforms to gather evidence, monitor activities, and identify perpetrators, but they can also mirror and thereby legitimize their overlapping policing practices and the at times controversial ethical norms that guide or emerge from them. This parallel adoption of tactics by digital vigilantes and law enforcement agents underscores the complex interplay between informal and formal policing, and demonstrates how the future they each perform can reproduce or strengthen, and not just renounce, their respective modes of operation.

Affective In-Justice

There is nothing inherently illegal about falsifying one's name, history, or political attachments to facilitate eliciting information about the identity of anonymous, potentially criminal internet users. On the contrary, if law enforcement actors are also actively and openly embracing such strategies to fight the spread of hate and calls to group-specific violence, they are, as representatives of a given state, condoning the legitimacy of such tactics, at least for use by other states. There are obvious differences between vigilante and state wielding such strategies for enforcing or policing actual or perceived mores and laws, such as the more-or-less consistent and rigorous use of protocols and mechanisms for accountability among formal state actors – including, for example, judicial review or other forms of state or NGO oversight. If actors or elements of those structures are understood to overlook or adopt far-right politics of hate, as Lavin suggests, justice cannot just be about the “visible application of the law at all costs, but also as negotiated

assemblages of feelings about inequality and power” (Clarke 2019, p. xxii). Indeed, when trust is lost in the adjudicators of law, a perceived gap in justice emerges between those who *feel that they should be protected* by law enforcement actors, and those who *feel that they are protected* in practice. As others have noted, this felt injustice on the level of *representation* when it comes to protection in liberal democratic societies becomes an injustice on the level of *participation* when targeted individuals retreat from or are compelled to entirely abandon engaging in online or offline spaces out of fear or threats to their life, family, or other sources of sustenance, support, or well-being.

Speaking of injustice as *felt* in no way minimizes its objective, quantitative, or structural qualities. Instead, it helps to capture an important tenor of Lavin’s book – namely, its constant recourse to morality, emotion, and feeling, not only in her condemnation of the hatred with which she continues to be targeted, but also by way of resenting the hatred she views to have been born within her while researching for the book. “Studying the far right taught me what hatred looks like,” she writes at one point in the introduction, “and taught me how to hate” (Lavin, 2020, p. 7). And later, “I will never forgive them for making me hate them as much as I do,” she wrote, referring to those she encountered on the internet, “for folding a red loathing into my soul” (p. 8). In an afterword, she elaborates on this in some detail:

Every day I was reading and writing about hatred: hatred of my people. Nearly everyone I loved was a Jew – my parents, my sisters, their children, the children I might have someday. I read about the people who hated kikes, and I talked to them. Although I opposed it, I internalized the depth of their hate and its vitriol: It changed the way I saw myself when I looked in the mirror. Suddenly I was the Jewess they derided: heavy, stooped, wretched, big of hair and nose. The things I loved about myself felt grotesque. It warped my mouth into bitterness. I wanted no part of my body and all its works. I wanted no part of myself. (p. 238)

Unearthing and analyzing online injustice as digital vigilante is hence a practice that can produce within the vigilante an echo emotion of that which the figure sets out to police. A mirror manifestation of the hate that Lavin targets as vigilante, in other words, becomes an internalized and driving motivation for her continued vigilante activities. Clarke (2019) has offered the term affective justice to describe the production of particular justice discourses through knowledge, affect, and emotion, thereby drawing attention to how justice assemblages are felt, experienced, and pursued. Building on the work of Sara Ahmed (2004), Clarke (2019) is interested in what people do with emotions, in particular as embedded within post-violence practices. While her study is novel to legal anthropology in locating the circulation of emotions within macro-global formations, thereby exceeding the aims and possibilities of this analysis, Clarke’s (2019) attention to a displaced focus of justice from structural equality to the ontologies and temporalities of dominant justice practices resonates strongly with Lavin’s (2020) narrative, as does her interest

in how “such forms of displacement ignite affective responses to other conceptualizations of justice” (Clarke, 2019, p. 17).

Indeed, this lens of affective justice directs attention to the sentimentalized motivation and appeal of Lavin’s (2020) proclaimed wishes for her book:

So let *Culture Warlords*, such as it is, be part revenge, part explainer, and partly the story of what hate does to those who observe it and those who manufacture it. Let it be a manual that leads you to fight – for a better world for you, for me, for all the black kids and Muslim kids and Jewish kids and trans kids and brown kids, who deserve a world free of the verminous miasma of hatred. Let us hold it to the light – this wet, rotting, malodorous thing – and let it dry up and crumble into dust and be gone (p. 8)

The use of imagery, simile and metaphor to describe hatred, such as “verminous miasma” and “wet, rotting, malodorous thing,” intensifies the affective energies of Lavin’s mission, and contributes to the production of its perceived moral significance and sense of urgency. The verb “fight” here is multiply charged, associated with notions of courage, heroism, and moral righteousness, but also encompassing emotions like anger, indignation, and determination. Lavin’s call to battle is intertwined with identity construction and empathy, fueling a collective drive for transformative action through a sentimental, expanding, and energizing structure of feeling (Williams, 1977). By connecting the fight against hate to specific identities, she harnesses the force of collective experience and emotional identification, speaking to and producing a type of oppositional community (Kasra, 2017, p. 175) driven by affect and the abstract vision of a “better world” defined in part by mutual protection through revenge, deceit, and punishment. This shared commitment taps into the affective power of collective emotion, fostering a sense of solidarity and unity among those engaged in her proclaimed and prescribed fight against hatred.

For Clarke (2019), engaging with affective justice obligates consideration of “how the past collides with the present to produce our bodies and our imaginaries, and it involves wrestling with the interplay between temporality and the role of sentimentalized narratives” (p. xxii). Beyond Lavin’s utopic longing for a world without hate, her proposition in the above quote that *Culture Warlords* be read as a form of revenge invites consideration of the meaning and role of revenge here as mode of, and intention for, responding to perceived injustice. Throughout the book, Lavin recounts a number of violent exchanges she endured during her research, and, as in the above paragraph, the lasting harm those exchanges inflected on her being. Perhaps most potent among them was the night in mid-June 2019, described at the start of chapter one, when she stumbled on a discussion in a chat room about whether she was too ugly to rape. Here, she quotes several responses: “‘Talia Lavin’s appearance makes me viscerally ill,’ ‘I can smell her through the monitor,’ ‘Talia Levin [sic] would make me wanna throw up my intestines’” (Lavin, 2020, p. 10). The revenge that she seeks is hence a mode of responding to the

harm inflicted by her interlocutors as much onto her as onto society – in particular, here, onto women, especially those at the intersections of varying forms of structural oppression. It is a means of reclaiming agency by making known, analyzing, and, arguably, demystifying otherwise anonymous online haters and the personal, community, and societal injuries that they can cause. “To do so,” in the words of Lavin (2020), “is to deprive them of the power to organize in total darkness, to operate as the terrifying bogeymen they would so like to be. It is to drag them by their hair into the light and let them scream” (p. 8).

There is, however, another level to be read into this notion of revenge as mode of justice, one that resonates with a recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum Frankfurt am Main, *Revenge: History and Fantasy*, which presented a cultural and historical link between what co-curators Riedel and Wenzel (2022) describe in the catalogue’s introduction as “Jewish fantasies of revenge, anti-Jewish conspiracy myths and historical acts of revenge by Jews” (p. 14). Complicating any narrative of passive victimhood read from documented histories of Jewish persecution, oppression, and experiences of violence, they suggest that Biblical stories of revenge “seek to intercept history, change its course or establish justice *retroactively*” (p. 15; emphasis added). In another catalogue text, Czollek (2022) suggests that rabbinic tradition allows for revenge if its purpose is to restore what he refers to as “divine order” (p. 26). Such forms of vengeance, Czollek (2022) summarizes, are intended “to hold the wicked accountable for their transgressions when secular institutions have failed to do so” (p. 26). Rather than distinct from or antithetical to justice, what Czollek (2022) calls “Jewish revenge” is hence intertwined with a notion of justice in which secular jurisprudence takes precedence, but is also expected to achieve its promised results. This understanding of revenge as affective pursuit of justice *retroactively* folds the failures of secular jurisprudence into the motivations behind Lavin’s vengeance, such as from the Holocaust – an event for which, it has been argued, “no justice can be done, at least no justice that could balance or make good on the harm or wrong inflicted” (Lang, 2005, p. 18). Such a framing adds a temporal, trans-generational quality to Powell’s (2015) observation, about the use of the internet by survivors of rape, that particular justice needs are not being served by formal criminal justice systems (p. 580). Beyond this, it responds to Favarel-Garrigues’s (2020) argument that analysts of vigilantism “should pay more attention to the various benefits, both material and symbolic, that participants accrue” (p. 307), but expands the benefit framework to explicitly include the affective as entangled with but also distinct from the material and symbolic.

Conclusion

For some, criminal law and formal law enforcement structures are seen to offer a promising way out of the politics of hate and violence that are thought to

significantly plague the current socio-political moment. For others, as for Lavin, these same structures have the potential to obscure or reproduce structural, political and material inequalities – even as these critics may take on and reinforce law enforcement logics, dynamics and tactics. Growing appeals to criminal law and state law enforcement actors presume that these injustices are best countered with recourse to the tools and structures of the formal criminal justice system. Lavin, on the other hand, is concerned with how structural inequalities can exceed or even penetrate the punitive and penal, and how related justice discourses can come to conceal those realities. This shift in perspective also shifts our attention from the mode of calculable justice mobilized – such as via the juridical, social, or economic – to the subjective feeling that some form of justice has been served.

Synthesizing and expanding upon an emerging literature, this paper has presented an analysis of selected processes of temporalization embedded within the depictions and actions of a particular iteration of the digital vigilante. While scholars of digital vigilantism have focused primarily on the temporalities of immediacy and endurance in the figure's activities – two modes of time that presume temporal linearity and progression – I have argued that anthropological concepts accounting for the co-production and contestation of temporal moments can help to provide a more complex appreciation for the processes and implications of temporalization in vigilante narratives and activities. In particular, the notions of past presencing, un/doing futures and affective justice expose how the digital vigilante can operate within a nuanced, at times consolidating, at other times contradictory, temporal framework, introducing complex ethical questions that may not go unacknowledged by the vigilante even as they remain in conflict, unresolved, and at times, never directly addressed in their self-presentation. Such a reframing draws attention to the contemporary conjuring and continuities of historical events, narratives and forms of oppression in framing vigilante pursuits of justice online, but also to the modes of mutual reinforcement of what otherwise amount to antagonistic actors with dissimilar visions of the future.

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