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# Pants on *Fyre*: Parasitic Masculinity and the *Fyre* Festival Documentaries

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## Abstract

The documentaries *Fyre Fraud* and *FYRE: The Greatest Party that Never Happened* recount the fraudulent and imprudent decision-making process that led up to the ill-fated *Fyre* Fest. These documentaries represent the music festival's failure through depictions of white masculinity that seek parasitic attachment and proximity to the hegemonic ideal of masculine authority in the neoliberal marketplace. We argue that these movies map the operations of an imitative form of white masculine subjectivity that thrives in precarity, even as they recuperate the status of late-stage neoliberalism by symbolically removing parasitic masculinity from the neoliberal social order that it feeds on.

**Keywords:** abjection, neoliberalism, masculinity, entrepreneurialism, *Fyre* festival

*Fyre* Fest was a music festival experience like no other. Festivalgoers were promised luxurious beach-front accommodations on an island in the Bahamas and performances from popular artists including Blink 182 and Major Lazer. The event was notable not for its ingenuity or exclusivity but because it never actually happened. Instead of luxury tents and gourmet meals, early attendees were welcomed by unfinished, rainsoaked FEMA tents and cheese sandwiches. No national acts ever appeared on stage, and the festival was canceled the day it was to begin. After an investigation revealed that the main organizer, Billy McFarland, lied to his investors, a federal court sentenced him in 2018 to six years in prison for multiple counts of wire fraud, bank fraud, and lying to a federal law enforcement agent.<sup>1</sup>

The spectacular failure of Fyre Fest garnered attention from a variety of media sources, from late night talk show hosts, reality television programs, and social media influencers who mocked the privilege and naiveté of festivalgoers who paid between \$12,000 and \$100,000 to attend the event; condemned the unabashed greed and incompetence of the event organizers; and railed against the influence of social media marketing practices for selling the fraudulent event to unsuspecting millennials. In 2019, two full-length documentaries contributed to the media spectacle: *Fyre Fraud* (Hulu) and *FYRE: The Greatest Party that Never Happened* (Netflix).<sup>2</sup> Airing within days of one another on competing streaming services, both films contrast the abject state of the campgrounds with McFarland's luxurious lifestyle. Talking head interviews with journalists, the event's planners, and festival attendees work alongside footage of the event to critique the decisions leading up to the festival. Together, they offer a parable about the damaging influence of savvy hucksters with a knack for leveraging brand images on social media platforms to commit fraud.

This article attends to the documentaries' portrayal of McFarland and Fyre Fest's spectacular failure as a representative anecdote for a particular model of white masculinity in contemporary public life in the US. Since President Trump's election in 2016, a myriad of cultural texts featured shockingly deceptive behavior by privileged white men. Predatory scam artists are featured in podcasts (*Broken, Dr. Death, The Dream, Dirty John*), docuseries (*Love Fraud, The Inventor, Baby God, Dirty Money, Filthy Rich, Generation Hustle*), and documentaries (*Class Action Park, Act and Craft, An Honest Liar, Sour Grapes*). The underlying formal structure of the anecdote that runs across each of these texts foregrounds how seemingly well-off men put vulnerable populations at risk in their pursuit of financial gain, leading to abject circumstances and dire consequences for their victims. It is not surprising that such texts proliferated during the Trump presidency, a period marked by fraudulent activity within the nation's highest political office, distrust in expertise, triumph of market rationality over the social good, and a cruel disregard for others.<sup>3</sup> Media attention to stories of fraud committed by white men in positions of authority refracts national debates about the legitimacy of men in leadership positions and the implications of their decisions for people who lack the presumption of authority by virtue of their race and gender.

We argue that the anecdote about men pursuing deceptive financial pursuits in the US foregrounds a mode of entrepreneurial white masculinity that is profoundly parasitic. Parasitic masculinity is an extension of the entrepreneurial subject that monetizes, brands, and imitates values such as leadership, authority, and expertise for personal profit at the expense of others. In labeling such activity parasitic, we highlight how social actors have seized upon the authority of white masculinity to exploit the trust of those invested in the core fictions of enduring market, gender, and race myths.<sup>4</sup> A subject formation under late capitalism, parasitic masculinity finds expression in mediated portrayals of individuals such as McFarland who engage in crass performances of masculine mastery and financial success to deceive financiers and customers. Through the representation of such figures, mediated texts expose how the parasite feeds upon others' desires for economic opportunity and self-gratification for his own self-advancement.

In extending this metaphor, we also attend to the "host"; namely, the body (politic) transformed into a hospitable environment for fraudulent financial schemes by the triumph of what Wendy Brown refers to as the "neoliberal markets-and-morals project" that

privileges “white and male superordination,” particularly when its primacy is threatened by equality.<sup>5</sup> As Trump’s election raised its profile, popular culture has staged a reckoning with parasitic masculinity and its relationship to the social and economic order. *Fyre Fraud* and *FYRE: The Greatest Party that Never Happened* (hereafter *FYRE*) illuminate the interplay of the fraudulent business schemes that thrive under neoliberal deregulation<sup>6</sup> and the culture of impunity that has long underwritten white masculine authority.<sup>7</sup> The *New Yorker’s* Jia Tolentino captures this sentiment in *Fyre Fraud*: “in the millennial era, scamming is the air we breathe.” Billy McFarland is the prototype for a parasitic form of white manhood that operates within a culture and marketplace that advantages the entrepreneurial subject.

We read these competing documentaries to explore how mediated representations of parasitic masculinity reckon with the imploding myth of the virtuous self-made man and neoliberal fantasies of market governance. Together, these documentaries showcase the operations of an emergent form of masculine subjectivity that thrives in the new terrain of social and economy precarity, where individuals succeed or fail according to the logics of branding, entrepreneurialism, and the hustle. This form of masculinity sustains a parasitic relationship with dominant social myths while extending the life of the host on which the parasite depends.

The metaphor of a parasite also responds to media texts that have rendered exploitative entrepreneurial activity abject. The *Fyre Fest* documentaries transform their subject into an abject spectacle fueled by the biopolitics of disposability that renders marginalized people vulnerable to increasingly precarious economic conditions.<sup>8</sup> This framing constructs the festival as a source of both fascination and dread that marks the boundaries between order and disorder. Popular texts such as *Fyre* and *Fyre Fraud* portray crass and deceptive behavior as outside of the boundaries of legitimate business practice even as such practices are driven by the imperatives of late-stage capitalism. Consequently, parasitic masculinity stabilizes the very conditions that have prompted figures such as McFarland to pursue fraudulent business practices in the first place. We conclude that while popular media have provided abject encounters with parasitic masculinity that offer cultural lessons about neoliberal failure, these lessons recuperate the status of late-stage neoliberalism by symbolically removing parasitic masculinity from the neoliberal social order that it feeds on.

### **Entrepreneurial masculinity, neoliberal failure, and abjection**

Our interest in parasitic masculinity expands upon scholarship about dynamic expressions of manhood on popular film and television. Several media and rhetoric scholars have explained that white masculinity has maintained its hegemonic status through its flexible adjustments to changing social and economic conditions. R. W. Connell’s foundational work argues that hegemonic masculinity is composed of contingent traits that embody manhood at particular conjunctures.<sup>9</sup> The recurring trope of the wounded white man in Hollywood in post-9/11 cinema illustrates how hegemonic masculinity has disavowed its privileged status,<sup>10</sup> affirming Hamilton Carroll’s point that white masculinity has increasingly defined itself as a marginalized identity in response to feminist and antiracist challenges.<sup>11</sup> Paul E. Johnson argues that post-recessionary film and television have represented white masculinity as precarious and even victimized by the marginal social and economic

gains of women and people of color.<sup>12</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly adds that the emergent “wounded man” of contemporary cinema transcodes Trump-era discourses of white victimhood that treat general economic precarity as if it were fundamentally the same as the experience of structural racism and misogyny.<sup>13</sup> Noting that representations of white men’s victimization produce corollary portraits of redemption and heroism that attempt to regain what white men have supposedly lost, Johnson concludes that such texts help maintain audience investments in toxic white masculinity.<sup>14</sup> We explore connections between economic precarity and mediated portrayals of white masculinity from a different angle by attending to how streaming nonfiction media have renewed attention to white masculinity’s exploitative relationship with others and to the socioeconomic context that fosters such relationships. By characterizing mediated portrayals of fraudulent entrepreneurs as representations of parasitic masculinity, we draw attention to the fractured status of white masculinity and its intrinsic connections to late-stage capitalism.

Parasitic masculinity has recently appeared in popularized representations of fraudulent entrepreneurs who hustle, self-brand, reshape markets, and generate an impression of success based on possible future rewards. The figure of the entrepreneur dominates the neoliberal political imaginary as a kind of ideal political subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> As the “self-made man” archetype illustrates, the entrepreneur has historically been depicted as a masculine figure engaged in risk-taking, ingenuity, and opportunity-seeking.<sup>16</sup> As Luana Jéssica Oliveira Carmo et. al. explain, the neoliberal entrepreneur is “a subject trained to win.”<sup>17</sup> The traits that characterize the entrepreneur mirror expressions of manhood dominant under Western post-industrial capitalism: speculative, adventurous, resilient, responsible, self-reliant, self-motivated, and self-confident.<sup>18</sup> Such traits also comport with what Tasha Rennels has characterized as “ideal whiteness” under neoliberalism, which privileges white bodies only insofar as they “display the dominant cultural standards” of “wealth, rationality, personal responsibility, and self-control.”<sup>19</sup> Discourses securing hegemonic white masculinity have historically drawn from the image of the entrepreneur to secure the authority and power of white male subjectivity. While the status of the entrepreneur has evolved from that of a specific figure in late capitalism to a subject position under neoliberalism that informs all aspects of human activity,<sup>20</sup> the entrepreneurial figure still captivates the popular imagination to amplify market values and intensify their outcomes.

The entrepreneur is mythic in multiple senses. In one sense, the entrepreneur functions within the ideological system of neoliberal capitalism that evacuates meanings from their historic specificity and ignores their contingent and evolving character.<sup>21</sup> In another sense, the entrepreneur projects an image of the market society, not as it is, but as a fantasy—belying the hopelessness and intractability of persistent stratification and the omnipresence of failure.<sup>22</sup> The entrepreneur is an ideal model of success where formal labor markets are unable to provide meaningful employment or guarantee career advancement. Hegemonic discourses of whiteness and masculinity now offer limited immunity from the overwhelming force of forty years of austerity, privatization, and wealth stratification.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the function and image of the entrepreneur has shifted even as it has maintained its mythic status.

The changing figure of the entrepreneur corresponds with hegemonic masculinity’s own adjustments to fluctuating economic conditions. Delinked from labor by deindustrialization,

globalization, and the rise of the service economy, white masculinity underwent a second decoupling from hegemonic ideals at the outset of the neoliberal period.<sup>24</sup> New market logics shifted hegemonic masculinity from its emphasis on the family breadwinner within a quasi-planned post-war economy to the maximization of individual self-interest through cutthroat competition, ingenuity, self-reliance, and social climbing.<sup>25</sup> Entrepreneurship was especially important to the development of neoliberal governance because it offered a model of success outside of the formal labor market. As Paul du Gay observes, the rise of globalization intensified competitive pressures in the early neoliberal period, forcing corporations to downsize or outsource their workforce to survive.<sup>26</sup> As a result, workers were forced to become entrepreneurs to secure what was once guaranteed by waged labor. Yet, as Wendy Brown contends, the economic rationality that underwrites the self-made man of neoliberalism is difficult to sustain amid the transparent failure of markets to support limitless upward mobility.<sup>27</sup> Particularly since 2008, neoliberal crises have foregrounded the limits of market logics for managing the externalities of capitalism: poverty, inequality, human indignity, and the destruction of the planet. Neoliberalism's inability to manage its own failure to guarantee upward mobility has thus created a crisis of self-confidence for workers. The relatively recent experience of precarity by white men has destabilized the social world of those who were once the primary beneficiaries of market logics.<sup>28</sup>

In an era of perpetual crisis, neoliberalism has transformed hegemonic masculinity by offering an intensified and radically contingent entrepreneurial subject as the new self-made man.<sup>29</sup> Amid its failures to deliver on promises of economic progress, Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser explain that the recent uptick in violent expressions of white masculinity are signs of neoliberalism's failure to secure subjects within its political rationality.<sup>30</sup> The entrepreneur reemerges in this context as an attempt to resecure white men within the subjectifying processes of neoliberal governance. As Michel Foucault observed at the outset of the neoliberal period, the ubiquitous discourse about "enterprise" had already begun to refashion the self-made man as a risk-taker who invests in human capital. The worker had been transformed into "entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital."<sup>31</sup> This new entrepreneurial subject operates in an environment of downward immobility where one tirelessly hustles to get ahead.<sup>32</sup> Post-recessionary neoliberalism injected white masculinity with radical uncertainty that puts white men in an increasingly competitive, atomized, and hyperindividualized position—a subject who must struggle in a cruel and mercurial marketplace.<sup>33</sup> This position marks a new phase in hegemonic masculinity's public appearance.

We suggest that portrayals of parasitic masculinity reveal the full extension of hyperindividualism under conditions of economic precarity and intense wealth stratification in which traits of the self-made man—expertise, leadership, and trustworthiness—cannot guarantee success. Instead, these traits are bought and sold as human commodities. Parasitic masculinity imitates virtues of wealth, personal responsibility and self-reliance in schemes that exploit the credulity of vulnerable populations for profit. In the same way that a parasite disguises itself to feed from its host, this entrepreneurial subject cloaks himself in trusted images of hegemonic manhood (even though he may embody virtually none of those attributes) to pursue risky, opportunistic ventures.

Parasitic masculinity foregrounds white masculinity's strategic yet vulnerable relation to the abject, particularly when amplified by its fusion with free market principles. Conceptually, abjection attends to the vulnerability and permeability of the subject. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection names encounters with objects that threaten subjects with their organic mortality, often but not exclusively substances like bodily fluids and waste as well as corpses and other signs of death and decay.<sup>34</sup> In the broadest sense, the abject is that which "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire."<sup>35</sup> While it prompts the urge to restore normalcy, abjection compels the subject with both fascination and dread. Abjection also refers to anything that can be called alluring yet menacing, an object, image, or experience that violates and helps establish the boundaries of the self. It is the threat of abjection, the desire to witness and cast it aside, that shores up the boundaries between order and disorder.

Much like the consumptive practices it engenders, neoliberalism elicits a perverse reaction.<sup>36</sup> As both a form of governmentality and a political subjectivity, neoliberalism puts a premium on transgression and excess, exemplified by the persistent overturning of the social in the pursuit of extreme and often grotesque forms of private accumulation that nullify democracy and threaten collective well-being.<sup>37</sup> Andrea Cornwall writes that practices under the current economy "have brought new forms of abjection and privation, unspeakable inequalities and an insidious precarity that unsettles the very fabric of our communities."<sup>38</sup> As markets collide with the material limits of the body, we are witnessing new forms of debasement that subject all human life and values to economic calculations. According to these calculations, feeding from the labor and resources of others is not only lucrative but moral.

In its parasitic form, the entrepreneur is both seductive and dangerous as he preys on hegemonic white masculinity's authoritative status in Western culture. For film scholar Claire Sisco King, white masculinity maintains its dominance through "abject hegemony"; it sacrifices some of its core fictions to expand the number of things "white" and "masculine" can be.<sup>39</sup> King suggests that white masculinity remains elusive so that it can inhabit strategic positions of both dominance and weakness, success and failure, allure and repulsion. Parasitic masculinity exhibits hegemonic masculinity's slipperiness by amplifying traditional masculine traits of mastery and strength. Exuding such self-assuredness, however, is precisely what elides the mediocrity and ineptitude of figures such as McFarland, who have historically benefited from the cultural presumption of white men's competence, knowledge, and authority even when they possess little, if any.<sup>40</sup> By attending to two documentaries featuring McFarland, we illustrate how popularized narratives have given form to this emerging masculine subject, thus providing a cultural resource for audiences to reckon with neoliberalism's failure to affirm dominant market, race, and gender myths.

### **The abject state of parasitic masculinity at Fyre Fest**

*Fyre Fraud* and *FYRE* work together to foreground the representative anecdote of parasitic masculinity. Drawing from rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke, Barry Brummett describes the representative anecdote as a formal narrative pattern that structures a set of seemingly disconnected discourses and encapsulates the "essence of a culture's values, concerns and interests in regard to some real-life issues or problems."<sup>41</sup> Brummett emphasizes that the

anecdote does not exist independent of the critic but serves as an interpretive method that functions as a “lens . . . through which the critic studies and reconstructs the discourse” by abstracting from the specific narrative elements of a particular text.<sup>42</sup> By discerning the overarching anecdote, the critic reveals how seemingly mundane discourses give expression to broader social concerns and “equip a culture for living in that situation.”<sup>43</sup> Awareness of a given representative anecdote indicates how textual forms mediate widely shared concerns and anxieties with lessons for responding to these problems insofar as narratives “follow discursively a pattern that people might follow in reality.”<sup>44</sup>

A variety of narratives about enterprising scam artists illuminate the representative anecdote about parasitic masculinity in popular culture. While we could extrapolate from each of them, we elaborate on the Fyre Fest documentaries because we believe it is a compelling instantiation of the anecdote. *FYRE* and *Fyre Fraud* received a largely positive reception upon their release. Both earned Primetime Creative Arts Emmy nominations. With a 92 percent fresh score on Rotten Tomatoes, *FYRE* earned four Emmys in 2019. Although *FYRE* received more critical acclaim, we analyze both films as emblematic of parasitic masculinity given their consecutive release dates, overlapping narrative structure, and concurrent, favorable reception.<sup>45</sup>

Although all popular mediated texts involve elements of drama, the documentary genre is a potent vehicle for promulgating representative anecdotes. Angela Aguayo notes that the status of documentary cinema has shifted in recent years due to the proliferation of widely accessible, commercial documentaries that have circulated broadly alongside an evolving digital culture.<sup>46</sup> While popular documentaries have courted an oppositional culture invested in social justice, Aguayo remarks that they are as intent on entertaining as they are in making a political point. Given their popularity, documentaries are important resources of cultural knowledge. They are rhetorical and ideological insofar as they “ask us to agree that the world itself fits within the frame of its representations and ask us to plan our agenda for action accordingly.”<sup>47</sup> As film scholar Bill Nichols attests, documentary films are “a fiction unlike any other.” While they tell stories through plot and character development, they support propositional arguments with forms of visible evidence that “bear an indexical relation to the historical world.”<sup>48</sup> *FYRE* and *Fyre Fraud* engage in what Nichols identifies as an “expository mode”<sup>49</sup> of documentary film-making that immerses the viewers in the events unfolding on screen through the interplay of archival footage and interviews with witnesses. Nichols explains that this mode’s emphasis on clear causal relations functions to structure documentary “around a solution to a problem or puzzle.”<sup>50</sup> We describe how the representative anecdote of parasitic masculinity emerges through the interaction of archival footage shot by event promoters and festival attendees and interview commentary from participants.

The documentaries portray the failed Fyre Festival as a parable about the devastation wrought by a grotesque, phony, and predatory entrepreneurial scheme. We identify three narrative elements that structure the representative anecdote about parasitic masculinity. The first is the figure of the conniving entrepreneur who is intent on wielding influence for fraudulent financial schemes. The second is the complicity of accomplices allured by the con artist’s performances of authority who enable the entrepreneur to follow through on a series of terrible decisions that have increasingly catastrophic consequences. The third is



the breaking point or climactic moment that publicly exposes the entrepreneur for a fraud. This last feature amplifies elements of abjection to cast parasitic masculinity outside of the bounds of proper entrepreneurial activity.

The Fyre Fest documentaries contribute to this representative anecdote as they document a figure of parasitic masculinity in public culture and render it abject. By exploring how individuals goaded by the myths of entrepreneurial success and white masculine authority ultimately created a scene of abjection that they could not entirely control, the documentaries foreground how parasitic masculinity has emerged to feed upon the myths that have sustained late-stage neoliberalism and ravaged those vulnerable to these myths and their superstructure. This abject framing mediates the crisis induced by the fusion of neoliberalism's disdain for social democracy with white masculinity's culture of impunity, both of which find their most emphatic expression in the aggressive, cruel, and zero-sum politics of white masculinity in the Trump era. Yet, such mediation should not be taken as resistance to the logics of neoliberalism. We conclude by remarking on how the representative anecdote's own hyperindividual emphasis on individual scam artists ultimately disavows the deeper structures of exploitation under neoliberalism that undergird hegemonic masculinity.

#### *A parasite with a pipe dream*

The figure of the conniving entrepreneur is central to the representative anecdote of parasitic masculinity. *FYRE* and *Fyre Fest* present it in the portrait of McFarland as a con artist who sought parasitic attachment and proximity to the hegemonic ideal of entrepreneurial authority in the neoliberal marketplace. Interviews with financial journalists and people associated with McFarland contextualize the events surrounding Fyre Fest within McFarland's previous fraudulent history to suggest that McFarland's public performances of entrepreneurialism belied his strained financial resources. *FYRE* features a variety of interviews with his former associates who describe him as an "amazing entrepreneur" and "one of the world's greatest salesmen." Prior to 2017, his main business was the creation of a membership club called Magnesis that promised to provide millennials with exclusive access to a variety of parties and events in New York City. Archival footage evokes the image of the successful entrepreneur with a keen understanding of how to market services to wealthy millennials. Clips from a Fox Business segment presents McFarland telling reporters that Magnesis would provide young people with a sense of community and information on "what to do, where to go, where to find great things in my city." McFarland performs the role of a high-performing businessman. Wearing a crisp white shirt and charcoal blazer, he exudes confidence as he explains his aptitude for recognizing millennials as an untapped market for services designed to compensate for their feelings of insecurity and isolation. His performance clearly appealed to investors. As *Fyre Fraud* indicates, many former colleagues continued to regard him as "the smartest person [they] know" even after he was arrested on fraud charges.

Interviews with former employees establish that McFarland exuded an image of wealth that he did not actually possess. His former employee Martin Howell tells *FYRE* cameras that McFarland purposely drove a Maserati and flew to meetings in private jets to maintain a "brand image" that would appeal to potential customers; former Magnesis employee

Emily Boehm appears in *Fyre Fraud*, explaining that he had orchestrated a small-scale Ponzi-scheme prior to his work on the festival, selling event tickets he did not have and using the sale of future tickets to pay for those tickets that he had already sold. All together, witness accounts indicate that his careful attention to self-branding was designed to advance his success in the absence of financial capital. What appeared to be emblematic of his identity as a successful entrepreneur was a hollow performance that appealed to the needs of millennials but offered little if any substance.

*Fyre Fraud* situates McFarland's actions within the cultural and economic context that enabled him to persuade wealthy millennials, illustrating how parasitic masculinity thrives under conditions of generational precarity that have developed over the past forty years. One segment uses voiceover commentary from Tolentino alongside a montage of news and television clips to suggest that McFarland opportunistically fed upon millennials' collective preoccupation with influence, status, economic precarity, and fear of missing out. Tolentino describes a millennial universe populated by fear, victimization, and planetary-level disaster as she notes that young people "want to construct their own reality" as an escape from constant reminders of economic precarity and instability, that they "dream of being successful . . . and beyond accountability." A montage of video clips including immigrant refugees on a raft and a scene from the reality television programme *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* appear alongside Tolentino's commentary to highlight how global precarity and influencer culture provided McFarland with opportunities for entrepreneurial gain.

As *Fyre Fraud* narrates McFarland's personal history of fraud alongside the development of the internet, social media culture, and the precarity of living under late capitalism, it illustrates how McFarland is a byproduct of a culture preoccupied with status and the pursuit of extraordinary experiences. By connecting McFarland within a broader culture context, the segment presents the Fyre Fest as a metonymy for conditions that make millennials exploitable. The film situates his fraudulent actions within a culture that wants to believe his fantastical lies because they offer a temporary reprieve from abject encounters with the fragility of all things. This is an environment in which the parasite thrives.

The documentaries suggest that the Fyre Fest was much like McFarland himself: an approximation of an ideal experience with no infrastructure to support it. The festival was intended to lure wealthy millennials to a beautiful private island in the Bahamas with the promise of an exclusive luxury music festival. McFarland's goal, however, was to use it as a platform to promote a new app in development with hip-hop musician Ja Rule. The problem was that neither of these individuals had experience with planning festivals, nor did they have an interest in developing this expertise. The goal was to market a fantasy more than to provide consumers with an experience. McFarland's genius was in recognizing that he could exploit millennials with a fantasy built on brand images. In doing so, he invented new markets and created value from nothing at all, which is ultimately what late-stage neoliberal capitalism requires.

Both films elaborate how marketing strategies sold this fantasy. Marketing executives and film-makers hired to promote the event explain that McFarland and his Vice President of Marketing, Grant Margolin, hired several supermodels to appear in a promotional video with them on Norman's Cay in the Bahamas, which they advertised as the former

residence of Pablo Escobar. Footage from the shoot depicts the models laughing together, playing with wild pigs, and celebrating on a large yacht surrounded by bright blue water off the coast of what appears to be a largely uninhabited island. In addition to the promotional video, McFarland invested in social media influencers such as Kendall Jenner who was paid \$250,000 for one Instagram post about the festival. The gorgeous imagery and influencer endorsements explain why people paid thousands of dollars to support or attend the event. The fantasy of the festival was pristine—far removed from the world’s mounting economic and environment catastrophes.

The men’s commitment to image over logistics and vision without planning illustrates parasitic masculinity’s attachment to the signifiers of expertise, wealth, and status in the absence of material resources necessary to fully embody these ideals. McFarland appears invested in cultivating a world of status driven by the fantasy of white masculine virility. As Boehm recounts on *Fyre Fraud*, the shoot featured “beautiful women and random white guys for no reason.” *FYRE*’s footage of the influencer video suggests that McFarland keenly understood the market for the festival needed to be enticed by his vision. Speaking to models and other event planners huddled around a bonfire at night, McFarland announces: “We’re selling a pipe dream to your average loser.” Ja Rule corrects him: “Selling a pipe dream to fucking buyers!” McFarland adds, “Your average guy in middle America.” It is a remarkable moment, captured on camera because the marketing team was instructed to film “everything” that happened during the weekend of the promotional shoot. McFarland’s remarks lay bare the competitive logics underlying neoliberal thought in which unregulated markets necessarily entail winners and losers within a system that offers nothing to those who struggle and fail.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, McFarland’s remarks suggest he regarded potential festivalgoers as suckers who might want to see themselves in the fantasy image McFarland carefully crafted for himself—an approximation-yet-imitation of ideal whiteness. By depicting McFarland as a liar and a scam artist, *FYRE* and *Fyre Fraud* illustrate how parasitic masculinity establishes its authority via deceptive images of wealth and social status.

In exposing this fantasy as a fraud, the films foreground the abjectification of masculinity that is dictated by market logics. In *FYRE* clips that do not make it into the promotion shoot, McFarland and Margolin appear buffoonish as they sidle up to the models and joke about their celebrity acumen and sexual prowess. Marketing Director for Matte Projects Brett Kinkaid describes the weekend as “more of a party than a promotional shoot”; a photograph of McFarland, passed out on the beach in broad daylight, accompanies his remarks. Kinkaid notes that the models “didn’t really know what they were there to do.” While McFarland behaves as though the models have chosen to spend leisure time with him, Kinkaid intimates that he and others on the film crew understand the reality: the models are smiling and laughing because it is their job. Additional footage from the influencer video highlights the illusory nature of McFarland’s fantasy. The footage captures McFarland and Grant carefully scripting out “genuine shots” of their activities planning the festival. As their “genuine” interaction was anything but, the two repeat and rehearse their conversation multiple times. By amplifying his failed effort to embody masculine ideals, the documentaries construct McFarland as part *homo economicus*, part sociopath—scrounging and opportunistically feeding on both hegemonic masculinity as well as the credulity

of accomplices, customers, and financiers persuaded by his performance. Interviews with festival organizers in both documentaries reveal that there was nothing authentic about McFarland's efforts to prepare for the festival. Escobar never lived on Norman's Cay and when the owners learned that McFarland had advertised the festival as Escobar's former home, they pulled their contract, leaving McFarland in need of a new location with just weeks left to prepare. Through the portrayal of McFarland's fraudulent efforts to build his brand image as a successful and attractive entrepreneur, the documentaries present an entrepreneurial actor who embodies a form of transgressive masculinity that is the byproduct of U.S. culture's pathological embrace of extreme market logics.<sup>52</sup> He is the epitome of parasitic masculinity's abject status.

### *The ruse of magical thinking*

Beyond the figure of the scam artist, parasitic masculinity necessarily involves a broader organization of willing participants in fraudulent schemes. In quotidian terms, con artists need accomplices to carry out a con. As a subject formation, parasitic masculinity depends on a host which is comprised of others who have incorporated the entrepreneur's fantasy of unparalleled success into their psyche as well as the broader cultural fantasies of neoliberal hyperindividualism that make fraudulent performances of self-mastery compelling.

By approximating the image of white masculine authority, McFarland captivated accomplices whose own aspirations of upward mobility and financial growth ensnared them into investing time and finances into the scheme. The films explain that McFarland convinced the festival's investors, promoters, and organizers to finance and plan the event despite overwhelming evidence that they did not have the resources to pull it off on time. Both documentaries concentrate on moments when these individuals become irrevocably committed to seeing his preposterous fantasy through. A variety of McFarland's former associates pinpoint the moment at which the alluring fantasy could not overcome the material limits of reality—the point at which neoliberal fantasies collided with conditions of impossibility—even as they continued to prepare for the festival. They explain that McFarland's vision of the festival was alluring because it was a masculinist fantasy of wealth and sex and repulsive because it entailed extraordinary risk. This perverse mixture of desire and trepidation propelled the festival organizers despite their certainty of its failure.

Interviews with event organizers imply that McFarland preyed upon accomplices' desires for self-efficacy and achievement, fundamental attributes of the ideal neoliberal subject. The commentary offers a powerful illustration of "magical thinking and narcissistic fantasies of omnipotence" in late capitalism.<sup>53</sup> Former employee of the festival's marketing agency Oren Acks told *Fyre Fraud* that he realized planning a music festival in six months was impossible, yet he decided to "just do it," because he and his coworkers "We're, you know—We're both pros at what we do. What could go wrong?" Rhetoric scholars Josh Gunn and Dana Cloud describe such "magical voluntarism" as "an inability to recognize the structural, political, economic, cultural, and psychological limits of an individual's ability to act in her own interests."<sup>54</sup> As an orientation to one's self-efficacy, magical voluntarism is cultivated by neoliberal logics that ignore structural limits on individual agency in pursuit of self-enterprise and personal achievement. Acks recalls that when other companies began to pull out of the festival, his agency dismissed suggestions that the festival could

ultimately fail. Although he is critical of his glib attitude after the fact, Acks illustrates how the hyperindividualized entrepreneurial subject can prey on white men's unshakeable belief in their own self-efficacy and capitalize on masculinist fantasies of wealth and success. Driven by magical thinking, the festival's promoters were willing to cast rational judgment aside.

Many of the festival's planners and promoters observe how their judgment was clouded by McFarland's confidence and audacity. Interviewees recall a series of "red flags" they ignored because they were misled by McFarland's phony image of expertise and authority. Music festival consultant Marc Weinstein told *FYRE*'s cameras that he begged McFarland to cancel the event because they failed to secure the necessary accommodations. He notes that McFarland wished away his concerns with the power of positive thinking: "We're not a problems-focused group. We're a solutions-oriented group. We need to have a positive attitude about this." In a radical embrace of the "power of positive thinking" trumpeted by such popular culture self-help manuals as *The Secret*, Weinstein explains that McFarland's unshakeable confidence caused him to doubt his own concerns. He asks, "Is this guy a genius or is he a madman? Because he would not take 'no' for an answer and he would not take advice." (Of course, financial interests also propelled McFarland's associates. Weinstein admits that 70 percent of his fee was dependent on making the festival a reality, exposing his financial stake in continuing a vision he knew was not only impossible but dangerous.)

The "madman or genius" frame suggests that McFarland's narcissistic attachment to the hegemonic ideal of the successful entrepreneur was infectious, causing multiple stakeholders to ignore their better judgment and engage in delusional thinking. Event organizers became seemingly transfixed by McFarland's entrepreneurial ethos even as unchangeable material conditions made the limits of his vision abundantly clear. Even Calvin Wells, the festival's most outspoken detractor, observed in *Fyre Fraud* that he started to question his own judgment: "Am I wrong? Am I crazy?" In *FYRE*, Wells marveled at how well McFarland's pipe dream fooled "very smart financial guys." Yet, this is precisely how the entrepreneurial actor succeeds; they gamble on an uncertain future, engender phony confidence in their abilities, and exploit others' greed and willingness to believe. McFarland cultivated both confidence in his abilities to will success into reality and self-doubt for those who believed that they otherwise knew better than to play along. Creative Director Mark Masters observed, "You couldn't differentiate between what was true and what was not true."

The sequences leading up to the day of the festival foreground how parasitic masculinity operates within an illusion of mastery that cultivates extraordinary and delusional perseverance against reality-defying odds. McFarland persuaded his associates by engendering belief in their own skills, even as the events started to sputter out of control. And sputter out control they did. After establishing numerous stakeholders' credulity and self-delusion, the movies chronicle the harried days leading up to the first day of the event. For *Fyre Fraud*, Acks relays the intense feeling of dread that set in with less than a month remaining: "There's so much money, so much momentum, so much force behind everything that it's like 'this train's not stopping.'" The film's pace quickens to a fever pitch. The music intensifies and becomes more ominous as a countdown of days remaining are projected in between commentary and footage of the chaotic preparations on Great Exuma,

the island they ultimately secured for the event. A variety of figures recount the many obstacles facing festival planners as a countdown scrolls at the bottom of the screen. As the days decrease in number, obstacles mount. With less than two weeks remaining, the police shut down construction because the organizers were not paying national insurance. With less than a week remaining, the planners still had not secured enough accommodations for the guests. With five days left, they had yet to establish the communications infrastructure because McFarland had not paid customs. Interviewees summarize the mood on Exuma: “panic,” “breakdowns,” “shitshow,” “chaos and anarchy.” Finally, “1 Day Out” appears in markedly larger font size. The crew recounts their experience of what one characterizes as an “act of God”: a deluge of rain, thunder, and lightning. Amplified by footage of torrential rain, one person recalls “We’re fucked.” This rapid and intense countdown ends with a shot of flood waters rushing toward and enveloping the camera, followed by a shot of an alarm clock buzzing at 5:00. This montage of failure brings the spectator to the day of disaster. It’s time to face the music (or the lack thereof).

In documenting the lead-up to the day of the event, each film illustrates how parasitic masculinity operates by way of an enticing but dangerous ruse of expertise, vision, and capability to succeed despite all signs to the contrary. Much like a parasite, the entrepreneurial actor seeks out a hospitable environment in which to feed off other people’s greed, self-confidence, and desire to mirror hegemonic models of masculine success. The relationship between parasite and host is symbiotic insofar as everyone believes they will profit from the same delusion. But this relationship collapses when material conditions pose the limits to the neoliberal imagination and its appetite for financial success freed from the imperatives of costs, labor, or expertise. By illustrating how each individual lie, misdeed, and careless decision further entrenched McFarland’s accomplices, the films prime viewers for the big reveal: What kind of abject horrors await the guests heading to Exuma?

### *The shit show*

*FYRE* and *Fyre Fraud* highlight the breaking point of schemes driven by parasitic masculinity in climaxes that revel in the abject consequences of the festival. Both movies detail how an intoxicating fantasy of opulence, status, and sex appeal devolved into drunken festivalgoers sleeping on mud-soaked mattresses in FEMA tents without food, potable water, or bathrooms. In this regard, the documentaries portray the festival’s failure in terms of disgust, most notably in the contrast between the alluring promises of the huckster with the violation, filth, and defilement that results when entrepreneurial schemes misfire. Attendees were literally confronted by the material limits of the body. In another sense, the documentaries portray the fraud perpetrated by McFarland and his enablers as abject because it resulted in a botched event that was both horrific and comedic. Both documentaries frame the festival as a horror/comedy that transfixed spectators with a mixture of shock and amusement. As lawyer Ben Meislas explains in *Fyre Fraud*, “It would be perplexing and funny if it wasn’t criminal. And it is criminal, but it is still perplexing. And still a little funny too . . . but horrible.”

Even before the climactic moment when festivalgoers arrive on the island, the documentaries frame the festival in terms of abjection. The word “shit” appears frequently in *FYRE*, to characterize McFarland (as a “shit” or as being “full of shit”), to characterize the

preparations for the event (as “a shit show”) or to document how Ja Rule responded in aftermath, urging Magnesium employees (to dig themselves “out of this shit.”). *Fyre Fraud* also documents that festival planners knew the event was “going to be a shitstorm” when vendors began to withdraw, and that the attendees had “a shitfit” when they arrived on the island. These excremental metaphors draw from perhaps the most repulsive of bodily wastes to amplify the chaos, disorder, and bodily vulnerability of what transpired when festivalgoers landed on Great Exuma.

The documentaries’ “shit” talk is a signpost for how McFarland’s scheme was bolstered by white masculine fortifications of the self vis-à-vis the abject status of others—the average loser—that he and his accomplices bore no responsibility toward. In an early scene in *FYRE*, one of the first festival consultants, Keith, raises concerns regarding the lack of available toilets on Norman’s Cay. McFarland and Margolin deflect Keith’s concerns, opting to fire him rather than address the crisis that would ensue should attendees not have access to toilets during the festival. Their deflection speaks to the ways the male symbolic order has repressed its debt to the natural world. The symbolic economy that is driven by the fantasy of masculine control over pristine wilderness and feminine beauty cannot reckon with the materiality of the body and its messy entailments.<sup>55</sup> Ironically, their refusal to address the material limits of their vision ultimately led to a shit show, literally and figuratively.

The day of the festival is a scene of abjection. Images of the campgrounds after the monsoon rainstorm the morning before the festival was to begin feature rain-soaked mattresses stacked up along the road and tent supplies spilling out of abandoned cargo beds. In *Fyre Fraud*, a fence separating the grounds from the precipice of a high cliff appears to have collapsed, likely a result of the previous night’s downpour. Oren Acks narrates the scene, “The first thing I thought is, these are FEMA tents. What have I done?! My child is Satan!” It is fitting that Acks characterized his work in terms of an iconic horror figure. Indeed, much of the footage taken from the first 24 hours of the festival replicates conventions of horror. The documentary’s pacing structure builds to this climactic moment that event planners had anticipated with both trepidation and glee: the moment when McFarland’s festival was exposed as a fraud. Like the conventions of horror, the documentaries position viewers as knowing audiences, aware of the menacing threat that had been growing behind the scenes of unsuspecting victims’ carefree lives. Once guests begin arriving on the campgrounds, they are forced to confront the monster lurking in the shadows. The exuberant festivalgoers who have been lured to Great Exuma are finally subjected to parasitic masculinity’s monstrous creation.

Footage of festival attendees’ arrival foregrounds their shock and surprise. Both documentaries include footage taken from an attendee member’s camera phone shot from inside a yellow school bus transporting arrivals from the airport. The camera provides a long view of the campground as the phone’s audio captures sounds of people groaning from inside the bus. *Fyre Fraud* presents events with a mixture of levity and horror. A woman asks, “what are we going to do?” followed by a man who laughs, “we have burned down all of our money.” The footage and accounts of the rest of the day’s events depict other scenes of disorder resulting from McFarland’s poor management.

The movies suggest that circumstances became particularly dire once the sun went down. *FYRE* presents a montage of videos taken from attendees' camera phones after dark. Here, the documentary visually conforms to the conventions of a found footage horror film combined with German expressionism. The first shot is from a video selfie taken by a woman walking by herself down a road dimly lit by a car's headlights. The glare from the headlights casts long shadows of the figures walking behind her. Her eyes widen as she glances in their direction and remarks, "It's . . . an absolute disaster." Subsequent footage documents the campers' desperation and panic. One guest notes that the campground "became barbaric." A subsequent shot confirms this. Someone is recording events in front of them. A dim light from behind makes the cameraperson's shadow stretch vertically across the screen. Damaged FEMA tents spread out across the upper third of the screen. As the camera shifts from left to right, someone screams, "Run!" in the background. The effect is both disorienting and terrifying.

Although the night scenes of the festival are alarming, the most broadly circulated social media image taken during the festival was posted the next day: a cheese sandwich. Revolting in its presentation, the sandwich consisted of a lone piece of American cheese with a smear of yellow mustard on wheat bread, accompanied by a small salad. The documentaries suggest that the pathetic meal announced the festival's dismal failure to the rest of the world because the image revealed that everything used to market the event—beautiful models, a pristine beach—was a lie. By establishing the festival's failure through the lone image of a cheese sandwich, the movies force a confrontation between the fantasy of the con and the material realities of human existence, the demand for food even when the only sustenance available is oil and condiments on bread. The documentaries' production tactics and storytelling devices—both sickening and frightening—invite viewers to remain fixated and horrified by the outcome of the organizers' delusions of male superordination.

This reckoning is not merely a confirmation of a material reality that McFarland's fantasy elided. The documentaries' encounter with the abject is also an effort to reestablish boundaries between the social and the antisocial in the wake of the serious harms caused by reckless disregard for others in the pursuit of wealth and status. In addition to putting festival attendees in a precarious living environment, McFarland defrauded his employees, contractors, and investors. The FBI concluded that McFarland had defrauded 80 "victim investors" of "\$24 million dollars" all together. He also owed a quarter million in wages to local workers on Great Exuma who were never compensated for their labor. In heartbreaking testimony, a local restaurant owner explained to *FYRE*'s cameras that she lost \$50,000 of her life savings to pay her workers when McFarland directed initial busloads of arrivals to her business when he had nowhere else to take them. She begins to tear up as she reflects, "I am really hurt from that. To see nobody return to say 'Let me take care of what she has done, we know she has done right.' . . . It really pains me when I have to talk about it, so I just wipe it away.'" The restaurant owner's commentary amplifies the extent to which McFarland was willing to put others in financial ruin and positions viewers to exult in the McFarland's prison sentence.

By connecting the abject spectacle of the festival's failure to the figure of McFarland himself, these documentaries represent white masculinity as the source of abjection—



emphasizing how greed, fraud, exploitation, boundary violations, fecklessness, and a careless disregard for human life are characteristics articulated to certain enactments of white masculinity. The emphasis on abjection foregrounds how the politics of disposability underwrites parasitic masculinity. McFarland's willingness to put others in vulnerable and precarious positions, his careless disregard for others' basic human needs, is part and parcel with his selling the fantasy of escape to men who might identify with him. He targeted people who were exploitable because they were vulnerable, and once people became unexploitable, they were entirely expendable. In this regard, the films illustrate the larger con game of white masculine sovereignty which relies on a legacy of colonial relations based on the exploitation of Black and brown bodies to shore up structures of white power and authority.

### *The world is on Fyre*

We have argued that *Fyre Fraud* and *FYRE* stage an encounter with parasitic masculinity by illuminating its fraudulent, self-serving, and exploitative character. This grotesque ethos can be found in the ubiquitous frauds and Ponzi schemes perpetrated under the banner of entrepreneurialism and financialization. The cultural preoccupation with Fyre Fest and similar scams speaks to audience desires to reckon with the cultural conditions that have made fraud and mass deception seem ubiquitous. Beyond the cultural schadenfreude of gawking at gullible millennials, Fyre Fest refracts many conjunctural assemblages that constitute millennials' experience with the late stages of neoliberal capitalism—a convergence of social, economic, and technological transformations that have eviscerated the social good. Our pathological attachment to market governmentality has wrought a ceaseless onslaught of deceptions that tear at the fabric of community and make all life expendable. Indeed, such characteristics became emblematic of manhood in the Trump era.<sup>56</sup> As Meiselas jests "There [was], essentially, a Fyre Festival going on every day in the West Wing."

Donald Trump's ascendance to the White House provided an aperture into the grotesque politics of aggressive white masculinity intermingled with crass and exploitive entrepreneurialism—with near weekly revelations of either sexual misconduct or fraudulent business schemes.<sup>57</sup> Trump's election coincided with intensifying economic precarity particularly among younger demographics who express little faith in the doctrines of neoliberal capitalism.<sup>58</sup> The authority crisis fomented by Trumpism is reflected in the proliferation of stories of white men, who, when exposed for their petty entitlement and malign incompetence, reveal themselves to be monsters. Media culture's fascination with the parasitic masculinity of the entrepreneurial subject marks white masculinity's contested status in the US. While white masculine hegemony has rested upon a legacy of control over other people's resources, lands, and movements, its implicit authority has undergone scrutiny in the face of growing austerity on a precarious planet. The spectacular failure of Fyre Fest conveyed this increasing cynicism toward the myths that have empowered white men to direct life on this planet. To use a recurring phrase from both documentaries, attachments to the fantasy of white masculine authority are a "shit show."

We suggest that naming and pinning down this form of masculinity as parasitic offers important resources for publics to critically engage with the ubiquity of fraud and impunity in U.S. business and political culture at a conjunctural moment in which the myths

sustaining the superordination of white masculinity are approaching their material limits. Because abjection speaks to a common subjectifying experience, the documentaries create an entry point for audiences to grapple with the horrifying yet alluring spectacle of white masculinity and the overwhelming totality of neoliberal failure. These documentaries confront spectators with a form of white masculine abjection to reestablish cultural boundaries and prohibitions that might otherwise contain the surfeits of white masculine impunity.

By narrating these stories in terms of the abject, popular texts such as the Fyre documentaries both redraw and restore the boundaries of the white masculine order. Although media culture's investments in rendering parasitic masculinity abject reasserts a social commitment to the common good that violates the crass individualism inherent to neoliberal ideology, we remain wary of media culture's fascination with abject masculinity. Stories of contemporary fraudsters expose how traditional authority and the rule of law are ill-equipped to respond to those who display a reckless disregard toward civic conventions and human life. Yet these narratives routinely turn to traditional figures of authority (the FBI agent, the civil attorney, the business reporter) to restore borders between the abject and the clean social body. At the same time, it is the ongoing allure of the self-made man, powerful in his unbridled capacity to make his world in his image that forms the grounds for parasitic masculinity.

Essentially, all entrepreneurialism is parasitic. The opportunism it depends upon flourishes in downward economies as it strives to create and satisfy needs under conditions of scarce resources and growing wealth stratification. Narratives like *FYRE* and *Fyre Fest* perform a scapegoating function insofar as they resolve the crisis of neoliberal failure through the arrest and expulsion of its most abject adherents like McFarland who embody the excesses of hyperindividualism. While McFarland was convicted of fraud, others like him continue to exploit the vulnerability of others through both legal and illicit financialization schemes and hollow promises of future success. Public derision toward individuals such as McFarland distracts us from scrutinizing the conditions that produce parasitic masculinity in the first place and inure us from the less spectacular forms of abjection within late-stage neoliberal economies. The biggest threat to society is not the parasite per se but the host that arouses its thirst.

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