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“WE AIN’T PLAYING F*CKING NICE...”:
REACTIONARY FANDOM, PLAYFUL PLATFORMS, AND THE WHITE MASCULINE
CRUSADER FAN IDENTITY

by

ANTHONY DANNAR

Under the Direction of Ethan Tussey, PhD

ABSTRACT

This dissertation will explore the role of brand culture, digital platforms, and fan play in the development of a reactionary fan identity that I call the white masculine crusader (WMC). By interrogating the playful affordances of digital platforms and how people adopt fan practices in reaction to contemporary politics, I reveal three distinct (yet interconnected) fannish and playful embodied expressions of reactionary politics and white supremacy conspiracy theories (the tactical body, the fit body, and the spiritual body). The following chapters highlight how fan communities not only seek and spread reactionary content but often poach brands to play out fantasies of fighting back against a world corrupted by secularism, multi-culturalism, and

progressive politics. This dissertation is designed to show how our current media environment, through playful and preparatory practices, enables the persistence of white supremacy and the growth of far-right extremism.

INDEX WORDS: Fan studies, Platform studies, Digital media, The capitol insurrection, Reactionary fandom, Right-wing extremism, Playful media, Fan Identity, Embodiment, Fan bodies, White Supremacy

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ANTHONY DANNAR

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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2023

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DEDICATION

Five years ago, I told my wife Elinda I wanted to change my career and to go back to school. At that time, we were running a small business, raising a three-year-old boy, and had another child on the way. Nevertheless, my wife supported my decision without question, knowing that together we could accomplish anything.

I must admit there were challenging moments. My first semester of coursework was particularly grueling. I remember the late nights when Elinda was out fighting fires and I was responsible for my infant daughter's late night bottle feedings. I got pretty good at rocking her to sleep while simultaneously finishing my assigned readings for the week. The two-hour commute to Atlanta also took a toll on me. However, I was not only determined to get my PhD but stay an integral part of my family's life. Elinda was always in my corner and made it clear that quitting was not an option.

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful wife Elinda, my hero and love of my life. There are not enough words to express how grateful I am for you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1. WMC What Masculine Crusader
2. SLD Safe Life Defense
3. WOD Work out of the Day
4. COH Church of the Highlands

1 INTRODUCTION

During the attack on the Capitol Building, one unidentified man screamed, "We ain't playing fucking nice (The New Yorker, 2021)!" While he likely hoped to express how serious his actions were, the word "play" caught my attention. Could theories of play explain why a collection of Trump supporters assaulted police officers, destroyed government property, and called for the hanging of members of Congress? When I first entered my Ph.D. program, I was not interested in writing about reactionary politics, white supremacy, and domestic terrorism. Instead, I wanted to focus on fandom. However, my time reviewing the literature on fan studies has revealed the importance of considering the darker side of fandom. As Stanfill (2020, p. 130) writes, "Fan behavior, at its worst, can be terroristic." No better example of the terroristic potential of fan behavior is the January 6th Capitol Insurrection, where individuals acted like soldiers and spies as they breached the Capitol Building and searched through documents on the desks of members of Congress. It was almost as if they were playing out a QAnon¹ treasure hunt, hoping to find evidence in the physical realm that validated the transmedia story world they helped to create in online spaces. Recently, I participated in a roundtable discussion with three other fan scholars pointing to new territories for fan studies (Petersen et al., 2023). We collectively stressed the usefulness of applying the tools of fan studies and theories of play to conspiracy theory movements such as QAnon, militia groups like the Proud Boys, and domestic terrorist events like the Capitol Insurrection. This dissertation's following case studies will be engaging with similar themes.

¹ QAnon is a conspiracy theory movement which mentions celebrities, politicians, and companies as culprits in an underground crime syndicate of Satan-worshipping pedophiles (Hodson & Gosse; 2022; Packer & Stoneman, 2021).

This dissertation will explore the role of brand culture, digital platforms, and fan play in sustaining the myth of white masculine superiority and the persistence of a prominent body ideology centered around white supremacist conspiracy theories and reactionary politics. Critical scholars have focused on how media frame the binary between adored and despised bodies (Frankenberg et al. 1997; Dyer 1997; Jeffords 1994; Bernardi, 2007; McRobbie, 2020). These frames certainly influence fandom, but as fan scholars reevaluate fan studies' progressive politics, it is time to reevaluate the relationship between fans and body paradigms (Affuso & Scott, 2023). By exploring the playful affordances of digital platforms and how people adopt fan practices in reaction to contemporary politics, I will show how fans use play and body presentation to establish transmedia narratives about their place in the socio-political hierarchy. This dissertation will include a multifaceted analysis of three seemingly disconnected fan communities and their role in the maturation of the *white masculine crusader* (WMC) fan identity. I argue that this fan identity is politically reactionary (in the sense that it is centered around a safeguarding and rationalization of the status quo)² and defined by the imperative to prepare the body for an uncertain future in which citizens might be called to defend (and in some cases avenge) a particular perception of America which legitimizes and reinforces their position in the social hierarchy. These fan communities not only accept this body ideology and the challenge of preparedness but perform this identity through the playful affordances of digital technologies. This dissertation will examine the WMC fan identity through three iterations: the tactical body, the fit body, and the spiritual body. While each chapter focuses on a specific segment of American popular culture and its surrounding fan communities, each works in

² Capelos and Katsanidou (2018; p.1274) define reactionarism as a political orientation, typically associated with right ideologies, centered around “a desire for change backwards, the restoration of an undefined time in the past, combined with a resentful affectivity and sense of injustice.”

concert to paint an increasingly comprehensive picture of the WMC fan identity. Given that the convergence culture industry is more likely to deem masculine practices as legitimate (Scott, 2019), the WMC fan identity is developing into a recognizable, profitable, and marketable segment of the digital economy. Thus, this dissertation is designed to show how our current media environment, through playful and preparatory practices, enables the persistence of white supremacy and the growth of far-right extremism.

1.1 Foundational Thoughts

1.1.1 Reactionary Fandom

Literature has been abundant on the long history of political reactionarism (Berlet & Lyons, 2000) and the rise of far-right communities in America (Kelly, 2017; Kitts, 2021; Stern, 2019). However, this dissertation interrogates the “intersection of the reactionary and the fannish” (Stanfill, 2020, p. 125), or reactionary fandom, through the framework of fan embodiment and play to best describe the ways fans operationalize, or “poach” (Jenkins, 1992), media celebrities, popular culture texts, and brands to play out stories about themselves and the society in which they live. What separates fans from general audiences has been debated extensively. Nonetheless, the three qualities fan scholars have consistently assigned to fandom include the development of intense affective attachment towards certain celebrities or texts (Grossberg, 2002; Jones, 2014; Lewis, 1992; Wilson, 2016), the sustained sense of belonging and membership in a knowledge community (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Gray et al., 2007; 2017; De Kosnik, 2021), and the active participation “in the construction and circulation of textual meaning” (Jenkins, 1992, p.24; Bacon-Smith, 1992; Hills, 2002). More recently, some fan scholars suggest that the dichotomy between fans and non-fans becomes increasingly meaningless in the digital age (Booth, 2010; Petersen, 2022; Sandvoss et

al., 2017; Stein, 2015). The digital practices traditionally associated with fandom may no longer be exclusive to fan communities but have developed into a popular model of digital participation. It may be far more helpful to think of digital culture and fan cultures as "a complex web of mutual influences and modes of participation" (Petersen, 2022, p.1). However, I would contend that there are additional theoretical and methodological benefits to examining reactionary communities through a fan studies lens. For example, the tools of fan studies can shine a brighter light on the importance of emotions, identity performance, and play to ideological communities, even those centered around hate.

Fan studies as a field is well-suited to ask what social, cultural, economic, and psychological structures inspire such strong feelings and motivate fans to behave in toxic ways. Rather than emotional attachment, fans often internalize their fan objects to the extent that it fuses with their identity. Fan objects can provide a sense of "ontological security" (Williams, 2015) or a mode of self-construction in which fans mirror their sense of self-identity through specific interpretations of textual material (Sandvoss, 2005). Therefore, fans often perceive changes to a fan object as an external attack on the "internal object of fandom introjected within the self" (Hills 2017, 21). It may not be surprising when fan communities, especially those once considered niche, see mainstream acceptance as a threat to the integrity of the fan object and react in toxic ways. This is not meant to excuse toxic fan behavior or revert to the days of labeling fans as pathological (Jensen, 1992). However, it is worth acknowledging that the qualities of aggression and defensiveness associated with fan entitlement might be baked into the biographical aspects of the fan (especially fans who experience a degree of privilege in society). Exacerbating the toxic potential of fandom is the tendency for some communities to center their fandom around white visibility politics. Wanzo (2015, p.1.4) advocates placing a particular

identity at the center of interpretive practices, writing that "an investment in whiteness may be foundational to some groups of fans." Thus, affection for a fan object can be fueled by a sense of "representation duty," doubling as political activism (Martin, 2019).

Fan scholars have become increasingly concerned with how the many tactics and practices once characterized by fan scholars as resistant, transformative, progressive, and altruistic are co-opted by reactionary communities to spread misinformation and conspiracies (Lamerich et al., 2018; Petersen, 2022; Reinhard et al., 2022), harass marginalized communities (Blodgett, 2020; Phillips, 2015; 2018; Massanari, 2017) and stir up controversy and muddy political discourse (Pande, 2018; Williams and Bennett, 2022).³ The characteristics of identity politics, which motivated women and marginalized fans to form supportive communities and produce their alternative works, have become (or perhaps have always been) the centerpiece of far-right and hate-centered communities. The intersection of politics and fans of popular culture has a storied history in fan studies (De Kosnik, 2008; Ruddock, 2005; Sandvoss, 2013; Van Zoonen, 2005). Fan scholars have explored how fan communities engage in "fan activism" or "fan-based citizenship" to motivate others to engage in the public sphere (Hinck, 2019; Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Conversely, fan scholarship has also explored how affective attachment drives individuals and communities to spread political messaging and deploy fannish tactics (Davisson, 2016; De Kosnik, 2008; Miller, 2020). Framing political enthusiasm as a form of fandom explains the more personal and dedicated forms of media consumption and production. Politicized fandom may now be an established feature of contemporary politics, significantly shaping citizen participation in political debate and the democratic process (Dean, 2017).

³ It should be noted that this new area of fan scholarship is not just studying the inverse of progressive fandom but reassessing just how progressive these practices, communities, and cultures were to begin with.

Stanfill (2020) has stressed the importance of expanding our understanding of fandom to other aspects of politicization, including growing racial tension, cultural wars, and conflict in fandom. "Reactionary fandom" is not simply another type of "anti-fan" (Gray, 2003), for these fans do not only indicate opposition to texts or celebrities, but the group's ideology is socially and culturally regressive (Serazio & Thorson, 2020). Thus, reactionary fandom does not simply explain how fan communities tend to embrace right-leaning politics but how communities and movements that are politically reactionary (such as the alt-right, Proud Boys, and QAnon) adopt fannish practices. While some may assume that the anonymized nature of online forums fuels far-right movements, micro-celebrity tactics have become increasingly influential in reactionary, anti-progressive, and conspiratorial politics (Lewis, 2020). Digital media personalities such as Richard Spencer, Milo Yiannopoulos, and Gavis McInnes have gained widespread recognition for their regressive and reactionary content on large user-generated platforms like Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Other internet personalities like Joe Rogan, who often portray themselves as politically neutral, continually spread misinformation and give legitimacy to conspiracy theories. Considering that a sense of belonging and membership often sustains fandom in an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) and functions as sites of hierarchy and exclusion, it should not be surprising that fan behavior resonates so well with reactionary ideologies. Reactionary communities also borrow the marginalized label often associated with fandom and frame their communities as a people oppressed by progressive or "woke" culture and changing demographics, expressing feelings of the world being rigged against them and seeking like-minded individuals to share and strengthen their grievances.

While fannish, the WMC fan identity is not centered around media or popular culture objects nor is it a type of anti-fandom of multiculturalism, feminism, and progressive ideologies

(although they indeed direct their animosity towards those things). Instead, the fan communities in this dissertation could be described as a type of citizenship-based fandom. Closely related to what Hinck (2019, p.6) calls “fan-based citizenship,” or “public engagement that emerges from a commitment to a fan object,” the individuals and communities discussed in this dissertation are more focused on protecting a romanticized (perhaps mythical) national identity in crisis. Put differently, these communities are fans of a particular perception of America supported by a fannish homology of interconnected white supremacist texts, including right-wing media discourse, conspiracy theories, racist depictions of crime, retrograde body politics, and religious dogma. This alternative version of America is canonized by both reactionary media sources and the participation of fans in ways that resemble fandom. Yet, these reactionary fans do not simply contribute to this reactionary fan fiction but play out this story world through embodied performances.

1.1.2 The Fan Body and Political Embodiment

A key distinction of the WMC fan identity is the focus on a particular body type. In yet another example of the utility of fan studies, examining fan communities through the framework of fan bodies and embodiment is a growing subset of fan studies. Recent fan scholarship has focused on how fan bodies are constructed, remediated, and transformed through fans' lived experiences and active participation in digital media (Affuso & Scott, 2023; Williams, 2020; Lamerichs, 2018). Bodily sensations of touch and sensory experiences are inextricably linked to fandom (Rahman et al., 2012). Hoping to capitalize off fan desires to materialize their fandom, corporate identities have developed products, experiences, and technologies designed to play out these fantasies. The WMC fan identity is not simply an embodiment of white supremacy and reactionary politics but has developed into a consumer identity recognized and amplified in our

digital economy. Thus, it is crucial that fan scholars also incorporate literature on the relationship between fandom and brand culture.

Many scholars have noted that the relationship between culture and economics grows more profound and entangled in the digital age (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Brands are more than just the products sold or the promotional materials created. A brand's identity is based much more on the "values, commitments and forms of community sustained by consumers" (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 236). While fandom surrounding particular brands, or "brandom," is often applied to entertainment, sports, and media companies (Guschwan, 2012), Affuso (2013) suggests that most contemporary brands operate within the language and logic of fandom. The logic of neoliberalism now involves spheres traditionally understood as separate from the everyday workings of capitalism, such as civic and political engagement (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The idea of self is intimately linked to consumption processes, and companies often market their products as symbols for broader social issues and causes (Ouellette, 2012). The rise of user-generated content paired with efforts of contemporary capitalism to predict consumer behavior has led to ever-expanding niche markets and an "increasingly more sophisticated and complete exchange between the consumer and the brand in a shifting cultural environment" (Banet-Weiser & Lapsansky, 2008, p. 1250). It should not be surprising that brands have developed around celebrating white supremacy and reactionary politics.

As foundational popular culture scholar John Fiske (1989) writes, all commodities possess material and cultural functions. On the one hand, consumers can use commodities for literal functions. For example, a man might buy a gun to hunt and feed his family. On the other hand, commodities also work to "construct meanings of self, of social identity and social relations" (Fiske, 1989, p. 9). Thus, that same man might purchase a gun to signify

empowerment, self-reliance, strength, masculinity, preparedness, and in certain instances Whiteness. What has changed is the intensification of an intertextual matrix by digital software and algorithms. Just as media texts in the age of convergence are characterized by their intertextuality, products are rarely isolated entities but act as "intertextual commodities" (Marshall, 2002). By focusing on the commodities and brand identities associated with tactical apparel (the tactical body), CrossFit training (the fit body), and religious participation (the spiritual body), I identify the ways that fans of white supremacy prepare their bodies to participate in their shared mythology.

1.1.3 Political Participation in Digital Spaces

Given the centrality of digital platforms in maintaining and defending fan identities, consideration of how it facilitates the WMC fan identity is essential. Fan scholars frequently discuss what motivates fan communities to use online tools and digital platforms. While marginalized communities have long gravitated to the internet for it provides relatively safe spaces to construct supportive networks and communities (DeKosnik 2016; Stein, 2015), other fan communities have used digital technologies to become more visible to producers and corporate decision-makers (Jenkins, 2006). Additionally, fan participation in online spaces can be driven by an affective charge generated by feeling part of an intimate community or authoring a collective text (Hellekson & Busse, 2006). Stein (2015, p. 158) writes how fans are often driven by "the feels" or a collective passion common in spaces like Tumblr, which combine "an aesthetic of intimate emotion [and] high performativity." Fueled by the desire to fill the in-between movements when content is not released, Hills (2017) states that reacting to rumors, generating speculation, discussing theories, and gathering information provide fans with "interesting everyday micro dramas." Therefore, fandom is essentially "always-on" and creates a

"24/7 chorus of affect." Unfortunately, digital technologies not only provide the means for fans to create content but also instigate highly antagonistic moments when fans are defending against threats to their fan objects (threats which traditionally have been perceived as the inclusion of women and people of color). Hills argues that the ramifications of 24/7 "always-on" fandom are that antagonism is often amplified in various fan communities and digital platforms (Hills, 2017).

Although digital technologies and online platforms have permitted extremist groups to bypass the traditional editorial process and provide a microphone for far-right celebrities (Finlayson, 2021; Lewis, 2020), it would be a mistake to assume that the logics of new technologies are somehow reshaping our society and culture to be more accepting of reactionary ideologies (Burgess, 2021). This is not meant to minimize the role of digital technologies and internet personalities in the growth of the alt-right (Daniels, 2018; Kelly, 2017), ethnonationalism (Stern, 2019; Kitts, 2021), the far right (Fielitz & Thurston, 2018), and other movements and ideologies which might fit under the banner of reactionism. The logic of user-generated platforms and social media certainly rewards click-bait, antagonistic, and controversial content (Massanari, 2017). Many scholars have pointed out how online algorithms naturalize traditional power differentials between men and women and amplify preexisting stereotypes of race and gender (Noble, 2018; Chun, 2009). On the one hand, the rise of far-right extremism is nothing different from other cultural pushbacks throughout American history. Nevertheless, the prevalence of participatory media and interactive technologies allows conspiracist scapegoating and misinformation to spread quickly and is increasingly influential in contemporary politics. As sociologist Jessie Daniels (2018, p. 65) states, "The difference this time is that the 'Whitelash' is algorithmically amplified, sped up, and circulated through networks to other White ethno-

nationalist movements around the world." The abundance of alternative news sources and online personalities paired with libertarian ideals of unregulated freedom of speech creates a breeding ground for far-right ideologies to flourish. However, examinations of our current political climate must consider how the affordances of new technologies allow digital communities to continue America's long tradition of scapegoating, demonization, and conspiracism.

Digital platforms, like Facebook and YouTube, have become a popular target of blame for the spread of fake news (Geeng et al, 2020), hate speech (Ben-David & Fernandez, 2016), and conspiracy theories (Bleakley, 2023). Until recently, digital media platforms have had a hands-off approach in censoring harmful discourse in the name of freedom of speech, a byproduct of the libertarian ideology prominent in tech culture (Marwick, 2013). While perhaps not explicitly designed for the spread of fake news, harassment, and white supremacy, Facebook and YouTube do enable the darker side of American culture to thrive (Shuster & Perrigo, 2021). I agree with Phillips (2016, 2019), who argues that toxic behavior cannot be blamed solely on a few bad apples abusing platforms such as Reddit and 4Chan but should be characterized as a digital manifestation of preexisting cultural attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, and difference. Digital platforms certainly afford the ability to disconnect from consequences (Petersen, 2023; Phillips & Milner, 2018). However, the thrill of upsetting others (typically the historically marginalized) through trolling is less determined by digital platforms and more a symptom of uncensored white supremacy in American culture. How trolls characterize harassment as harmless fun or fair punishment for those perceived to be overly sensitive and ideologically rigid is consistent with how attacks against marginalized communities have been downplayed throughout American history. In other words, the rise of reactionary discourse is less a byproduct of what today's media environment encourages and more of what it allows.

While cultural pushbacks are nothing new, particularly in American culture, there has been a steady shift in how people contribute to and interact with democracy's formal institutions (Hinck, 2019). Not only is political engagement much more fluid, but the affordances of digital media and mobile technologies have also fueled the already growing fragmentation of political ideologies into singular issues (Bunz, 2019). Digital interfaces can automatically manage details and notify users of issues, newsworthiness is often determined by whether it will go viral, and political participation is fueled through affective attachment. While rejecting 'rational choice' theories for why people seek out political information, many scholars advocate for conceptualizing civic participation as a form of identity expression or "self-mediation" (Chouliarki, 2010). Rather than framing news consumption as "normative forms of democratic citizenship," Wilson (2011, p. 447) argues that interactive technologies and mobile devices allow for a more performative political engagement. Hoffjann (2021) advocates for framing political strategic communication as perceived by the audience as theatrical performances. This explains how politics are becoming increasingly like fictional performances in which the "entertainment character is more important than the binding nature of the staging and the statements" (Hoffjann, 2021, p. 268). More attention has been paid to new technologies, practices, and approaches to citizen engagement. This includes gaming, urban mobile media use, and other imaginative, creative, and affective modes of media consumption.

1.1.4 The Playful Possibilities of Online Platforms

This dissertation shows how theories of play can bridge the gap between fan studies, digital media studies, body politics, and the literature on political tribalism. The concept of play has been conceptualized by various academic disciplines and used by scholars in numerous (and sometimes inconsistent) ways. Due to the "ambiguity of play" (Sutton-Smith, 2009), I should

clarify how I will be defining it. This dissertation will use play in two ways. First, play highlights the identity position that individual fans and communities take on and choose to perform through media (Silverstone, 1999), as well as the ways in which particular media texts and playspaces encourage (and sometimes guide) a type of playful performance (Cote, 2020). Silverstone (1999, p. 61) argues that we do not merely experience media daily, but "we play with and through our media. We play with and around them." The importance of studying media is to elucidate "the ways in which in play we can and do claim something of our individuality, constructing identities through the roles we take and the rules we follow" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 63). Using play is not intended to suggest that players are entirely immersed in a game-like "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1978; Juul, 2011), unable to decipher fantasy from reality. As I will show in my analysis, some fans take very seriously their role in fighting against what they perceive as a collection of traitors destroying the country from within and would take umbrage with my characterization of their words and actions as playful. Conversely, these communities might accuse me of misinterpreting their political commentary and defend their words and actions as simple "trolling" or "playing around" (Phillips, 2018; 2015; Phillips & Milner, 2018). As many scholars note, however, play helps describe the ambivalent nature of online participation, particularly the "synergetic back-and-forth between playful fiction and 'serious' collective action practices" (Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023, p. 2). The WMC fan identity is constructed, legitimized, and perpetuated through what Phillips and Milner (2017) call "identity play." Phillips and Milner (2017) state that it is sometimes impossible to distinguish the sincerity of extremist online rhetoric from simple trolling or even satirical works. In many ways, harassment, taunting, and pranking have become popular modes of political discourse. As Lamerich et al. (2018) write, the alt-right often frames racist and sexist speech as parodies or harmless jokes. The motivations and

reasons for creating and sharing problematic memes might differ from person to person, but the results remain the same, the harmful discourse flourishes.

Secondly, I use play to define the relationship between media and audience as a function of interactivity and cocreation (Raessen, 2006). Rather than assuming fans mindlessly accept the ideology perpetuated in media, fans actively negotiate with media and, in some cases, alter the logic of platforms in a dynamic relationship (Massanari, 2013). Many have used play as a tool for the analysis of the media experience (Fiske, 1987; Fuchs, 2012; Silverstone, 1999; Raessen, 2006). Fan scholars, too, have framed fan participation in digital spaces as a form of mediatized play (Booth, 2015; Petersen, 2020). Petersen (2020) writes that fans seek out and contribute to digital communities to create and maintain a full range of playful moods that are pleasurable and encourage more play. As digital technologies and online platforms become increasingly accessible and affordable while providing more playful possibilities, fan communities are provided with more avenues and opportunities to "stay in play." Understanding digital practices as playful highlights how an affective charge often drives digital participation and how fandom can be 'played out' as a form of identity performance and body politics. Given that I am defining play as an identity position that allows for plausible deniability and trolling that is motivated by one's desire to participate in a fan community, these playful expressions are not limited to traditional sites of play and not merely motivated by the gamified design of a platform. While digital media is a significant aspect of our everyday experiences and our identities are continually framed as something to be played, this dissertation does not subscribe to the fundamentals, concepts, and theories of gamification (Deterding et al., 2011). While gamification can be useful in describing the implanted motivational affordances of gamified media and their outcomes (Seaborn & Fels, 2015), its uses are typically restricted to technologies and

applications that are deliberately designed to create “gameful experiences” (Koivisto & Hamari, 2014). Gamification also implies that play is something forced on society by industrial forces (Jacob et al., 2022), rather than a disposition towards media seen in a variety of human-media interactions (Trammell & Gibert, 2014).

While most might associate digital play as unique to video games or gamified media, I agree with the digital media scholars who have stressed how most media in the digital age- including participatory and social media- possess playful affordances (de Lange et al., 2015; Fuchs, 2012; Raessen, 2006; Sicart, 2023). Arguing that ludology is not located in the game object nor conceived by the player’s attitude, Fuchs (2012) advocates for a “ludocentric approach,” which locates digital play at the interaction between the two. Both computer games and other digital technologies (such as social media and user-generated platforms) stimulate playful goals and provide the means for players to construct identities through playful means. Raessens (2006, 2014) argues that it is not enough to characterize this part of history as more playful than others. Instead, the concept of play "can be used as a heuristic tool to shed new light on contemporary media culture" (Raessens, 2014, p. 96). Sicart (2020) argues for understanding play as a relational approach to software and how technologies create and shape social and cultural relationships. By making the process playfully pleasurable, digital technologies encourage the user to identify the rules and processes of digital technologies while also providing the freedom to define their own goals for the interaction partially. Sometimes technologies are specifically designed to be experienced playfully, like video games, while other times, play is the consequence of the player's intentions and creativity. The allure of a playful platform is that users "can feel an increased sense of agency in the worlds constructed by play, since they are capable of negotiating the conditions of engagement" (Sicart, 2020, p. 2085). I would argue that

digital media scholars should examine political participation through what Brett (2021) calls "moments of political gameplay," when the player and the game become political through interaction. Rather than a game-offered subject position (Cote, 2020) or a procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), the game reproduces and responds to the political actions of the player in a "political conversation." The design affordances permit the player to adjust the game's parameters, and the game responds with "new politically encoded game challenges back to the player" (Brett, 2021, p. 231).

Referring to this type of embodiment as playful is not meant to minimize the consequences of white supremacy and right-wing extremism. On the contrary, I want to show how play is not always benign but can potentially be very serious, toxic, and dangerous (Huizinga, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 2009). Play also highlights how political participation works in the digital age. Rather than a coherent and consistent political message from a centralized source, political discourse is co-constructed by "an ecosystem of amateur internet produsage" and through "a serpentine pipeline of digital-cultural interactivity and networked internet platforms" (Packer & Stoneman, 2022, p. 256). Many fan scholars have discussed how the more performative and playful forms of political engagement have become popular with far-right communities (Lamerichs et al., 2018; Petersen, 2022; Tuters, 2019). As Reinhard et al. (2022) write, conspiracy theories such as those spread by QAnon could be interpreted as transmedia story worlds, existing across numerous online platforms and constructed through fan labor. Like fan fiction, the narratives that orbit the WMC fan identity do not have a single authorial vision but are more of a collaborative storytelling experience driven by an "always on" fanatical participation and influenced by an understanding of American history, culture, and politics supported by reactionary discourse, and white supremacist texts. While we could focus on how

reactionary fans contribute to this fan-produced canon or "fanon" (Mittell, 2009) of America, we must not ignore how these conspiracy theories get embodied by their actions.

1.1.5 Defining White Supremacy

This dissertation will continue the long tradition by cultural, feminist, and critical race scholars of examining the place of white supremacy in the contemporary body politics of the United States. Before moving onward, it seems appropriate to qualify the use of the term "white supremacy." My research is informed by and seeks to contribute to, the literature from critical scholarship, which asserts that the United States, like many countries impacted by colonization, is a racially unequal society. While America has progressed culturally and politically primarily due to the work of social justice advocates, white ideologies and identities still occupy a dominant social position in the United States. In conceptualizing Whiteness, Frankenberg (1993, p. 11) states that race, like gender, is a "socially constructed category that has a 'real,' 'tangible' impact on people's identities, lives, and experiences." White power secures its dominance "by seeming not to be anything in particular" or "revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death" (Dyer, 2017, p.126). However, whiteness is simultaneously framed as an "ideal type" of racial identity (Feagin, 2020). Thus, whiteness is paradoxical, simultaneously assuming a normalized racelessness and a false assumption or belief that whites are superior because of their race (Feagin, 2013). As Mayer (2005, p. 153) states, whiteness possesses both a "cultural invisibility and cultural universality." Whiteness is often framed as distinct or in opposition to blackness. Strings (2019, p. 8) writes that race, as a double agent, often "entails the synchronized repression of 'savage' blackness and the generation of discipline whiteness." In response to the supposed threat of black influence in America, white supremacy has historically existed to

marginalize black people while obscuring significant differences in white people's social, political, and economic experiences (Taylor, 2016).

While whiteness may be a form of hegemony, it is essential to understand its complexities and contradictions. As Bonilla-Silva (1997) writes, whiteness is not merely a social identity but also a relation of discourses and ideologies that maintain white privilege through institutional practices and cultural assumptions. Thus, whiteness is not a static construct but a process that is "multifaceted, situationally specific, and reinscribed around changing the meaning of race in society" (Green, Sonn, & Matsebula, 2007, p. 393). One of the defining features of whiteness is that it must be continually reaffirmed and reinforced, which makes it tremendously flexible in redefining itself to maintain a dominant position (Doane, 1997). The "changing configurations of whiteness," as Bhattacharya, Gabriel, and Small (2016) call it, are often influenced by shifting national demographics and particular social and political conditions. To put it differently, whiteness is slippery and continually shifting (Rasmussen et al., 2001) and assimilates groups who conform to white norms and reproduce white supremacy (Brodkin, 1999; Gabriel, 1998).

While white supremacy may be a significant throughline in this dissertation, it is also essential to consider how whiteness, as just one facet of social and political identity, combines to create different modes of discrimination and privilege (Perera, 1999). As Hylton and Lawrence (2015, p. 769) state, whiteness should be "thought of as a process that is inflected differently by its intersections with numerous and competing social, ethnic, political, cultural and racialized discourses." Whiteness is not an isolated power structure but part of a broader interconnected grid of social categories, including class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality (Lipsitz, 2006). The WMC fan identity may be unique to the digital age, given that digital media and fan

participation amplify it. However, it also reaffirms the long intersectional alliance of white masculine Christianity and its influential position in the United States (Griffith, 2004; R. P. Jones, 2021).

The antecedents of the WMC could be traced to before the country's foundation. However, many historians point to a peak in reactionary discourse linking the nation's crisis with the decreasing dominance of white masculine Christianity. Often referred to as the "muscular Christianity" movement, religious and political leaders, such as President Teddy Roosevelt, helped to redefine Christianity in a manner that embraced the more fundamentalist and militant aspects of the faith, resonating with rugged masculinity, American imperialism, and Westward expansion (Putney, 2001; McKenzie, 2016). Since then, there has been an almost endless cycle of religious leaders and conservative personalities characterizing cultural diversity, gender equity, and progressive politics as "feminizing" the nation (Bert and Lyons, 2000; Stock, 1996). Still today, many reactionary personalities and communities blame America's supposed weakness and moral decline on the diminishing power of white Christian masculinity (Hartzell, 2018; Kutner, 2020; Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018; Wilcox, 2018).

Notable media scholars have provided detailed accounts of how white Christian masculinity's cultural power and privilege are reproduced within American popular culture. The preservation and personification of the mythologies of white Christian exceptionalism can be found in the representation of celebrities (Redmond & Holmes, 2007; Mez, 2020), athletes (Hawzen & Newman, 2017; Kusz, 2007; 2017; Leonard, 2017), and politicians (Jeffords, 1997; Marti, 2020). In her detailed analysis of the affinity for John Wayne by white American evangelicals, Du Mex (2020, p. 10) explains how the actor's image came to signify "traditional gender roles and the reassertion of (white) patriarchal authority." Similarly, Jeffords (1995)

examines the connection between the muscular heroes of 1980s popular action films and the images of President Reagan. Just as the action hero acted as a "panacea for feelings of disempowerment" to the perceived softness and weakness of the "seventies male," Reagan's persona resonated with the "hardbody," or a rearticulation of masculine strength and power, which closely aligned with the gendered and racialized nostalgia espoused by conservative politics. Another rearticulation of white Christian masculinity has become extremely popular in the digital age.

I do not wish to examine how media represent these myths nor how tech developers construct technologies with normative presumptions of whiteness and maleness. As mentioned previously, many studies of the representation of whiteness in media exist. Instead, this dissertation makes its central intervention into studies of digital media, body politics, and fandom by focusing on how fan communities actively exploit the technological affordances of digital platforms to play out the WMC fan identity (and its many iterations) both in online and offline spaces. As discussed previously, our digital economy is highly responsive to the actions of online participation. Digital algorithms are quick to react and sometimes predict the desires of online users, often recommending which celebrities to follow, platforms to use, and products to purchase. Fan studies, as a field, is distinguished from other political communication theories by examining the liminal spaces where various discourses in a cultural field converge into a metadiscourse (Hills, 2020; K. Jones, 2021). While the messages provided by specific celebrities, products, and platforms may not have been intended to perpetuate White masculine superiority myths, I will show how reactionary fans operationalize them for their own purposes. After various brands are anointed with cultural, racial, and political meanings, they become entangled and develop into marketable segments of the digital economy. To put it differently, the

fannish desire to actualize ways to perform (or play) masculine Christian Whiteness creates a fannish playfield for reactionary fans to play out these fantasies. However, this dissertation highlights how white supremacy is derived from the play of fans rather than just through the structural realities of governance or platform design. Thus, the WMC fan identity is a commodity-driven embodiment of white supremacy existing across a transmedia landscape and fueled by fan play.

1.1.6 Conceptualizing the Prepared Body

I use the term prepared body to typify a playful expression of the WMC fan identity, constructed and amplified by digital media and online fannish participation. The word "body" taps into a long tradition of examining bodies as sites of social experiences and political struggle (Butler, 2011; Haraway, 2006; Harcourt, 2009; Spivak, 1978). As the hypernym of the tactical body, fit body, and spiritual body, the prepared body calls on white Christian warriors to defend a particular set of American traditions and values that legitimize and reinforce the dominance of white masculine Christian culture. The prepared body may be a decedent of the hard body and a rearticulation of whiteness meant to reify claims of racial and ethnic superiority. However, it is also a direct response to contemporary anxieties surrounding the increasing visibility and power of nonwhite bodies. By framing these individuals and communities as fans of a particular perception of American citizenship, this dissertation better explains how the imperative to prepare the body resonates across an ecosystem of seemingly disconnected subcultures and online communities. The various iterations of the prepared body express preparedness in unique ways. For example, those who play out the tactical body construct ensembles with politically infused products and symbols. The fit body sees fans emulating the physicality of fitness celebrities. Church parishioners congregate with like-minded individuals in physical space to

play out the spiritual body. While there may be much demographic and ideological overlap between the fan communities discussed in this dissertation, they also possess unique differences worth acknowledging. I do not consider all the fan communities in this dissertation to be the same concentration of white supremacy. Some argue that fan scholarship tends to overuse the term "toxic" rather than appropriately describing the complex layers of fan participation (Proctor, 2017; Arouh, 2020). As Melenia Arouh states, "Fans will participate in passionate debates and resist creative choices in extreme ways, but whether this is indeed toxic or simply a matter of fan resistance within the wider context of fan participation requires careful delineation" (Arouh, 2020, p. 71).

The individuals and communities in this dissertation defend white masculine Christian culture as defined by their fannish practices across various registers, including trolling, consumption-based support, devotion to celebrities, religious obligation, and coordinated political campaigns. Although the January 6th Capitol Insurrection is a central event in this dissertation, I do not wish to focus solely on the sensationalist examples of white supremacy. Doing so might perpetuate the myth that white supremacy is maintained by a few "bad apples" who give average Americans a bad name. The media personalities, brands, and fans discussed in this dissertation express their objections towards America's changing cultural and political landscape in different ways (some are more explicit with their racist and hateful discourse, while others implicitly suggest that diversity, multiculturalism, and progressive politics are dangerous). However, as Taylor (2016, p. 8) writes, when it comes to perpetuating racism, "it is the outcome that matters, not the intentions of the individuals involved." Thus, most of the communities discussed in this dissertation are certainly toxic in that they legitimize white supremacy. However, placing the Capitol Insurrectionists on the same level as the other fan communities

discussed in this dissertation would be a mistake. The WMC fan identity is not exclusive to isolated fringe groups. White supremacy is far more insidious than that. It is systematic, adapts to progress, and is sometimes legitimized unintentionally through play.

Given that reactionary narratives often spike during political, social, and cultural change, it is not a coincidence that the rise of the alt-right, ant-government militia groups, and the overarching moral panic surrounding cancel culture coincides with the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements. Along those lines, the rise of President Donald Trump and the prevalence of nationalist policies should be considered a direct response to the election of the first African American president, widespread legalization of gay marriage, and increasing (albeit slow) tolerance of transgender and nonbinary communities. On the one hand, the prepared body is just another expression of the cultural pushback against the perceived threats to traditional gender dynamics and the racial hierarchy. However, what makes the prepared body unique to our current moment is how it is inspired and justified by postracial discourse. As Mukherjee, Banet-Weiser, and Gray (2019) write, postrace is a construct closely aligned with color blindness denials of racial privilege and discrimination. While it may not be socially permissible to explicitly use race as a justification for discrimination and social contempt, the mythologies of postrace, which are often embodied in the case studies in this dissertation, "renders racial grievance by people of color an anachronism while amplifying white grievance (p. 9)." The prepared body exists in a paradoxical state which frames white bodies as raceless and universal but simultaneously sustained by the notion that it is better prepared to combat attacks against the traditional social hierarchies in the United States. One of the defining qualities of contemporary reactionarism is the tendency to celebrate the country's progress in racial and gender equality while also warning that our society is progressing in the wrong direction or going "too far."

Similarly, the communities examined in this dissertation sometimes claim to be inclusive and tolerant but also imply that this tolerance can be oppressive to white masculine Christianity.

There are three broad questions that this dissertation is designed to answer. First, how do regressive perceptions of the prepared body and reactionary narratives of appropriate American citizenship entangle with the fanish call to prepare the body? Second, how does preparing the body predispose some fans to take advantage of the playful possibilities of digital media? Finally, how does the convergence cultural industry respond and reward the performance of the WMC fan identity?

1.2 Methodology

This dissertation will explore the prepared body through three iterations: the tactical body, the fit body, and the spiritual body. Each iteration will be examined through a detailed case study of three seemingly unrelated fan communities, incorporating theories of play with the histories and methodologies of fan studies and platform studies. A singular media object, celebrity, or platform does not define the WMC fan identity. Instead, it resonates across an ecology of reactionary media. Thus, it is necessary to show how a pathway to the WMC fan identity can manifest in various fan cultures.

Explorations of fan audiences have traditionally drawn on the qualitative methodological traditions of audience research, such as participant observation, interviewing, the analysis of fans' written or artistic work, or a combination of such methods. Those practices inform this dissertation. However, I will examine how the discourse surrounding the prepared body materializes after traversing through three interrelated discourse layers, including the discourse provided by brands, the discourse generated by the logic of online platforms, and the discourse generated by fans' actions. As Poole (2010, p. 138) states, critical discourse analysis has become

a necessary "interdisciplinary approach to the description and analysis of texts in terms of their wider social and political significance." While CDA has never attempted to provide one single or specific theory, I follow the roadmap provided by those who have used this methodology in the past (Janks, 1997; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). This school follows the critical tradition of viewing texts as artifacts that reflect and create contemporary social, cultural, and political realities. One of its most influential practitioners, Fairclough (2013), uses the methodology to examine the complex interrelationship between language use and social systems to answer questions about related discourse and its relations of power.

I will begin the analysis of each case study by examining the transmedia promotional content central to each brand, including the discourse on dedicated websites, merchandise, social media accounts, and other "paratexts" (Gray, 2010). Understanding that this is only one lens through which to consider the data, I establish patterns in the discourse at work. I also consider the social conditions that affect textual production, including structures of power and ideology. I compare these themes with other forms of politically reactionary content, including conspiracy theories and right-wing media. As part of the second discursive layer, I examine how brands, celebrities, and religious organizations attempt to channel the productive power of their fan bases by providing digital spaces for them to engage and interact. Fan scholars have developed several tools for studying digital technologies and the communities that use them (Brock, 2018). Stanfill (2015, p.1061) advocates for a discursive interface analysis, an approach that considers the productive constraints of interfaces, the norms they construct, and how fans build "a set of possibilities into the object." Since fans relate to their brands differently, I use slightly different analytic approaches for the third discourse layer. Thus, it seems necessary to summarize each chapter to demonstrate how fans navigate their fan identity with each cultural object.

1.3 Summary of Chapters

1.3.1 *The Tactical Body*

Chapter 1 examines the Safe Life Defense brand, its fans, and its connection to right-wing violence. Safe Life Defense is a body armor manufacturer based in Las Vegas, Nevada. The company also has a dedicated Facebook page which has developed into a space for fans to contribute to the discourse surrounding body armor, gun rights, and "civilian self-defense." Given that norms of technologies are not simply determined by the affordances and limitations of the design but also, to a large extent, by the community of users whose actions provide a road map for other users, the Facebook comment section reveals important ways fans interact and extend primary content in important ways. As part of the third discursive layer, I closely analyze the comment sections of over 100 Safe Life Facebook posts between 1/01/22-2/10/2023. Facebook comments may be a rare research area, but it is one of the platform's most widely used communication features. I did not read every comment in Safe Life's catalog. Instead, I focused on the "most popular," "most viewed," and most commented. I collected a large sample of comment data, approximately 100,000 comments temporarily stored on my personal computer for analysis. I removed their online names in each excerpt to protect fans' virtual privacy. The comment section consists of mainly unstructured text fragments, making analysis very cumbersome; however, I discovered consistent themes by sorting them into similar narratives, expressions, and talking points. Many commenters express their affection for Safe Life Defense products or affirm Safe Life's promotional materials. A significant clustering of fans also extends these narratives by connecting it to conspiracy theories, right wing discourse, and racist attitudes toward crime. Safe Life's Facebook page does not simply become a space for fans to express their anger toward a world they see as corrupted by progressive politics and the liberal

agenda (and in some cases plot their revenge). Instead, the blending of Safe Life's promotional materials and fan participation develops into a canonical story world on the tactical lifestyle.

By putting the data from the comment sections in dialogue with Safe Life's promotional content, I show how fans not only connect the narratives in these videos with other reactionary content but how fan responses blend and shape the discourse itself. By combining the literature on brand culture and the concepts and tools from fan studies, I show how Safe Life Defense merchandise develops into wearable symbols of white supremacy and reactionary politics celebrated by a fan culture and integrated into a tactical ensemble. While both Safe Life Defense's promotional content and the actions of fans point to how capitalism provides a permission structure for white masculine supremacy, only by combining these approaches do we reveal the tactical body. I argue that the tactical body is a fan embodiment of white supremacist conspiracy theories and a playful form of political engagement designed to actualize a revenge fantasy of insurrection. While I focus primarily on Safe Life Defense's fans play out the tactical body, this chapter also points to a more significant trend of tactical brands profiting from growing cultural tension, racist attitudes toward crime, and militant extremism. Since algorithms quickly construct consumer identities around similar content and products, Safe Life Defense is just one company in an ecosystem of brands centered around tactical embodiment.

1.3.2 The Fit Body

Chapter two examines the marketing and presentation strategy of CrossFit Mayhem and fitness celebrity Rich Froning. Froning is a 3-time CrossFit champion and owner of CrossFit Mayhem (a successful CrossFit facility in Cookeville, Tennessee). He is also a devout Christian who often frames his faith as a key contributor to his athletic success and frequently speaks at CrossFit and religious functions. Just as marketers are creating transmedia campaigns to offer

fans an array of different media in which to participate, celebrities also move across media texts manifesting in a transmedia brand that blurs the lines between their public and private lives. Thus, it seems necessary to analyze today's celebrities through the context of "transmediatization" Hills (2020).

As part of Rich Froning's promotional partnership with Whoop, a wearable exercise monitor, his CrossFit gym's dedicated YouTube channel has put together a collection of videos featuring the CrossFit athlete performing workouts with the device. I conducted a discursive interface analysis of the platform to show how Froning's interaction with Whoop acts as both a discursive device and a ludic model or "subject position" for his fans to follow (Cote, 2020). I argue that positioning Froning's body, abilities, and signature playing style at the focal point of the Whoop platform constructs an unstated default subject position of "strained whiteness." Strained Whiteness follows in the tradition of other fitness and sports culture myths that mask the cultural, social, and economic benefits of being white and male in the U.S.

As part of this case study's third discursive layer, I show how fans reaffirm and extend the myths of strained Whiteness in ways that epitomize the second pillar of the WMC fan identity, the fit body. Using a similar method as the previous chapter, I provide examples from CrossFit Mayhem's dedicated Facebook page of fans playing out the fit body, which I define as a subject position within fitness culture that emphasizes the perception that preparedness is a choice one can make by exercising and bodybuilding in particular ways. While reactionary in nature, the fit body is not necessarily driven by a desire to return us to a previous historical moment but instead built to withstand the increasing criticism from progressive politics and social justice movements. As I will show in the fit body chapter, the interrelating layers of discourse which mark Whiteness as marginalized, persecuted, and strained lead to highly

problematic embodied performances, many of which frame the fit body as not only prepared for any physical challenge but more suited to withstand the attacks from an array of enemies foreign and domestic.

1.3.3 The Spiritual Body

Chapter three will examine Church of the Highlands, its use of digital media, and its relationship with its parishioners. COH is a non-denominational multisite church that has enjoyed unprecedented success incorporating a small group directory, a platform designed to encourage parishioners to deepen their relationships with other members of COH across its many campuses. As with the previous two case studies, I paired the discourse surrounding COH's promotional materials with a discursive interface analysis of the small group platform. COH's small group directory has slightly different uses and affordances than traditional social media sites. Thus, I used a slightly different approach. Traversing through the over 2,000 small groups created by COH's parish, I focused on the small groups which showcased the dark ramifications of COH's use of the consumer-based approach to religion, especially in the political climate of the Southeastern region of the United States. Because I have been writing this dissertation for many years, the examples in my analysis come from various small groups "semesters" between 4/1/18-5/30/23.

I show how the church's emphasis on personal interpretation and the use of online platforms as an evangelical strategy offers a pathway for play that can intersect with the tactical body and the fit body and resonate in a way that brings out their most destructive elements. As the third pillar in the white masculine crusader fan identity persona, the spiritual body actualizes a fantasy of Christian foot soldiers fighting against a demonic force of invaders and the country's secularization. The spiritual body may begin in online spaces, such as COH's small group

directory. However, the imperatives of the spiritual body often lead parishioners to seek out like-minded others for religious communion.

Critics of this methodological approach may accuse me of only focusing on the more incendiary and threatening examples of toxic online participation to characterize Safe Life Defense, CrossFit Mayhem, and Church of the Highlands as white supremacist organizations. While a few toxic fans should not define a fan community's identity, I am not attempting to create a snapshot of the average fan in these cultures. Instead, I wish to highlight how the playful affordances of participatory media often provide a pathway to online expression consistent with the prepared body and the creation of the WMC fan identity. While my attention focuses on the more problematic expressions, they are not hard to find, neither scattered nor buried deep in the comment section. Instead, the following fan response tends to be the most popular, “liked,” and replied to, rising to the top of each comment section.

1.3.4 Conclusion: The Dark Consequences of the WMC Fan Identity

The concluding chapter draws from the evidence of the preceding chapters to show how the WMC fan identity has developed into an algorithmically recognized consumer identity in our convergence culture industry. As Scott (2019) writes, the convergence culture industry describes industrial efforts to standardize and commodify fan culture. While empowerment discourse pervades fan culture, industrial shifts and the development of digital technologies routinely dismiss female fans in favor of privileging male fans and their preferred modes of participation. Showing the possible implications of the WMC fan identity, I will provide examples of those who epitomize this persona's various aspects, including influential people present at the January 6th Capitol Insurrection. The Capitol Insurrection is certainly a disturbing byproduct of the playful expressions discussed in this dissertation, but sadly the WMC does not stop there. Given

that digital media and online platforms are being further engrained in our everyday lives and brands will no doubt find new ways of offering more playful platforms for fans to engage, expressions of the prepared body and its iterations (including tactical body, fit body, and spiritual body) are only likely to increase. The evidence from the three chapters should be considered a warning of the possible ramifications of reactionary politics and white supremacy embodied by fannish behaviors. I will offer suggestions on how to curtail these expressions and discuss how the lessons learned from this dissertation can be applied in future analysis, including fields outside of fandom and digital media studies.

2 “PROTECTING THE PROTECTORS:” BODY ARMOR, REACTIONARY FAN PLAY, AND THE TACTICAL BODY

Larry Rendall Brock, a former fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force, was one of the many people photographed inside the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 (see Fig.1). Brock made it to the Senate Chamber, donning a military-style helmet and a tactical vest embedded with body armor (Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, 2021). While FBI agents could not connect him directly to the many militia groups who collectively conspired beforehand to overthrow the government, affidavits and reporting show his political views had grown increasingly radical leading up to the Insurrection. White supremacist ideology and culture war issues fueled his growing frustrations, even getting him fired from a job for allegedly making racist and threatening comments. People closest to Brock said he had gone "all in on Trump," with social media being the primary facilitator of his radicalization (Farrow, 2021). Brock told FBI agents his original motivation was not to disrupt the proceedings. Instead, he had gone to Washington, D.C., to demonstrate peacefully, mentioning Trump's call for supporters to attend.

Brock characterized wearing body armor as primarily defensive, saying, "I didn't want to get stabbed or hurt." However, he had also posted several violent messages on Facebook leading up to the 2020 presidential election. In one post he wrote, "when we get to the bottom of this conspiracy we need to execute the traitors that are trying to seal the election" (Kunzelman, 2023). On the day of the Insurrection, Brock wrote, "[m]en with guns need to shoot there [sic] way in." Fueled by conspiracy theories and far-right talking points, Brock saw himself as a soldier fighting alongside fellow patriots battling against a collection of evil forces conspiring to take over the country. Brock constructed a tactical ensemble not as a defense measure but to prepare for a violent confrontation. As Brock wrote on his Facebook page, "I bought myself body armor and a helmet for the civil war that is coming" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, 2021).



Figure 2.1 A picture of Larry Rendall Brock inside the Capitol Building. Photo was obtained from an FBI affidavit.

According to a USA Today analysis of the court documents for individuals charged in the Capitol Insurrection, at least 20 people were spotted in photos and videos wearing tactical ensembles (Penzenstadler, 2021). A few years before the Capitol Insurrection, the Buggalo Boys

and Proud Boys regularly attended political protests across the country, heavily armed and armored. These militia groups often characterize their intentions as peaceful and justify their arsenals as necessary to counter Antifa and Black Lives Matters protesters. However, their presence was meant primarily as an intimidation tactic, either hoping to scare peaceful protesters or start violent confrontations. The tactical gear these militia groups wore was sold exclusively to the military and law enforcement until recently. While a few states have limitations on who can and cannot buy body armor, there are few federal restrictions on its sale. Body armor companies may not deliberately target right-wing extremists with their promotional materials. However, body armor is becoming more common in incidents of domestic terrorism. In May 2022, the gunman who killed 19 children in Uvalde, Texas, wore a tactical plate carrier (Stieb, 2022). Another shooter wore bullet-resistant soft body armor when he killed shoppers at a Buffalo supermarket (Associated Press, 2022). The Buffalo shooter's vest was strong enough to stop a round fired by the security guard, allowing him to return fire, killing the retired police officer. It is certainly concerning that extremists utilize body armor in their acts of terror. Yet, it is also essential to address what draws these perpetrators to tactical ensembles in the first place.

While it is impossible to know where these militia groups bought their tactical ensembles, their ideological justification is due primarily to platforms like Facebook. The social media platform has been at the center of increased accusations of profiting and facilitating recruitment for the Capitol Insurrection (“How Facebook profits from the Insurrection,” 2021; Timberg et al., 2021), with many pointing to how Facebook is often a nerve center for conspiracy movements and fake news (Gross, 2021). Members of Congress, including Representative Mike Doyle, claimed Facebook “supercharged” false election claims before January 6 and provided a platform for Donald Trump supporters to rally around the “Stop the Steal” campaign (Frenkel, 2020).

Created in November of 2020, a "Stop the Steal" Facebook group became the fastest growing group in Facebook's history, amassing 320,000 users in 24 hours. At a time when the 2020 presidential election remained uncertain, the site became a hub for those trying to delegitimize the election, providing a space to post photographs, videos, and testimonials asserting evidence of voter fraud. While Facebook may have appointed a "civic-integrity team," along with other tools designed to detect and take down election misinformation, these efforts were rather ineffective in keeping up with the many splinter groups (Cameron et al., 2003). Content promoting falsehoods about voter fraud or inciting violence were appearing faster than the company's fact-checkers could act (Brewster, 2020). Organizers could also easily elude detection by avoiding certain words or rebranding preexisting Facebook groups. Facebook may have taken steps to reduce the spread of misinformation from their sites, including adding a way for users to report a post or other users for spreading false news (Hughes, 2016). Still, these steps were highly ineffective in hindering the spread of the big lie. Revelations that the company relaxed its regulatory policies before the 2020 election, brought to light by former data scientist and whistleblower Frances Haugan (Allyn, 2021), points to how Facebook's mishandling might have enabled these groups to congregate online and plan the protest, which eventually led to the dangerous coup attempt (Isaac, 2021).

This chapter presents a case study examining the role tactical companies, participatory media, and fandom have in the rise of right-wing violence. By combining the literature on brand culture and the concepts and tools from fan studies, I show how body armor develops into wearable symbols of white supremacy and reactionary politics celebrated by a reactionary fan community and integrated into a tactical ensemble. This case study will focus on Safe Life Defense, a body armor company with abundant promotional materials, including a dedicated

Facebook fan community. According to research by the Tech Transparency Project, SLD was one of the many body armor companies that featured advertisements frequently shown alongside election misinformation and militant content, revealing that Facebook's algorithms may have pushed these types of advertisements to groups that engaged in far right and militant activity (How Facebook Profits from the Insurrection, 2021). I am not arguing that SLD is responsible for the Capitol Insurrection, right-wing violence, or the radicalization of Trump supporters like Brock. It is impossible to know whether Brock purchased his body armor from SLD. SLD is undoubtedly one of many companies that markets its products to tactical professionals and is not the only brand to promote a tactical lifestyle. However, I will illustrate how in today's digital environment, a brand's identity is no longer determined solely by the company itself but constructed through its integration with digital media and its fans. SLD's efforts to promote its products may be crucial in understanding brand culture's role in mainstreaming the "tactical lifestyle" in the United States. However, I will show how fans can take brands promoting self-defense and poach them as tools to terrorize. While both SLD's promotional branding and fans' actions point to how capitalism provides a permission structure for white masculine supremacy, only by combining these approaches do we reveal the tactical body. As one pillar in the White Masculine Crusader fan identity, I argue that the tactical body is a fan embodiment of white supremacist conspiracy theories and a playful form of political engagement designed to actualize a revenge fantasy of Insurrection. While I focus primarily on how SLD fans play out the tactical body, this case study points to a more significant trend of tactical brands profiting from growing cultural tension, militant extremism, and political tribalism. Since algorithms quickly construct consumer identities around similar content and products, SLD is just one company in an ecosystem of brands centered around the tactical body.

2.1 Conceptualizing the Tactical Body

2.1.1 *Tactical Embodiment and Fan Play*

While the literature has been abundant on the long history of political reactionarism (Berlet & Lyons, 2000) and the rise of far-right communities in America (Kelly, 2017; Kitts, 2020; Stern, 2019), this chapter interrogates reactionary fandom as an adjacent category of political identity. Utilizing the framework of fan embodiment and play theory, we can understand how fans utilize tactical brands to play out stories about themselves and the society in which they live. Examining fan communities through the framework of fan bodies and embodiment is a growing subset of fan studies. Recent scholarship has focused on how fan bodies are constructed, remediated, and transformed through fans' lived experiences and active participation in digital media (Affuso and Scott, 2023; Wiliams, 2020; Lamerichs, 2018). Bodily sensations of touch and sensory experiences are inextricably linked to fandom (Coppa, 2014; Rahman et al., 2012). Literature on other types of performative fan practices, such as cosplay, suggests that the act of playing out roles of fantasy characters is an "embodiment of a fan's affective relation to a text" (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 1). Thus, cosplay is a process whereby fans actualize "an existing story in close connection to the fan community and their own identity" (Lamerichs, 2011, p. 1.2). Fans' reasons for cosplay may vary and cosplayers do not necessarily share the same interests, motives, or experiences. What connects most cosplay enthusiasts, however, is a desire to "write and perform their chosen character upon their own bodies" (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 3.2). While most fan scholars discuss cosplay's transgressive potential, others write on the more problematic types of costuming. For example, Jaworowicz-Zimny (2019) examines the controversial wearing of Nazi uniforms in the Japanese subculture of "military cosplay." Similarly, Strauss's (2003) ethnographic work on Civil War reenactors

highlights the fuzzy separation between wearing the uniforms of Confederate soldiers for historical accuracy and demonstrating empathy for the antebellum South, Lost Cause mythology, and white hegemony.

Cosplay may be typically experienced firsthand at fan convention sites, but many cosplayers remediate the convention space through performances online. Fans often turn to online spaces because it allows them to extend the cosplaying experience and reach spectators outside the play space. Thus, embodied performances are not simply tied to physical locations but exist across various media as a "transmedial process" (Lamerich, 2015). Stoyanova (2023, p. 219) suggests that the body becomes an originating site for layered hybridizations [...] of a virtual media object (the character) and a body through the practice of cosplay." Fan scholars often explore how costume culture transcends the fan convention grounds to online environments and digital platforms, but this study examines the inverse. As I will show in the following analysis, SLD fans do not simply share white supremacist conspiracy theories and reactionary content but show affection for SLD merchandise by integrating its products into their tactical ensemble and displaying them for others. Annexing participatory sites like YouTube may be the first step in reclaiming territory thought to be lost, but these revenge fantasies manifest in the real world as white men dressed ready for war. The body is central to this form of political engagement because these fans are playing, or "fleshing out," a "preferred version of reality" and laying "their subjective desires onto the world" (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 8). Numerous and varied motivations sometimes inspire embodied performances. Thus, I will follow Mishou's (2023) strategy of reading both cosplayers and the costumes produced as texts to understand the individual narratives behind these embodied performances. Like cosplayers and civil war reenactors, SLD fans also construct an ensemble to present to an audience. Sadly, the purpose of

the tactical body is not to entertain or bring joy to an audience but to intimidate as part of a revenge fantasy of white men at war with a society corrupted by Liberals, multiculturalism, and progressive politics.

Comparing traditional cosplay with tactical embodiment may be disheartening. Some may wish to protect the practice of cosplay by defining it as inherently feminist, transgressive, and liberating. Others may see these performances as more closely aligning with LARPing or live-action role-playing (Mackay, 2017), for SLD fans are essentially adopting the role of a character (i.e., soldier, spy, masculine hero) and are motivated by immersion in a story world (i.e., white supremacist conspiracy theories). By drawing parallels to fandom, I am not attempting to trivialize the consequences of domestic terrorism or to frame the perpetrators as harmless. Instead, I wish to show how fandom, like play, can be very toxic, destructive, and dangerous, especially when the object of fandom is a perception of America believed to be under attack. To put it differently, the purpose of this chapter is not to define Larry Brock and other right-wing terrorists as LARPers or cosplayers. Instead, I wish to extend the tools of fan studies to highlight how the behaviors and practices traditionally considered fannish are fundamental to reactionary communities.

2.1.2 The Tactical Body

I use the term tactical body to typify an expression of white supremacist ideology and reactionary politics that emerges from online play. Like the prepared body, that tactical body is a site of social experiences and political struggle (Butler, 2011; Haraway, 2006; Harcourt, 2009; Spivak, 1978). I could use many words to indicate the militant aspects of this embodied expression. However, "tactical" signals what has developed into a subcultural aesthetic, lifestyle, and consumer market. A simple Google search reveals that the tactical moniker is recognized by

online communities and algorithmically amplified in our digital economy with an ever-expanding ecosystem of online personalities, communities, and content. In other words, the tactical lifestyle shares many of the characteristics of a fan identity, highlighting the interaction between online reactionarism, consumer culture, and fandom, which best defines what has developed into a popular mode of political participation in the digital age. The tactical body is also "tactical" in another crucial way. Fan scholars suggest that by acting out roles of fantasy characters in public, fans are "poaching" urban spaces, converting them into safe or home-like places (Crawford & Hancock, 2018). Those who play out the tactical body also attempt to convert spaces to make them more comfortable. Some are satisfied with annexing digital spaces, such as SLD's Facebook comment section. Others desire to reassert their dominance and power in public spaces, showing up to political protests, government buildings, and voting stations heavily armed and ready for war.

While some may see the tactical body as closely aligned with doomsday prepper culture, critical differences make this subculture distinct and uniquely dangerous. A desire to regain agency and control during uncertain times may fuel preppers (Kelly, 2016), but prepping is fundamentally a defensive, precautionary, and speculative practice. Preppers enact their apocalyptic fantasies by "bunkering down," sustained by a list of potential disasters energized by mass media and real-world disasters (Garrett, 2021; Mills, 2019). There are also notable ideological differences between preppers and the tactical body. Ethnographies of doomsday prepper culture challenge the prevailing assumption that contemporary prepping is predicated on fringe right-wing ideologies (Barker, 2020; Huddleston, 2016). Although there is overlap with the performative behaviors and vocabulary, those who play out the tactical body are not simply

preparing to defend themselves against potential threats and disasters but actively conspiring to retrieve and restore white men's place at the top of the social hierarchy.

Body armor companies and their patrons might frame these products as tools for self-defense. Still, I challenge the assertion that wearing body armor is simply defensive, especially when heavily armored men show up to highly volatile situations seeking violent confrontations. Instead, wearing body armor in public is an aggressive and offensive act. The tactical body is also politically infused with a "white-man-as victim" mentality and self-righteous anger over what they consider to be a dispossession of certain "God-given rights" taken away by government bureaucrats and given to less deserving people (Kimmel, 2017). Thus, a desire for revenge inspires and drives the tactical body, which goes beyond defensive measures. Of course, white supremacy is not simply the main component of the tactical body; it is the glue that binds the other elements together (gun enthusiasm, citizen-protector mentality, fears of changing demographics, aggrieved entitlement, and feelings of victimhood). Its inherent stickiness attracts other toxic byproducts of internet culture, intensifying a preexisting crisis motif that rationalizes a longing for angry white men to go on the offensive. As demonstrated by the actions of Larry Brock, this type of play does not remain confined to digital spaces but, once it reaches a fever pitch, erupts in the real world as acts of violence.

2.2 Analysis

2.2.1 Fear-mongering and Stoking Anxiety

Based out of Las Vegas, Safe Life Defense specializes in hard and flexible armor plating. Labeling itself as "one of the fastest growing companies in the state," SLD's promotional messaging stresses the importance of having the bulletproof vest as part of one's everyday attire. The company may primarily target military, police, security personnel, and first responders with

its promotional content, but it also encourages and supplies "civilian self-defense." SLD's definition of "self-defense" aligns with the beliefs of 2nd Amendment advocates who frame gun ownership as an essential defensive measure. While SLD often characterizes gun violence as an immediate threat to the average citizen, the company also has an almost fetishized obsession with firearms and the destruction they cause. Indeed, many SLD promotional materials support fantasies of gun-packing heroes protecting their families, community, and country from other deranged gunmen.

While many body armor companies restrict sales to civilians, SLD distinguishes itself from its rivals by seeking to "provide the best body armor for all morally sound and ethically inclined citizens." As SLD states, "If you follow the law, you can purchase our body armor." The company's website dedicates an entire page to assuring potential customers that "body armor is legal for almost anyone to possess or use in all 50 states within the U.S." Providing a chart of the types of "law-abiding citizens" who could benefit from wearing body armor (from "security organizations" to "neighborhood groups"), SLD characterizes its body armor as the best "long - term investment that can keep you and your loved ones alive." Targeting security organizations resonates with how body armor is traditionally sold. However, SLD's inclusion of "neighborhood groups" shows the company sees the average citizens (or those who desire to take the law into their own hands) as an untapped market. While not explicitly stated, the rationale for owning and wearing body armor are tied directly to racist attitudes toward crime. Critical race scholars have long highlighted the longstanding conflation between blackness and criminality by the media, politicians, and society. As Livingston and Young (2020) state, the law-abiding label is rarely extended to black gun owners. Instead, many scholars suggest that opposition to gun control is tied directly to fears of black violence (O'Brien et al., 2013), even

when white men make up a larger share of perpetrators of mass shootings in the United States. Whether SLD intentionally included racist dog whistling or not, the differentiation between “good” and “bad” gun owners taps into the widespread myth in the United States’s gun culture that white Americans arm themselves “legally” while Black Americans use their guns to commit crime (Allen, 2007).

While SLD frames its goal to protect the average citizen as altruistic, it is essential to mention that the company is also highly invested in expanding its clientele. More people buying armor means higher profit margins. There may have been a time when body armor seemed only necessary for those in high-risk professions, but today more and more people see the world as a hostile environment. The number of first-time buyers of body armor has slowly increased in recent years, with many concerned about mass shootings (Diaz, 2022). Stoking fear and anxiety to increase body armor sales is a common strategy by SLD. Mimicking the popular rationale for owning and carry firearms, SLD promotional materials frame the America as a warzone, a place where at any moment a heavily armored and armed citizen may be called to defend themselves and their community. In fact, SLD’s promotional materials frequently imply that there are three types of America citizens: the violent criminals who wish to do harm, the weak or innocent who need protection, and those who are called to defend those who cannot defend themselves. Its promotional materials may rarely explicitly reference current events, but the almost daily mass shootings in the United States create the perfect backdrop for SLD's sales pitch. SLD characterizes the world as an exceedingly dangerous place, the only defense being body armor. As the company's missions statement states:

We believe our job is to protect your life and prepare you for any threat by creating the most innovative gear on the planet. In addition, we believe that everyone-from normal

civilians to elite police SWAT teams- has a right to FEEL SAFE & PREPARED with our elite tactical gear.

At a time when it is becoming increasingly profitable to sell products designed to increase one's ability to survive a mass shooting, more and more companies are hoping to capitalize on fears that our world is becoming an increasingly unsafe place. These companies also exploit America's long tradition of looking for any solution to gun violence that does not involve stricter gun restrictions or gun safety laws. Gun rights advocates and politicians have paved the way for a more significant trend of companies centering their products around self-defense. Shortly after the Uvalde Shooting, where gunmen killed 19 kids and two adults (Dey et al., 2022)-U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz proposed increasing security measures in places of work, schools, and homes (Mendez & McCullough, 2022). Rather than making it harder for people to obtain weapons that kill, politicians frequently propose funding for "hardening" schools by constructing bulletproof doors and windows-panic buttons, armed security guards, or other types of "security theater" (Anthony, 2022). Disturbingly, SLD has developed products directly marketed to parents concerned about school shootings. In a blog promoting their new "backpack armor," SLD asks, "As you prepare to send your children back to school, you probably find yourself picking pencils, color, folders, and wide ruled notebooks [...] but have you thought about safety?" SLD hopes to ease the minds of parents by providing armored panels designed to fit inside a "wide variety of backpacks." While sending kids to school heavily armored might seem like a shameless ploy to profit off school shootings, SLD frames backpack armor as one more tool in "family protection." To SLD, federal law restricting the types of guns sold and the types of people who can buy them is not the solution. Instead, "It's on each one of us as individuals to prepare our kids for these tragic possibilities as we send them back to school."

Conveniently, SLD's promotional materials fail to mention the ease of owning and obtaining guns in the United States. Instead, SLD often directs the blame of mass shootings on "mainstream media" and "unstable individuals." The company may not be invested in firearm sales and claims its products simply protect its customers from gun violence. However, SLD's promotional materials reflect a mentality consistent with gun rights advocates. Perhaps this should not be surprising, given that increased gun violence justifies SLD's existence. It is also safe to assume that SLD understands that anti-gun narratives would be unpopular with their fan base. Gun owners tend to be the most common return customers for body armor, and alienating their fan base would be bad for business. As I will show in the following sections, SLD's fans are vocal about their disdain for gun safety laws.

2.2.2 Citizen Protector Mentality

While SLD does not sell firearms, they do offer a variety of gun accessories, including tactical belts, holsters, pouches, shooting gloves, and an assortment of tactical gear designed to "protect your life and prepare you for any threat." SLD body armor is continually framed as part of an ensemble which allows citizens to take up the roll of a citizen protector. Fueled by fears and anxieties surrounding crime and police inefficacy, Carson (2015) refers to this model of citizenship influenced by American gun culture. The citizen protector celebrates:

the protection of self and others as an everyday civic duty that is particularly compelling in contexts where alternative ways of asserting masculinity (such as being the sole financial providers for one's family) are eroding and the state's capacity to protect (through policing, for example) appears precarious (Carson, 2015, p.20).

A citizen-protector rationale is not only prevalent throughout SLD's promotional materials, but also the key selling point. Painting the world as under-protected and filled with unmeasurable threats, SLD calls on the average citizen to fight with law enforcement. SLD characterizes its body armor as the perfect tool to protect neighborhoods, places of work, families, and homes. As mentioned in one of the company's many dedicated blog posts, "Owning body armor and practicing your defense skills regularly can stop bad things from happening." While SLD is often ambiguous about the types of "bad things" that may occur, its official blog does provide scenarios when wearing body armor may be necessary.

In an article titled "Halloween Safety Tips," the author opens with the warning, "amidst corn mazes, costumes, haunted houses, and trick-or-treating fun [...] real danger lurks." While most might consider Halloween a wholesome, family-friendly affair filled with make-believe scares, the article paints the holiday as a night full of terror, suggesting moments when it might be necessary to "get into your body armor if you haven't already." Although police terminology (including color-coded threat levels) is prevalent throughout the blog, law enforcement is not the target audience for these blogs. Instead, SLD declares that every citizen must have a "mindset of preparedness," implying that wearing body armor is appropriate for a holiday as innocuous as Halloween. SLD may state that these safety tips "aren't meant to be scary, they're meant to be empowering." However, claiming that average citizens should behave like police officers encourages a brand of vigilante justice that can be very deadly. It is worth repeating that I do not wish to trivialize the consequences of paranoid citizens roaming the streets looking for supposed criminals. However, the connection to fandom is hard not to ignore. SLD is essentially producing a Halloween-themed tactical role play scenario, with its body armor and related merchandise becoming part of a tactical ensemble meant to transform the environment into a fantasy arena for

fans to play out the role of citizen protector. As Crawford and Hancock (2018, p. 306) argue, cosplayers do not simply use their bodies as canvases or stages for performance, but through individual expression “reimagine or transform their surrounding environment to construct a safe space for their activities.” While this “urban poaching” is characterized by cosplay scholars as transgressive and resistant to the status quo, I contend that symbolically appropriating public space can lead to very dangerous acts of play. As has become all too clear with the number of gun killings in the name of self-defense, fearing for one's life has too often been used to justify (and escape conviction from) the murdering of unarmed Americans, especially Black Americans. As Armour (2023) writes in an opinion piece on the controversial "stand your ground laws," Black Americans are often the victims of frightened citizens and police officers with itchy trigger fingers, exacerbated by negative stereotypes about Black people and crime. While SLD may claim it is "better to be safe than sorry," this discourse validates lethal force being used hastily and without provocation. SLD may describe their body armor as the "number one product you need for self-defense." However, its promotional materials also perpetuate the myth widely held by gun advocates that taking “criminal” life is sometimes necessary when protecting “innocent” life. SLD is also perpetuating the same narratives used by right-wing militia groups and extremists to justify taking on the role of law enforcement and enforcing the peace themselves. Kyle Rittenhouse, the 17-year-old arrested in the shooting deaths of two people in Kenosha, Wisconsin, claimed he traveled to the city armed with an AR-style rifle to "protect" the city from Black Lives Matter protesters (Tarm & Richmond, 2021). Rittenhouse reportedly wore body armor before giving it to an armed guard for protection (Clair & Gutowski, 2021).

SLD frequently posts videos on its social media accounts, showcasing its body armor's flexibility, concealability, lightweight nature, and ability to stop live rounds and knife stabs.

Some more popular videos feature "ballistics tests," where the body armor is "hit" with various guns and ammunition. SLD presents these highly bombastic demonstrations as evidence that it has "the most protective soft armor ever." SLD's dedicated Facebook page also provides the perfect hub for sharing videos from other YouTube channels and personalities. Shooting body armor with various weapons has become a popular content genre in digital spaces. Many YouTubers have centered their content around testing and reviewing multiple tactical products. For example, Kentucky Ballistics reviewed SLD's "flexible rifle armor system" (Kentucky Ballistics, 2020) Before the test begins, Scott shares his personal experience with body armor as a former law enforcement officer. He then proceeds to demonstrate how the body armor holds up against a barrage of firearms, praising the body armor's ability to stop the deadliest attacks.

Following the pattern of other contemporary brands, SLD surrounds its products with various interactions for its fans to engage. SLD does not simply want its fans to buy its body armor, but wear its merchandise, watch its YouTube content, visit its website, and read its blogs. The company's Facebook page acts as an interactive hub where all SLD content can coexist and draw fans in, like a club. It is also a space where various tactical companies, reactionary personalities, and political organizations can post their content, combining to create a metadiscourse surrounding tactical embodiment. SLD promotional materials exist in an ecosystem of body armor discourse constructed by various digital media personalities and tactical companies.

As mentioned, SLD's main website hosts a series of blogs by public relations team members. These blogs focus on various topics, from stories honoring the bravery of police officers to safety tips designed to increase "situational awareness" ("Blog-Safe Life Defense," n.d). A repeated narrative in these blogs concerns the increasing number of mass shooters with

high-caliber firearms. Some of SLD's most highly rated and augmented plating, called the "enhanced multi-threat" armor, is specially designed to be "special threat resistant." SLD promises to protect against different ammunition types and threat levels. Its body armor also "protects against rifle threats." As the website states:

Despite popular belief, it's not always handguns that shooters are using, but rather high-powered rifles like the AK-47, AR-15 and those you might find in the family gun safe for hunting" ("Body Armor Buyer's Guide," 2023).

Beyond the body armor, SLD and other similar tactical companies are also making and selling the raw materials for the tactical body. It is undoubtedly concerning body armor companies, like SLD, characterize the world as a war zone in which only the most heavily armored citizens can survive. Although SLD might claim wearing body armor is "a defensive security measure" and should only be used to safeguard the American public from gun violence, the frequent sightings of anti-government militia groups, far-right terrorists, and mass shooters incorporating body armor into their tactical ensembles should make one question this assertion. SLD does warn that wearing body armor in public can "draw extra attention from both the public and local law enforcement" ("Body Armor Buyers Guide," 2023). However, the company often implies these restrictions are due to a misinformed public and fearful politicians. In response to California's proposed legislation regarding body armor, Nick Groat, CEO of SLD, shared a message on their social media accounts suggesting to its patrons to "please consider ordering body armor while legal ownership is available to you."

The way SLD inserts itself within a constellation of conservative and gun rights ideological beliefs to construct a narrative about crime and the tactical lifestyle has many similarities to fan fiction, a practice that has received much attention in fan studies (Coppa, 2017;

Hellekson & Busse, 2006). Like cosplay, much of the literature celebrates the feminist, queer, and trans narratives found in fanfiction archival spaces (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Busse & Lothian, 2009; De Kosnik, 2021). However, more recent scholarship has highlighted how conspiracy theories, fake news, and misinformation shares many of the qualities of fan fiction, in that they act as a "communal headcanon that theorizes a fantastical version of the United States" (Reinhard et al., 2022, p. 10). In their examination of the use of memes by alt-right communities, Lamerich et al. (2018) show how supporters of political candidates create and distribute their own framing of the political landscape in the United States. However, fan fiction is not simply storytelling but a "textual attempt to make certain characters 'perform' according to different behavioral scripts" (Coppa, 2014, p. 224). SLD contributes to this tactical fan fiction and offers its products as tools to actualize these behavioral scripts, essentially fashioning a presumed fan body. As I will show in the following section, the playful affordances of SLD's Facebook page allow fans to expand upon this tactical fan fiction, not only infusing it with white male grievances and racist attitudes towards crime but embodying these white supremacist myths through the construction of a tactical ensemble.

2.2.3 Facebook and Digital Play

Given that I am arguing that the playful affordances of Facebook are integral to the construction and amplification of the tactical body, it seems fitting to describe how the platform works. This is somewhat difficult. Facebook could be more forthright with information about how their software works, although they state that the system is constantly tweaked to improve its prediction performance (Oremus, 2021). Facebook's platform uses machine learning algorithms to compute the expected utility of content to its users. Facebook aims to make its click prediction system more robust and adaptive, capable of learning from massive volumes of

data. While the desired intent is to predict a user's preferences and show ads they may be interested in, Facebook is also regularly accused of creating echo chambers that reinforce extremist views and, in some instances, even auto-creating hate groups ("TTP-White supremacist groups are thriving on Facebook," 2020). Facebook's "related pages" feature often directs users already consuming extremist content to other far-right groups and influencers. As mentioned previously, Facebook was found serving up ads for companies selling weapons accessories and body armor alongside election misinformation and insurrection talk. BuzzFeed News found ads for bulletproof body armor and tactical gear even after Facebook promised to suspend these types of advertisements after the events of the Capitol Insurrection (Mac & Silverman, 2021). Even more troubling, these ads were often next to recommendations for pages belonging to the anti-government extremist militia groups mentioned previously.

While Facebook certainly played a role in spreading the lies which motivated so many to storm the Capitol Building on January 6, it would be highly reductive to claim Facebook is solely responsible for the Capitol Insurrection. Facebook is not the only platform whereby misinformation, conspiracies, and hateful content spread. Nor was it the only platform used by the Insurrections. Election lies and misinformation thrived on Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Reddit, Periscope, and Parlor. On the day they stormed the Capitol, many Insurrectionists also used covert communication applications such as Signal and Zello. However, there are unique facets of Facebook that give insights into how radicalization works in our current convergence culture. First, Facebook is a highly interactive and intertextual platform. Like many social media sites, Facebook is a hub for sharing content from various websites and makes it incredibly easy to form communities around conspiracies and misinformation. While Facebook has allegedly made efforts to curtail hate speech, dozens of white supremacist groups, including the groups

linked to the Proud Boys, were until very recently allowed to operate freely on Facebook (Associated Press, 2022b). One could indeed find examples of Insurrectionists engaging in “dark play,” or what Petersen (2022) refers to as online activities that are “designed to generate chaos or confusion” or “to push for dramatic response” in anonymous online spaces. However, this chapter will underscore how radicalization is afforded and normalized in broad daylight. Many Insurrectionists made their intentions known shamelessly and publicly on Facebook, some even live-streaming their actions.

Facebook groups centered around fear-mongering body armor companies would be problematic enough, but when implanted in a system designed to respond to the actions of users and recommend similar content, a dangerous vector to extremism is not only possible but expected. Since body armor companies often perpetuate the same reactionary ideology, Facebook's software recommends these brands to political extremists. Thus, incorporating theories of play allows researchers to focus on how the digital economy responds to the conflation of self-expression and political participation within consumer capitalism. Like most data companies, Facebook incorporates data from users' browsers to create a more personalized experience and targeted advertisements. As a profit-making machine, Facebook's primary business model involves convincing businesses and other data companies to advertise on their website (Simons Institute, 2015). In 2018, Google and Facebook signed an undisclosed agreement that allowed Google's search engine to integrate with Facebook's homepage and marketplace (Wakabayashi & Hsu, 2021). The partnership explains why a user's Google results often reappear as advertisements on their Facebook account. Digital advertising is a multi-billion-dollar industry and is growing dramatically each year. Facebook has no real incentive to

stop how its recommendations work, even if it means amplifying dangerous movements toward democracy.

While characterizing commodities as something more significant has been a long-time industrial strategy, what has changed is the intensification and elaboration of an intertextual matrix by digital software and algorithms. Just as intertextuality is a defining feature of media texts in the age of convergence, products are rarely isolated entities but act as "intertextual commodities" (Marshall, 2002). These products do not exist in isolation but imply or call forth other texts. Tactical brands are so heavily gendered as masculine that their matrix of related products is inherently more enticing to the convergence culture industry. Economic power has long influenced how the industry relates to fans, and, as Scott (2019) has argued, the convergence culture industry tends to favor masculine modes of fannish participation, for they are more easily marketable, - co-optable, and not ideologically challenging.

These masculine-coded commodities become part of a marketable segment of the economy that alters the algorithms of other websites, applications, and platforms. As postcolonial and feminist scholars have long highlighted, capitalism has always provided a permission structure for white supremacy. However, the tactical body is dangerous because it has developed into an algorithmically recognized consumer identity centered and sustained by the desire for violent confrontations. As I will show in the following sections, the fans discussed in this study do not simply contribute to the spread of misinformation and conspiracies but consume products that they perceive to be integral to their identity and, in some cases, support a political agenda.

2.2.4 Tactical Canon and Reactionary Play

SLD's promotional materials frequently justify the right and need to own body armor by framing the world as a dangerous place. Fans throughout the comment sections of SLD's Facebook page echo and expand upon this sentiment. While SLD is deliberately vague in describing the threats one might face (mainly focusing on the weapons a would-be attacker would use), fans tactlessly define the types of people more likely to be dangerous. Fans' descriptions of "the enemy" often fall along political and racial lines. Democrats and gun safety advocates are frequently labeled as corrupt government elites making the country a more forgiving place for violent crime and attempting to take away citizens' "right to defend themselves." The comment sections become even more troublesome when fans mention the racial unrest surrounding police brutality. Many fans refer to "Ferguson" and "Kenosha" to epitomize times when lawlessness puts "law-abiding citizens" at risk from rioters. The word "rioter" is loaded with racial undertones, meant to signify the racist conflation of Blackness and criminality. Fans often reference rioters and Black Lives Matter protesters in the same statements, stirring up imagery from the media coverage showing looting and the destruction of property. Fans often echo right-wing talking points, including those claiming police officers refused to respond to 9-11 calls in certain "cities:"

The police are currently not enforcing the laws in many cities. During the riots in the 90's the citizenry was left to deal with the rioters (many whom were armed) by themselves as police stopped responding.... kinda hard to be protected by someone who won't come out.

This comment follows in the tradition of right-wing news and Republican politicians, including former President Donald Trump, who frequently use the word "cities" to signify racially diverse parts of the country while characterizing the "rural country" as housing true "patriots" (often

implied to be white). Racist language, lies, and conspiracy theories make up many comments on SLD's Facebook page. SLD seems unconcerned with the disturbing places fans take these posts. Instead, the company periodically posts stories with incendiary headlines to stir up its fan bases. Sharing the latest information from the proposed California state laws restricting body armor sales generated quite a heated tirade of comments (Safe Life Defense, 2023). The story, which has developed into a sponsored Facebook advertisement, has generated over 1.5 k comments. Fans are unsurprisingly outraged by these proposed laws, referring to the restriction of body armor as "tyrannical," "fascist," and "communist." Some fans seem perplexed that state officials would restrict body armor, sharing the narrative that body armor is solely "defensive equipment." Unable to see the proposed restrictions as a response to the increased use of body armor by mass shooters and domestic terrorists, fans suggest that a more sinister and coordinated plot is behind the law. As one fan says, it is "easier for the government to shoot people when they take away your body armor." "This is about a defenseless population to control," warns another. A few fans urge others to contact their legislators to express their opposition to the proposed measure, while others suggest "stocking up" or intentionally breaking the law in resistance. Many fans characterize this as an attempt by a corrupt government to "take away your liberties and freedoms" and suggest that this is evidence that "we are heading for a war."

Remember your liberal enslavers give them no mercy when our war for Freedom start here in America Remember it's A JUST US SYTEM because of liberal voters and there' to boxes to vote with [sic]

Interestingly, most fans do not make distinctions between the right to own body armor and the right to own a gun, suggesting that both are meant for self-defense. However, many also write that SLD body armor is "great for [where] America is headed," alluding to an impending

battle. These comment sections do not have a light peppering of comments calling on gun-toting, body armor-wearing patriots to fight a corrupt government and a wave of “criminals.” Quite the opposite. Accusing liberals, democratic politicians, and ethnic minorities of attempting to create a “New American,” one that is disarmed and easily controlled, is not only common but a dominant theme. Politicians who advocate for stricter gun laws are also mentioned, labeled as an enemy attempting to “take over” the country. “This is how you know the government is trying to kill all of us,” one fan writes. “Crooked governments want their citizens defenseless. That’s the only explanation,” writes another. While some may interpret these statements as simple masculine bravado, trolling, or angry fans attempting to blow off steam, when paired with other discourse posted to SLD’s Facebook page, these comments become even more disturbingly, especially when paired with racist attitudes toward crime.

As mentioned earlier, Facebook is a highly interactive and intertextual platform. SLD’s dedicated Facebook page allows frequent posts from other tactical-themed internet personalities like the “DaChief.” A Chicago police officer and social media influencer, DaChief appears to have a promotional partnership with SLD, regularly featured in videos promoting the company’s products. DaChief claims on his Twitter account that his primary goal is to show “the positive side of law enforcement” (DaChief, n.d.b) However, his Facebook show, “Live Leo with DaChief,” might best be described as a collection of rants degrading social justice movements, like Black Lives Matter, and providing “evidence” of “the news” deliberately framing police officers in a bad light (DaChief, n.d.a). In one video posted to SLD’s Facebook page (DaChief, 2020), two suspects are forcefully removed from their car and arrested. One screams, “I can’t breathe,” after being shoved and pinned to the ground. DaChief suggests this video only received national attention because the suspects were Black, mocking the Black Lives Matter movement

by saying, "Let's loot, let's riot after watching this video!" He then "breaks down" the rest of the dashcam footage, concluding that the police officers were justified in using force due to the suspects' actions.

DaChief's commentary certainly has white supremacist undertones, but it is nothing compared to the blatantly racist language in the comment section. Some fans suggest that the Black Lives Matter movement offers a "Get Out Of Jail Free card" to criminals, yet another example of fans conflating Blackness with criminality. Indeed, Black Americans are a popular target of disdain from commenters on this video. Using terms like "they" and "them" to project the actions of these two suspects onto the Black Lives Matter movement and "the black community," one fan claims this proves that there is "some kind of dysfunctional bullshit [sic] that makes them act this way." Echoing the rhetoric by conservative and right-wing new sources, like Tucker Carlson, who frequently frames marginalized races as social threats and frequently depict BLM protestors as violent criminals (Gondwe and Bhowmik, 2022). Others suggest these suspects were playing the "race card." As Taylor (2016) writes, Black people and communities are often blamed for their own oppression, transforming structural causes into biological or cultural causes. Thus, the frequent rationalization of violence against the Black people in this video is consistent with America's long tradition of reducing criminality to the presence of Black culture. The conflation between black culture and criminality by fans is made evident by many of the comments:

It's just too sad. And they want to blame America, white culture, the police anyone but themselves. I have no sympathy for this fool. He deserves everything that he gets From This moment forward.

Many fans also admit they received pleasure from seeing the suspects tossed to the ground, suggesting that they deserved whatever mistreatment they received because they resisted arrest.

I had a great laugh talk about overreacting [...] personally I thought the police were being nice [...] I suppose they will used [sic] the I'm coloured rule.

SLD may state that it should not be responsible for comments posted on DaChief's videos. However, the statements made on SLD's official posts are not drastically different. Regardless, Facebook's affordances and fans' actions allow for the discourse surrounding SLD, DaChief, and many other tactical personalities to become entangled and bound together, creating a metadiscourse on body armor and the tactical lifestyle. SLD's Facebook page had developed into a space for fans to create and share stories centered around gun rights narratives, reactionary politics, and white supremacist ideology, almost like a fan fiction forum or archive. Fans do not stop at contributing and reaffirming this tactical canon but play out this story world by constructing a tactical ensemble, with body armor the centerpiece. Fans may frequently repeat SLD's narrative that body armor is solely for protection. However, they also post photos of SLD body armor featured with other tactical gear, including shooting gloves, belts, holsters, pistols, and assault rifles. This fan base has anointed themselves as armed and armored protectors, prepared and ready to defend their family and country against an impending battle, one which they claim not to desire but helped to canonize. They also name and sanction targets to direct their anger and fear. Whether against a wave of criminals or a corrupt government, the desired intent of the tactical body is to actualize a revenge fantasy that does not remain confined to internet spaces but manifests as far-right violence and domestic terrorism.

The parallels between traditional cosplay and this tactical embodiment are disturbingly apparent. As Mountfort et al. (2019, p. 29) write, cosplay is an embodied citational act in which

fans' "bodies are transformed into texts that make reference to other, publicly available texts." An integral part of the practice of cosplay is the way a costume allows a participant to broadcast their affection for and identification with a media text (Lamerich, 2014) "and immediately be accepted, recognized and embraced within a community of other fans" (Nichols, 2019, p. 275). While cosplayers construct costumes with swords, shields, guns, wands, and other (often harmless) props to reference their chosen source text, the ways SLD arrange the selection of pieces for their tactical ensemble are references to a variety of white supremacist parent texts, including the discourse surrounding SLD's promotional materials. However, just as cosplayers appropriate, transform, and perform an existing story in close connection to their own identity (Lamerichs, 2011), SLD fans are not just citing materials from the original source but collectively editing and co-creating a playful embodiment of this tactical fanfiction through the constructing of a tactical ensemble. When playing out the tactical body, SLD fans are not merely adopting the role of a police officer but also the racist assumptions which has plagued law enforcement throughout the country's history. Police officers have experienced more scrutiny for how they treat unarmed black men in recent years, thanks in large part to the Black Lives Matter movements (Taylor, 2016). The racial anxiety caused by the challenge to the traditional power structure is being displaced by the fans in these comment sections, primarily as myths of unchecked black crime.

Describing this behavior as playful is not meant to make light of the disturbing comments made on SDL's Facebook page or trivialize far-right extremists' actions. As scholars have noted, play can be severe, dangerous and perpetuate oppressive ideologies. Instead, I show how today's digital ecosystem often enables and amplifies extremist ideology by providing avenues for fans to construct unique transmedia story worlds, poach body armor, and other tactical products, to

play out white supremacist fantasies. SLD fans often cite progressive politics, multiculturalism, and Black empowerment as the evidential erasure and subjugation of white Americans, which is alarmingly consistent with "the great replacement," a conspiracy theory often cited by perpetrators of mass shootings (Cosentino, 2020; Ekman, 2022). Days before fatally shooting nine Black parishioners at a Church in South Carolina, the Charleston shooter told a friend that "blacks were taking over the world" and that "someone needed to do something about it for the white race (Collins & Bynum, 2015)." A complaint in the case of the man who shot 10 Black shoppers at a Buffalo supermarket provided evidence that he wanted to "prevent Black people from replacing white people and eliminate the white race, and to inspire others to commit similar racially motivated attacks." (Associated Press, 2022a). Fighting against a corrupt government is also a popular motivation for anti-government militia groups. The Oath Keepers, a group of extremists who claim to be defending the U.S. Constitution and fighting tyranny, had multiple members, including leader Stewart Rhodes, storming the Capitol on January 6. Many were arrested and accused of tactically conspiring to oppose the presidential power transfer. Other right-wing political organizations (including the Proud Boys, Red Elephants, and the 3 Percenters) claimed they defended their U.S. Constitution interpretation when they stormed the Capitol.

2.3 Final Thoughts on SLD and the Tactical Body

It may be impossible to know if the founders of SLD deliberately intended to profit off far-right extremism or wanted to carve out a segment of the digital economy for "civilian defense." However, I am not arguing that SLD is solely responsible for far-right radicalization. Rather, reactionary fans actively operationalize the brand to symbolize white male grievances, anger, and a desire to prepare the body for an impending conflict. This chapter also reveals the

tactical body, a fan embodiment of white supremacist conspiracy theories and a playful form of political engagement designed to actualize a revenge fantasy of Insurrection. Understanding the tactical body as both a fan embodiment and playful expression paints a better picture of how white supremacy and reactionary discourse become enacted (and rewarded) in digital spaces. Like many fandoms, SLD fans have formed a community around a shared sense of belonging, rituals, and traditions. Disturbingly, the expressions of white male grievance and tactical embodiment make up a significant portion of this community's online participation.

My argument is decidedly not that all SLD fans are domestic terrorists or desire to overthrow the government. SLD videos tap into a much broader cultural symbolism, echoing images from popular culture of armed men who use guns to reclaim their masculinity as they save their families, communities, and the nation. What separates SLD's brand from traditional expressions of heroic white masculinity is how fans select and amplify the more militant and violent narratives embedded in SLD's videos and embrace them as a playful form of political expression. SLD is undoubtedly not the only company that embraces a militaristic, nationalistic, and gun-centric aesthetic, and the tactical body is not exclusive to this fan base. This case study warns of a more significant trend of tactical companies profiting from growing cultural tension and political tribalism. The tactical body is also amplified by online algorithms and recognized as a consumer identity in our digital economy. Future studies could examine other intersections of brand messaging and fan play that reveal similar fan embodiments.

3 “WHAT IS RICH DOING? EXACTLY WHAT YOU ARE:” FITNESS FANDOM, WEARABLE FITNESS TECHNOLOGIES, AND THE FIT BODY

Marjorie Taylor Greene, the Georgia congresswoman and self-proclaimed "Christian nationalist" (Draper, 2022), may be best known for the many controversies that have comprised her short tenure. Supporting calls to execute prominent Democratic politicians, spreading white genocide conspiracy theories, and comparing COVID-19 safety measures to the Holocaust are just a few of the many incendiary statements she has made to date. However, often overlooked is Greene's affection for CrossFit, the high-intensity fitness movement. Greene's political identity became tightly intertwined with CrossFit, especially during her rise to power (Brooks and Jamieson, 2021). Greene built her credibility as a small business owner, first as the cofounder of a contracting company (sold to her by her father) and then through her short time as a CrossFit affiliate owner. Hoping to position herself as a fighter, she made fitness an integral part of her political image, regularly posting her CrossFit workouts on social media. Her first viral tweet came shortly after winning her congressional seat. Upset that she could not work out in a public gym due to COVID quarantine protocols, Green posted a video of herself doing a WOD (workout of the day) in her Washington, D.C. hotel room. With the caption, "This is my COVID protection," Greene became another perpetrator of a commonly held belief in the fitness community that having a "fit body" would protect you from exterior threats, whether a pandemic virus or something else. After sharing this post, many critics of Greene spent their time mocking her lifting form or discrediting CrossFit as a legit fitness modality. However, I wish to focus on what I consider to be yet another example of the alarming partnership between fitness culture and regressive body politics.

Body narratives, especially regressive ones, are often at their most explicit within fitness culture. Greene's political persona represents an overlapping Venn diagram of fitness culture, white supremacy, and Christian nationalism which is becoming increasingly common in fitness communities. Like Greene, CrossFit has recently faced its fair share of controversies, including the ousting of its founder and CEO, Greg Glassman, for making a series of racist comments. There have also been several accusations of CrossFit being inaccessible and even hostile to nonwhite athletes (Demby, 2013; Sanchez, 2019). While the more explicit and blatant examples of white supremacy discussed in the prior chapter are certainly worth examination, it is also essential to explore how whiteness maintains its dominance through more covert and banal "white supremacist recovery projects" (Kusz, 2017a; 2017b). This chapter will reveal yet another fannish and playful pathway to far-right political extremism in our digital environment through a case study of the fandom surrounding CrossFit celebrity Rich Froning.

Rich Froning is a 4-time winner of the CrossFit Games and the owner of CrossFit Mayhem, an affiliate in Cookeville, Tennessee. Froning has also been featured in many promotional materials for Whoop, including several YouTube videos showing the athlete performing workouts with the wearable fitness tracker. By examining Froning's transmedia brand, including an interface discourse analysis of the Whoop platform and CrossFit Mayhem's dedicated Facebook page, I show how Froning and his fans extend a narrative of "strained whiteness." As part of a fannish homology of Christian persecution myths and fitness pain narratives, "strained whiteness" extends the perception that extreme exercise and bodybuilding negate the privilege of being white and male in America. Positioning Froning's body, abilities, and signature playing style at the focal point of the Whoop platform constructs an unstated default subject position, which sets Froning's strain as an obtainable level. While some fans play

out this subject position, others expand upon it, revealing the fit body. I argue that the fit body is an embodiment of reactionary politics and white supremacist body narratives designed to actualize fantasies of white Christian patriots preparing for a final confrontation or “storm.” There is certainly much overlap between the tactical body and the fit body, which is salient to an understanding of the WMC that is the focus of the broader research in this dissertation. However, the tactical body and fit body have unique differences worth examining. While the previous chapter explored how fans construct ensembles meant to symbolize revenge fantasies of white male grievance, the fit body materializes through fans' desire to match Froning's physical prowess and strain tolerance to not only prepare the body for any fitness challenge but to better protect against an onslaught of attacks from progressive, secular, and woke politics.

3.1 Conceptualizing the Fit Body

3.1.1 Fan Bodies and Fitness Embodiment

While there has been an abundance of literature on the relationship between fitness and body politics (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Frew & McGillivray, 2005; Rich & Evans, 2005), examining fitness communities through the framework of fan bodies and embodiment more adequately explains how fans utilize celebrity texts and fitness body narratives to tell stories about themselves and the society in which they live. Fitness communities have not traditionally been considered fandom, but reimagining them explains the associated behaviors, including the appropriation of cultural artifacts and the active use of participatory media for self-expression, identity performance, and community formation. Not everyone in the CrossFit Mayhem Facebook community may self-identify as a Rich Froning fan (some may be more interested in general fitness). However, Froning's celebrity plays an integral role in the success of CrossFit Mayhem and the group's collective identity. Understanding the CrossFit Mayhem Facebook

community as fans best describes the interaction between media producers and audiences in the age of participatory culture.

As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, fan studies often explore the liminal spaces where various narratives converge to form a metadiscourse. Rich Froning is more than just a CrossFit celebrity but a transmedia fitness brand developed around a particular set of body narratives. Like many contemporary brands, Froning's brand does not exist in a vacuum. However, it moves across and between various media, poached by a myriad of digital media personalities and fan communities. Fans not only reaffirm the original fan object but expands upon it, incorporating new signs, symbols, and interpretations to create “vast intertextual networks of connected texts” (Booth, 2010, p. 34). The individuals who make up the CrossFit Mayhem Facebook community are not simply passive consumers of Froning’s brand, but actively negotiate with the discourse, ignoring some narratives and reaffirming others to produce a “canon” of fitness, CrossFit, and Rich Froning (Busse, 2017). Many fan scholars have discussed how subcultures use specific texts to articulate their group identity. Building from Willis' (1978) concept of subcultural homologies, Hills (2002, p.5) writes that fans adopt the marginalized status of certain subcultures to mark themselves as different or separated from the mainstream culture. As I will show in the follow sections, fans extend the discourse centered around Rich Froning's brand to create a fannish homology centered around the supposed suffering one experiences as both a CrossFit athlete and a white male Christian. However, Froning fans do not simply contribute to this “fanon” but play it out through the affordances of digital media. As fans produce their own meanings through their participation in this community, these playful performances rotate back into the fan community as “a continual feedback loop of narrative discussion and creation” (Liebler & Chaney, 2007, p. 6). Thus, it is helpful to examine

Froning's celebrity through the lens of transmediatization. As Hills (2020) argues, "where mediatization concerns the media's integration into everyday life [...] transmediation instead involves the systemic interaction of, and between, different media." Researchers can no longer study a single celebrity text in an age of media convergence. Instead, it is necessary to explore what manifests when all the subsets of Rich Froning fandom converge to form a homology of celebrity fandom, CrossFit/fitness fandom, and religious fandom.

3.1.2 The Unbearable Whiteness of CrossFit

A brief history seems appropriate to better understand CrossFit culture and its connection to the fit body. CrossFit is a fitness brand, exercise modality, and sport that promotes high-intensity exercise in a group-based interactive environment. Since the first CrossFit box opened in Santa Cruz, California, in 2000, CrossFit has garnered a reputation for promoting a distinct exercise regime centered on a "functional approach" to fitness with a range of workouts routines that entail "constantly varied functional movement, executed at high intensity, across broad time and modal domains." CrossFit athletes are taught to "train for the unknown" and strive to be proficient at various traditional physical activities, movements, and sports-specific skills, including gymnastics, Olympic Weightlifting, and functional training. CrossFit also brands itself as the "Sport of Fitness" and claims its practices can produce the "fittest" type of athlete. Since 2007, CrossFit has held the CrossFit Games, a yearly competition designed to "objectively measure fitness" and crown the "Fittest Man and Fittest Woman on Earth."

There are undoubtedly many ways in which CrossFit falls short as a progressive and inclusive organization, but where CrossFit really lags is in its racial diversity. Many have questioned if a racist attitude is at the center of CrossFit culture due to its many controversies surrounding race (Heffernan, 2020). CrossFit's association with white supremacy is no better

personified than by its founder and former CEO, Greg Glassman. The figurehead and sole arbiter of what defined CrossFit for years, Glassman was forced to resign in 2020 for making racist comments about the police killing of George Floyd during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. CrossFit affiliates and prominent CrossFit games athletes were quick to speak out against his comments, including Rich Froning, who reassured his fans that his gym was an inclusive and welcoming space for everyone (Salinas, 2020).

CrossFit's association with white supremacy may also be due to its overwhelming White leadership, affiliate ownership, and membership in CrossFit boxes. Through an ethnographic study of CrossFit gym, Sanchez (2019) shows how nonwhite members of CrossFit boxes express feelings of being outsiders due to daily microaggressions, lack of attention from coaches, and their body's incompatibility with CrossFit branded clothes and attire. Nonwhite CrossFit athletes also feel pressure to "code-switch" or behave in a certain way to fit in within these white spaces. Given CrossFit's relatively expensive membership fees, Demby (2013) suggests an economic barrier that disproportionately affects people of color explains the predominantly white membership of CrossFit spaces. CrossFit also has a long-standing relationship and support of the police and the military, which could explain why marginalized communities might find these spaces unwelcoming, especially after the frequent incidents of police brutality. Not only are many of the most famous CrossFit workouts named after fallen (predominately white) American soldiers, but CrossFit HQ's promotional videos frequently feature CrossFit athletes training at military bases and police stations. Compounding CrossFit's association with whiteness, the CrossFit Games champions and competitors list has also been overwhelmingly white. Not only has the homogeneity of Games athletes led to incidents of racism towards their nonwhite athletes

(Heffernan, 2020), but it has the effect of painting the “sport of fitness” as a domain exclusive to white athletes.

By situating the racial construction of whiteness at the center of this analysis, I am not arguing that CrossFit and the communities centered around the sport are explicitly white supremacists (in the contemporary neo-Nazi sense) or actively promoting white interests. As Hylton and Lawrence (2015, p.767) state, "White supremacy has very little to do, if anything, with a hatred of black people but more a hegemonic defense of (racialized) status and power." Thus, this chapter is interested in how CrossFit and its fans affirm the structure of racist domination and oppression through their tendency to conflate whiteness with fitness unwittingly.

3.1.3 The Fit Body

Following the same path as the tactical body chapter, I show how Froning’s celebrity branding, the technologies he uses to define fitness, and his fans' embodied performances reveal a subject position centered around white masculine Christianity that I call the fit body. The fit body emphasizes the perception that protection and preparedness are choices one can make by exercising and bodybuilding in particular ways. This emphasis on body type is not unusual within fitness culture. However, it is particularly salient to an understanding of the fit body. As several scholars argue, beauty standards in the United States have a long history of legitimizing racialized and gendered hierarchies, to the exclusion and denigration of the historically marginalized (Petermon, 2020). As Strings (2019) writes, attitudes toward body size have affirmed racial differences since before the country’s foundation, when distinctions between white and black bodies were necessary to justify polygenist beliefs, colonial conditions, and slavery. The underpinnings of America’s phobia about fatness parallels the fear of the imagined black body, which is often framed as immoral, gluttonous, or being in excess (Sanders, 2019).

Fitness culture has also been a venue for the construction of particular gender identities and seen as a "solution" to the blurring of traditional gender roles, tied to "normal" sexual development, and a means to curb homosexuality (Griffin, 2004). Politicians, pundits, and celebrities not only conflate healthiness with thinness but frame the fat body as a sign of weakness and individual failure. Individuals and communities outside these normative definitions of fitness are deemed unhealthy, deviant, or a drain on the American economy. Compounding this stigmatization of nonnormative bodies is the ongoing "obesity epidemic," which is too often influenced by reactionary political discourse, sensational media reports, and specific cultural values that uphold a body standard (Farrell, 2011; Patterson-Faye, 2016). Media representations of fitness also help standardize the ideal body's appropriate size, shape, and color by too often framing it as white, able-bodied, and built for heterosexual reproduction (Dyer, 1997; Jeffords, 1995)

Given fitness culture's long tradition as a hegemonic formation of self-surveillance and a means of disciplining bodies, it is unsurprising that it resonates with conservative body politics. Conservatism, as both a political and economic philosophy, is geared to establishing hierarchy and division between the types of bodies which benefit from government policies (such as welfare recipients and immigrants) and the groups of "free" Americans whose supposed self-reliance and hard work negates the need for government assistance (Jeffords, 1994). Both conservative politics and fitness culture extend meritocratic myths which stress the importance of individual duties and the pleasure of self-discipline and self-sacrifice (McKenzie, 2016). Commercialized fitness emphasizes personal responsibility and the benefits of self-discipline, which negates the need for regular medical check-ups and provides an alternative to universal health care (Sassatelli, 2010). Just as conservative politics has successfully capitalized on cultural anxieties to frame progress as a threat to traditional values and the American family, the

fitness industry, too, frames modernity as the enemy of the fit body (Maguire, 2007). While the discourse surrounding fitness tends to ignore how advancements in science and medicine, increased safety regulations, and higher living standards have significantly extended the average American lifespan, fitness culture too often overstates the ills of a modern lifestyle. The recent Paleo trend, frequently promoted in CrossFit gyms, urges people to resist the temptations of processed foods and sugars by returning to the presumed diet of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers (Edmonds, 2020; Weedon and Patchin, 2022).

In many ways, CrossFit markets itself as a "primal" form of fitness, pushing back against the traditional 'globo' gym and the modern lifestyle (Herz, 2014). While each box has its own character and localized twist on the CrossFit training style, the typical CrossFit 'box' is a highly stripped-down version of the traditional gym. Many boxes lack central heating and air conditioning, instead resorting to placing giant fans or opening the workout space to the environment. It is not uncommon to find CrossFit boxes in repurposed warehouses or industrial spaces, with large roll-up doors being the primary way of entry. Other than a few exercise bikes, Concept 2 rowers, ski machines, and the occasional treadmill (designed to replicate "functional exercises" and therefore acceptable in the CrossFit space), CrossFit prides itself as a throwback to the nostalgic "garage gym." CrossFit may promise to return members to a time before the modern lifestyle presumably undid the human species. However, CrossFit's success, as both a fitness trend and sport, is largely due to the enthusiasm generated in digital spaces and online communities. While romanticizing a pre-civilization past is at the heart of CrossFit (Crockett & Butryn, 2018), many boxes also embrace social media and online training programs designed to allow those not in the physical space to participate. Additionally, CrossFit athletes do not avoid innovative technologies, like wearable fitness trackers, in their promotional materials. Thus,

CrossFit exists in an interesting tension between maintaining a low technology aesthetic and embracing new technologies to prove why this fitness modality is superior to others.

Some might see the fit body as a playful expression of conservative body politics or a recycling of media representations of white masculinity. However, given CrossFit's embrace of new technologies and online engagement, the discourse surrounding CrossFit is not simply a nostalgic reclamation of traditional masculine power but a rearticulation of white masculinity which more directly responds to the crisis of whiteness in our contested society. Rather than driven by a desire to return humanity to a previous historical moment, the fit body is built to withstand both a grueling workout and the supposed "attacks" against white Christian masculinity from an increasingly "woke" and progressive society.⁴ The discourse surrounding the fit body is more of a repackaging of the ideological structures of white supremacy rather than a call to earlier modes of overt racism. Thus, the fit body sits conformably in the "affective lure of postrace," which "produces the conditions that make possible aggressive claims of whiteness and white grievance" while underplaying the oppression of black people and other marginalized communities (Mukherjee, Banet-Weiser, and Gray, 2020, p. 7, 11). As I will show in the following sections, the interrelating layers of discourse which surround the Froning fan community not only mark whiteness as disconnected from the privileges and power with which it is traditionally associated but also marginalized, persecuted, or "strained." Consequently, strained whiteness is framed as something which can be bolstered, strengthened, leveled up and playable through the affordances of Whoop.

⁴ "Woke" has become a moniker weaponized by conservative politicians and right-wing media. As Cammaerts (2022: 735) writes, it has developed into an "insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction." (Cammaerts, 2022:735) neutralize contestations against racist, sexist and anti-LGBTQ views. which has been used to justify policy that regulates how race, gender, and sexuality can be taught in public schools (Russel-Brown, 2022).

3.2 Analysis

3.2.1 *Froning as the Hardworking "Christian Soldier"*

In a YouTube video shared on CrossFit Mayhem's channel, Pastor Ashley Wooldridge of Christ's Church of the Valley (CCV) asks Rich Froning what he contributes to his success as a premiere CrossFit athlete (CCV (Christ's Church of the Valley), 2021). In what has become Froning's much-repeated "born-again" testimony, he tells the live church service that his many CrossFit championships are largely due to his ultimate failure. In the 2010 CrossFit Games, Froning's body began to break down from the onslaught of physical challenges. Due to his inability to ascend the many rope climbs necessary to complete the final event, he received a poor score and dropped out of first place. The video of Froning slipping and falling multiple times is shown at the live church service. The dramatic images provide the perfect metaphor of an athlete humbly falling from grace. According to Froning, this misstep was both an embarrassment and a life-defining moment requiring a complete reassessment of his priorities. Although Froning did achieve second place, an impressive accomplishment for any CrossFit athlete, this supposed defeat was proof enough that a divine endowment was missing from his life. Now that his Christian faith is the primary motivation for competing, Froning feels confident that he can overcome any challenge, even the perception that "Christians are soft, and they don't compete with the same ferocity." Froning hopes to glorify God with his talents and be a role model for future Christian athletes.

Although Rich Froning has reached celebrity status, his image centers around being a "blue-collar" American. Retreading familiar narratives from past white Christian athletes (Newman & Hawzen, 2017), Froning describes himself as coming from a long line of "workers." Froning could easily rest in luxury after his success as a CrossFit athlete, business owner, and

motivational speaker. However, that would be inconsistent with the frontier imagery integral to his persona. Supposedly rejecting the economic and social privileges of being a premiere athlete and businessman, Froning raises bison in his spare time. It is not a coincidence that Froning has chosen the bison as the official mascot of his brand. Since the bison's association with Teddy Roosevelt, the animal has historically symbolized a type of rugged white masculinity and a romanticization of a "golden era." Like Roosevelt before him, Froning explicitly connects his rugged individualism and physical prowess. As Froning boasts, the bison has made a resurgence in recent years after almost being "hunted almost to extinction." Inspired by the bison, Froning has built a body to endure a grueling workout and the forces of change around him.

Froning's rugged masculinity also resonates well with CrossFit culture, which often frames the sport as a more primitive, grueling, and arduous type of fitness. The trope of the hardworking white athlete overcoming his genetic limitations through intelligence, determination, and scrappiness is common in many sports narratives. However, the prevalence of "bootstrapism" discourse in CrossFit culture sets it apart from many. Much of the discourse surrounding CrossFit culture promotes the sport as less about physical prowess and talent and more about an athlete's devotion, willpower, and ability to push through pain. In this way, Froning embodies a "neoliberal imperative" which not only reinforces the white masculine ideals of heroism but also encourages people "to 'choose' to undertake a project of the self in which they become "personally responsible for committing to behaviors requiring physical and mental labor" (Nash, 2018, p. 1448). When juxtaposed with CrossFit's Paleolithic imagination, Froning's promotional materials glamorize a time that predates modern civilization, before white Americans were forced to "check their privilege." CrossFit culture's preoccupation with meritocratic myths becomes increasingly problematic when considering the white-centric nature

of the CrossFit community. While Froning is a physically gifted athlete, media representations often frame his success as due primarily to the qualities stereotypically associated with whiteness, including his willpower, commitment, and ability to "push through the pain" (Kusz, 2017; Leonard, 2017). Thus, Froning's white masculinity is coded as superior, hardworking, and self-sufficient while simultaneously underprivileged.

Influenced by an extended formulation of past white athletes (Carroll, 2011), Froning's story borrows from the popular "redemption" arc. As Leonard (2017) writes, the story of redemption is a privilege typically only available to white male athletes. Beginning with admitting guilt for a past "sin," this redemptive narrative is designed to show how much an athlete has suffered due to past transgressions, either by losing money or going to jail. Although Froning has never been part of a public controversy or committed an act of criminality, his supposed hubris at the 2010 CrossFit Games and preceding failure provides the necessary misstep for his atonement. To his fans, Froning is an inspirational figure not merely because of his hard work and "good" moral values but because of his transformation through adversity. Kusz (2007) argues that this story of redemption enables white athletes to "conveniently disavow their role in the perpetuation of systems of racial advantages by framing them as going through a life-changing transformation." Froning may not go as far as claiming himself a persecution victim. However, he does frame himself as suffering daily, not only in his grueling training but through his faith and his supposed rejection of the social, cultural, and economic benefits of being a White man in America. Froning's personal trials and tribulations implicitly work to distance him from the privileges associated with being white and male in a Black Lives Matter cultural landscape. However, it is not just Froning's story of redemption that marks himself as marginalized but the pain he suffers as a white Christian athlete in a secularized society.

3.2.2 *CrossFit Homology: Suffering Through Pain, Faith, and CrossFit*

Having been interviewed by many religious-themed podcasters and YouTubers, Froning has repeatedly retold the story of hitting rock bottom. During an interview with the 4:8 Men podcast, he describes his failure to achieve first place in the CrossFit Games as a "dark place and a hard place to land" (Huff, 2022). According to Froning, CrossFit had become a false idol, one in which he made the mistake of investing "so much of who I am in CrossFit." Understanding that "things of this world are fleeting," Froning found "faith and a new identity in Christ." Since devoting his life to a higher power, he says he is now free to "compete knowing that no matter what happens, I'm gonna be okay and whatever God's will for my life." Froning's persona is marked by his faith, both metaphorically and literally. Tattooed on his right biceps reads "Galatians 6:14," representing his desire to "never boast in anything except for the cross of Lord Jesus Christ which has been crucified to me and I to the world." This bible verse and several religious-themed motivational quotes have also made their way into a product line of workout gear for CrossFit Mayhem fans to purchase. One of the most popular mantras, "into the storm," is meant to represent both the challenge of completing a CrossFit WOD and being a person of faith in a secular society. Froning makes explicit connections between his hard work ethic and God's calling. Christian influencers, like Pastor Wooldridge, extend this narrative by describing the type of Christian man Froning embodies. "Life is going to throw some storms your way," says Wooldridge, and bison is the perfect symbol of a "faith meant to preserve, to push through." Rather than recognizing the long history of Christian dominance in American society, Wooldridge frames Froning as battling the intolerance of a secularized world.

In yet another parallel to Teddy Roosevelt, Froning contributes his success to Christian commitment to fitness and manliness. Retreading the tenets of "Muscular Christianity," Froning

extends the narrative that fitness is just another facet of the protestant work ethic. Keeping a "health temple" can be realized by developing a fit body and actively pursuing the Christian ideal. As Putney (2001) writes, the mid-19th century movement arose out of masculine anxieties over the perceived feminization of the Christian faith. Religious and political leaders, including President Teddy Roosevelt, helped to redefine Christianity in a manner that embraced the more fundamentalist aspects of the faith, resonating with American imperialism and Westward expansion. Influenced by Christianity's historical focus on the outer body as the primary sign of a person's inner life, Froning's fan presents his body as a manifestation of his devotion to God or an indication of "chosenness."

Froning's ability to overcome adversity, even if self-inflicted, marks his body as marginalized. His promotional materials frequently celebrate his ability to endure and tolerate pain, framing it as a sign of determination, courage, and toughness. Plenty of sports and fitness trends may promote the value of suffering, but CrossFit culture has an almost unhealthy preoccupation with pain. If asked, many coaches would claim that they do not endorse overtraining or behaviors that risk injury. However, they would also maintain that pain is normal and productive in fitness and a powerful source of transformation (Dawson, 2017). Conversely, the failure or refusal to "suck it up" is a sign of weakness and lack of control over oneself. Some more grueling CrossFit workouts are named after U.S. soldiers killed in battle. While dedicating workouts to fallen soldiers is meant to honor them, it also creates a morbid connection between the sacrifice of death and the pain one suffers in a CrossFit WOD. In this way, CrossFit possesses a militaristic spirit that not only conforms to the mandates of hypermasculine ideals but uses pain discursively to "promote the measurement and value of health, fitness, and self-esteem by extreme achievements" (Nash, 2018, p. 1449). Edmonds et al. (2022) write that

CrossFit communities often celebrate pain and have an attachment based on suffering together. CrossFit fans usually take pride in how far they can push their bodies. Ripping one's hands due to excessive pull-ups, suffering a scar from a failed box jump, and exercise-induced vomiting are common occurrences and a rite of passage for many CrossFit athletes.

CrossFit's obsession with pain becomes even more complicated when interwoven with themes of religious piety. While CrossFit was not founded as a religious sport, many CrossFit communities (including CrossFit Mayhem) make the connection between enduring painful workouts and Jesus's suffering on the cross. While not necessarily intended to replicate or imitate the crucifixion, bodily suffering is a spiritual practice that helps CrossFit enthusiasts to "take up their cross" or suffer with/and for Christ. Writing on the connection between CrossFit and Christianity, Ornella (2019, p. 207) states that CrossFit workouts can be seen as an intimate religious experience or as "painful forms of prayers and worship" and "a way for the athlete to enter a mystical union with Christ." In this way, Froning possesses a body perfect for a "Christian soldier" (Hawzen & Newman, 2017), one that is not only shielded spiritually from the forces of evil but also built to endure any physical challenge. Like Tim Tebow before him, Froning has emerged as a generative embodiment of evangelical Christian whiteness. Also, like Tebow, Froning is codified as a "spiritually endowed athlete rather than a 'natural,' or racially endowed one" (Hawzen & Newman, 2017, p. 17).

I certainly do not wish to downplay or mock Froning's personal challenges. However, the discourse surrounding his brand mischaracterizes him as underprivileged or lacking the social, cultural, and economic benefits associated with masculine whiteness. While Froning never explicitly claims he is a victim of Christian persecution, the discourse surrounding Froning's brand provides all the necessary ingredients for fans to interpret his life as marginalization.

Critical scholars have shown how conservative pundits and right-wing politicians read the broad criticism of Christian athletes as a persecution against Christians and Christianity (Butterworth, 2013; Newman & Hawzen, 2017; Kusz, 2017). While Froning's promotional materials do not explicitly tap into the Christian persecution complex (Castelli, 2007), it still serves the interests of white patriarchy by circulating what Kusz (2017, p. 231) calls a "color-blind white racial frame" which regularly fabricates "paranoiac visions of white male disempowerment, victimization, and loss of power." Whiteness is central to Froning's popularity, and his success is grounded in a sport with structural barriers to nonwhite Americans, compounding the problematic nature of these persecution narratives. It is also important to remember how these discursive maneuvers come about during a historical moment when the abuse of Black citizens (through police brutality) has become increasingly visible during the Black Lives Matters movements. Intentional or not, Froning's promotional discourse works to discourage attempts to combat structural racism by framing some white Americans as also sometimes victimized. In other words, Froning promotional materials implicitly convey that "white bodies matter" too, a message that becomes even more problematic when juxtaposed with the technologies he uses to define a fit body and fitness.

3.2.3 Strained Whiteness as Playable Subject Position

As part of Rich Froning's promotional partnership with Whoop, his gym's dedicated YouTube channel put together videos featuring the CrossFit athlete performing workouts with the wearable fitness tracker (CrossFit Mayhem, 2021). While countless videos feature CrossFit athletes completing a "workout of the day" (WOD), this hypermediated example provides a slightly different allure. A live feed of Froning's body data is displayed next to him, giving viewers an almost voyeuristic glance inside the body. Paired with the heroic images of Froning

powering through a gauntlet of strenuous exercises (with surprisingly few rests), we also witness his biometric data responding to these demands in real-time. No need to assess the physical toll this is putting on his body because Whoop quantifies this in the form of "activity strain." Unique to Whoop, activity strain measures "how much stress you're putting on your body, both mentally and physically" ("Whoop Strain," 2023). Along with the display of calories burned and heart rate, Froning's strain is also slowly tabulated, allowing us to watch as Froning suffers, as he becomes "strained." In typical CrossFit fashion, Froning performs this workout sans shirt, giving the viewer a glance at his white muscular upper body. While the video highlights the benefits of Whoop, it also possesses an implicit promise to tell us something about Froning that we did not already know. Is there something biologically special about how he performs? Could Whoop help us unleash something that Froning possesses?

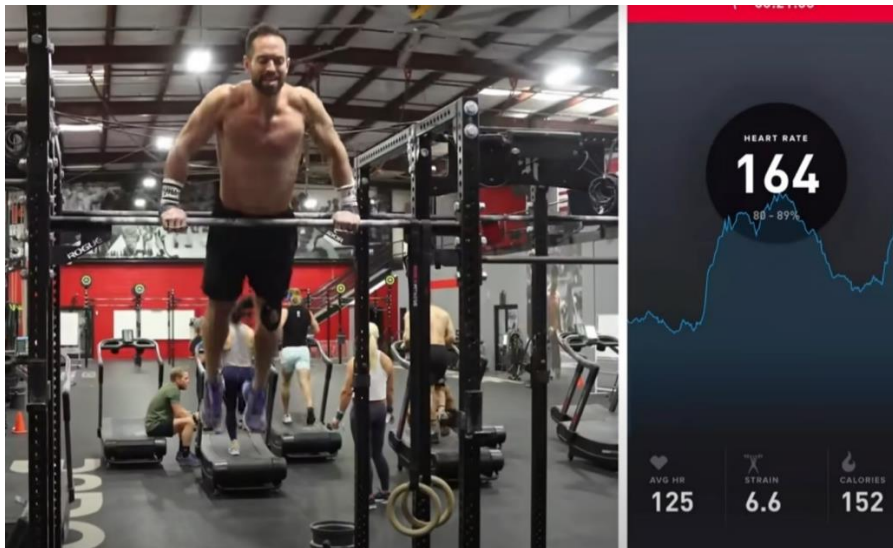


Figure 3.1 Froning completing a WOD with Whoop. Screenshot taken from YouTube

Whoop is a wearable exercise monitor similar in design to Fitbit, which tracks biometric data to provide daily notifications and feedback to "optimize your performance." Like most activity tracker technology and mobile applications, Whoop comprises a device worn on the

wrist and a smartphone application that displays and records many categories of information. Whoop promises many health-related benefits, from monitoring heart rate, optimizing exercise, and tracking sleep. While daily notifications providing feedback and incentives to meet your daily health goals are standard in all wearable fitness trackers, one of the more unique forms of feedback that Whoop provides is an athlete's daily "strain." As stated by Whoop's promotional materials, strain measures the physical and mental exertion one puts on your body. In this way, Whoop acts as a digital "strain coach," monitoring your workout in real-time to let you know how "strenuous" your training is and the amount of rest you need for recovery. The device will alert the user to their "daily recovery score," quantifying their readiness to perform the next workout. In fact, Froning tells his fans that the "recovery" metric is what he considers to be his favorite aspect of Whoop. After describing the types of workouts that give him the most "strain," Froning confesses that there may be a "four- or five-day period where I was completely in the red and I felt really run down." To Froning, the most significant barrier to reaching his full potential is not a lack of determination or incentive but overtraining. Froning stresses the importance of having a technology that monitors how much work he has done and how much rest he deserves, appreciating a device that can save him from himself.

Since wearable tracking technology has become increasingly prevalent in the fitness industry, Whoop is an important technological artifact that underscores the interplay between fitness culture, ludic interfaces, and body politics. Critical scholars have brought up several concerns with wearable tech, including privacy issues surrounding the collection and sharing of user biometric data (Lupton, 2013), how they reproduce racial bias and privilege able-bodies (Goggin, 2017), or follow and perpetuate normative modalities of health (Sanders, 2017). Technologies that track and quantify biometric data have real-life consequences and raise serious

social and political issues concerning electronic patient records and "big data" in the healthcare system. Some healthcare insurance companies and corporate wellness programs already offer rewards for those who share their data with their insurance company. While insurance companies claim this makes it possible to identify the risk of illness earlier and more effectively, there is growing concern that as this technology becomes more sophisticated, companies might start denying coverage based on a user's biometric data (Paluch & Tuzovic, 2019). The consequences of releasing personal health data become even more worrisome after the Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*. In states where abortion is criminalized, period and cycle tracking apps could provide evidence of a terminated pregnancy. This data could lead to serious prosecutions and highlights how technology could monitor and suppress civil liberties (Torchinsky, 2022).

The dangers of surveillance and regulation are certainly serious and worth further exploration. However, this is not my main concern in this chapter. Instead, I wish to show how Froning uses the playful affordances of Whoop's platform to tell stories about his body, his relationship with the fitness community, and the society in which he lives. What separates contemporary fitness tracking technologies from their earlier predecessors is how these devices and apps utilize social networks to provide incentives for maintaining use over time. Writing extensively on the mediation of the human body through wearable technology, Gilmore (2016) argues that the quantified self-promotes a qualitative re-experience of our bodies and social relationships. In this way, Froning's movements and functions are not simply transformed into graphs and trends shared with his fans but communicate a particular body narrative of health and wellness. As Soto-Vasquez (2021) writes, body narratives are data-informed personal rationalizations we use to justify pre-existing notions of healthy and fit bodies. However, these

playful platforms strip away all context to provide a seemingly objective ranking order. Paul (2018, p.34) writes that playful technologies are "uniquely placed to make a meritocratic approach seem natural and normal." Meritocratic ideology tends to ignore the structural advantages that some have in the social hierarchy in favor of framing those who are successful as talented, gifted, or somehow inherently better than others. Froning's embodied commentary of the Whoop platform extends the problem at the heart of all gamified fitness that maintaining a healthy, mobile, and productive body is as simple as an individual's willingness to suffer like Froning.

While there is extensive literature on how racial bias is inscribed in the logic of digital technologies (Chun, 2009; Noble, 2018), this case study shows how the white-centric discourse surrounding the fit body is not determined solely by Whoop. Instead, celebrity branding and fan play influence the discourse surrounding this digital technology. This does not mean racial discrimination does not exist with the technologies. There have been reports of the photoplethysmographic (PPG) green light mechanism, the basis of data collecting in fitness trackers, providing inaccurate readings for people with darker skin tones (Fine et al., 2021). This fundamental design flaw is another example of race-based structural health disparities (Colvonen, 2020). Additionally, marketing and advertising strategies for wearable technologies tend to privilege "an imaginary of Whiteness" (Noble & Roberts, 2016, p. 187) and perpetuate body narratives that idealize certain bodies over others. Even when the advertising surrounding these technologies moves toward inclusion and diversity in representation, scholars continually highlight how these technologies reaffirm gendered power relations and profit from a white-centric notion of fitness.

Considering I am using concepts from video game studies, it seems necessary to ask: if Whoop is a game, how is it designed to be played? Well, Whoop is not a game in the traditional sense. As a playful device, however, it does have ludic potential, which is actualized in Froning's promotional materials and played out by fans. Whoop encourages users to wear the device to measure and quantify their movements and share their biodata with others to incentivize continued usage. It should not be surprising that Whoop has chosen a CrossFit athlete to partner with, for CrossFit is already a gamified form of fitness. Workouts are quantified, and athletes are encouraged to compete with others. Whoop is most likely attempting to capitalize on CrossFit athletes' tendency to score their activities by extending this desire to other aspects of everyday life (such as sleep). However, simply focusing on the type of play the platform encourages does not paint the whole picture. Instead, a more appropriate question would be: what kind of playful identity is promoted by Rich Froning and his fans? Given that Whoop encourages a playful performance, Froning's interaction with Whoop is both a discursive device and a ludic model or "subject position" for others to follow. As Cote (2020) states, subject positions are restrictive gendered identity positions that players accept and elect to perform.

Whoop serves as a ludic bridge between Froning's body and his fans. While CrossFit Mayhem's training program may promise that fans can perform the same workouts as Froning, Whoop goes one step further by challenging fans to match his physical performance, almost like obtaining a level in a virtual reality game. A fan's elevated heart rate, burned calories, and accumulated stress levels provide a quantifiable account of how much they have suffered like Rich Froning and reached the physical demands of the strained whiteness. While I am not suggesting that fans are "roleplaying" as Rich Froning, in the sense that they have swapped out their personality for Froning's or shifted to a state of non-reality. As Booth (2008, p. 516) writes,

fans of celebrities rarely build from celebrity texts but "branch from them," tying both the elements of their own life with that of a branded narrative. As I will show in the following section, fans are instead playing out a reimagining of their own identity through a particular characterization of Froning's persona and discourse supported by the fan community. Fans are not merely building from the narrative of strained whiteness but connecting it to their own lives in ways that manifest as the fit body.

3.2.4 Playing with/as Froning

In addition to convincing CrossFit Mayhem members to invest in Whoop to track their daily strain and share their biodata with others, new members are also encouraged to join CrossFit Mayhem's dedicated Facebook group. The CrossFit Mayhem Facebook group is a global community composed of members from the physical "box" and those who have purchased the online fitness training program. Meant to help members stay motivated and accountable in a passionate community, the CrossFit Mayhem Facebook also becomes a space for fans to share their own body narratives and perform idealized identities. While Froning's celebrity brand perpetuates white-centric values of fitness, and the Whoop device constructs a playable identity of strained whiteness, the CrossFit gym's dedicated Facebook page is where we see the interpellation of the fit body and its inevitable consequences.

The material body is crucial in expressing a communal identity in the CrossFit Mayhem Facebook group. Many fans share images of themselves completing workouts, overcoming physical challenges, or the effects of the fitness modality on their bodies. Given that CrossFit is closely associated with diet challenges, "before and after" photos make up a large portion of the posts in this fan community. CrossFit athletes are also known for completing workouts with very little clothing. This assortment of images creates a collage of half-naked white bodies. I do not

wish to ignore or belittle the pleasure and satisfaction of this embodied performance, including the empowerment fans feel when their bodies become thinner, more muscular, and closely aligned with traditional beauty standards. The joy in receiving feedback from others in the community is meaningful, a powerful tool for self-esteem and feeling sexually attractive. Facebook's mobile-centered design encourages spontaneous image sharing and the platform's logic centers around large and small forms of social validation. Receiving likes and positive comments can be very gratifying, even if that means exposing one's body and participating in a space of self-surveillance. Given this Facebook community's overwhelming white membership, however, the collection of uncovered white bodies implicitly frames this CrossFit community as a space of (and for) whiteness. I am not saying that fans from other races and ethnic groups do not exist in this community. Instead, the underrepresentation of nonwhite bodies normalizes and naturalizes the Whiteness of CrossFit and its fan base.

While I believe that Froning's brand is in many ways a derivative performance of normative whiteness and idealized masculinity, I do not wish to depict these fans' imitation of Froning as evidence of a frivolous and shallow essence or proof that they lack individuality and subjectivity. I plan to avoid reverting to the mistakes of early communication studies, which often framed the celebrity-fan relationship as a one-sided and non-reciprocal mediated interaction whereby immature individuals could not separate fiction from reality (Horton & Wohl 1956). Imitation of celebrity is not inherently pathological. As many argue, the fan-celebrity relationship is part of a normative media culture that increasingly resembles social practices as celebrities become a resource through which fans can construct and deepen their self-identity (Redmond & Holmes, 2007). As D'Adamo (2020, p.63) writes, celebrities offer different "navigational functions" for their fans, not simply identities to imitate but "different

strategies of meaning-creation for the fan to apply to their own experiences.” Fan studies scholars write that in some contexts copying a celebrity's physical appearance and imitating their behavior could become acts of resistance for some fans, particularly when they are enacting "desires and aspiration that did not find acceptable expression in their day-to-day life" (Anselmo, 2017, p. 131). While I am not saying these embodied performances are transgressive (quite the opposite), we cannot ignore how fans extend, alter, and shape Froning's persona in minor (but meaningful) ways. Given that the celebrity-fan interaction is not a "social dyad" between a "lone fan and individual celebrity," Hills (2015, p. 471) advocates for moving away from the parasocial to the "multisocial" in explaining how fans draw from a wide range of social interactions and “culturally situated social scripts to any technology they use and derive meaning from.”

Froning's performance of white hetero-masculinity, represented as committed, heroic, and Holy during fitness competitions, is undoubtedly admired by many in this fan community. Many fans emulate the iconography associated with Froning's brand by sharing their embodied performances. While CrossFit Mayhem's promotional material promises to be inclusive, many posts from the more active Facebook group members make it clear that this community makes faith-based fitness a centerpiece of its collective identity. At times, the CrossFit Mayhem Facebook group feels more like a fitness-themed Bible study than a social media account dedicated to a gym, no greater personified than by "Christian Patriot." Christian Patriot, a pseudonym I assigned to one fan, enjoys sharing his physical accomplishments with the digital community and includes an onslaught of religious motivational memes. While I desire to mask his real name, I intentionally use the pronoun "his" to stress that masculinity is a crucial component of this fan's identity. In one post, Christian Patriot shares a meme with the words, "Be

a warrior not a worrier: If God is for us, who can be against us? Romans 8:31.” The meme, inspired by a Bible verse, also includes a picture of a shirtless muscular man carrying a slingshot. What appears to be a heroic depiction of the young shepherd boy who rose to slay a giant in the famous "David and Goliath" story, the image carries on a trope popular in Christian sermons which uses the Old Testament tale to frame one’s spiritual journey as analogous to war.

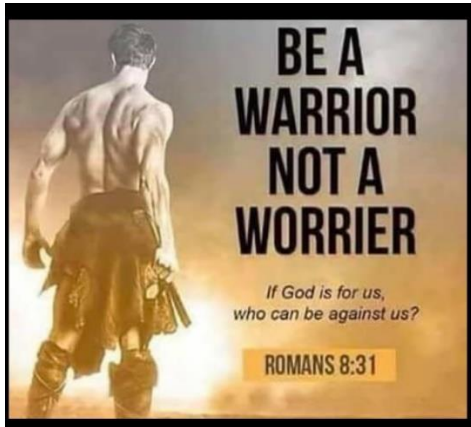


Figure 3.2 “David and Goliath” meme. Screenshot taken from CrossFit Mayhem Facebook group

This is one of many memes posted by Christian Patriot, who often frames his CrossFit training as a battle against the forces of evil. Like Froning, a religious-themed tattoo marks Christian Patriot, three crosses on top of a mountain with a colorful sunrise in the background. Clearly, Christian Patriot has made his faith a critical part of his identity, conveying as much with a prayer asking, “Dear God, equip me with Your strength as I face my biggest challenges.” It is safe to call Christian Patriot a frequent contributor, his posts comprising a large portion of the fan participation in the community. While religious-themed memes are his favorite type of community engagement, he also likes to include photos and videos while working out at his local CrossFit affiliate. Like many CrossFit boxes, he has decorated his workout space with military-themed paraphernalia. Flags of the various armed forces (including a "Don't tread on me") hang

from the ceiling behind him. Christian Patriot also frequently dons an assortment of patriotic-themed apparel brands. His workout ensemble usually has a variety of nationalist symbols, colors, and phrases.



Figure 3.3 “Christian Patriot” expressing the fit body. Screenshot taken from CrossFit Mayhem Facebook Group.

Christian Patriot is undoubtedly not the only fan who has extended the tenets of the fit body to validate an ethno-nationalist perception of CrossFit. Many "top contributors" are white men who pair their affective investment in Froning and the narrative of strained whiteness with an imperative to defend the nation. "Mayhem Moderator," a pseudonym I have given another fan because of his position as moderator of this Facebook group, frequently offers words of inspiration to his CrossFit community. Judging by his tendency to use military terminology in describing the struggle of being a Mayhem athlete, Mayhem Moderator is most likely a current or retired armed forces member. In one post, the fan encourages the digital community to develop into a "hard target." In military and self-defense circles, "hard target" describes a person who is not easily defeated or assaulted. Conversely, a "soft target" is weak (physically or mentally) or not paying attention to their immediate surroundings. Mayhem Moderator

encourages the Facebook community to "put on God's armor so that you will be able to stand against all strategies of the devil."

These fans would most likely defend their posts as simple metaphors or colorful language to motivate their fellow CrossFit Mayhem community members to channel their faith and love of country in their fitness preparation. "Putting on the armor of God" is a popular phrase in religious circles, often used to describe resisting the temptations of the flesh or combating the Devil's attacks on one's spiritual purity. However, when paired with religious and nationalist discourse, this fan play resonates disturbingly well with extreme sects of white Christianity. Even Froning's motto, "Into the Storm" could be construed as a reference to the post-apocalyptic fantasies in many white supremacist conspiracy theories. For example, the term "storm" is often used by QAnon adherents to refer to cataclysmic events, or when the forces of good expose and defeat the supposed shadowy cabal of pedophilic, satanic world leaders (Domonoske, 2021).

While Christian Patriot and Mayhem Moderator are just two examples of fans embracing this ideological partnership, they are not the only fans who express the tenets of the fit body. Many other fans share similar photos, videos, and memes that frame the challenges of being a CrossFit athlete as a spiritual battle against an ambiguous enemy. Sometimes this enemy is characterized as one's own individual weakness or sinful nature; other times, it is the Devil himself. Using ambiguous language opens the door for interpretations that conflate the imperative to be physically fit with that of preparing the body for an impending holy war, which calls on Christian warriors to fight. This type of fan embodiment is concerning in our current political moments, with the rise of Christian Nationalism and other extreme sects of the Christian faith. The Proud Boys, the far-right militia who had members implicated for their role in the

Capitol Insurrection, had increasingly seen violence as a necessary measure to defend the country against its enemies.

The playful affordances of both Whoop and Facebook allow fans to actualize these fantasies. Whoop serves to materialize the tenets of the fit body through the app, while Facebook provides examples for others to follow. I am not suggesting that embodied performances of religious ethnonationalism are the only type of fan expression in this CrossFit Mayhem Facebook community. Fans negotiate with Froning's subject position differently, with different outcomes. Some fans seem more interested in Froning's celebrity and clothing brand, while others are more preoccupied with the fitness training program. However, a few highly visible and active fans have extended Froning's subject position and the "strained whiteness" narrative to develop a "standard metagame" for the fit body. Claiming that all games are enclosed in a messy circle structured by the material practices and community histories of players, Boluk and Lemiux (2017, p. 279) argue that the metagame is "a large and diffuse category of play occurring alongside video games" informed by the voluntary choices of players and tacitly understood as the "normal" or "correct" way to play. Sometimes the cultural conventions and unspoken assumptions of the metagame can be toxic, including the coordinated online harassment and intimidation effort waged against women critiquing the prevalence of sexism in video game culture, better known as GamerGate (Shaw & Chess, 2016).

3.3 Final Thoughts on Strained Whiteness and the Fit Body

This chapter provides a deeper understanding of how white male identities are continually (re)constructed, negotiated, and contested in the context of fitness in the digital age. Rather than direct communication or media representations, Froning defines fitness through virtually embodied gameplay. Positioning Froning's body, abilities, and signature playing style at

the focal point of the Whoop platform circulates an unstated default subject position, which sets "strained whiteness" as an obtainable level. While strained whiteness works somewhat differently than your traditional color-blind rhetoric, it does work to mask the cultural, social, and economic benefits of being white and male in the U.S. The CrossFit Mayhem Facebook group is a space for Rich Froning fans to congregate around a shared fandom and present embodied performances in which fans show they have elected to "train like Rich Froning." As expected, this training goes beyond the completion of CrossFit workouts. Still, the collection of embodied performances reaffirms and expands upon the discourse provided by Rich Froning's promotional materials to reveal the fit body.

While I focused exclusively on Rich Froning, other scholars could interrogate the persistence of the hegemonic power of masculine whiteness through the tactile and embodied performances of other fitness celebrities and their fans. Future research could also examine the potential for transgressive performances and how female fans negotiate with the overwhelmingly masculine performances in these CrossFit digital communities. While white men make up a large portion of this fan base, many women also post photos, videos, and comments. While the women in the CrossFit Mayhem community typically adopt and perpetuate the Christian warrior and strained whiteness narratives provided by Froning, other CrossFit spaces may be more inclusive and welcoming to diverse bodies.

4 "BREATHE, RELAX, AND BE YOU:" CHURCH OF THE HIGHLANDS, THE SMALL GROUP DIRECTORY, AND THE SPIRITUAL BODY.

After the intentional chaos settled inside the Capitol building on January 6, 2021, a group of Trump supporters gathered around the Senate dais and began praying. While moments earlier,

this same group violently forced their way past police officers and screamed obscenities, including, "Mike Pence is a fucking traitor," the group felt compelled to give glory to God.

"Thank you, heavenly father, for being the inspiration needed to these police officers to allow us into the building, to allow us to exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communist, and the globalists, that this is our nation, not theirs, that we will not allow America, the American way of the United States of America to go down. Thank you, divine, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent creator God, for filling this chamber with your white light and love. Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you and love Christ" (The New Yorker, 2021).

The man who led that prayer, Jacob Chansley, became one of the most talked about insurrectionists, primarily for his bizarre ensemble. Media outlets and the FBI quickly identified Chansley as the shirtless man wearing white and blue face paint, a horned fur headdress, and carrying a speared American flag and bullhorn. Gaining fame as the "QAnon Shaman," Chansley became a favorite punchline with late-night comedy show hosts like Stephen Colbert, who mocked him for "committing the crime of looking like an idiot" ("The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," 2021). Many on the Right tried to downplay Chansley's behavior inside the Capitol that day. Fox News personality Tucker Carlson referred to the events at the Capitol as "mostly peaceful chaos" (Grisales & Swartz, 2023). Representative Andrew Clyde claimed that January 6 resembled a "normal tourist visit" rather than a deadly attack (Shammas, 2021).



Figure 4.1 Capitol Insurrectionists praying inside the Capitol Building. Screen shot taken from YouTube (The New Yorker, 2021)

Contrary to what Chansley and right-wing media hosts may claim, the Capitol Insurrection was not peaceful, and police did not escort Chansley inside the Capitol Building. Media coverage and FBI affidavits show he was with the crowd that violently forced their way through the police line and broke open the door to the U.S. Capitol Building (United States Capitol Police, Department of Justice, 2021). While much of the news reporting of the January 6 Insurrection focused on the acts of violence and Trump's involvement, it would be a mistake to ignore the religious dimension of the assault on the Capitol building. Christian imagery was dominant at the "Stop the Steal" rally. The preceding event that led to the attack on the Capitol had many in attendance holding bibles, carrying Christian flags, and openly confessing their support for uniting the nation around a single Christian identity. Many of the same individuals also brandished pro-Trump signs, Confederate flags, and other white supremacist symbols. Most prevalent was the American flag, which many at the rally used to symbolize their role as patriots in a fight against a coalition of traitors. As Perry (2021, para. 3) writes, the "militarized fusing of

Christianity and American identity," often referred to as Christian nationalism, was on "display during one of America's darkest days."

Of course, those who stormed the Capitol building were not the only ones who characterized Trump's loss in the 2020 election as the beginning of a holy war. Florida televangelist and Trump's faith advisor, Paula White, accused "demons" of rigging the election. Days up to the Capitol attack, she preached a viral sermon calling for "angelic reinforcements" to "smite the president's enemies" (Sommerlad, 2020). Leading up to the Capitol Insurrection, several Christian leaders organized faith-themed protests, including Rev. Kevin Jessip, who used military terminology in describing the struggle ahead. "Today, I call this the warrior mandate, a battle cry, a call to arms," said Jessip. "This battle cry is a Christian call to all Christian men...as we prepare for a strategic gathering of men in this hour to dispel the Kingdom of Darkness" (Stewart, 2023). These two religious leaders' narrative is just one example of a more significant trend of militant Christian discourse in the United States. The more violent and explicit forms of religious extremism are worth academic attention, but I would argue that we should not ignore the seemingly banal versions of religious observance. During a time when personal interpretation is more celebrated than the church's authority, many churches have centered their evangelistic strategy around providing parishioners the freedom to define their own religious experience. Examining the tools churches provide their parishioners to express their devotion becomes crucial to understanding how playful expression of faith can lead to the WMC fan identity.

Church of the Highlands, a conglomerate of churches spread throughout Alabama and Georgia, has incorporated digital media, particularly an online small group directory, to encourage and embolden the active participation of its parishioners. While megachurches are everywhere in the United States, Church of the Highlands' small group directory provides a

unique case study for examining the nexus of organized religious, participatory media, and fanish play. COH may not explicitly support white Christian nationalism or its many tenets. However, given the church's emphasis on personal interpretation and the use of online platforms as an evangelical strategy, COH offers a pathway for play that can intersect with the tactical body and the fit body and resonate in a way that brings out their most destructive elements. While the material dimension of the tactical body was costuming and the fit body physicality, the spiritual body is expressed primarily through the congregation of bodies in physical space. As the third pillar in the white masculine crusader fan identity persona, the spiritual body actualizes fantasies of Christian foot soldiers fighting against a demonic force of invaders and the country's secularization. The spiritual body may begin in online spaces, such as COH's small group directory. However, the imperatives of the spiritual body often lead parishioners to seek out like-minded others for religious communion.

4.1 Conceptualizing the Spiritual Body

4.1.1 COH as a Space of Fandom

While religion, like every other cultural activity, could be understood as always mediated through spoken word, art, architecture, dance, and sacred texts (Horsfield, 2003; Stolow, 2005), the introduction of new technologies and media forms (including T.V., video, mobile phones, and the internet) has had a significant impact on the socially constructed process of religion and religious authority. To stay relevant, institutional religion has embraced new technologies as powerful tools for evangelism and incorporated them into their weekly services to enhance the church experience. Media forms are not only distributors of religious information, but the "mediatization of religion" produces unique religious experiences by shaping them according to the demand of popular media genres (Hjarvard, 2008). In the case of participatory media, online

spaces can also become social and cultural environments that take over many of the functions of institutionalized religions. Lovheim and Lynch (2011) state that the mediatization of faith is neither a universal nor evolutionary progression, but the practices and logic of media transform religion in particular social and cultural contexts. While cultural change is not driven solely by technological change, religion is primarily shaped by the forms and practices mediated by it (Morgan, 2013).

Digital media has provided an array of opportunities for churches to create innovative religious experiences, from extending the “sacramental space” to the virtual realm (Campbell, 2005) to augmenting the physical place of the church with hypermediated services. Religious scholars have also discussed how established churches increasingly behave like corporate brands by utilizing digital media to recruit new members, shape and present their religious identity, and communicate with parishioners. In response to declining church attendance, Kokkonen (2022) highlights how Finnish churches use their official Facebook pages to characterize their church as an integral part of its national tradition. Hoping to expand their church identity beyond purely religious practices, Hutchings (2017) shows how churches use online platforms to construct their images as indispensable and central to universal concepts like death and mourning. Multisite churches are especially dependent on technology to run their services and facilitate church life (Virtullo, 2019). Rather than building a bigger building, replicating the worship experience of the “home church” with live feeds, large media screens, and state-of-the-art facilities has become a popular form of church expansion. While analyzing churches through the lens of brand culture has become popular with religious scholars, I argue it is even more helpful to incorporate the literature from fan studies to explain the dialectical relationship between mediated churches and their parishioners.

As the boundaries between the virtual and physical realms blur in the digital age, it is crucial to extend our analysis beyond the physical realm to include the virtual and hybrid worlds created by media use. Ironically, fan scholarship has a history of characterizing visits to fannish sites, as quasi-religious experiences, with a fan's annual trip resembling a pilgrimage to a Holy city (Porter, 2009). This chapter examines the inverse; how COH's small group directory resembles spaces of fandom. The importance of embodiment, physical presence, and a fan communities' affection for physical locations, including theme parks (Williams, 2020; Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2018), fan conventions (Hanna, 2019; Zubernis & Larsen, 2018) and filming locations (Brooker, 2007; Toy, 2017) has been a centerpiece of fan literature and written about extensively. Corporate entities have hoped to channel and capitalize on fan enthusiasm by creating interactive or playful sites encouraging attendees to curate their own experiences. In an analysis of offsite interactive advertisements (or activations) near San Diego Comic-Con, Kohlen (2021, p. 8) writes how affect-driven branded experiences in physical spaces and their mediation on social media lead to "feelings of being immersed in the world of play." Rather than persuading fans to purchase goods, the industry has shifted toward an "experience economy," providing memorable experiences and "immersive physical sites with a high degree of diegetic verisimilitude" (Kohlen, 2012 2). As Lamond (2020, p.36) writes, events like Comic Con are "fuzzy" and never grasped as a singular essence. Instead, they exist as an "evental landscape within which a multiplicity of narrative structures interlaces in ways that can be coherent, concomitant, or contested." In her extensive work on theme park fandom, Williams (2020) coins the term "spatial transmedia" to describe the moments of narrative extension and world-building taking place within specified rooted locations. It is worth reiterating that calling this behavior playful does not mean fans are absorbed in self-contained fantasy worlds separated from reality.

Instead, this immersion is consistent with what Sconce (2010, p. 48) calls “ludic belief,” or “rehearsal of belief, and entertaining of possibilities either for the benefit of oneself or one’s presumed audience.” My analysis adds to this literature by showing how the playful affordances of digital media enable parishioners to augment the spaces of their religious gatherings by making their favorite leisure activities part of a transmedia spiritual canon inspired by reactionary politics and white supremacist conspiracism.

Given that space is a social process "constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales" (Massey, 2013, p. 4), new media technologies exist in "an imminent field of relations that are in constant flux as bodies, material forms and images come into contact" (Berry et al., 2013, p. 5). To put it differently, space is socially constructed and can be symbolically transformed or politically infused by the people within it and the technology used (Sibley, 2002; Couldry and McCarthy, 2004). Virtual and physical space should not be considered two distinct realms, nor is one diverting a user's attention away from other people and the world around them. Instead, it is far more accurate to interpret space as being augmented or becoming more complex with media use (McQuire, 2008). The fact that media saturate our everyday spaces with the proliferation of digital media means this pluralization or “doubling of place” is almost ubiquitous (Moores, 2004). As Morley (2010, 11) states, "We are all now, in effect, audiences to some kind of media, almost everywhere, almost all the time."

While the places that COH small group members may congregate are not "thematic" in the traditional sense, the small group directory offers a space where parishioners' own "fantasies, mythologies and cultural icons can be enacted and played with" (Waysdorf & Reijnders, 2018). Thus, it seems appropriate to describe how the real and virtual lives of COH parishioners integrate to create specific adaptations of imaginative worlds. Describing the ritualistic viewing

practices of fans with their favorite television shows, Brooker (2017) proposes a form of communion with a text that allows a state of “traveling without moving.” This “inner pilgrimage to sacred places within the mind and body” takes fans “into a liminal border zone between the real world and diegesis” (Brooker, 2017, p. 159). As I will show in the following analysis, the COH small group directory enables a similar phenomenon. Rather than a physical journey to a distant location, the playful possibilities of COH's evangelical strategy allow parishioners to “symbolically travel” to an extended story world, with some manifesting as expressions of the spiritual body. In many ways, COH parishioners are altering the physical spaces around them akin to an augmented reality game (Paavilainen et al., 2017; Tan & Soh, 2010).⁵ Parishioners may not be using mobile devices with computer-generated imagery to insert characters from a popular media franchise. However, the affordances of digital media allow them to reimagine the world around them by integrating their virtual lives into their religious gatherings.

4.1.2 The Spiritual Body

The spiritual body follows the tradition of past scholars who have examined the complex relationship between religious identity, new media, body politics, and political engagement. Following in the same pattern of the tactical body and the fit body, the spiritual body is an embodiment of reactionary politics meant to actualize fantasies of reclaiming white Christian dominance. Christianity is certainly not a homogenous community. We could point to many historical examples of influential Christian leaders and communities fighting for equality, civil rights, and social justice. However, the political history of Christianity in America, mainly since Falwell's "Moral Majority," which helped get Reagan elected, reveals its long association with

⁵ Augmented reality games, such as Pokémon Go, generally refer to games that create “a synthesized perspective of the real physical environment using computer-generated imagery” (Tan and Soh, 2010:1)

regressive politics, particularly when it comes to preserving traditional hierarchies and clear boundaries which disproportionately favor some groups over others (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Using their power to strengthen their political influence and maintain an unjust system, Christian leaders have also been influential in the persistent hostility toward feminism, queer and trans people, marginalized religious communities, globalism, and gender and racial equity (Buss et al., 2004). Writing extensively on the white supremacist roots of Christianity in the United States, R.P. Jones (2021, p. 6) states that "White Christian churches have not just been complacent; they have not only been complicit; rather, as the dominant cultural power in America, they have been responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality." The unlikely pairing of the teachings of Jesus and a white supremacist political agenda has been a recurring theme in American politics since its foundation. However, more contemporary social movements have attempted to mobilize evangelical Protestants into conservative political action. Political leaders demanding a Christian vision of social traditionalism have been a focal point of the Republican party since the 1970s (Green et al., 1998). Often referred to as the Christian Right, this coalition's efforts to build an alliance of conservative religious faiths united under a "natural family" political banner was not only influential in the election of Ronald Reagan (Wilcox, 2018) but also set a precedent for Republican leaders to place the blame for America's woes on the supposed secularization of America (Buss, 2003).

The spiritual body is not merely synonyms with conservative Christianity in that it seeks to preserve institutions of value crafted over centuries of American history. The spiritual body is also not simply an embodiment of Christian Nationalism or white evangelical politics, although defending the nation from secularized interlopers is a crucial theme found in this type of play.

Instead, I argue that the spiritual body is a playful expression of a warrior mandate that has become increasingly popular with online and offline Christianity expressions. The imperatives of the spiritual body often conflate a spiritual battle between the forces of good/God and evil/Devil with a political battle between a Christian and secular society. The spiritual body aligns closely with what Ryan (2021) calls the "politics of the stranger," an ideology that justifies Christian citizens owning and stockpiling firearms. The spiritual body can apply to many variations of the Christian faith (including Christian Nationalism, the Christian Right, white evangelical Christianity, and conservative Christianity), which frame Christians as foot soldiers or an insurgent force protecting the country from the secularization of the country and declaring war on demonic invaders and global liberalism. Simply put, the spiritual body is a playful embodiment of a spiritual warrior mentality designed to actualize a fantasy of Christians "locked in combat with a more powerful, false America" (Ryan, 2021, p. 33). Those who play out the spiritual body do not merely use digital media to spread these narratives but call on others to assemble in religion communion. The body is central to this form of religious observance, for the spiritual body often materializes as congregations of parishioners in physical space.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 Empowerment play in the Leadership Development Series

Senior Pastor Chris Hodges may define his organization as "one church on one mission" (ABC 33/40, 2016). However, COH is a collection of 14 separate campuses, each broadcasting Hodges' sermon on a high-definition projection screen. The multisite church is enjoying unprecedented success in Alabama and Georgia. In a 2016 interview, Chris Hodges boasted a typical Sunday attendance of 38,000 people with a total membership of 60,000 (ABC 33/40, 2016). While its own church entity, COH is also under the umbrella of ARC (Association of

Related Churches), a church startup that "helps plant churches" worldwide ("ARC - Association of Related Churches," 2023). Formed in 2000, ARC describes its mission as "working with church planters and church leaders to provide support, guidance, and resources to launch and grow life-giving churches." With separate entities in Canada, Ireland, Netherlands, Australia, and South Africa, the website boasts that ARC has planted "over 600 churches, with hundreds more partner churches." Chris Hodge is one of the six "founders" of ARC. Describing the scope of ARC and Church of the Highlands' facilities and outreach, from their Dream Center to Highlands College, is out of the scope of this paper. However, the concentration of ownership and standardization of programming is integral to understanding how the small group directory is designed and implemented.

Housed on COH's official website, the small group directory is a user-generated online registry comprising the various small groups across COH's multiple campuses. A remediation of the phone book and church bulletin board, the small group directory provides a convenient means to select a religious experience tailored to one's hobbies and interests. The interface feels strikingly akin to searching for a restaurant on Google Maps. Typing in a keyword brings up a map of the Southeastern region of the United States, with icons indicating the meeting locations of small groups. The directory also provides basic information about the small groups, dates and times meetings occur, a short description of the small group's focus, and the type of person (age/sex) encouraged to participate.

While COH promises parishioners a certain degree of freedom in serving the church, they also provide training and oversight to each new small group leader. Along with assigning a "coach" to a new group and encouraging new leaders to become members of the Church, COH also requires small group leaders to complete the Leadership Development Series, a collection of

10 instructional videos created to help "you to prepare your first small group meeting" ("Small Groups Leadership Development," 2023). The online series begins with "Leadership 101," featuring Hamp Greene (another COH leadership team member), who provides a four-step format for leading a successful small group (Greene, 2023b). Leading others in spiritual growth may be daunting to a new group leader, but Greene promises that the pressure of "bringing people to Christ is not on them, but on God." Besides a devotion to encouragement, scripture, prayer, and leading new group members to their "next steps" (a strategy with the acronym ESPN), Greene reassures the newly anointed small group leader to "be you" (Greene, 2023a). After browsing COH's substantial web of small groups, one might conclude that being "you" means creating a small group tailored to your interests. If you like to hike, create a hiking-themed small group. If sewing is more your style, lead a group of like-minded sewing enthusiasts and sew for Jesus. A collection of "approved curriculums" are available for those having difficulty determining their gifts, ranging from managing finances to parenting ("Small Groups Discovering Your Bible Curriculum," 2023). Suppose a potential small group leader was interested in creating a small group centered around marriage, for example. In that case, the website offers several documents providing "some suggested discussion questions and related scriptures for you to talk about in your group." While COH offers many suggestions on how to lead a small group and continually encourages small group leaders and members to "take one step closer" to the church, they also promise parishioners freedom and control in expressing their faith (Greene, 2023c). The Leadership Series utilizes an array of empowerment discourse to anoint small group leaders with higher authority while simultaneously working to "take the pressure off" small group leaders by describing their responsibilities as simply being their

"authentic selves." As one video states, "We want you to get to the place where you think of yourself as a pastor, shepherd, and guide of your small group" (Spicer, 2023).

It is essential to state that COH recently updated its Leadership Training Series videos. When I began writing this chapter almost three years ago, the videos featured older white men sermonizing on the importance of Godly leadership and providing Biblical examples of good leaders (primarily men) while warning of bad influences (often women). COH has realized that its antiquated training videos were alienating potential new leaders. The updated version of the leadership development series is consistent with the concerted effort by COH's production team for more diverse representation, with the newer videos featuring women and black church members. The differences between these leadership videos are significant in another way. While the newer videos are instructional, offering practical advice on how to facilitate discussion, navigate conflict, and ways to empower future small group leaders, the advice could be more specific. A good small group leader is often characterized as being "authentic," a good listener, and an active prayer.

Emboldening new leaders with empowerment narratives while ensuring that a higher power will do most of the heavy lifting is a constant theme in the small group leadership training series. While the training videos suggest small group leaders reach out to COH leadership if they encounter issues or conflict, they are also encouraged to "give the holy spirit room to speak and to move" (Winston, 2023). Of course, how the holy spirit may "move" is certainly open to interpretation and leaves the door open for discussions or practices that may be inconsistent with the church. However, that is of no concern to the COH leadership team. Instead, Schranz admits that the biggest challenge of the small group system is convincing potential leaders that they do not have to possess a breadth of knowledge of the Bible or the teachings of Jesus:

We're trying to break down that perception that a leader of a small group has to study all week long...they have to come up with three points and a poem. [We are] trying to break that barrier down . If you can push play on a DVD player you can lead a marriage group and it will change people's lives (Greene, 2023c).

COH's evangelical strategy is consistent with a larger shift in religious authority caused by a growing distrust of organized religion (O'Leary, 2013). In response, religious leaders have repositioned their preaching away from the church's authority in favor of "the power and autonomy of individuals to make their own moral choices for themselves" (Hoover, 2006). While COH's goal is to develop an active and dedicated congregation, its evangelical strategy seems tailored directly to accommodate those who (may at first) prefer a state of vicarious religion (Davie, 2007). Describing vicarious religion as a form of "belonging without belonging," Davie points to an increasing number of Christians who approve of what the church is doing but are not necessarily interested in being active participants. The appeal of the COH small group system is that it provides an avenue to ensure that "religion will continue to be an inherent and important dimension of modern society" without asking parishioners to commit to religious rituals regularly and thoroughly. Of course, to lead a small group, one must become a church member and no longer practice faith vicariously. Thus, the small group provides a playful opportunity and a bridge between a more tangential religious experience and taking an active role in the church.

Hoping to avoid messages perceived as anti-capitalistic, anti-individualist, and un-American, celebrating personal taste is prominent in COH's outreach and evangelism. In many ways, COH follows an "online shopping model" of religious participation, allowing parishioners to 'shop' for a religious experience that most precisely addresses their needs and interests (Freie, 1998, Moore, 1994). Given that most small group meet-ups are outside the COH church space,

COH offers a more secularized expression of faith, making religion less threatening to reluctant members while endowing their parishioners' particular hobbies and interests with spiritual meaning. More accurately, COH's evangelical strategy resembles how the convergence cultural industry treats fans. COH provides an official interpretation of a canonical text for parishioners to follow but encourages them (within limits) to adapt the source text to their expressive needs.

A more personalized or individualized spirituality does not necessarily mean a more progressive and inclusive religion. Some argue that the rise of Christian nationalism in the United States is largely due to religious institutions' weakening power (Edsall, 2021; Whitehead et al., 2018; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). As parishioners become more active in producing and interpreting religious content (or moving from consumers to producers) they tend to treat faith with a consumer's mentality, picking and choosing from various available beliefs, practices, and symbols (Moritz & Bartholomew, 2000). The freedom to interpret the teachings of one's faith may have transformative potential. However, individuals and communities could also select what aspects of religion are more beneficial to them or what confirms and supplements their existing assumptions (Bartholomew & Moritz, 2000). Digital technologies only exacerbate this self-confirming bias. Social media makes it easier for like-minded citizens to form "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles," which reinforce pre-established beliefs and insulate from contrary perspectives (Barbera, 2020; Priniski et al., 2021). Online algorithms provide highly personalized content to keep users engaged with their platforms and provide a gateway to political misinformation and fake news (Bright, 2018).

Religious tribalism becomes even more concerning when participatory conspiracism becomes its driving force. The rise of QAnon, the right-wing conspiracy theory that claims former president Trump was (and currently still is) leading a holy crusade against a ring of elite

pedophiles, was in many ways built on the affordances of social media design (Marwick & Partin, 2022). Militia groups such as the Proud Boys, whose primary goal is to "tear down the wall separating church and state and to weaponize Christianity against perceived foes" (Lempinen, 2022), are also known for harnessing the power of digital technologies and social media for recruitment of new members and getting their message across (DeCook, 2018; Kitts, 2020; Stern, 2019). In other words, putting faith "in the hands of the people" does not always allow for a diversity of voices and opinions, but in some cases, displaces political power in the form of religious tribalism. The rise of extreme sects of Christianity, which filter out the more peaceful elements of the faith in favor of the ideals of patriarchy, cultural chauvinism, and racial and gender essentialism, is an inevitable byproduct of a decentralized religion. These militant factions see mainstream Christianity as too accepting of progressive politics, including the tolerance of racial integration, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. Feeling betrayed and besieged, these communities of radical Christianity use digital technologies to play out fantasies of reclaiming the power and influence they perceive to have lost.

While the older videos consisted of folksy stories of Biblical figures and their exceptional traits, including their obedience to God, they at least left parishioners with a clear ideology of the church. The intended purpose of ambiguous language is to make the advice applicable to various people and groups. However, it also allows the small group leaders to play with religion, creating a unique and tailored religious experience. As I will show in the next section, the consequences of giving parishioners the freedom to pair religious participation with leisure activities also enable them to express the problematic embodiment of the spiritual body.

4.2.2 The COH Small Group Directory as a Playful Platform

In an interview on the unSeminary podcast, Layne Schranz, a member of the COH leadership team, stresses the need for a church with a large congregation like COH to "get people into relationships" (unSeminary, 2016). According to Schranz, one of the church's strengths is its ability to connect people, and COH has developed a highly effective system that works with any size church. The small group system requires little funding and oversight but provides two vital services for COH; attracting new members and "strategically turn[ing] their lives into ministry." Schranz boasts that more people participate in small groups than attend the official church service. In fact, he is "thrilled" by that notion stating, "We believe with all of our hearts that true life change happens in the context of relationships, not [church] services." While churches have always relied on the productivity of their parishioners, it may be surprising that the COH leadership would be so open about how they channel their parishioner's talents, hobbies, and interests into a self-replicating and autonomous labor force. Broken up into Fall/Spring/Summer semesters, the small group model allows for regular replenishment of gatherings from which to choose. An outsider may see this as yet another example of free labor exploitation in the digital age (Terranova, 2000). The COH leadership team, on the other hand, frequently frames it as a form of empowerment for their parishioner, encouraging parishioners to take on the role of a church leader and use their talents to serve a higher power.

To compensate for the changes in how people consume media in the digital age, COH has shifted its outreach away from traditional televangelism to embrace the participatory aspects of digital media. Given that parishioners are emboldened to take an active role in what they interpret as appropriate worship, devotion, and service, the small group directory adopts an almost fannish type of religious participation. The network of COH parishioners linked together

through a web of taste cultures resembles how fans of celebrities, sports, and media have long used the internet to create relationships and communities around shared interests. In many ways, COH is attempting to replicate what Fiske (1989, p. 47) calls “popular pleasures,” a fannish mentality that “consists of both the producerly pleasures of making one’s own culture and the offensive pleasures of resisting the structures of domination.” It is not simply the use of participatory media which replicates a fannish approach to religious participation. The discourse surrounding COH's digital media strategy also resembles fan scholars' early attitudes and assumptions concerning digital media's liberating potential (Jenkins, 2006). Layne admits that he believes the small group model endows the everyday parishioner with a higher degree of autonomy and control:

The system that we use at Church of the Highlands, we just call it the 'free market' small group system. Which means we are not trying to build the church around us and our passions and our giftings and what we think a small group should look like or ministry should look like. We want to discover what's in the people of the church and let that come out in ministry (unSeminary, 2016).

Heavily influenced by the imperatives of neoliberalism and the discourse of consumer empowerment, COH has provided a space for parishioners to construct an interlinked web of personal tastes and preferences. Portraying religious participation as a blend of leisure activities and spiritual communion, COH is attempting to strike a balance between promising parishioners a higher degree of personal deliberation in their spiritual growth while continually encouraging them to attend Sunday service to ensure that their choices are consistent with the teachings of the church. It is safe to assume that Schranz's use of the “free market” refers primarily to “the marketplace of ideas,” a concept that has developed into an ideology popular with libertarians,

conservatives, freedom of speech advocates, and antiregulatory capitalists. While the use of the term "free market" is undoubtedly absurd given that the church directory is not precisely a democratized space where *all* values, beliefs, ideas, and peoples are free to reside, it is telling that COH has adopted a Christian libertarian rationale for the small group directory.⁶

Just as adherents to free market ideology asked Americans to put their faith in the unfettered outcome of economic and ideological competition, COH discourse characterizes the small group directory as an almost sacred space where God can move freely through the platform and its users. Layne states, "We wanted to discover what's in the people of the church and let that come out in ministry" and channel the "energy and excitement" from parishioners who are "getting to fulfill God's calling on their life and not fulfill the church's calling." COH's leadership has an almost naive expectation that by "allowing the leaders to determine the market," only the best expressions of Christianity will prevail in this supposedly unregulated space. While there are perhaps many reasons the small group directory has been such a success, COH leadership seems to believe that the church's growth is primarily due to removing the guard rails of the small group directory to allow the invisible hand of God to work through the platform.

Given COH's massive congregation and the relative inaccessibility of the church's central leadership, the COH small group directory replicates the more personal and intimate communities in smaller churches. The COH website alludes to this by describing small groups as "less about what you do and more about who you do it with" ("Small Groups," 2023).

⁶ Religion scholars have long discussed the quasi-religious dimensions of free market ideology, including how people regard and characterize the market as a divine entity (Cox, 2016). While not all religious expressions are equally compatible (and in some cases antithetical) with market capitalism, Christianity in America has existed in a prolonged tension between the Bible's imperatives to reject the temptation of wealth accumulation and a patriotic celebration of free market ideals (Bartholomew and Moritz, 2000; Koenig, 2016). Day (2016: 45) states that some forms of "evangelical Christianity even conceptualize obedience to the market as part of their broader religious duty to obey God." For example, the attitude fostered by the prosperity gospel movement frames wealth and success as the result of unwavering faith and an example of God's favor.

Individuals looking for a small group are encouraged to "select a few groups that interest you, contact the leaders, and try out a couple of different groups." The top of the page provides a search bar for users to find a group centered around a specific activity, hobby, interest, or goal. Searches can also be further filtered by age, sex, location, day, and discipline of study. Parishioners can browse this list of popular categories or type keywords into the page's search bar. Heavily inspired by other online indexes and search engines, the small group directory allows users to browse more than 2,000 small groups in the COH database. The small groups in this directory run the gamut from boxing to human trafficking awareness, providing the user ample opportunities to "serve."

4.2.3 Constructing and Playing Out Spiritual Body Canon

Many of the groups found in the small group directory center around the interests and activities expected of a church congregation, including prayer, charity work, and bible studies. Some, on the other hand, can be rather specific. For example, "Adventures with Parents of Millennials" is a group designed to help parents "build relationships and read the Book of Matthew" while engaging in outdoor activities from "kayaking to hiking." There are many fitness-themed groups for those wishing to get in shape. A boxing-themed group offers members "one-on-one personal training with a former professional boxer." Childcare is appropriately provided for the "Budgeting and Saving as a Single Parent," which focuses on "basic budgeting, debt, saving and financial resources." Users looking for a romantic connection could attend the "Co-ed Singles" group, which promises "fellowship and fun with activities such as game night, kayaking, roller skating, escape room, etc." It is easy to see the appeal of these small groups, not only providing low-cost alternatives for recreation but relatively safe and stress-free places for Christians to meet new people and develop relationships.

Many other small groups are more politically based, including "Bound4Life- Silent Siege Prayer Meeting." This small group provides an address and invites members to "meet across the street from the abortion facility & pray for ALL involved, especially those without a voice." The address provided by the description houses a facility called "Reproductive Health Services," located in Montgomery, Alabama. According to the facility's website, abortions are provided, along with "routine gynecological services, pregnancy testing, pap smears, STD testing," and an OB/GYN physician "dedicated to providing the highest quality care" for women. The group's description may claim it is "not a protest" but a collection of women praying "for those without a voice," the fact that group members will be making their presence felt outside the clinic is inconsistent with that claim. Other small groups centered around abortion are not necessarily designed for protest but offer support for those who have had an abortion. In the Spring of 23, a small group titled "abortion recovery" promises "you are forgiven from abortion." While the group description claims that the group is "caring, confidential and non-judgmental," the implication that someone would be suffering "grief, guilt and shame" and would need "recovery" from having an abortion is consistent with Christianity's long attitude towards reproductive rights.

4.2.3.1 Human Trafficking

Fighting human trafficking is another popular form of activism for COH parishioners. Each semester features several groups focusing on "educating" and "raising awareness" on the issue. "Trafficking Hope," for example, describes human trafficking as a form of "modern-day slavery" existing in almost every city "from massage parlors to sporting events." Given that the book "Caged No More" is listed as the group's primary instructional tool, it is safe to assume that the sexual exploitation of women is this group's focus. Telling the supposedly true story of a

woman attempting to rescue her granddaughter from a tragic life of sex trafficking, *Caged No More* describes a dark underworld of child predators and the collection of heroes brave enough to fight back. The author, Molly Venzke, might be best described as a Christian influencer with her own social media accounts, website, and YouTube channel. While *Caged No More* appears to be the author's only published novel so far, her website features a collection of writings meant to encourage her followers to "pick up the sword God has for you and to walk victoriously into the life of joy, peace, and prosperity that was designed just for you!" ("Fearless 365," 2017). Unsurprisingly, *Caged No More* received a film adaptation in 2016 produced by the independent distribution company Freestyle Releasing. Following in the footsteps of small-budget Christian-themed films such as the *Left Behind* and *God's Not Dead* series, *Caged No More* (2016) is, in many ways, a Christian retelling of *Taken* (2008). The film's biggest draw, former "Hercules" television star Kevin Sorbo, has garnered a reputation as an outspoken conservative Christian actor. While Sorbo often claims he has been "blacklisted" by Hollywood for his faith (Stanford, 2023), his ousting might have more to do with his frequent sexist and racist rants on Twitter (Puente, 2014). Unsurprisingly, the presentation of child trafficking in the book and film feeds directly into the moral panic surrounding this issue. The film overly simplifies the more complex and nuanced problems associated with human trafficking. The film also implicitly suggests that a secular society is to blame, which resonates well with conspiracy movements whose growth centers around spreading misinformation and unreliable statistics about the issue (Moran & Prochaska, 2022).

The trafficking of human beings, especially children, is an incredibly anxiety-provoking and emotive subject. People should be rightly concerned about this issue and search for ways to take actions to address the nuances and needs of victims. Many scholars have argued that the

prevailing discourse surrounding human trafficking ignores the root causes, including economic hardship, emotional vulnerability, lack of a social safety net, wars, natural disasters, and political instability ("What is Human Trafficking? | Homeland Security," n.d.). Instead, the discourse surrounding the issue often focuses on sensational reporting of young (mostly white) girls abducted at airports, sporting events, or superstores (Austin & Farrell, 2017). The preoccupation with women and girls also works to make invisible a significant percentage of human trafficking victims, including boys and transgender individuals. Human trafficking is also becoming a popular subject in the movie industry, with films such as *Taken* (2009) retreading popular narratives of women rescued from massive underground crime syndicates (Todres, 2015). It is not simply the media that reflects these misconceptions. Churches and religious activism tend to frame the anti-trafficking movement as a holy crusade against nefarious forces that corrupt, complicit, or inept government officials are unable or unwilling to combat (Weitzer, 2007).

Additionally, the Christian stance and response to human trafficking is inherently against any form of sex work and unfairly targets individuals who follow this employment path regardless of their circumstances (Berman 2005; Kempadoo et al., 2015). Today, human trafficking encompasses everything from baby abduction to forced labor, compounding the issue's complexity. In many ways, human trafficking has developed into a moral panic, working to erase essential details about the context that fosters sexual exploitation and ignoring accurate appraisals of experiences and contexts that depart from the grand discourse (Cree et al., 2014). As Snajdr (2013, p. 231) writes, "The problem of human trafficking is far from monolithic, most certainly dynamic and context-based, and often linked to a host of issues that appear to be overlooked or ignored in policy-making, in legislation or advocacy for people victimized."

While combating human trafficking and supporting victims is a laudable endeavor, the use of popular media portrayals rather than evidence-based research and other critical information as instructional device reinforces a particular construct of human trafficking, one that perpetuates many misconceptions and falsehoods. Additionally, the small groups' association with *Caged No More* and its many paratexts predisposes it to, at best, a sensationalized and reductive portrayal of human trafficking and, at worst, serves as a gateway to the rampant conspiracism that exists online surrounding human trafficking. As I have shown in my analysis, these anti-human trafficking gatherings do not exist in a vacuum. However, due to the affordances of digital media, they easily connect to a chain of human trafficking discourse. The narratives found in these small groups also resonate well with online conspiracy movements such as QAnon. QAnon not only conflates human trafficking with human smuggling but also frames the world as run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, often mentioning top politicians, celebrities, and companies as culprits (Priniski et al., 2021). Misleading information about the scope of child trafficking has undoubtedly existed long before QAnon and the internet, but QAnon and other movements centered around digital anti-trafficking campaigns have a real negative impact on anti-trafficking organizations and, in some cases, hinder law enforcement's ability to investigate actual instances of human trafficking (Laboratory to Combat Human, 2020). Rather than helping to develop successful prevention strategies and support systems for these forms of exploitation, digital anti-trafficking campaigns often spread misconceptions and falsehoods, which get incorporated into law and policy (Todres, 2015).

In many ways, COH parishioners are developing a fannish transmedia story world surrounding the issue of human trafficking. This COH "fanon" does not begin or end in the small group directory but exists in an online ecosystem of Christian media personalities and evolves

across various media platforms. I am not the first to show how online communities surrounding conspiratorial folklore resemble fandom. Others have argued that by understanding conspiracy movements as participatory fan communities, we can more adequately describe the driving forces in conspiracism and radicalization (Hodson & Gosse, 2022; Lamerichs et al., 2018; Reinhard et al., 2022). Most research on QAnon and similar conspiracy movements has focused on the role of social media platforms (such as 4Chan, 8Chan, Reddit, and Facebook) in facilitating and amplifying their spread. Filtering the issue through a religious lens, the COH parishioners frame human trafficking as a holy crusade, putting themselves in the role of a heroic protagonist (perhaps like the ones found in *Cage No More*), rescuing vulnerable populations and fighting against the forces of evil. Just as other scholars have drawn parallels between QAnon and digital games (Petersen, 2022; Tutors, 2019; Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023), I argue that the inherent playfulness of this type of activism is vital to the issue's popularity in the COH small group directory. Many digital media scholars might assume that conspiracy movements are mainly generated and organized on social media platforms, online spaces perceived as more vulnerable to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. I have shown, however, how all platforms that encourage a playful type of participation, even ones as innocuous as a church directory, are just as susceptible.

4.2.3.2 “3G-God, Gun, & Guys”

While small groups centered around political action on abortion and human trafficking might be consistent with the Christian Right's long history on these issues, what is even more troublesome is the many small groups centered around firearms. One group, "God, Guns, and Good News," is intended for men who "love God and enjoy shooting weapons" (see fig. 6). In the same semester, another group described itself as "mixed with a little Scripture and

gunpowder!" Like group fitness and Bible study, small groups centered around firing weapons are a popular and recurring activity in the COH directory. It is worth noting that these groups stress that you must have a gun permit to participate, and members will first meet for a "safety talk." However, many might wonder why celebrating deadly weapons would be acceptable for religious participation and service. The entanglement of faith and firearms is a sad reality for those who live in the United States, especially in the South. Scholars have long investigated Christianity's contribution to America's attitudes toward gun violence and control (Ryan, 2021).

Tuscaloosa
God, Guns, and Good News

This is a Men's Group for guys who love God and enjoy shooting weapons. The first time, Saturday, June 8th, we will meet at my house for meet/greet and safety talk. Then on Saturday, June 15th at South Sandy Outdoor Shooting Range in Duncanville, AL.

Leader(s):	Van White (334-507-3449)	Who:	30s, 40s, 50s, 60s+
Where:	6113 Woodcrest Drive Tuscaloosa, Alabama 35405	Category:	Fellowship / Connect, Men
Childcare:	No	When:	Saturday at 3:00PM (Central)
		Requirements:	Guns (if hand gun, Concealed Carry Permit), Ammo, Water and Bible

[Contact Leaders](#)
[Directions](#)
[Share](#)
[Add to Favorites](#)

Figure 4.2 God, Guns, and Good News small group. Screenshot taken from COH small group directory.

While adherents of different religious groups in the United States favor stricter gun-control, including Catholics, Black Protestants, and non-Christian communities like Muslims and Jews (Bailey et al., 2022), white Protestant evangelicals are more likely to own a gun compared to the general population and are often hostile to gun regulation (Yamane, 2016). Even in the face of so many needless gun killings in the United States every year, there is still strong opposition to gun regulation, especially from the religious right. This attachment to guns may be a byproduct of Christianity's long alliance with conservatism, which often frames the U.S. Constitution (including the Second Amendment) as a right bestowed onto the American people

by a Christian God (Whitehead & Perry, 2018). Others have connected the love of guns with the patriarchal aspects of the faith, including the emphasis on masculinity and traditional gender roles, informed by the position that a man's responsibility is the protection of others (Stroope and Tom, 2017). Critical race scholars have pointed to white gun owner's racist attitudes toward crime, fueled by the perpetual conflation of black culture and criminality (Livingston & Young, 2020; Taylor, 2016). Of course, one could simply interpret the love of firearms as a sign of extreme hypocrisy or a distortion of the faith meant to justify the desire for empowerment and security. Whatever the reasons, the entanglement of faith and guns has existed since the founding of the country (Austin, 2020), with religious influencers and activists typically steering the focus away from sensible gun regulation in favor of blaming bad parenting, cultural changes, and an irreligious society (Grasmick & McGill, 1994).

The combination of God and guns is worrisome for many reasons. Besides the fact that there is arguably no sound interpretation of the teachings of Jesus that makes the celebration of a deadly weapon appropriate, the celebration of guns, including their inclusion as the centerpiece of religious participation, fosters the belief that taking life is consistent with a spiritual imperative to defend yourself, your family, or the country. As mentioned previously, the Proud Boys frequently frame their ownership of guns as a necessary measure to defend the country from its supposed "moral decline." These religious militant groups also aim (metaphorically and literally) at various marginalized communities, including racial and religious minorities. I am not claiming that these small groups are analogous to the Proud Boys or, because of their love of guns, are guilty by association. However, it is worth acknowledging the clear overlap of mythologies, imperatives, and discourse that exists between the spiritual body and other embodiments of reactionary politics discussed in this dissertation, including the tactical body. As

mentioned in the tactical body chapter, products and brands centered around firearms, body armor, and tactical gear are so prevalent in our digital economy that tactical embodiment has developed into an algorithmically recognized consumer market. Social media and other playful platforms have not determined this outcome but enabled fannish participation in appropriating cultural objects for identity expression. A similar phenomenon is happening in the COH small group directory, in which communities of parishioners choose guns as their object of religious observance. Knowing the group's relationship with guns is impossible, given my methodological approach. Perhaps these parishioners are proponents of strict gun control, believing that practicing gun safety means limiting who can own guns in the United States. I would also expect them to defend their Second Amendment right to bear arms, claim they are the "good guy with the gun," or claim that owning a firearm is necessary for hunting or sport. Given the long history of the Christian Right's tendency to oppose gun-control legislation and the widespread distortion of the teachings of Jesus found in beliefs of the Christian Right, it is safe to assume these gatherings of gun enthusiasts appear to be yet another expression of the United States problematic gun culture. It is also unclear whether COH leadership shares the same positive attitudes towards guns or if they permitted the group to avoid pushback from members, understanding the political climate of Alabama and Georgia. Either way, COH's decision to allow parishioners to choose their own religious observance has allowed playful expressions of the spiritual body.

It may be worth mentioning that the human trafficking and gun-centric small groups, while often recurring from semester to semester, are not necessarily the most "popular" or common. Instead, COH's small group directory comprises the types of religious gatherings you would expect to see in an established church, including Bible studies, prayer groups, and

marriage counseling. However, COH's evangelical strategy provides the perfect breeding ground for these groups to materialize. Given that COH emboldens its parishioners to choose their style of religious observance, in a region of the United States known for its regressive politics, using a platform that provides the possibility to create transmedia story worlds around white supremacist conspiracy theories, with parishioners meeting in physical space to play out those stories, expressions of the spiritual body are likely to occur. Nevertheless, even though these more problematic small groups exist, there are still possibilities for more positive play.

4.2.3.3 *"God and Race"*

If you are tired of acting like racism isn't a problem, sick of staying silent, and done with deferring the solution to someone else, Wayne and I want to share with you some practical thoughts about getting ready to take a stand and say that's enough. (Siebling & Francis, 2022, p. 35)

While I have focused on the prominence of regressive body politics in the COH directory, it is worth noting that the very playful nature of the COH directory-which I have argued enables expressions of the spiritual body- does have transformative potential. In what seems to be a recent addition to the COH small group directory, several groups are centered around the book "God and Race: A Guide for Moving Beyond Black Fists and White Knuckles" by John Siebeling and Wayne Francis. Organized by personal stories told by both Siebeling and Francis, the book offers to give the reader "a guide" for "not just starting conversations with people who don't look like you, but letting those conversations turn into friendships" (Siebeling and Francis, 2022, p. 13, 5). Offering "both a Black and White perspective," God and Race markets to those who are "frustrated with the lack of attention your church is giving to race

relations and are ready to make positive changes" (13). Siebeling shares many struggles and mistakes as a white pastor striving to form and maintain a racially mixed church in Memphis, Tennessee. Francis's contribution to the book includes several historical examples of racial injustice, including the prejudice and profiling he experienced as a black man in America. Rather than reverting to color-blind rhetoric, which is rampant in conservative Christianity, the book begins by declaring that "racism is real, and it affects everyone" (3). The book is also not shy about mentioning prominent victims of police brutality, such as Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, topics that might be uncomfortable to some white audiences.

Given that white churches have historically coordinated campaigns that have been resistant to black equality or depicted the struggle as external to churches and Christian theology, it is reassuring that conversations around racial inequity are happening somewhere in the COH congregation. As one outlier in a collection of problematic small groups, "God and Race" is a breath of fresh air. The group could be one step in breaking down one of the most obtrusive barriers to racial injustice in America, white Christianity's apathy.

While the existence of God and Race small groups reveals the potential for more positive playfulness in the COH small groups directory, it has limitations. As a COH attendee, I have noticed COH's concerted effort for racial diversity in the worship team, promotional materials, and to a lesser extent, their leadership team. COH, however, is still, in many ways, a white-centric church. As Francis stated in an interview, "The biggest key to having a church that is diverse [...] is having diversity in your leadership," and this is where COH suffers the most. Only three of the 25 campus pastors are nonwhite ("Leadership," 2023). COH also has a "Senior Pastor Leadership Team" of predominantly white men. It is also worth noting that God and Race only address racial injustice issues. In an interview with "Storyteller's Studio" (2022), the authors

admit that the book does not address other areas of inequality in America, including the mistreatment of people based on their gender or sexual orientation.

4.3 Final Thoughts on COH and the Spiritual Body

This chapter maps yet another possible vector to the far-right extremism and the WMC fan identity made possible by the platforming of established churches. COH may have been attempting to harness the productive potential of participatory audiences by encouraging a user-generated and interactive approach to service and religious participation. However, their evangelical strategy opened the door for parishioners to pair regional politics and conspiracism with religious observation. I showed how the spiritual body manifests as COH parishioners congregate to actualize fantasies of a story world inspired by their co-created fanon.

I do not mean to suggest that the spiritual body is the only expression in COH's pairing of leisure activities and religious communion. Many COH parishioners center their gatherings around innocuous hobbies and acts of community service. Christianity's long association with white supremacy may inform this chapter. However, I do not wish to argue that COH is an openly white supremacist organization or to accuse all COH parishioners of knowingly supporting retrograde body politics. While not all parishioners who play out the spiritual body may be explicit white supremacists in the sense that they openly express their belief that white people constitute a superior race, they are constructing and playing out fantasies inspired by white supremacist texts. The affordances of the small group directory allow for communal playfulness, which enables gatherings of church members to augment their religious gatherings by connecting their leisure activities to a larger story world inspired by white supremacist conspiracism and reactionary politics.

While this study showcases the dark realities of religious institutions adopting participatory media and the possible implications of mediating religious observance, future studies could provide examples of more positive playfulness. Other scholars have shown that play has progressive potential, even if severely suppressed by social and cultural constructs. Thus, examining how parishioners use the playful affordances of participatory media to implement positive change in religious organizations could provide a more uplifting counterexample to the ones I provided in my analysis.

5 CONCLUSION: THE DARK CONSEQUENCES OF THE WHITE MASCULINE CRUSADER FAN IDENTITY

You want to say that that was a mob? You want to say that was violence? No sir. No Ma'am. No, we could have a 2nd Amendment rally on those same steps that we had that rally yesterday. You know, and if we do, then it's gonna be a sad day because there's gonna be blood running out of that building. But at the end of the day, you mark my word; we will plant our flag on the desk of Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer and Donald J. Trump if it boils down to it.

Days after illegally crossing metal barriers into a restricted area of the Capitol grounds, Couy Griffin posted the above message on his Facebook account (Graziosi, 2021; The United States Attorney's Office District of Columbia). While Griffin maintains he only led others in prayer at the Capitol that day, a video posted on his Facebook account also showed him rallying the crowd with a bullhorn (Kuznia & Bronstein, 2021). After first helping to create a chaotic atmosphere, Griffin then joined the mob that overwhelmed and outnumbered law enforcement,

participating in a "Heave! Ho!" chant meant to synchronize the mob's ramming efforts, which brutally crushed a police officer in a metal door frame in the West Terrace tunnel (State of New Mexico County of Santa Fe First Judicial District Court, 2022). Even after the event, Griffin continued to make threatening remarks, including reportedly telling colleagues he planned to return to Washington D.C. for Joe Biden's inauguration with his revolver and rifle (Lybrand & Polantz, 2022). When attending the "Stop the Steal" rally on January 6, Griffin was a New Mexico County Commissioner. He was eventually removed from elected office after refusing to fulfill his duty to certify the results of the 2020 election (Lopez, 2022).

Not everyone who stormed the Capitol was an elected official, but Griffin's story resonates with many of the Capitol Insurrectionists. Throughout his life, Griffin bounced between various jobs and ventures in search of purpose, spending time as a small church pastor, restaurant owner, and performer in the Disneyland Paris remake of Buffalo Bill's Wild Western Show. Griffin is rarely seen without his cowboy attire, frequently wearing a combination of Stetson hat, Western t-shirt, and jeans with a large belt buckle. He claims his love of cowboy hats, horses, and American flags "has nothing to do with politics." However, he admits some look at him with contempt when he travels to more "progressive cities" (ProViewNetworks, 2020). Many might interpret his frontier cowboy persona as shallow as his Disney Buffalo Bill performance. However, it has led to some political success. Along with being elected Otero County commissioner, Griffin received media attention for traveling the country riding on horseback. More recently, he channeled his love of horseback riding into the organization "Cowboys for Trump," a collection of Trump enthusiasts who perform parades supporting the former president. Griffin became somewhat infatuated with Trump, even visiting the White

House to meet him in person (See Fig.). In September 2019, he posted a photo with Trump in the oval office (Maxwell, 2019). Expressing his excitement on his Facebook page, Griffin wrote:

We need to “wash” out debt with China. We have paid them back with suffering from the COVID-19 virus. Cut ties and start building America again. Restore the American Pride!!! The best is yet to come!!!



Figure 5.1 Griffin meeting President Trump in the White House. Screenshot taken from Alamogordo Daily News.

Some might see Griffin’s role in the Capitol Insurrection as the dark consequence of a passionate fandom surrounding a politician. Like many of his supporters, Griffin saw Trump as a savior figure, an outsider who not only promised to clean up government corruption (“drain the swamp”) but return the country to some mythical past period of exceptionalism (“make America great again”). Nevertheless, understanding Griffin's story reveals a man not merely infatuated with Trump but with what he represented. Trump was (and still is) a personification of an unapologetic defense of the dominant ideology in the United States, one which upholds,

reinforces, and normalizes white masculine supremacy. While you could undoubtedly frame Griffin as a Trump fan, it is more fitting to describe him as a fan of something more troubling.

His inflammatory and offensive rhetoric also fueled Griffin's rise to prominence. A video of Griffin stating that "the only good Democrat was a dead Democrat" was even retweeted by Trump (Davoran, 2020). While Griffin alleges he was only speaking metaphorically about politics, he later suggested that Democratic governors who locked down their states during the coronavirus pandemic could be guilty of treason and might face the death penalty. "You get to pick your poison [...] you either go before a firing squad, or you get the end of the rope." (Blake, 2021). Griffin was also known for his many racist rants. Becoming another voice contributing to the derision of African American athletes who support social justice movements, he expressed his contempt for Black athletes who chose not to stand for the national anthem (Contreras & Contreras, 2020). In a video posted on his Facebook account, Griffin said:

Why don't you go back to Africa and form your little football teams over in Africa. And you can play on an old beat-out dirt lot, and you can play your black national anthem over there.

Critics and scholars have pointed to the discursive connection between Trump's campaign slogans and Ethno-nationalist rhetoric (Eddington, 2018), mainly how they both frame an (often racialized and feminized) "other" as a threat to the country. As Bobo (2017, p.100) writes, the call to 'Make America Great Again' "was a none-too-subtle dog whistle signaling an effort to return to an America where the material well-being and privileged position of white citizens would be protected and made something that could be again taken comfortably for granted." Others have argued that the growing support for Christian nationalist beliefs played a significant role in Trump's election (Whitehead et al., 2018). Many supporters, including Griffin,

anointed the Trump presidency as a defense of the country's perceived Christian heritage and a step toward restoring a distinctly Christian future. As Du Mez (2020, p. 3) writes, the evangelical support for Trump, even though he rarely upheld the moral standards of the Christian faith, was the "culmination of evangelical's embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad."

Couy Griffin and the many others who stormed the Capital that day were not necessarily rushing to defend Trump but to defend (or perhaps to avenge) their privileged position in the United States' social hierarchy. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, the connection between white masculine power and militant defense of a supposed Christian America has been the basis of evangelical politics long before Trump. However, what has changed is the prevalence of digital media, which provides more opportunities for the playful expression of these beliefs. Griffin's affection for Trump is closer to a reactionary fandom built around a homology of white supremacy conspiracy theories, gun rights discourse, Christian persecution myths, and white male grievances. Trump was a symbol (or a fannish text) poached by this fandom to actualize the imperative to prepare the body for an impending battle. Given that the convergence culture industry recognizes and constructs profitable and marketable segments of the digital economy, this fandom has developed into a fan identity that I call the White Masculine Crusader.

5.1 Griffin as the White Masculine Crusader

5.1.1 Griffin's Tactical Body

If you're a Democrat and you looked at a map, and you wanted to identify where all your enemies are living at , what would you look for? You would look for all the red areas.

Where are all the red areas at? All the red areas are all the rural parts of America.

In a November 2020 interview on the local YouTube political show "To the Point with Mich Rich," Griffin describes how he thinks his political opponents see the United States (ProViewNetworks, 2020). Often referring to democrats as "assassins" or "the enemy," Griffin implies that he and other rural Americans are marked targets, ready to be taken out by democratic lawmakers. Griffin may not have a relationship with body armor companies, but his actions are consistent with the tactical body. He often refers to politics as a "war" or "battle," infusing his political rhetoric with calls to prepare the body for a tactical confrontation.

Griffin played a crucial role in the Stop the Steal movement's mobilization efforts, occasionally partnering with the New Mexico-based militia called the New Mexico Civil Guard (State of New Mexico County of Santa Fe First Judicial District Court, 2022). Leading up to the Capitol Insurrection, he made several speaking appearances at rallies throughout the country, spreading lies of an election "stolen" by "elitist, wicked, vile people." Often using inflammatory language in his speeches, he likened the struggle to keep Trump in office to the Alamo and warned that "we're gonna have to declare martial law." Even after facing multiple criminal charges, Griffin continued his adherence to election lies. At a QAnon conference, he told the crowd, "don't let anyone shame you on January 6. I wear January 6 as a badge of honor" (Kuznia & Scott, 2021). After being removed from office, Griffin faced a restraining order when he attempted to threaten and intimidate the 77-year-old commissioner who replaced him (KOAT, 2022). The commissioner claims she felt "fearful" when Griffin arrived "on a horse in front of the county administration building holding a flagpole that read 'We the People'" (Albizu, 2022).

Griffin often confuses his first amendment right to protest with bullying and intimidation. His primary tool of terror is not a gun or body armor but a symbol even more closely tied to white masculine hegemony: the horse. While Griffin may claim his choice to ride on horseback

is just an expression of his love for animals, animal studies scholars have highlighted the horse's traditional role as an enforcer of the social order. The image of the horse is still a powerful tool to communicate authority and symbolize state power. As Lambert (2015) points out, the image of the horse has long served to express and reinforce racialized domination over enslaved people. Long before D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) depicted the Ku Klux Klan as vigilantes on horseback, the white man on horseback has historically been a symbol of racial subordination and "the personification of the police, authority in general, and the system in which black people are victimized" (Howell & Taves, 2021, p. 499).

5.1.2 Griffin's Fit Body

Griffin begins his life story with a tale of tragedy. Telling an interviewer that his family sawmill business was stolen by "environmental attacks" and "activist environmental organizations," Griffin paints his family as victims of an overreaching government and political activism (ProViewNetworks, 2020). Griffin has spent his life spewing contempt for the federal government's enforcement of environmental protection policies, such as the "endangered species act." He also blames the federal government and special interests groups for the increasingly "horrible fires" in the Otero County forest. To Griffin, the poor health of the New Mexico wildlands is not due to climate change or decades of unregulated industrial growth and increased privatizations. Instead, he sees it as a result of the mismanagement of government officials from big cities like "San Francisco." Suggesting that the rural lands of New Mexico should be entrusted to local communities, Griffin says, "The true stewards of the land are those who utilize them for their livelihoods." While the local Native American tribes might have a more convincing claim to this territory, Griffin implies that he and his kin are the more capable caregivers of the land.

While many of Griffin's actions are consistent with the imperatives of the tactical body, his persona also aligns with the fit body. Griffin may not be a CrossFit athlete (or an athlete in general). However, he often characterizes himself and his body as more fit to withstand the physical demands of a frontier lifestyle. He also frames himself as somehow more attuned with nature, his love of horseback riding a symbol of his rugged masculinity. Also consistent with the fit body, Griffin perpetuates many of the tenets consistent with producerism, which tends to rationalize class hierarchies and the system of wealth distribution (Bert & Lyons, 2000). Griffin dichotomizes society into those perceived to be strengthening the country and those supposedly weighing it down. He perpetuates the myth that blue-collar white men are a burdened class, shackled by those unwilling or unable to work. Considering white supremacy is woven into this myth, Griffin quickly blames economic disparities on a "lack of will" among African Americans, immigrants, and women and is slow to blame inequality and systemic racism.

Those familiar with political history might recognize Griffin's cowboy persona as a derivative reboot of the conservative masculine archetype embodied by Ronald Reagan. As mentioned in the fit body chapter, Reagan touted himself as the defender of the average citizen who needed rescue from corrupt government bureaucracy (Jeffords, 1995). Much of Griffin's persona is nothing new, but what has changed is how Griffin plays out this identity in online and offline spaces, constructing a subject position of strained whiteness for others to follow. While Griffin does not use wearable fitness technologies, his organization "Cowboys for Trump" provides an achievable level for those who wish to prove their fit bodies. There are also ideological similarities between Griffin's political rhetoric and the fit body. Griffin characterizes his body as strained by both the physical demands of being a "rural American" and the persecution he receives being a Christian conservative politician in today's America. While

Griffin deserves contempt for his frequent use of offensive and incendiary language, he claims he is simply being "covered in mud" by "liberals" and "the media." However, as Griffin suggests, it takes a certain kind of rugged masculinity to withstand the attacks from his political rivals. "Character is built through trials and failures," Griffin says. He then offers his motto: "Cowboy up...don't be a sissy, don't back down, don't quit, and if it stings a little bit, brush it off and keep moving forward."

5.1.3 Griffin's Spiritual Body

“[I] look for opportunities to share the gospel along the way. You either want to honor God through your politics or you just want to serve yourself.”

Claiming that "ministry and politics parallel so much," Griffin preaches the importance of the Christian faith being a driving force in American politics and people's lives. He also wants to "give credit where credit is due" for his rising popularity and success. When "I look back in my life, I can see where God gave me the experiences," said Griffin. "It's unbelievable the story of how God opened these different doors." During his many speaking appearances leading up to the Capitol Insurrection, Griffin often appealed to the crowd's faith by framing the defense of Trump as a holy crusade. He even warned one crowd that "there might be some of us that might lose our lives." However, he reassured the crowd that if they remain faithful: "There is nobody that really truly ever loses when you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior" (State of New Mexico County of Santa Fe First Judicial District Court, 2022). During his trial sentence hearing, Griffin attempted to defend his participation in the Stop the Steal rally, saying his Christian faith prompted him to travel to the Capitol on January 6. He told the District judge, "I received that message to go pray with people" (Lynch, 2022).

Griffin's frequent professions of faith may seem like a glaring contradiction, especially in light of the video footage showing him gleefully participating in an event that eventually led to "seven deaths, injuries to more than one hundred police officers, and millions of dollars in damage to the Capitol complex" (State of New Mexico County of Santa Fe First Judicial District Court, 2022). Some may see Griffin as another example of hypocrisy in politics or the consequences of the intensification of Christian nationalism. However, just as Griffin's persona resonates with the tactical body and fit body, his actions are also consistent with the spiritual body. Griffin may not have used a church directory to form a small group, but he did lead his own Christian gathering for a short time. As a preacher and founder of New Heart Church, he led others in a religious communion. As mentioned in the spiritual body chapter, a more personalized and individualized religion can sometimes lead to problematic expressions of faith. Judging by his path to the Capitol Insurrection, Griffin appears to have centered his religious observance around a vengeful warrior mentality, conflating a spiritual battle with a political one. While he often praises God for having a hand in the growth and popularity of Cowboys for Trump, he also attributes the success to his "social media platform." The affordances of social media enabled Griffin and other horseback-riding Trump supporters to get their messages across and recruit new members. It also provided a playable subject position for others to follow, eventually manifested as men traveling the country on horseback and sharing the gospel.

5.2 The White Masculine Crusader Fan Identity

This dissertation touched on three distinct (yet interconnected) embodied expressions of reactionary politics and white supremacy conspiracy theories, all of which paint a better picture of the white masculine crusader (WMC) fan identity. The imperatives of the tactical body, fit body, and spiritual body are not only compatible but sometimes converge. Griffin's persona

exemplifies this, and his actions during the Capitol Insurrection point to the dark consequences. The WMC is not exclusive to Griffin nor the fan communities discussed in this dissertation. Instead, it is a wide-ranging fan identity formed, validated, and performed by various digital media personalities and online communities. The tenets of the WMC align with fantasies of white Christian soldiers preparing their bodies (tactically, physically, and spiritually) for an impending civil war against an unholy alliance of corrupt government officials, criminals, and foreign agents. While the WMC legitimizes and performs white masculine supremacy, it does not mean all who identify with the WMC are white men. Women and people from historically minority populations can (and do) play out the WMC.

The WMC challenges previous explanations of the events of the Capitol Insurrection, which often frame the insurrectionists' actions as a result of radicalization determined by the lies spouted by politicians and misinformation spread on social media. While the power and influence of politicians and social media to impact the interpretation of world events is worth academic attention, it is also essential to consider how online communities manipulate messages on social media. Individuals and fan communities use digital platforms uniquely and unexpectedly, sometimes using methods developers did not intend. As I have shown in this dissertation, digital platforms allow individuals and communities more opportunities to create alternative versions of reality, connecting real-world events with conspiracy theories, misinformation, and lies. To put it differently, Facebook and YouTube did not brainwash people into believing in a corrupted 2020 election or that a cabal of baby-eating devil worshipers runs the world. Instead, the playful affordances of digital media provided an avenue for reactionary communities to actualize what they already wanted to be true and to justify their hatred for marginalized communities, progressive politics, and challenges to the status quo.

Throughout this dissertation, I have referred to the actions of fans and the platforms they use as playful. The widespread nature of playful media means that fandom is increasingly staged in playful platforms. While Facebook, YouTube, Whoop, and the COH small group directory differ from video games, the fan communities discussed in previous chapters could be interpreted as "players" in two crucial ways. First, they are players because they adopt a playful disposition of imagination and story building (Lamerichs, 2018). While not wholly escaping into a fantasy realm or "magic circle" apart from ordinary life, fans are expressing a "ludic identity" (Raessen, 2012) or a particular identity that comes to the fore in some engagements with playful platforms (Calleja, 2015). Second, they are players because they negotiate and test the boundaries of the rule structure of digital media platforms. The interaction between the player, the game rules, and other players create unique experiences and sometimes alters the structure's parameters (Booth, 2015; Raessen, 2012). The discourse surrounding the playful platform constructs a standard metagame or a "right" way to play (Boluk & Lemieuz, 2012). As Petersen (2022, p. 6) writes, it is fruitful to understand fan practices as a form of mediatized play for it allows us to consider how fans are "instrumental in transforming modes of participation on digital media through their play and play moods." Thus, seeing fans as players helps explain how fans often arrive at fandom with agendas rather than being primarily driven by the meaning they find in the texts.

Given that fan identities are not only constructed in spaces of fandom but also through the complex interaction with participatory media, online personalities, and digital economies, the WMC has also developed into an algorithmically recognized and amplified consumer identity. Businesses and online platforms are profiting off the transmedia playfields that reactionary fans have constructed, providing more ways to "stay in play" (Petersen, 2022). In this way, the WMC is a byproduct of convergence culture and the commodification of fannish practices. The ways

the convergence culture industry legitimizes particularly marketable fan practices into fan identities are of great interest to fan scholars (Booth, 2015; Tussey, 2022). The mainstreaming of fan practices, including the recognition of fans as a critical demographic for targeted marketing and advertising, has developed "into a major economic force" and burgeoning "fan industry" (Bennett & Booth, 2016, p.2,3). The convergence culture industry primarily emphasizes standardizing "masculine" fan identities and privileges affirmational fan practices (Scott, 2019). Thus, the WMC fan identity and the convergence cultural industry are in a cyclical and mutually beneficial relationship. The embodied performances and identity play of the WMC help feed the convergence cultural industry while the convergence cultural industry validates and incentivizes embodied performances of reactionarism and white supremacy.

5.3 Future Research, Limitations, and Final Thoughts

This dissertation demonstrates that the intersection between brand culture, playful media, and reactionary fandom is worth our attention. Fan scholars have long defended the importance of studying fan communities. A person's fandom can be a fundamental aspect of their identity, informing who they interact with, the communities they form, and even how they interpret the world. Fandom and its practices have become so mainstream that corporate entities have developed strategies to profit from fan participation, new media technologies have incentivized fandom's productive potential, and digital media personalities have developed in these fannish media ecologies. Fandom is also heavily affect-driven and expressed through the body (Affuso & Scott, 2023). As Lamerich (2018, p. 236) writes, fandom shows how "texts are not only felt but also read in a personal and embodied way, and this embodiment pertains to both the fan's own identity and that of others." Thus, studying fandom allows insight into how and why people

operationalize certain brands and use participatory media to negotiate their online and offline identities while being acutely aware of the consumerist nature of our digital environment.

Studies of fandom must continue to complicate and challenge our ideas of who fans are and how these concepts help areas traditionally thought as outside the influence of fandom, including networked communication, political participation, and religious observance. While early fan scholarship celebrated the progressive, feminist, and transgressive potential of fandom, recent works have challenged this misconception. As Reinhard (2018, p. 180) points out, "Fandom is both a unifying force and a means of separation. It brings people together over their shared love of something, but also segregates based on that same thing." Many have pointed to examples of toxic fandom caused by racism (Pande, 2018), sexism (Massanari, 2017), homophobia (Aalto, 2016), and other oppressive ideologies. However, few have examined the "fannish tactics of reactionaries" (Stanfill, 2020; p. 131). As I have shown, a particular perception of America supported by a homology of white supremacist myths and reactionary discourse can sometimes be the object of fandom itself. My contribution to the field of fan studies centers around the ludification (Raessens, 2014) of reactionary politics and white supremacist texts through performances of fandom. Playful platforms have the potential to not only extend the WMC fan identity, but create new expressions, avenues, and playstyles found in online and offline spaces. Consequently, white supremacy and reactionarism have become exceptionally playful in the digital age. To make matters worse, our digital economy appears to be profiting from playful expressions of reactionary fandom, providing yet another driving force in the persistence of white supremacy in America.

Extending the concepts and theories of fan studies to conspiracy movements, right-wing militia groups, and domestic terrorists more accurately explains the driving motivations and

mechanisms which spread reactionary discourse and white supremacy myths in the digital age. However, it is crucial to restate that by framing these reactionary communities as fans and describing their behavior as playful, I am not attempting to trivialize the consequences of reactionary fandom. When describing the Capitol Insurrection, I do not wish to perpetuate the lies that many right-wing pundits and politicians shared, framing the violent assault on the Capitol as somehow exaggerated by the media or perpetrated by a few Trump supporters who got out of hand. I also do not want to make the mistake of simply mocking the individuals and communities in this dissertation, labeling them as pathological, infantile, or completely detached from reality. Fan scholars do run the risk of characterizing the actions of reactionary fans as harmless, expected, or perhaps even justified if we do not recognize that fandom and play have both progressive and reactionary potential. While some fan communities in this dissertation may be more explicit with their white supremacist attitudes and perhaps more likely to resort to violence, placing them on a spectrum from harmless to dangerous would be counterproductive to my argument. Instead, I wish to show how reactionarism and white supremacy is particularly conducive to the types of play recognized and amplified in our digital economy. White supremacy has always been persistent in the United States, but when driven by reactionary fandom, it is now easily concentrated and amplified through the playful possibilities of platforms. Regardless of the original concentration, embodied performances of white supremacy create a very alarming snowball effect, exemplified by the WMC fan identity.

Close examinations of how reactionary fan identities emerge provide one avenue to begin to explore possible vectors to online conspiracism and far-right extremism. Studies of online radicalization should not solely focus on discourse perpetuated by brands, online platforms, and fan practices but on the liminal spaces where they converge. Filter bubbles and echo chambers

are certainly a concern of communication and digital media scholars (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016; Risius et al., 2019). However, the ways fans actualize the transmedia story worlds created in these echo chambers and how our digital economy responds also needs to be addressed. While these filter bubbles typically occur online, they can potentially burst in the physical realm as acts of violence, such as the Capitol Insurrection. Thus, theories of play allow researchers to focus on how the digital economy responds to the conflation of self-expression and political participation within consumer capitalism.

Before I conclude, it is worth acknowledging the limitations of this study. This dissertation addressed the increasingly playful expressions of reactionary politics and white supremacist conspiracy theories in the United States, with the Capitol Insurrection as the central event. I focused exclusively on American Fandom, for the WMC fan identity is particularly salient in the United States. However, reactionarism and white supremacy exist across the globe. Future literature on reactionary fandom may wish to continue to "de-Westernize" fan studies by shifting the emphasis away from fandoms based in Western countries (Chin, 2007). Pande (2019) rightfully argues that fan studies is too focused on "Anglo-American cultural texts." My methodological approach could help interrogate how reactionary fandom exists and works globally, including other cultural, national, and faith-specific forms of reactionarism. More intersectional and transnational approaches to the study of fan embodiment could also allow for a broader understanding of how white supremacy is legitimized and validated in the digital age.

This dissertation is a warning of fan performances used for destructive and dangerous purposes. Individuals and communities who embrace a playful identity inspired by white supremacy and reactionary politics are undoubtedly alarming. The WMC fan identity will

most likely inform the design of future brands. Many have called for companies like Google, Meta, and X (formerly Twitter) to regulate what is posted and shared on their platforms (Cusumano et al., 2021). Self-regulation may slow the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. However, self-regulation takes a concerted effort from tech companies, who often need to provide the necessary labor force. If the growth of the "Stop the Steal" campaign on Facebook is any indication, social media companies are also not particularly good at recognizing and censoring problematic content. Since taking ownership of X, Elon Musk seems uninterested in suppressing problematic speech, even if that means the platform is more welcoming to far-right communities (Peters, 2022). The byproducts of the WMC can be very profitable, providing few incentives to suppress these embodied performances. Hopefully, more scholars and journalists expressing these concerns will force tech companies to take censorship more seriously. Until then, we will continue to suffer the consequences of fans not "playing f*cking nice."

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