

## ABSTRACT

Hyperstitional Communication and the Reactosphere: The Rhetorical Circulation of Neoreactionary Exit

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This thesis evaluates the communicative means through which neoreactionaries compose a broader alt-right reactosphere. By retrieving the concept of hyperstition from the archives of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit—an experimental poststructuralist collective based at the University of Warwick in the 1990s—I reemphasize the role of mythos in the rhetorical circulation of far-right memes and accelerationist theory. Aspirational nihilism, as the affective nodal point of the reactosphere, coopts structural feelings of disaffection and puts them in service of racial capitalist futures such as transhumanism or the right to exit. Centering research on the mythological foundations of extremist subcultures is key to deflating the collective fervency that sustains neoreaction. I conclude with a call for rhetorical studies to discover its own exits from the dominant social order or else risk ceding a monopoly on future possibility to neoreactionaries.

Hyperstitional Communication and the Reactosphere: The Rhetorical Circulation of  
Neoreactionary Exit

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## CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| List of Figures .....   | vi  |
| Acknowledgements.....   | vii |
| Chapter One .....   | 1   |
| Enter the Reactosphere .....  | 1   |
| Introduction .....  | 1   |
| Literature Review.....  | 11  |
| Methodology .....   | 27  |
| Thesis Framework .....  | 40  |
| Conclusion.....   | 43  |
| Chapter Two.....  | 45  |
| Hijacking the Outside: Rhetorical Circulation and Hyperstitional Communication .....                      | 45  |
| A Prelude by the Bay .....  | 45  |
| The Missing Subject of Circulation .....  | 52  |
| “A description with divine power. In the beginning was the Word” .....                                    | 68  |
| “CCRU does not, has not, and will never exist” .....  | 85  |
| “Coldness be my God” .....  | 116 |
| Mapping the Reactosphere .....  | 135 |
| Chapter Three.....  | 150 |
| “Everything starts from the end”: Roko’s Basilisk as Neoreactionary Hyperstition ...                      | 150 |
| Introduction .....  | 150 |
| “Perhaps we share an Outside” .....   | 156 |
| You Just Lost the Game .....  | 162 |
| Rococo’s Basilisk, or: Nightmares of the Rich and the Famous.....   | 169 |
| Chapter Four .....  | 173 |
| White Flight from Citizenship: Neoreaction and the Rhetorical Circulation of the<br>‘Right to Exit’ ..... | 173 |
| Introduction .....  | 173 |
| The Right to Gov-Corporatism .....  | 177 |
| Circulating Exit Signs .....  | 180 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Manifesting Passivism.....   | 182 |
| The Petri Dish.....  | 186 |
| Conclusion.....  | 196 |
| Chapter Five.....  | 198 |
| Conclusion: Nomenclature Trolling and the Right to be Invaded..... | 198 |
| A Call for a Left Exit.....  | 198 |
| The Right to be Invaded.....                                       | 201 |
| Final Thoughts.....  | 203 |
| Bibliography .....   | 205 |

## LIST OF FIGURES

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Fig. 1 – “The History of Science Fiction” by Delphi Carstens.....                           | 115 |
| Fig. 2 – Barron Trump 2036 cyberpunk meme.....  | 130 |
| Fig. 3 – Two-Axis Chart of the Alt-Right.....   | 137 |
| Fig. 4 – Dark Enlightenment Visual Trichotomy .....   | 138 |
| Fig. 5 – “Visualizing Neoreaction” by Scharlach.....  | 139 |
| Fig. 6 – An “Are Ya Winning Son?” meme about Roko’s Basilisk. ....                          | 159 |
| Fig. 7 – A meme comparing Roko’s Basilisk to The Game. ....                                 | 162 |
| Fig. 8 – 4Chan post reading “It’s trans...” .....   | 188 |
| Fig. 9 – 4Chan disagreement about the right to exit.....                                    | 188 |
| Fig. 10 – 4chan post quoting Yarvin defending fortification of all sovereignty borders.     | 189 |
| Fig. 11– 4Chan post contrasting pre-WWI migration in Europe with the modern border<br>..... | 190 |

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Enter the Reactosphere

#### *Introduction*

Contemporary rhetorical analysis of far-right extremist discourses has yet to seriously confront the growing influence of neoreactionary thought and the implications that it bears for the study of communication writ large. Neoreaction (or NRx) refers to an ideological tapestry of techno-deterministic, anti-democratic, and so-called “race realist” belief systems that converge most visibly in the “disruptor” culture of Silicon Valley. It is unique, even among other segments of the “alt-right,” in deriving its theoretical lineage directly from late-20th-century poststructuralism. Thus, unlike other cases where the term may be misapplied, NRx is an explicitly accelerationist project.

“Accelerationism” refers to the tendency of desire within capitalist social systems to immanently produce alternatives to contemporary cultural formations.

“Accelerationists” variously name the theorists and/or proponents of this mode of transformative desire who—depending on their political predispositions—describe its impulses as either deriving from or striving against the societal force of capital.

Neoreactionaries belong in the first camp, insisting that marketization is a force of social evolution responsible for propelling the human species out of the era of feudalism.

Within this set of discourses, an imperative to economize all aspects of social existence culminates in a series of bizarre techno-dystopian imaginaries including patchwork fiefdoms run by Silicon Valley despots, a vengeful artificial general intelligence raining

down punishment on any would-be dissenters, and futuristic manifestations of white flight exemplified by extraplanetary excursions for the rich and powerful. What binds these disparate visions together is a racialized affective anxiety premised on notions such as “human biodiversity” or “hyperracism.” As this affective energy is transmitted through online spaces, it leaves in its wake a composite of manifestos and memes, explainers and critiques, boosters and trolls, forming a digitalized discursive ecosystem known as the “reactosphere.” Rhetorical scholars must make use of an updated set of analytical tools if they hope to discern how NRx’s racialized affective anxiety embeds itself within far-right communication online and off.

To obtain a clearer picture of reactionary culture’s capacity to seep outside of purely online domains, communication theorists must analyze the thinkers responsible for outlining right accelerationism. A Breitbart article written by Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos attempted to bring the alt-right out of the shadows and into the mainstream by casting groups, including neoreactionaries, as more high-minded than the legacy media would have one believe. In this piece, Bokhari and Yiannopoulos described NRx as a “fearsomely intelligent group of thinkers prepared to assault the secular religions of the establishment,” that was “led by philosopher Nick Land and computer scientist Curtis Yarvin.”<sup>1</sup> While this column was a rather transparent attempt to normalize and render attractive reactionary thinking and thus should be viewed with quite a bit of skepticism,

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<sup>1</sup> Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right,” Breitbart, March 29, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201208004101/https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>.

understanding “neoreactionaries as the intellectual vanguard of the [alt-right]”<sup>2</sup> provides a useful starting point for a rhetorical investigation into the nascent revival of right-wing ideology online.

So, who are Yarvin and Land? Curtis Yarvin is a software engineer based in Silicon Valley and the founder of the tech startup Tlön, which markets a decentralized, personal cloud-computing platform called Urbit. He is better known by his online alias, Mencius Moldbug, a persona dedicated to inventing a political philosophy with a newly-acquired library of books funded with dot-com boom money. Yarvin has increasingly tried to separate his identity as a computer programmer from his writings as Moldbug—the latter of which “may well be the only notable political philosopher wholly created by and disseminated through the internet”<sup>3</sup>—but that has not halted his frequent ventures into autodidacticism. Aiming to pry these two personas apart from one another is likely in his best interest—after all, he constantly draws protest whenever he attends programming conferences because “he believes in reinstating slavery and thinks that black people make especially good slaves”<sup>4</sup>—but for all intents and purposes, Moldbug and Yarvin are clearly inseparable entities.

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<sup>2</sup> Shuja Haider, “The Darkness at the End of the Tunnel: Artificial Intelligence and Neoreaction,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/03/28/the-darkness-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel-artificial-intelligence-and-neoreaction>.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Ratcliffe, “Rebooting the Leviathan: NRx and the Millennium,” *b2o: an online journal* 4, no. 2 (April 2, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right* (Eruditorum Press, 2017): 16.

The chief sociopolitical innovation credited to Yarvin’s blogposts is what he termed “neo-cameralism.” It advocates for a world in which all existing systems of ownership and political control—including indirect influence such as the power of money in politics—are formalized into codified law, even and especially when those relationships are unequal or asymmetrical. This philosophy of strictly individualist utility-maximization in which personal value is a direct reflection of monetary worth is exemplified by Yarvin’s infamous pragmatic advice regarding government inefficiency: “find the world’s best CEO, and give him undivided control over budget, policy and personnel. I don’t think there is any debate about it. The world’s best CEO is Steve Jobs.”<sup>5</sup> Through the devolution of state power to a decentralized patchwork of monarchic fiefdoms known as “gov corps,” Yarvin sought to disentangle the varying contradictions between proto-fascism, neo-segregation, libertarianism, and technocracy. His declared enemy was termed “the Cathedral,” or the “set of institutions that produce and propagate the Synopsis—mainstream academia, journalism and education.”<sup>6</sup> Resembling other terms that were favorites among the alt-right— “cultural Marxism,” “the swamp,” “political correctness,” “the mainstream media,” or “the Deep State”—the Cathedral’s inefficient sanctification of “tolerance” and “diversity” supposedly threatened to undermine the productivity of well-meaning technocratic capitalists.

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<sup>5</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives: Chapter 6: The Lost Theory of Government,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), May 22, 2008, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2008/05/ol6-lost-theory-of-government>.

<sup>6</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives: Chapter 4: Dr. Johnson’s Hypothesis,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), May 8, 2008, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2008/05/ol4-dr-johnsons-hypothesis>.

This is where Nick Land enters the story. Twenty years prior, he was at the cutting-edge of poststructuralist thought as a philosophy professor at the University of Warwick, where he founded the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (or CCRU). The CCRU was dedicated to putting into practice the insights of late-twentieth-century philosophers and social theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Jean François Lyotard, J.G. Ballard, and others, through a series of performative interventions and mind-boggling experiments. They sought to synthesize these theoretical works with the popular culture of their day, including sci-fi, millenarianism, occult speculation, psychedelia, jungle music, raves, and much more. They believed that combining rigorous study of these phenomena with intense participation within them would hold the key to a posthuman future beyond the strictures of liberal capitalism. Thus, while the term would not exist until over a decade after their disbanding, the CCRU was arguably the first institutional foray into the theory and praxis of accelerationism. Land was at the forefront of these endeavors, not an exception to them.

One of Land's students, Nicholas Blincoe—in an article with the subtitle “My PhD supervisor turned out to be satan”—recalls a presentation by Land called “Putting the Rat back into Rationality” which posited that “rather than seeing death as an event that happened at a particular time to an individual, we should look at it from the perspectives of the rats carrying the Black Death into Europe.”<sup>7</sup> This would soon seem tame by comparison: Land spent three weeks only referring to himself in the third person as “Cur,” meant to represent Current French Philosophy; he invented “qwertology”

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Blincoe, “Nick Land: the Alt-writer,” *Prospect*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/philosophy/nick-land-the-alt-writer>.

wherein the chapter names of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* were turned into acronyms and plotted as vectors on a QWERTY keyboard; and he increasingly lived in his office furiously typing away on his ancient green-screened computer. Eventually this constant process of pushing his body to its physical and mental limits took its toll: "In any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did 'go mad.'"<sup>8</sup> And soon after, the CCRU was shuttered by Warwick, which subsequently denied that it had ever been officially sanctioned by the university in the first place, and Land traveled to the other side of the world, eventually becoming a journalist in Shanghai.

Land's reemergence into the scene of political philosophy came most forcefully with the 2012 publication of his manifesto, "The Dark Enlightenment," and this was how neoreaction in its modern form was born. "The Dark Enlightenment" explicitly engaged with Yarvin's visions of "gov corps" and "patchwork neo-cameralism," analyzing them as crucial bulwarks against a liberal democracy that had gone off the rails. Land laid the blame for modern governance's dysfunctional tendencies at the feet of social welfare and the underprivileged: "because grievance status is awarded as political compensation for economic incompetence, it constructs an automatic cultural mechanism that advocates for dysfunction."<sup>9</sup> Within Yarvin's writings, Land saw a solution to the status quo's moralism, and "The Dark Enlightenment" thus operated as a proper politico-

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<sup>8</sup> Robin Mackay, "Nick Land - An Experiment in Inhumanism," *Umělec*, February 27, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180703221508/http://divus.cc/london/en/article/nick-land-ein-experiment-im-inhumanismus>.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Land, "The Dark Enlightenment," *The Dark Enlightenment* (blog), 2012, <http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land>.

philosophical defense of racial prejudice, and more explicitly, white flight. By deriving a distinction between “voice” and “exit” from the economist Albert O. Hirschman’s *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Land argued that a “right to exit” would allow the white, upper class to escape from the “barbarism” of inner cities.<sup>10</sup> The neoreactionary vision of accelerationism, therefore, maintains that capital is an agent of social evolution and that the externalities it produces along racialized, classed, sexualized, gendered, and ableist lines are features of this system that effectively separate strong from weak and productive from unproductive. By contrast, the Cathedral is seen by Land as a decelerative “super-social trap” whose promises of progress and equity represent the “cancellation of capitalism.”<sup>11</sup> This might seem like a far-cry from the stridently anti-capitalist politics espoused by other theorists within the CCRU. One affiliate of the unit, philosopher Ray Brassier, attempts to explain this apparent discrepancy:

[Land] moves from this moment, where he’s perfectly willing to endorse or affirm radicals, where his critique of the Marxist left is that it’s not radical, revolutionary, or critical enough, and then five or six years later he seems to realize there is no bearer of revolutionary intensification left. Therefore, politics must be displaced, it must be deputed, and all you can do is endorse or affirm impersonal processes which at least harbour the promise of generating or ushering in the next phase of deterritorialization.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See, Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Declines in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> Nick Land, “Re-Accelerationism,” *Xenosystems* (blog), December 10, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200130033955/http://www.xenosystems.net/re-accelerationism>.

<sup>12</sup> Ray Brassier, “Accelerationism” (lecture, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, September 14, 2010).

This analysis reveals that the Landian project of neoreactionary acceleration is ultimately one of resignation. There is no posthumanism outside of capitalist accumulation, and all attempts to prove otherwise are doomed to failure. Such a conviction largely explains why the composition of Land's audience has so drastically changed from the post-Marxist left to the hardcore libertarian and white nationalist right.

One thing that is decidedly not different about the Nick Land of the CCRU and the Nick Land of NRx is his commitment to utilizing discursive and representational innovations found within new media technologies to shape the dissemination and reception of his work. The most reliable vehicle through which this has been accomplished is known as “hyperstition.” There are many differing definitions of the term and how it functions, but generally, hyperstition refers to “a fiction that makes itself real through time-traveling feedback loops: it operates as a future vision thrown back to engineer its own history.”<sup>13</sup> The concept makes one of its earliest appearances in the CCRU text “Lemurian Time War” which clarifies that the hyperstitional model “is not opposed to the real. Rather, reality is understood to be composed of fictions—consistent semiotic terrains that condition perceptual, affective, and behavioral responses.”<sup>14</sup> As a notion that is similar but not identical to postmodern devices such as social construction, hyperstition has direct bearing on rhetoric as a discipline because it details how the organization and transmission of narrative prefigures and composes hegemonic perceptions of reality. The role of fictioning within this process is central, making the

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<sup>13</sup> Simon O’Sullivan, “Accelerationism, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science,” *Cyclops Journal: Contemporary Theory, Theory of Religion, Experimental Religion 2* (August 2017): 14.

<sup>14</sup> CCRU, *Writings 1997-2003*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2020), 35.



concept of “*mythos*” crucial in determining the salience and affective force of any given hyperstitional performance. While there has been scattered writing concerning hyperstition’s role during the tenure of the CCRU, nearly none of this work extends beyond this era to consider how hyperstition has played into the growing influence of neoreaction. Furthermore, even though the discipline of communication has been updating its methodological procedures to account for the growth of digital extremism, it has yet to come to grips with hyperstition as a key rhetorical technology of neoreactionary ideology.

Rhetoricians that wish to track the evolution of alt-right communication must determine what affective qualities lend influence to particular mythic narratives and thus construct the reactosphere through the process of circulation. One thing that is unique about neoreactionary theory is that it provides a philosophical justification for existing feelings of jaded disaffection, sardonic cruelty, and sadistic *schadenfreude* that already dominate online subcultures. Following Larne Abse Gogarty and Ana Teixeira Pinto, I consider this “aspirational nihilism”<sup>15</sup> to be the circulated substance that affectively binds different segments of the reactosphere. Gogarty describes this affective posture as a “flat cynicism that accepts and enjoys the domination of all forms of life by the commodity form.”<sup>16</sup> Neoreaction offers political and ideological rationalization for this cold cynicism

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<sup>15</sup> Larne Abse Gogarty, “Larne Abse Gogarty - Coherence and Complicity : On the Wholeness of Post-Internet Aest. - 17/03/2018,” YouTube video, 1:08:01, from the *Propositions for Non-Fascist Living #4* conference presented at BAK – basis voor actuele kunst on March 17, 2008, uploaded by BAK basis voor actuele kunst, August 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UaJyokkC6g>; Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face: The Afterlife of Fascism and the Digital Frontier,” *Third Text* 33, no. 3 (October 2019): 324.

<sup>16</sup> Gogarty, “Larne Abse Gogarty.”

through the mythos of Gnon, which Land refers to as “the ‘God of Nature or (perhaps simply) Nature.’”<sup>17</sup> Gnon operates as a quasi-religious mythos of meritocracy that declares that the “Darwinian law of the universe” is to “*optimize for intelligence*”<sup>18</sup> and thus cements all forms of oppression as both predestined and utilitarian goods. This contention that “might is right and what is must be”<sup>19</sup> elevates impersonal online cruelty and cynical detachment into a sociopolitical mandate to preserve and exacerbate structural power imbalances. Thus, common features of digital rhetoric such as heteroglossia, transgression, and parody are inflected with an implicit affective politics, allowing for the cooption of even mundane online interactions by neoreactionary animus. These characteristics of online communication therefore operate as discursive conduits through which a common posture of scorn and disdain can be discerned at the heart of neoreactionary ideology, marking this aspirational nihilism as the affective nodal point of the reactosphere.

This thesis aims to conceptualize the rhetorical milieu wherein neoreactionary discourse circulates and generates social power. It attempts to demonstrate that the narrative coherence of alt-right visions of the future is dependent upon racialized affective underpinnings that filter into and shape the cynical disaffection of digital subcultures. Rightward accelerationism innovates a mode of hyperstitional

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<sup>17</sup> Nick Land, “The Cult of Gnon,” *Xenosystems* (blog), May 30, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200203011231/http://www.xenosystems.net/the-cult-of-gnon/>.

<sup>18</sup> Park MacDougald, “Accelerationism, Left and Right,” *PMacDougald* (blog), April 14, 2016, <https://pmacdougald.wordpress.com/2016/04/14/accelerationism-left-and-right>.

<sup>19</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 320.

communication that affectively fortifies a racialized subjectivity of aspirational nihilism. This communicative mode functions by rhetorically circulating textual fragments of neoreactionary mythos within the reactosphere. The task of this thesis is to rhetorically trace the spread of these fragments across networks and unearth the affective commitments that they reproduce.

### *Literature Review*

An effective investigation of neoreactionary rhetoric requires in-depth attention to the intersections of converging disciplines. Those disciplines include digital rhetoric and meme studies, affect theory, critical analysis of accelerationism and late capitalism, critical race theory, and histories of far-right mobilization. This literature review will therefore contextualize the different scholarly insights that help situate the contributions of my thesis.

Rhetorical scholarship has only just begun to interrogate the conditions for the emergence of alt-right communication. Heather Suzanne Woods' and Leslie A. Hahner's *Make America Meme Again* provides an example of recent work that theorizes memes as "important rhetorical texts that use their flexibility and circulation to move audiences."<sup>20</sup> It is a significant text squarely in the field of rhetoric that connects to other modes of research which explain the history, messaging, and mediums of reactionary mobilization. Kate M. Miltner's qualitative analysis of communication through memes argues that they "can be used by multiple (and vastly different) groups for identity work as well as in–

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<sup>20</sup> Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019): 9.

group boundary establishment and policing.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Viveca Greene conceptualizes memes through the lens of satire by analyzing the way the left and the right each use irony in different ways when discussing “white genocide.” She argues that “regardless of their mainstream or niche status, memes circulate in discursive communities that the memes themselves play a significant part in creating and expanding, and they encourage active involvement of their (virtual) community members; memes are memes precisely because they are shared....”<sup>22</sup> Danna Young also analyzes irony, using psychological research and polling data to blur the supposed line between liberal satire and conservative outrage because they both “play similar roles in the lives of their viewers and listeners.”<sup>23</sup> With regard to a distinct but overlapping online community such as men’s rights activists, Debbie Ging’s notion of the “Manosphere” describes decentralized webs of misogynistic sentiment found across “a myriad of interconnected organizations, blogs, forums, communities, and subcultures.”<sup>24</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly also attends to the manosphere, locating it as a rhetorical domain that fosters a white hetero-masculine apocalyptic death drive that “stands at the edge of oblivion—willing to burn it all down rather than let

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<sup>21</sup> Kate M. Miltner, “‘There’s no place for lulz on LOLCats’: The role of genre, gender, and group identity in the interpretation and enjoyment of an Internet meme,” *First Monday* 19, no. 8 (August 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Viveca Green, “‘Deplorable’ Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies,” *Studies in American Humor* 5, no. 1 (2019): 42.

<sup>23</sup> Dannagal Goldthwaite Young, *Irony and Outrage: The Polarized Landscape of Rage, Fear, and Laughter in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 191.

<sup>24</sup> Debbie Ging, “Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere,” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (October 2019): 639.

others share their dwindling reserves of prosperity.”<sup>25</sup> Whitney Phillips’s *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things* includes a crucial discussion of “the lulz” as an online cynical disposition that she describes as “a nexus of social cohesion and social constraint” that often functions through “amusement at other people’s distress.”<sup>26</sup> This notion of “the lulz,” even as it evolves via internet culture, is immensely useful as a component of the “aspirational nihilism” that pervades internet communities and fuels the affective growth of alt-right ideologies.

All of the aforementioned scholars operate within communication and media studies, but digital communication is often housed in other disciplines or even outside of the academy altogether. For example, David Neiwert is a freelance journalist and his book *Alt-America* is one of the most comprehensive accounts of the recent resurgence of the far-right in the United States. In it, he demonstrates how “any corner of the Alt-American universe can suffice to attract new believers who, sometimes in short order, become wholesale subscribers to the many different facets of Alt-America.”<sup>27</sup> Alexander Reid Ross, a lecturer in geography at Portland State University, has also written about the ideologically diverse landscape of contemporary right-wing radicalization. His book, *Against the Fascist Creep*, focuses on the “messy crossovers on the margins of left and right, the ways fascism cultivates a movement, and the ways that the left unwittingly

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<sup>25</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020): 161.

<sup>26</sup> Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015): 28, 27.

<sup>27</sup> David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (London: Verso, 2018): 38.

cedes the space for fascism to creep into the mainstream and radical subcultures.”<sup>28</sup> These works and others demonstrate the varied entrances into far-right discourse and emphasize the close interrelationships among even the most ideologically dissimilar parts of the alt-right.

While these scholars demonstrate that there is a growing breadth of published research on right-wing radicalization, the literature appears to have a noticeable gap when it comes to considerations of accelerationism, and neoreaction in particular. Some exceptions to this trend do exist. For instance, Jade Parker, a former Senior Research Associate at the Terror Asymmetries Project, has written about “coalitional accelerationism” as an “ideologically agnostic doctrine of violent and non-violent actions taken to exploit contradictions intrinsic to a political system to ‘accelerate’ its destruction through the friction caused by its features.”<sup>29</sup> While Parker focuses on the role of myth as a non-ideological motivating force behind accelerationist terror, she has explicitly distinguished this variant from that of Land and neoreaction, characterizing the latter as “technoindustrial accelerationism,” which may function as a radicalization pipeline, but does not explicitly advocate for political violence. One of the only mentions of NRx within the communication discipline appears in the work of Brian Hughes of American University. He includes a description of Land’s politics amidst a broader analysis of eco-fascism, arguing that the two phenomena are distinct but may contain some converging ideologies. While Hughes’s essay largely steers clear of an in-depth analysis of

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<sup>28</sup> Alexander Reid Ross, *Against the Fascist Creep* (Chico: AK Press, 2017): 2.

<sup>29</sup> Jade Parker, “Accelerationism in America: Threat Perceptions,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, February 4, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/02/04/accelerationism-in-america-threat-perceptions>.

neoreactionary thought, he notes that within its framework “capital itself is rendered the subject of history, while humanity is reduced to an epiphenomenon.”<sup>30</sup> Thus while these scholars certainly do not ignore neoreactionaries, they do not perform a comprehensive analysis of the connection between the technoindustrial accelerationism of folks like Nick Land and the forms of accelerationist political violence embodied by white nationalist terrorism.

Discussions of accelerationism in popular media—and neoreaction, in particular—tend to take place in the form of “explainers” that have varied results in accurately capturing the philosophical origins of the ideologies in question. Many liberal news outlets occasionally publish exposés that try to package accelerationist tenets into a more digestible format for readers who are inexperienced with critical theory or the history of the far-right. In some cases, this has produced solid investigative reporting. For instance, Rosie Gray of *The Atlantic* uncovered some of the key secondary influencers within the reactosphere such as @kantbot2000 and @BronzeAgePerv, while still tracking connections between NRx and Steve Bannon of the Trump administration, noting ideological distinctions within the movement, and acknowledging when particular responses to her questions might be partially trolling.<sup>31</sup> But other writeups have not been as nuanced or thorough. In the rush to produce sensational headlines that spotlight the most bombastic strands of alt-right thinking, reporters have cut corners in irresponsible

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<sup>30</sup> Brian Hughes, “‘Pine Tree’ Twitter and the Shifting Ideological Foundations of Eco-Extremism.” *Interventionen: Zeitschrift für Verantwortungspädagogik* 14 (December 2019): 24.

<sup>31</sup> Rosie Gray, “Behind the Internet’s Anti-Democracy Movement,” *The Atlantic*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/behind-the-internets-dark-anti-democracy-movement/516243>.

ways. Often, because of a belief that their paper's readership is uninformed about or uninterested in the nuances of theory, some authors have omitted or drastically simplified postmodern or poststructuralist philosophy. An even more dangerous and pervasive error present within this reporting consists of taking members of the alt-right at their word regarding their motivations and philosophical foundations, thereby allowing the general public to be misled about such groups' ideologies and makeup. Both of these mistakes can be discerned in Andy Beckett's explainer piece for *The Guardian* which declares that "Karl Marx was the first accelerationist" and that Deleuze and Guattari wanted the left to acknowledge capitalism's "ability to liberate."<sup>32</sup> These claims, while not indefensible, are presented as uncontested facts, bypassing years of intense debate on how such theorists are situated within the development of accelerationism.

Arguably the worst offenders of the simplified "explainers" written on accelerationism have been produced by online news platform, *Vox*. While one of their first pieces by Dylan Matthews did include more philosophical groundwork than is typical, *Vox*'s format emphasizes clickbait headlines and left-liberal conclusions, resulting in a crude lumping-together of neoreaction, paleoconservatism, and Gamergate all under the broad header of a singular "alt-right" movement.<sup>33</sup> But negative reactions to this piece paled in comparison to one written three years later by *Vox*'s Zack

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<sup>32</sup> Andy Beckett, "Accelerationism: how a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>.

<sup>33</sup> Dylan Matthews, "The alt-right is more than warmed-over white supremacy. It's that, but way way weirder," *Vox*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/4/18/11434098/alt-right-explained>.



Beauchamp. Entitled “Accelerationism: the obscure idea inspiring white supremacist killers around the world,” Beauchamp relied on a rudimentary conflation of what he termed “neo-Nazi accelerationism” and the writings of Land and Yarvin. Rather than detailing the complicated philosophical underpinnings of both camps, he implied a direct pipeline from one to the other, including in the article’s subtitle: “How a techno-capitalist philosophy morphed into a justification for murder.” The result was a confusing analysis that rendered Atomwaffen’s eliminationist mass murders, the CCRU’s experimental performances, NRx’s technoindustrialism, and Richard Spencer’s white nationalist electoral strategy as virtually indistinguishable.<sup>34</sup> This prompted backlash from both critical theorists and digital extremism experts. Jade Parker claimed that she’d spoken with Beauchamp for over an hour on the subject, carefully distinguishing NRx from coalitional accelerationism, but that “the article published had 0% in common w/ what I told him.”<sup>35</sup> Samuel Forsythe, a doctoral researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt argued “there’s an order of magnitude more written on Acc as field of postcapitalist theory than there are skullmasks using it because they like the thought of making apocalypticism sound a lil bit more zoomy” and jokingly suggested “perhaps

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<sup>34</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “Accelerationism: the obscure idea inspiring white supremacist killers around the world,” *Vox*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/11/11/20882005/accelerationism-white-supremacy-christchurch>.

<sup>35</sup> Jade Parker (@CybereVitas), “I spoke to the author for 1.5hr on background for that. The article published had 0% in common w/ what I told him. To your Q, & what I told Zach, is Land’s work blackpills NRx accelerationists-to-be & Kaczynski’s books posit violent destruction as white pill to overcome despair,” Twitter, September 5, 2020, 1:54 p.m., <https://twitter.com/CybereVitas/status/1302319184152539139>.

proceed to google results page 2 next time?”<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Bratton, Director of the Center for Design and Geopolitics at UC San Diego, quipped “Breaking: School shooters are hasten technocapital singularity becoz Lyotard.”<sup>37</sup> These reactions demonstrate an extraordinarily large gap between understandings of accelerationism offered by experts and the “explainer” model of news reporting on the subject. This not only necessitates a skeptical lens when approaching coverage done by these outlets, but it also compels a broader rhetorical investigation into the “explainer” as a genre of text that cements particular (mis)understandings.

Correcting these potential misunderstandings requires this thesis to embed itself in ongoing conversations within critical theory regarding late-stage capitalism and accelerationism and to define key terms so as to distinguish what rhetorical valences neoreactionary discourses display. The term “accelerationism” was initially a pejorative coined in 2010 by critical theory professor Benjamin Noys to criticize Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, theorists who—in Noys’s view—concluded that “if capitalism generates its own forces of dissolution then the necessity is to radicalise capitalism itself: the worse the better.”<sup>38</sup> In spite of this critique, Mark Fisher—a former

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<sup>36</sup> Samuel Forsythe (@poly\_metis), “Absolute galaxy brain take. Perhaps proceed to google results page 2 next time? There's an order of magnitude more written on Acc as field of postcapitalist theory than there are skullmasks using it because they like the thought of making apocalypticism sound a lil bit more zoomy,” Twitter, November 18, 2019, 12:50 p.m., [https://twitter.com/poly\\_metis/status/1196500838887428096](https://twitter.com/poly_metis/status/1196500838887428096).

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Bratton (@bratton), “Breaking: School shooters are hasten technocapital singularity becoz Lyotard,” Twitter, November 18, 2019, 10:29 p.m., <https://twitter.com/bratton/status/1196646593123893248>.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 5.

member of the CCRU and teacher in Goldsmith's Department of Visual Cultures—chose to reclaim the concept of “accelerationism” as “a strategy that must be part of any political program that calls itself Marxist.”<sup>39</sup> In doing so, Fisher clarified how the left could embrace such a project in order to imagine positive futures:

Capitalism is a necessarily failed escape from feudalism, which, instead of destroying encastement, reconstitutes social stratification in the class structure. It is only given this model that Deleuze and Guattari's call to ‘accelerate the process’ makes sense. It does not mean accelerating any or everything in capitalism willy-nilly, in the hope that capitalism will thereby collapse. Rather, it means accelerating the processes of destratification that capitalism cannot but obstruct.<sup>40</sup>

Fisher's conceptualization of a leftism more technologically and socially advanced than capital went hand-in-hand with the work of other critical theorists. The #ACCELERATE manifesto by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek marked the concretization of a left accelerationism (l/acc) with explicit political goals. It argued that “Landian neoliberalism confuses speed with acceleration,” ignoring forces of monopolization and social stratification, and they instead proposed taking advantage of technological innovations wrought by modernity such that the left could “develop sociotechnical hegemony: both in the sphere of ideas, and in the sphere of material platforms.”<sup>41</sup> By replacing the moralistic

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Fisher, “Terminator vs. Avatar by Mark Fisher (2012),” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 345.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Fisher, “Post-Capitalist Desire,” in *What Are We Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto*, ed. Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 136-7.

<sup>41</sup> Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, “ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics,” *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), May 14, 2013, <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics>.

attempt to separate technological evolution from political struggle, Williams and Srnicek insisted on a left accelerationist alternative that sought to harmonize tech- and labor-driven utopianism.

The release of works like these set-off a firestorm of debate, involving professors, graduate students, artists, and computer scientists representing every possible political predisposition. Many arguments took place on blogs and could be tracked with “pingbacks,” creating a flurry of unique flavors of accelerationism, several of which would later appear in book form in the *#Accelerate* reader. At issue was what was being accelerated and how that might be deemed emancipatory. Peter Wolfendale, an independent philosopher who organized several conferences in the early stages of l/acc, contested the common reading that what was being accelerated were capitalism’s contradictions, writing that “this is not a position that *anyone has ever held*,” not Deleuze and Guattari, Land, Srnicek and Williams, nor Marx.<sup>42</sup> A prolific online writer going by the name of Jehu disagreed with this firmly, claiming that “if there are no fatal contradictions inherent in capital, there is no Accelerationism.”<sup>43</sup> Land, himself, responded to the work of Srnicek and Williams, arguing that due to l/acc’s ejection of the Marxist labor theory of value, “the proletariat is stripped of the potential to incarnate

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Wolfendale, “OftA: So Accelerationism, what’s all that about?,” *Deontologistics* (blog), July 2014, <https://deontologistics.wordpress.com/2018/02/18/ofta-so-accelerationism-whats-all-that-about>.

<sup>43</sup> Jehu, “By way of reply to the author of the essay ‘So Accelerationism, what’s all that about?’,” *The Real Movement* (blog), August 19, 2014, <https://therealmovement.wordpress.com/2014/08/19/by-way-of-reply-to-the-author-of-the-essay-so-accelerationism-whats-all-that-about>.

history for-itself, consigning ‘Marxism’ over to an articulation of marginal grievances, and ultimately to the heat death of identity politics.”<sup>44</sup>

Critiques like these eventually prompted Srnicek and Williams to stray-away from accelerationist philosophy in their book *Inventing the Future*, articulating instead a more mundane leftist vision premised on four demands to create a post-work future:

1. Full automation
2. The reduction of the working week
3. The provision of a basic income
4. The diminishment of the work ethic<sup>45</sup>

For others within the self-described “/acc” blogosphere, this pragmatism represented a retreat from philosophies that endeavor to apprehend the force that propelled humanity out of feudalism, yet remains constrained by capitalism. This led to the introduction of unconditional acceleration (u/acc) as an ideologically diverse set of attempts to tap into an accelerationist desire. U/acc does not necessarily imply a refusal to take responsibility for accelerationism’s political effects nor a nihilistic political agnosticism—many unconditional accelerationists are communists who also happen to be “fundamentally anti-statist”—but it does place special significance on the concept of “deterritorialization,” “understood as the process of dismantling, attacking and exiting the overarching influence and rule of imposed social structures.”<sup>46</sup> One of the earliest essays that influenced u/acc was written by Simon O’Sullivan, a reader in contemporary art

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<sup>44</sup> Nick Land, “On #Accelerate (#1),” *Urban Future* (blog), March 5, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190223175504/ufblog.net/on-accelerate-1>.

<sup>45</sup> Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016): 127.

<sup>46</sup> Matt Colquhoun, “A U/Acc Primer,” *Xenogothic* (blog), March 4, 2019, <https://xenogothic.com/2019/03/04/a-u-acc-primer>.

theory and practice at Goldsmith's. He argued that "it will not be enough to take on — or commit to — a new set of ideas, or put our faith solely in technological progress — subjectivity has to be produced differently at this level," which means that "without an account of (and experimentation with) the affective production of subjectivity, any diagnosis of the problems produced in and by capitalism, or strategy to deal with them, remains *too* abstract (or, remains abstract in only a partial way)."<sup>47</sup> The reason O'Sullivan argues that such politics are too abstract is because they lack an analysis of the affective motivators that compel subjects to embrace capital in the first place, and thus, are unable to explain why an alternative would be desirable. The insights of this article are crucial to this thesis because it centers the role of affect as a force that constructs subjects through participatory experimentation. This has immediate relevance in terms of how neoreactionary subjects are constituted through their circulation of right accelerationist communicative fragments. It also aids leftist critics of NRx by reminding them that any meaningful response must come to terms with its own affective politics.

Affect theory is a necessary theoretical framework to understand the rhetoric and *mythos* of neoreaction. One of the most succinct definitions of affect is found in Brian Massumi's translation notes for Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. Drawing on Spinoza, he refers to it as "an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another

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<sup>47</sup> Simon O'Sullivan, "The Missing Subject of Accelerationism," *Mute*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/missing-subject-accelerationism>.

and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act."<sup>48</sup> In *Parables for the Virtual*, Massumi characterizes the realm of affect and the virtual as "a realm of potential."<sup>49</sup> While this line of thinking maintains a distinction between affect and emotion, wherein the latter represents the capture of the former within rationalized language, Sarah Ahmed presses against this distinction. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she argues that "emotions involve such affective forms of reorientation,"<sup>50</sup> negating the attempted split articulated by other theorists. Within the domain of communication theory, Zizi Papacharissi has theorized how "affective publics materialize and disband around connective conduits of sentiment every day and find their voice through the soft structures of feeling sustained by societies."<sup>51</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, affect functions as a circulated intensity that transmits feeling and imagined futures across social domains, including digital subcultures. It has the function of promoting social cohesion amongst neoreactionary communities, and thus establishing the informal bounds of the reactosphere.

Because of the inherently antiblack underpinnings of neoreactionary discourse, Ahmed's reading of Frantz Fanon is a useful reference point. Here, she examines Fanon's

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<sup>48</sup> Brian Massumi, "Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgements," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): xvi.

<sup>49</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002): 30.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014): 8.

<sup>51</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 133.

infamous scene in which he is caught within the petrifying gaze of a white child, and she claims that “in this encounter, fear does become contained in an object: the black body. And yet the containment of fear in an object remains provisional: insofar as the black man is the object of fear, then he may pass by.”<sup>52</sup> However, despite importantly centering this moment as an example of how fear is transmitted through affect, Ahmed misdiagnoses the operation of that fear by presupposing that antiblackness accrues due to the particular transgression or contingent movement of Black people within time or space. Tyrone Palmer provides a necessary corrective to Ahmed’s view of racialized affect: “the fungibility of blackness positions the Black as the embodied object of fear within the onto-epistemological order of Western Man. In other words, fear does not merely ‘stick’ to the Black body; rather, the Black body signifies fear at the level of ontology.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, affective analysis must understand that antiblackness is a structural template for fear-based politics, rather than a particular instantiation of how anxiety can be externalized.

Attending to antiblackness as distinct from yet foundational to other modes of racialization is essential to investigating the underlying affective motivations behind neoreaction. If antiblackness is inimical not only to white nationalist ideology but to the broader *socius*, then neoreactionary rhetorical circulation is undergirded by a unique relationship to epidermal schematics that directly inform how racialized anxieties coalesce into an affective public. Reckoning with this requires a broader critique of the

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<sup>52</sup> Ahmed, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Tyrone Palmer, “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 37.



way affect forms subjectivity within the modern world. Palmer’s work does not just indict Ahmed but operates as a foundational criticism of the “affective turn,” *tout court*. He argues that it assumes that subjectivity is generalizable to all racialized populations—even if authors within it may acknowledge differential access to the affective capacities of the subject, they still maintain capacity, itself, as a universal phenomenon. By contrast, “the Black, instead, stands as a *fungible object* upon, around and through which affect accumulates, yet whose own affective power is of no consequence.”<sup>54</sup> Patrice Douglass concurs with this sentiment, arguing that “affect is biomediated by a structure of feeling–action–being that is predicated on Black (non)existence.”<sup>55</sup> This understanding of Black being as subject to but not a subject of affective relationality is also present within the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, who develops the notion of “affectability” to denote “the condition of being subjected to both natural (in the scientific and lay sense) conditions and to others’ powers.”<sup>56</sup> These insights require rhetorical scholars to launch an attack on the very predicates of affect and communication as productive of human subjects. Doing so both contextualizes NRx’s investment in antiblack racialized anxiety and identifies how such anxieties are also present in the way even traditionally leftist modes of thought produce affective publics.

For this reason, a rhetorical critique of right accelerationism needs to account for the residue of affective humanism that is complicit in the reproduction of antiblack

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Patrice Douglass, “On (Being) Fear: Utah v. Strieff and the Ontology of Affect,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 17, no. 3 (December 2018): 339.

<sup>56</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007): xv.

modes of communication and relation. Attention to the work of Aria Dean’s “blacceleration” helps to provide a such a corrective to both left and right accelerationist accounts. She argues that “the trajectory followed by black people in the New World blurs the line set out by accelerationists between capital and its will and the human agents who are caught in its midst.”<sup>57</sup> This means that a theoretical posture that accounts for the ways that Black culture distends and negates the concept of the “human” will be far more effective in developing a critique of right accelerationism than any race-neutral reading of communism or technological automation found within traditional leftism. A similar line of thought is laid out by Kodwo Eshun—another member of the CCRU and one of the founding theorists of Afrofuturism—when he noted that “most African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human.”<sup>58</sup> These observations are essential in crafting a response to neoreactionary acceleration that does not lapse into oft-ignored modes of leftist antiblackness, which assume that affect or humanism are ubiquitously accessible. Many theorists within Black studies are unsympathetic to politics which imagine integration into humanism as the primary goal of liberatory thought. By beginning with a perspective that scrutinizes the usefulness of the affective turn, this thesis aims to develop a critique of NRx that also deconstructs the broader social order that makes the reactosphere possible in the first place.

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<sup>57</sup> Aria Dean, “Notes on Blacceleration,” *e-flux* no. 87 (December 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun* (London: Quartet Books, 1999): 193.

## *Methodology*

Neoreaction operates within an ever-evolving and self-constituting racialized mythos that is affectively transmitted and rhetorically amplified through its own circulation. Conceptual signifiers like the “right to exit,” “human biodiversity,” “neocameralism,” or “hyperracism” each denote imagined futures wherein reactionary value systems supplant liberalism’s supposed ethical prioritization of equality, diversity, or tolerance. But beyond spelling-out an explicit sociopolitical vision, such terms are carriers of an affective charge that reflects the antiblack and colonial anxieties that motivate NRx’s ideology, no matter what shape its desired future takes. This mythos conjures a renewed investment in a project of racial ordering that lies at the root of modernity, but which has long since been disavowed. The return of this repressed historical foundation takes the form of an immanent critique of contemporary social norms that conceals conservative nostalgia underneath presentist aesthetics. The reactosphere is therefore composed through the participatory augmentation of supposedly bygone social narratives that rely on racialization. These ideological touchstones are converted into seemingly “new” philosophies and techno-social solutions. Manifestos, reactionary provocations, and supposed intellectual transgressions become fragmented and circulated, often in the form of transmissible and remixable memes. A community of relatively likeminded neoreactionaries begins to compose themselves immanently through this participatory process of “meme magic.”<sup>59</sup> A reactosphere becomes self-

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<sup>59</sup> “Meme magic” is common terminology in far-right online communication that “identifies when desired outcomes are ostensibly brought into being by the calculated proliferation of internet memes and the apparent sorcery of particular images, rituals, and signs.” Woods and Hahner, 106.

constituting through the rhetorical circulation of such a racialized mythos. Such a community—founded on shared referentiality and an affect of aspirational nihilism—is therefore hyperstitional insofar as it is actualized through a feedback-loop where the narratives it relays about its own ideological homogeneity cement in- and out-ground dynamics, delineating the borders of reactionary culture.

The complex pattern of emergence charted here requires rhetorical theory to adopt several updated methodological frames if it is to be suited to the growth of digital extremism. A framework of rhetorical circulation must take precedence over one of bounded rhetorical situations if communication researchers are to understand where neoreaction comes from, how it operates as a gateway drug to other fringe forms of political philosophy, and how its intellectual development relates to the phenomenon of accelerationism and hyperstition. Catherine Chaput defines rhetorical circulation as “a fluidity of everyday practices, affects, and uncertainties”<sup>60</sup> which cohere broader ideological formations and group dynamics. This is an appropriate framework to evaluate neoreaction, because traditional situation-bounded rhetorical analysis “enables many elements of late capitalism to go uninterrogated because they do not exist in a location but in the connective tissues of affectivity passing through locations.”<sup>61</sup> High-speed digital communication generates cultural effects in which a given user’s identity, intentions, and ideology are in flux and persuasive power occurs through an

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<sup>60</sup> Catherine Chaput, “Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

overwhelming proliferation of message fragments. Jodi Dean refers to this as communicative capitalism:

Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communication technologies. Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence . . . the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples.<sup>62</sup>

Such a context destabilizes the contours of “audience” and “speaker” and greatly expands the catalogue of materials worthy to be analyzed as rhetorical “texts.” This makes relevant Michael Calvin McGee’s contention that “‘texts’ have disappeared altogether, leaving us with nothing but *discursive fragments of context*.”<sup>63</sup> But it is also important to recognize Darrel Wanzer-Serrano’s decolonial corrective to McGee’s work, which maintains that fragmentation is not a new phenomenon but “a case of first-world people finally having to deal with the conditions they created and that enabled their assertion of superiority.”<sup>64</sup> Such a corrective still allows rhetoricians to track the flow of fragments in the process of communication but refuses to belief in a foundational “break” before which texts were viewed with homogeneity.

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<sup>62</sup> Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 1 (2005): 55.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, “Text, context, and the fragmentation of contemporary culture,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (Summer 1990): 287.

<sup>64</sup> Darrel Wanzer-Serrano (as Darrel Wanzer), “Delinking Rhetoric, or Revisiting McGee’s Fragmentation Thesis through Decoloniality,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 651.

The rhetorical fragments exchanged within neoreactionary digital networks contain traces of a racialized affective energy that is expressed through the online structures of feeling that may inspire cynicism and cruelty. Chaput writes that “rhetorical circulation implies that some element moves throughout material and discursive spaces to connect the differently situated moments comprising its organic whole.”<sup>65</sup> This circulated intensity, for right accelerationist subcultures, is the aspirational nihilism that thinkers like Land attempt to politicize through the notion of “Gnon.” Therefore, once put in contact with neoreactionary communities, the post-ironic disposition of disaffected internet users turns into a political affect that expresses unbridled devotion to capitalist flows. If capitalism is always racial capitalism—as Cedric Robinson instructs when he suggests that racialized ordering “permeates the social structures emergent from capitalism”<sup>66</sup>—then these affective linkages among proto-alt-right networks can easily give way to racialized tropes. Land acknowledges this process as crucial to neoreaction’s growing influence. He notes a “distinction between ‘Inner-‘ and ‘Outer-Nrx’” such that Inner-NRx consists of those that directly identify with the philosophy of right accelerationism, while “Outer-NRx tends to like libertarians, at least those of a hard-right persuasion.”<sup>67</sup> El Sandifer argues that Land considers garden-variety white supremacists below his intellectual ability, so this distinction between Inner- and Outer-NRx merely

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<sup>65</sup> Chaput, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000): 2.

<sup>67</sup> Nick Land, “Outsideness,” *Xenosystems* (blog), August 1, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200619020345/http://www.xenosystems.net/outsideness-2>.

allows him to view “the bulk of neoreactionaries as a sort of Petri dish in which he can observe the spasming collapse of the technosingularity.”<sup>68</sup> Essentially, Inner-NRx has disseminated a racialized affect that causes a broader and more ideologically heterogenous Outer-NRx to orbit around the philosophical core of right accelerationism, without strictly adhering to its tenets.

The concept of mythos is central to neoreaction’s successful construction of an affective ecosystem within digital realms. Mythos, or what rhetorical critics understand as the process of cultural narration, helps demonstrate the hyperstitional nature of neoreactionary communication.<sup>69</sup> Just as O’Sullivan suggested that left accelerationists had sacrificed a focus on affect, he argues that the “occlusion of mythos is determinant of recent accelerationism (at least on the Left).”<sup>70</sup> One reason why this might be the case is that “myth is often at the service of a reactionary Right rather than a progressive Left” and is thus “precisely *anti*-accelerationist.”<sup>71</sup> However, this has allowed r/acc to monopolize affective energy through understanding acceleration only through regressive examples such as “the Cthulu mythos.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, while hyperstition considers the affective notion of “outsideness” crucial to the construction of new futures, since the days

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<sup>68</sup> Sandifer, 56.

<sup>69</sup> The importance of mythos to the operation of hyperstition will be a central component of the first chapter of this thesis.

<sup>70</sup> O’Sullivan, “Accelerationism, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science,” 18.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

of the CCRU, there has been an obsession the work of H.P. Lovecraft, which has equated this outside with “a call to the Old Ones.”<sup>73</sup>

Because hyperstition as a rhetorical technology and accelerationism as a political philosophy both center on a mythos of “outsideness,” rooting NRx’s fascination with the Outside in a uniquely Lovecraftian literary tradition identifies racialized affect as the primary circulated intensity of the reactosphere. What this accomplishes for this thesis’s methodology is tracing the substantive core and affective nexus of neoreactionary discourse back to its antiblack origin. While many have attempted to bracket Lovecraft’s infamous racism from the philosophy of horror that accelerationists draw on to imagine “outsideness,” I argue that Lovecraft’s racism is foundationally connected to his descriptions of gothic horror. If his “faith in the white supremacy of his day prevented him from confronting the actual objects of his fears as not the unknown but the racialized bodies he encountered every day,”<sup>74</sup> then this implies that antiblackness functions as a consistent undercurrent within existentialist philosophy, the gothic genre, and accelerationist hyperstition. Horror and fear are essential affective components of the “outside” that right accelerationists draw on to produce a signature mythos. However, they frequently detach this mythos from its racialized origin, instead cloaking their philosophy with references to speculative or existential horror. But, as Palmer’s analysis demonstrates, it is impossible to imagine fear in the modern world apart from antiblackness as a template for the horror that grips the subject. Rather, as Fanon writes,

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<sup>73</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 363.

<sup>74</sup> Quinn Lester, “St. Cthulu in the Anthropocene,” *The New Inquiry*, April 13, 2015, <https://thenewinquiry.com/st-cthulu-in-the-anthropocene>.



Blackness is “a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety,”<sup>75</sup> meaning that antiblackness functions as the metric through which other forms of fear are judged. As Quinn Lester writes, “the colonized becomes a metaphor for malevolent and evil powers, constructed as the very horror that so threatens Lovecraft and his contemporary heirs.”<sup>76</sup> This rereading of horror and racialization proves that the right accelerationist obsession with the “Outside” as symbolizing existential dread and the unknown conceals an antiblack affect premised on the terror that neoreactionary thinkers express in the face of Black existence. Such racialized animus extends from alt-right anxiety over “white genocide” and “great replacement” to Land’s fear of American inner-cities and development of the “right to exit” as a justification for white flight. At the core of each of these preoccupations is an intensified antiblack affect, which functions as the primary element circulated within the reactosphere.

Neoreaction implants the circulated substance of racialized affect into an existing online environment characterized by disaffection and distanced cynicism, by presenting its antiblackness as if it were something novel or contemporary. Right accelerationism thus expands its own realm of circulation—the reactosphere—through the hyperstitional imagination of future visions such as neo-cameralism or patchwork. This process simultaneously makes such futures more possible because each of them relies on establishing communities that share such racialized affects, turning such imaginations

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<sup>75</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008): 117.

<sup>76</sup> Quinn Lester, “The World-Against-Us: Horror Between Politics and Ontology” (conference paper, “Unbearable - Creatures,” 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, February 6, 2015).

into self-fulfilling prophecies. But at the core of this feedback loop is an endeavor to cloak its conservatism with contemporary aesthetics. Corey Robin argues that this mythical return is a “reconfiguration of the old and absorption of the new...to make privilege popular, to transform a tottering old regime into a dynamic, ideologically coherent movement of the masses.”<sup>77</sup> Here, we can see that neoreaction models this two-part structure by offering a conservative critique of the present while also adopting the presentist aesthetics of critical theory and technological futurism. Neoreaction thus relies on conditions of seekership that draws new recruits into a rabbit hole of shared references and escalating ideological fervor.

One way that such escalation occurs is through the creation and dissemination of specialized memes within the reactosphere. Citing visual cultural theorist Florian Cramer, Pinto argues that the alt-right could be described as “a tangle of semi-compatible ideological formations clustered around a meme-producing machine, arguably its real center of power.”<sup>78</sup> Yarvin, himself, has written about the process of designing a “*generic parasitic memplex*”<sup>79</sup> able to disseminate his neo-cameralist truth. Robert Topinka maintains that the process of repurposing and remixing inherent to the production and dissemination of memes makes them a unique lens through which Jodi Dean’s notion of communicative capitalism can be viewed as they are where “the symbolic submits to

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<sup>77</sup> Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 43.

<sup>78</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 324.

<sup>79</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “How Dawkins Got Pwned: Chapter 1: A Really Ugly Bug,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), September 26, 2007, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2007/09/how-dawkins-got-pwned-part-1>.

circulation.”<sup>80</sup> He argues that “as an allegorical form of communicative capitalism and the aesthetics of the ‘stream,’ the meme operates by signaling links—including to racist subcultural formations—rather than by encoding symbolic representation.”<sup>81</sup> This analysis matches the conclusion that NRx’s predominant object of circulation is a racialized mythos that is irreducible to any particular textual source or specific imagined future. “Memes function through deixis: they signal location in a culture, relying on in-group agreement for understanding.”<sup>82</sup> If neoreactionary communication is primarily deixical, then it mainstreams its affective core by signaling in-group and out-group dynamics through networks of inside jokes and symbolic referents.

The reactosphere relies on several other rhetorical elements to effectuate its spread, many of which play off of the inherent ambiguity of online domains as a vexed space for sincere communication. For Pinto, “irony implies heteroglossia. From this perspective, coarse racism and boorish trolling are read as anti-normative or anti-conformist; as having an edgy or defiant sheen, oppositional to mainstream taste; or as a form of culture jamming endowed with subversive potential.”<sup>83</sup> This allows traffickers in alt-right discourse to maintain a “fascist-curious schtick” that “flirt[s] with far-right tropes and racist idioms ironically, in order to maintain plausible deniability or be able to

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Topinka, “‘Back to a Past that Was Futuristic’: The Alt-Right and the Uncanny Form of Racism,” *b2o: an online journal* 4, no. 2 (October 14, 2019).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 326.

‘dodge responsibility.’”<sup>84</sup> This form of rhetoric—because it relies on affective circulation more than it represents exact philosophical tenets—“does not imply a coherent political design, but rather a pre-subjective investment.”<sup>85</sup> A key example of this mode of discourse is “shitposting,” referring to “implausible narratives” that are “embraced faux-sincerely” and whose “rhetorical function is not to express conviction but rather to signal ubiquitous cynicism and generalised distrust.”<sup>86</sup> As an evolution of “the lulz,” shitposting functions as “a strategy that replicates derivative images or floods a public forum to distract or annoy.”<sup>87</sup> Ideologically indeterminant internet users thus might be attracted to alt-right memes or fragments of neoreactionary texts because they are seen as embodying an edgy, presentist aesthetic. This calls attention to “transgression” as an affective currency through which fringe digital subcultures pull-in new members. Pinto notes that this phenomenon is uniquely likely to draw-in those that have grown-up in the context of post-ironic technological “disruptor” culture: “transgression is a genre, which produces mostly cynical attempts to render aesthetic experience a direct extension of moral outrage. More importantly, transgression has an economic dimension correlated to the doctrine of creative destruction or what in Silicon Valley vernacular is called disruption – a pivotal theme in the nexus between counterculture and tech or computer culture.”<sup>88</sup>

While “owning the libs” or “watching the world burn” might resemble *schadenfreude* at

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>87</sup> Woods and Hahner, 104.

<sup>88</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 326.

an interpersonal level, when scaled to a societal-wide perspective, it resembles the structure of disaster capitalism. Neoreaction is centrally involved in this process of scaling-up seemingly transgressive cynical affects into a more politicized aspirational nihilism.

The cooption of transgression and disaffection enlarges Outer-NRx's base of support and furthers its movement into mainstream culture. For this reason, "the alt-right's transgressive ethos and anti-establishment sentiment allowed it easy passage into social spheres not traditionally aligned with, or sympathetic to, the far-right."<sup>89</sup> This process broadly fits under the category of what Sandifer calls "textual hacking" which she defines as a "conceptual infiltration of someone's thought in which their own methods and systems are used against them" which "require[s] the creation of a rhetorical construct to engage in dialogue with the target."<sup>90</sup> By cloaking discourses in the garb of supposedly subversive aesthetics, neoreactionaries thus insinuate their way into new digital locales, expanding their capacity to "redpill" new potential recruits. The notion of the "red pill" is a specific form of textual hacking—derived from the *Matrix* trilogy—which "refers to waking up from the alleged false consciousness of liberal thinking (represented by 'the bluepills')."<sup>91</sup> Rebecca Lewis's report for *Data & Society* performed an in-depth content analysis on eighty-one YouTube channels and named redpilling as a "stepwise process" in which white nationalists encourage a slow descent into increasingly

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>90</sup> Sandifer, 87, 86.

<sup>91</sup> V. Greene, 65.

violent patterns of thinking.<sup>92</sup> As an initially hesitant or uninvested participant within alt-right meme culture becomes redpilled, they are caught in the gravitational pull of increasingly more virulent forms of white supremacy.

Another vector through which NRx expands the reach of its messaging is by manipulating its own coverage within liberal media channels. Because the alt-right ecosystem is vast and twisted, few reporters are capable of providing an accurate snapshot of it without missing important details. Leslie Hahner has described this as a condition inherent to textual circulation: “because the symbol is always catachrestic—always a naming and a misnaming, a presence and an absence—if scholars argue that content only moves one direction, they are missing a large part of the circulation process.”<sup>93</sup> Because scholars and journalists are likely to fall prey to this characteristic of catachresis, neoreactionaries make use of these misperceptions to seed incorrect information about themselves. One way this occurs is through “parodic fealty” or “taking premises further than their creators do, generally so as to demonstrate why they stopped where they did.”<sup>94</sup> Sandifer argues that this is a key strategy employed in order to redpill traditional libertarians and gives the example of the alt-right’s “formulation of the word ‘cuckservative’ to describe supposedly conservative politicians who were weak on

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<sup>92</sup> Rebecca Lewis, “Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube,” *Data & Society*, September 18, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/alternative-influence>, 35.

<sup>93</sup> Leslie A. Hahner, “Rhetorical Circulation and the Vicissitudes of Citizenship” (keynote address, Camp Rhetoric 2020: Rhetorics of Citizenship, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, February 28, 2020).

<sup>94</sup> Sandifer, 35.

immigration and thus allowing the nation's gene pool to be cuckolded.”<sup>95</sup> The tactic challenges libertarian conservatives on their belief that restrictions on immigration should be anything less than a sweeping ban on the process altogether. Neoreactionaries also take advantage of the alt-right “explainer” genre by insinuating that its racism must conceal more philosophical depth beneath its memes, aesthetics, and politics, rather than understanding that all of these latter components are distractions from that very racism. Referencing several explainers including Matthews’, Topinka explains why they fall into alt-right traps by

...[approaching] the meme with a surface-depth aesthetic model, asking what the meme *symbolizes*, and this representational reading misrecognizes the meme form. As a result, the explainers fail to reckon with the uncanny familiarity of these ostensibly obscure aesthetic forms. As is often the case in critical theory, the explainer positions the audience as the innocent questioner ... These headlines suggest that the alt-right’s racist ideology is obscure (even though it has always been a feature of American politics) and that its aesthetic practices are inscrutable (even though the meme is a primary aesthetic form of participatory media). Thus the *Weekly Standard* blames the alt-right on the “left’s moralism” and the *New York Times* diagnoses the undue expansion of the meaning of “racist” as the cause of the alt-right’s reactionary politics. By failing to reckon with aesthetics of the meme form, these “explainers” unwittingly redeem “meme magic” and its racist politics as something obscure and inscrutable rather than familiar and intractable.<sup>96</sup>

In this process, alt-right members, including neoreactionaries, get to claim two victories at once. Their own movement starts to seem closer to mainstream culture, and further critical investigation into their internal dynamics by the academy or the media appears unfair and subject to some kind of liberal bias. The root of both of these scenarios is

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-115.

<sup>96</sup> Topinka.

found within the left's unwillingness to recognize the reappearance of supposedly bygone forms of racialized structuring and antiblackness that persist among the extremist right and the ostensibly well-meaning left. In the liberal media's attempt to cast neoreaction as a curious aberration, they thus assure its continued diffusion into mainstream discourse.

### *Thesis Framework*

Understanding neoreactionary rhetoric through the frameworks of circulation and hyperstition unmask right accelerationism's attempt to portray itself through contemporary subversive aesthetics. Rhetorical analysis will demonstrate that the foundation of neoreaction's self-constituting communal structure is a racialized affect based in a mythos of antiblackness. The goal of this thesis is to deconstruct the reactosphere's rhetorical efforts to dissimulate its own racialized foundation by tracing how neoreactionary discourses employ memes and other rhetorical tactics to disseminate an affect of aspirational nihilism.

The second chapter of the thesis, therefore, will expand on these methodological tools by digging into further definitions of hyperstition developed during the CCRU's heyday and afterwards. By considering contemporary critiques of new media studies and circulation, this analysis aims to demonstrate how structures of affective cynicism can be coopted in service of neoreactionary aspirational nihilism. This analysis will be paired with a deeper look into the foundationally racialized origins of gothic horror and the notions of Outsideness that right accelerationists use to theorize hyperstitional futures.

In the third chapter, the implications of aspirational nihilism as an affect that compels a view of capitalism as a socioeconomic filter will be demonstrated by a brief



look at the circulation of “Roko’s Basilisk,” a meme often found in the reactosphere that reimagines Pascal’s wager in an age of artificial intelligence. This will function as a small case study of the way hyperstitional futures create rhetorical feedback loops that implicates neoreactionary rhetoric in the present. It will help to demonstrate O’Sullivan’s point that the role of *mythos* within hyperstitional communication is “as powerful as any reasoned argument.”<sup>97</sup>

The third chapter focuses on the rhetorical circulation of the “right to exit” within online alt-right communities. Through engagement with communicative theories of citizenship as “a *mode of public engagement*” represented in “fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments,”<sup>98</sup> this chapter demonstrates that the neoreactionary subject experiences a vexed relationship to “the citizen” through two paradoxical moves of “passivist” self-abdication and nativist exclusion. Additionally, this chapter seeks to determine the reach of NRx’s influence within contemporary culture by mapping how far particular concepts have traveled from their original genesis. To accomplish this, I’ll be scrutinizing evidence that wealthy figures such as Peter Thiel and political insiders within the Trump administration have engaged with neoreactionary texts and/or been in contact with neoreactionary figures. My investigation will also include a brief discussion of the various imaginations of exit conceived of within alt-right communities, including charter cities, shareholder states, seasteading, Bitcoin, and space colonization. The point of this chapter is to grasp the sheer reach of right accelerationism’s milieu and to demarcate the

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<sup>97</sup> O’Sullivan, “Accelerationism, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science,” 30.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 2 (2004): 191.

borders between Inner- and Outer-NRx. By tracking the movement of textual fragments and rhetorical intensities across a variety of nodal-points—both online and offline—I hope to prove that the reactosphere is composed of a collection of circulated affective intensities.

The conclusion will briefly sum up the insights of these previous chapters and begin to chart-out an alternative to the affective mythos deployed by neoreactionaries. What Sandifer refers to as a “right to be invaded”<sup>99</sup> functions as a direct repudiation of the conservative right to exit by crafting a philosophical vision of subjectivity that is inherently fractured and always already permeated by the influence of others. It functions as a leftist exit that does not reproduce fantasies of white flight, but instead foreshadows the dismantling of the modern subject’s racialized foundations and liberalism’s structural antiblackness. I wish to inflect this emancipatory concept with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s notion of the “general antagonism,” which recognizes that “the deprivation that is visited upon the would-be Black subject lets us understand the limitations and the deprivations that are visited upon subjectivity in general.”<sup>100</sup> My hope is that this critique of modernity’s violent process of subjective individuation can serve as an alternative hyperstitional future.

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<sup>99</sup> Sandifer, 114.

<sup>100</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “‘Wildcat The Totality’ - Fred Moten And Stefano Harney Revisit The Undercommons In A Time Of Pandemic And Rebellion (Part 1),” interview by Joshua Briond, *Millennials Are Killing Capitalism*, podcast audio, July 4, 2020, <https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/wildcat-the-totality-fred-moten-and-stefano-harney-revisit-the-undercommons-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-rebellion-part-1>.

## *Conclusion*

Neoreaction is a mode of alt-right accelerationism that circulates an affective energy premised on the antiblackness of racial capitalism. Through the circulation of textual fragments, neoreactionaries coopt structural feelings of disaffection and cynicism endemic to the internet to inject a politicized vision of aspirational nihilism into the heart of online subcultures. Such efforts contribute to its capacity to expand its rhetorical influence, even and especially while its primary authors remain largely unknown. A reactosphere is thus hyperstitionally constituted through the deixical communication of in- and out-group dynamics among those who trade in neoreactionary discourse. Because this process involves the maintenance of an informal distinction between Inner- and Outer-NRx, it can be difficult to draw precise linkages between the manifestos, blogs, and other source-texts of neoreaction and the direct and indirect influence that it may have over the broader alt-right. This is why rhetoricians have much to offer in comprehending the movement of reactionary affect across distinct online communities and how such affect cements itself into ideological fervor. A framework of rhetorical circulation is absolutely necessary in order to demystify the fragmented and diffuse character of neoreactionary communication. This is especially true insofar as the alt-right, and neoreactionaries in particular, deploy various strategies of textual hacking and utilize the unique rhetorical conditions of digital spaces to outflank opposing messaging and facilitate the expansion of their sphere of influence. My thesis begins with a theoretical acknowledgement of the centrality of antiblackness to the formation of extremist communities and the broader *socius*, and takes seriously the subversive rhetorical qualities inherent to communication within digital subcultures. This perspective aims to

equip rhetorical scholars with the methodological tools to deconstruct the racialized affective mythos that forms the infrastructure of the reactosphere.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hijacking the Outside: Rhetorical Circulation and Hyperstitional Communication

#### *A Prelude by the Bay*

Neoreaction owes its existence to a decentralized network of blogs, forums, and social media posts that have disseminated its ideological predicates to a vast and growing audience of shitposters. While neoreactionaries certainly have come together in offline forums before—most notably in the form of the far-right extremist LD50 art gallery<sup>1</sup>—the vast majority of their communication takes place within particular internet communities. The diffuse and often anonymous context of online rhetoric can make it difficult for traditional methods to track the movement of NRx’s affective and discursive transmissions. Still, it is possible to both name several influential neoreactionary figures and to identify a number of online hubs that feature admiring discussions of the dark enlightenment. In an exposé of the connections between Silicon Valley and the alt-right that would gain notoriety in online leftist circles, pseudonymous writer Josephine Armistead limned a rough image of the reactosphere:

There are two poles within neo-reaction, the ‘academic’ pole, exemplified in LessWrong and the blogs of the main theorists of the movement (Unqualified Reservations, More Right, Outside In), and the ‘alt-right’ pole exemplified in 4chan (especially the /pol/ board), 8chan, My Posting Career, and The Right Stuff. The two poles meet on Reddit, Twitter, and

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of this event, see, Larne Abse Gogarty, “The Art Right,” *Art Monthly* no. 405 (April 2017); and Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Artwashing – On NRx and the Alt Right,” *Texte Zur Kunst*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/artwashing-web>.

Tumblr, among other sites. In addition, neo-reactionary ideas are quite common in Silicon Valley, though often without explicit allegiance to its theory, as can be seen in the statements of Peter Thiel and Balaji Srinivasan, among others.<sup>2</sup>

This description approximates Land's distinction between Inner- and Outer-NRx, with the former representing a small, mostly ideologically-consistent group of online influencers and the latter pointing to a decentralized assemblage of differently-motivated far-right actors. The fact that neoreaction finds its primary constituency among Silicon Valley libertarian "disruptors" draws attention to the unique purchase that it has among those deeply enmeshed in internet culture. Consequently, the political and cultural conditions linked to the Valley's early culture can be viewed as a canary in the coal mine for internet culture's modern sociopolitical conflicts. This is not to suggest such developments only occurred within Silicon Valley. At the same time that the Bay Area was experiencing a massive tech boom, across the pond, the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit was attempting to turn "cyberdelic"<sup>3</sup> culture into a weapon against the "Human

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<sup>2</sup> Josephine Armistead, "The Silicon Ideology," *Archive.org*, March 18, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/the-silicon-ideology>, 9-10; for more context on the origin of this paper, see, Samantha Keeper, "The Silicon Ideology : Josephine Armistead : Free Download & Streaming : Internet Archive," *Sam-Keeper* (blog), May 18, 2016, <https://sam-keeper.tumblr.com/post/144580405755/the-silicon-ideology-josephine-armistead-free>.

<sup>3</sup> Broadly, cyberdelic culture refers to the nexus of cyberpunk-inspired rave culture that was prominent in the 1990s. It uniquely points to "themes of technological mind/body invasion and mutation" and the term is "a portmanteau combining 'cybernetics' and 'psychedelic'." For more context, see, Delphi Carstens, *Uncovering the Apocalypse: Narratives of Collapse and Transformation in the 21st Century Fin de Siècle*, PhD diss. (Stellenbosch University, December 2013): 19.

Security System.”<sup>4</sup> While these endeavors were markedly different, they both placed faith in technological production as a mode of social evolution.

But the experimental futurist aura of the early days of Silicon Valley soon gave way to a neoliberal disruptor culture in service of conservative doctrines. The “Californian Ideology” recuperated New Left utopianism into a combination of Third Way centrist liberalism and Ayn Randian individualism.<sup>5</sup> By the time that the dotcom bubble popped, “intellectuals [had] lost programming and hacker culture to neoliberalism & libertarians. Computer science transitioned from cyberpunk to Silicon Valley venture capitalism.”<sup>6</sup> This social upheaval altered the foundational ideological assumptions of many working in technology. Soon enough, “the ethos of the tech industry transmogrified...shifting from the market-besotted optimism championed by Bill Gates to the digital feudalism represented by Bay Area neoreactionaries and cybermonarchists. If every rise of fascism bears witness to a failed revolution, one could say that the rise of cryptofascist tendencies within the tech industry bears witness to the failures of the ‘digital revolution’, whose promises of a post-scarcity economy and socialised capital never came to pass.”<sup>7</sup> Many in tech laid the blame for this failed revolution at the feet of various government welfare initiatives, convinced that the subsidization of the poor and

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<sup>4</sup> The “Human Security System” was Land’s term for the “the anthropic conservatism of ‘philosophical thought’” that inhibited investigations of the Outside, “normalizing and limiting what thought can do.” Mackay.

<sup>5</sup> Haider.

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, “#AltWoke Manifesto,” &&& *Platform*, February 5, 2017, <http://tripleampersand.org/alt-woke-manifesto>.

<sup>7</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 319.

entitlement of the marginalized had snatched their utopian economy away from them. The increasing preference for top-down models of governance that resembled the hierarchical structure of tech startups created an opening for anti-democratic reactionary theories to gain prominence. Other phenomena provided expedited pathways to alt-right thinking, such as “STEM Supremacy” which held that “STEM knowledge (and those who possess it) is superior to other forms of knowledge [and] has become so hegemonic that our culture openly mocks those who possess other forms of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, tech culture inundated itself with a martial-futurist aesthetic—exemplified in comic books like *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, or *The Killing Joke*, first-person-shooter video games like *Wolfenstein 3D* or *DOOM*, and even tabletop games like *Warhammer 40,000*—which slowly dovetailed with a Eurocentric new atheist movement and a renewed interest in the Austrian school of economics.<sup>9</sup> These trends demonstrate that the failure of the digital revolution has eventuated a persistent alt-right undercurrent within Silicon Valley’s political culture. These “alt-techies” have sometimes embraced violent extremist beliefs, as noted in a profile by Josh Harkinson:

“The average alt-right-ist is probably a 28-year-old tech-savvy guy working in IT,” white nationalist Richard Spencer insisted when I interviewed him a few weeks before the election. “I have seen so many people like that.” Andrew Anglin, the publisher of the neo-Nazi *Daily Stormer*, told me he gets donations from Silicon Valley, and that Santa Clara County, home to Apple and Intel, is his site’s largest traffic source.

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<sup>8</sup> Keith A. Spencer, “Revenge of the nerd-kings: Why some in Silicon Valley are advocating for monarchy,” *Salon*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.salon.com/2019/04/13/why-some-in-silicon-valley-are-advocating-for-monarchy>.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this relationship, see, Armistead, “The Silicon Ideology.”



Chuck Johnson, the publisher of the conspiracy-mongering site *Got News*, said he gets lots of page views from the San Francisco Bay Area.<sup>10</sup>

While it is important to note that many of these white supremacists would benefit from exaggerating their claim to representing a significant component of Silicon Valley, nevertheless, the extent of tech culture's overlap with alt-right ideology is worthy of exploration. This is especially true as even supposedly "alt-lite" forms of libertarianism are increasingly operating as pipelines for extremism.<sup>11</sup>

I have drawn upon this brief history of Silicon Valley's descent into techie-fascism because the intensified forms of social, political, and economic disaffection and alienation seen here, in the wake of the failed digital revolution, can be seen as precursors to modern forms of aspirational nihilism that have spread far beyond the Bay Area's confines. Vicky Osterweil argues that in the wake of the failure of capitalist state, "the right looks to fill the political and libidinal void left by zombie liberalism."<sup>12</sup> This libidinal void should be understood as the mythos-deficit identified by O'Sullivan within status quo left accelerationism insofar as it speaks to an underlying set of affective needs that remain unmet within late capitalism. Yuk Hui refers to this as the "unhappy consciousness" of neoreactionaries, symptomatic of the failure of Western Enlightenment

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<sup>10</sup> Josh Harkinson, "Meet Silicon Valley's Secretive Alt-Right Followers," *Mother Jones*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/03/silicon-valley-tech-alt-right-racism-misogyny>.

<sup>11</sup> Matt Lewis, "The Insidious Libertarian-to-Alt-Right Pipeline," *The Daily Beast*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-insidious-libertarian-to-alt-right-pipeline>.

<sup>12</sup> Vicky Osterweil, "Liberalism is Dead," *The New Inquiry*, September 15, 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/liberalism-is-dead>.

humanism to universalize itself through globalized colonialism.<sup>13</sup> The goal of this thesis is to understand the role that neoreactionary communication plays in filling the libidinal void that increasingly inheres to technological culture. To grasp this, I employ a methodology centered on rhetorical circulation, which tracks the affect of aspirational nihilism across online spaces as it politically-charges this mythos-deficit and converts online cynicism into reactionary sentiment. The reactosphere should thus be conceptualized as a “milieu of dispersed transhistorical and transsituational moments”<sup>14</sup> that mobilize the greater alt-right toward accelerationist ends. Tara Isabella Burton’s theological analysis of the alt-right illustrates how certain acts of online expression can be imbued with a religiosity that satiates the subject’s libidinal void and that is transferred in circulation:

Shitposters . . . live in a time of economic uncertainty and spiritual apathy in which foundational myths about the self and its role in the cosmos seem to have been rendered obsolete. To fill the void, the ironist and the shitposter both create a self-image characterized by the freedom to say and do anything, beholden to nothing and to nobody — a freedom that finds expression through transgression, saying things (racist, sexist, etc.) “nobody else” will say — except, of course, for the shitposters. This is how the stories the “alt-right” tells about itself take on a religious quality. They are predicated on a desire for a meaningful narrative of the world that allows for participation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Yuk Hui, “On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries,” *e-flux*, no. 81 (April 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Chaput, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, “Apocalypse Whatever: The making of a racist, sexist religion of nihilism on 4Chan,” *Real Life*, December 13, 2016, <https://reallifemag.com/apocalypse-whatever>.

Such an analysis helps to explain how the iterative creation of Yarvin’s “parasitic memeplex” becomes a symbolic ritual that instills meaning in the very act of posting. Transgression becomes the currency of far-right spirituality, effectuating what has come to be known as “meme magic.”

However, such a sardonic and jaded affect of aspirational nihilism, which thrives on neoliberal negation above all else, cannot provide a respite from the mass spiritual alienation that neoliberalism has itself produced. For the rest of this chapter, I attempt to prove that this claim is uniquely true with regard to the digital domain—and more broadly, what can be understood as a digital *age*. To do so, I draw on theories of platform capitalism, new media theory, and network studies that note an inherent incommensurability between the human subject and the “user position” that both animates modern forms of late capitalist alienation and inspires mythic explanations for the circulation of viral memes (such as “meme magic”). These theories put pressure on ideas of networked circulation that fail to take into account the gap between the human and the user, and which therefore mistake technical aspects of platforms for magical expressions of human or nonhuman agency. The concept of rhetorical circulation can be made more rigorous by accounting for the *hyperstitional* dynamic that is at work when this very tendency to mythologize meme magic is itself hijacked, and what was once fiction engenders its own reality. Increasingly, the alt-right has been fabricating its own self-representations, memeing into existence the supposedly white supremacist implications of the “okay symbol” and the inherently reactionary qualities of Pepe the Frog (rebranded “The Cult of Kek”), despite the Matt Furie’s (the artist who came up with Pepe) objections. Therefore, I interrogate the origins of hyperstition as

conceptualized by the CCRU. In particular, I pay attention to the role that a notion of Outsideness plays within NRx's hyperstitional imaginary. My contention will be that Nick Land and the reactosphere rely on a conception of the Outside that remains indebted to an antiblack Lovecraftian gothic. This phobogenic relationship animates the entire mythos of right accelerationism and culminates in a series of dystopian visions, which can only exacerbate the violence of racial capitalism by indoctrinating reactionaries in the Cult of Gnon. It is thus only by mapping the relationship between Inner- and Outer-NRx that communication scholars can understand the specific rhetorical tactics that neoreactionaries employ to redpill their enemies and further disseminate their affective structure of racialized feeling.

### *The Missing Subject of Circulation*

In a recent article, Scott and McKenzie Wark argue that studies of online subcultures make a similar mistake when they employ the concept of meme magic as when they theorize through circulation: namely, they fail to consider the technical conditions of possibility of the platforms on which communication takes place. Most significantly, they at best ignore, and at worst, actively dissimulate the class relation grounded in information asymmetry:

There's a kernel of incommensurability at 'net culture's core. We endlessly produce data about what we do online, but we do it for the benefit of other. We do the labor, and often it is what Tiziana Terranova calls free labor, but we don't profit from our digital products. Underneath the apparently free-floating world of circulating texts, images, memes, there is an *asymmetry of information*. The means to produce data is

decentralized to us, but the means to collect and process that data is recentralized to the proprietors of the platform-based services we use.<sup>16</sup>

The implications of this insight that platforms have an imperative to extract data at all costs can only be properly understood when the meaning of the so-called “digital subject” is clarified. Scott Wark notes that most theories of circulation assume that the subjects of such communication are the humans that use technical interfaces; however, from the perspective of the platform, “what becomes—or ‘individuates’—online is not *you* or *us*, but the digital subject itself.”<sup>17</sup> Rather than simply a mediated expression of human subjectivity, the user position “emerges in and as circulating data” and “encompasses recognisable aggregates like social media profiles; but it also extends to more ephemeral aggregates like advertising profiles, alongside others we might not think of as ‘subjects,’ like credit scores or profiles created by government services.”<sup>18</sup>

The consequence of this is that the incommensurability noted by Wark and Wark is innate to the modern human-centered view of the digital subject. Crucially, this permits the platforms that mediate communication to have an outsized and often unseen role in the process of rhetorical circulation; “platforms actively produce incommensurability: they ‘black box’ their technical workings, leaving us with parameters in which we might enmesh the labor of producing culture and through which the value of our labor might be

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<sup>16</sup> Scott Wark and McKenzie Wark, “Circulation and its Discontents,” in *Post-Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Brown and Dan Bristow (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2019), 294-295.

<sup>17</sup> Scott Wark, “The subject of circulation: on the digital subject’s technical individuations,” *Subjectivity* 12, no. 1 (March 2019): 66.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

expropriated.”<sup>19</sup> Media theory and students of rhetoric can misunderstand—or worse, become an accomplice to—this process by mislocating the place of the subject within digital subcultural studies. In place of traditional conceptions of agency within media studies, “the basic proposition of the digital subject is that this mode of subjectivity emerges in the gap that distributed online services open between us and the data constructs that refer to, represent, or even act for us online.”<sup>20</sup> In this paradoxical condition, the elusive object/process understood to be “digital subjectivity” comes to be when traditional agential humanist readings of such a subject rub up against the “user position” constructed by platforms; and the internal operations of this interplay are themselves black boxed. This also means that the class relation established between platforms and human users regarding data extraction is black boxed too.<sup>21</sup> When a human user’s actions online (1) accrue agency only in contradictory reference to their composite data profile and (2) operate as extraction sites for platforms, “this double incommensurability creates the conditions for ’net culture’s impulse to call what Internet memes do ‘magic.’”<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, theories of “meme magic” that unproblematically reproduce narratives of digital agency as simply the result of a composite of human agents *or* a force outside of history misunderstand the role of platforms in the process of online subjectification.

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<sup>19</sup> Wark and Wark, 311.

<sup>20</sup> S. Wark, 68.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this particular class relation, see, McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Wark and Wark, 295.

Platforms have a refractory and amplificatory relationship to the social and cultural forces that enlist modern political subjects. Because the digital subject resides in the gap between the human and the user profile, the precise conditions for a given discourse's virality, permissibility, and credibility, are determined by an opaque assemblage of end user agreements, content moderation policies, reply deboosting, shadow-banning, and 'toxicity' metrics.<sup>23</sup> All of these factors directly reconfigure and convolute the rhetorical interplay of user subjects, distending and intensifying extant social formations such as antiblackness, settler colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and ableism.<sup>24</sup> This is, in no way, to push back against calls for refocusing on the preexisting

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<sup>23</sup> The literature on platform capitalism, the convolution of modern sovereignty by technic agency, and the refractory effects of platforms on structural power is too vast to capture briefly while doing the field justice. For some recent introductory works on the subject, see, Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism, Theory Redux* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); Patricia Ticineto Clough, *The User Unconscious: On Affect, Media, and Measure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Jonathan Beller, *The World Computer: Derivative Conditions of Racial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> See, Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Ruha Benjamin, "Assessing risk, automating racism," *Science* 366, no. 6464 (October 2019): 421-422; Winifred R. Poster, "Racialized Surveillance in the Digital Surveillance Economy," in *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*, ed. Ruha Benjamin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 133-169; Tamara K. Nopper, "Digital Character in 'The Scored Society': FICO, Social Networks, and Competing Measurements of Creditworthiness," in Benjamin, *Captivating Technology*, 170-187; Ashely Cordes, "Meeting place: bringing Native feminisms to bear on borders of cyberspace," *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 2 (March 2020): 285-289; Jodi Byrd, "'Do they not have rational souls?': consolidation and sovereignty in digital new worlds," *Settler Colonial Studies* 6, no. 4 (November 2016): 119-136; Claudia Aradau, "Experimentality, Surplus Data and the Politics of Debilitation in Borderzones," *Geopolitics*, Advance online publication

exigence of such structural systems; I'm not suggesting that they are *worse* because of the dawn of such apparatuses of digital control. It often seems like key dialogues on technology between new media studies and cultural studies are reduced to questions of the supposed "newness" of technological control against the backdrop of abiding relations of antiblackness, settlement, and more. By suggesting that platforms establish a refractory relationship to enduring forms of structural disposability, I aim to highlight the ubiquity and scale of such structures rather than diminish the importance of fighting them.<sup>25</sup> I consider this response by Fred Moten to a question about the supposed "newness" of algorithmic control to be particularly insightful:

My own personal tendency is to never give [...] the state or capital any credit for anything. Like [...] if everyone's trying to get us to acknowledge that they're doing something new, my impulse is always to try to see how it's not new at all, that it's pretty old. It might be new terms and there might be new apparatuses and mechanisms, but I don't know, one time with my mother and my grandmother, we were driving. My grandmother lived in this small town in Arkansas about 60 miles away from the border of Mississippi, and she had never been to Mississippi. She'd been a lot of other places; [...] it wasn't like she had lived some shut-in life [...] because as bad as Arkansas was in 1935, Mississippi was, in her mind, beneath contempt. You know, you just wouldn't go there. So, we went across the Mississippi River and we're driving up the Highway 61 (you know, that Bob Dylan made famous after other people made it famous first), and we were looking at...there's still essentially cotton plantations—this was 20 years ago, probably, 25 years ago. A lot of it was

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(2021); Chase Aunspach, "Discrete and looking (to profit): homoconnectivity on Grindr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37, no. 1 (March 2020): 43-57; Carolyn Bronstein, "Pornography, Trans Visibility, and the Demise of Tumblr," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (May 2020): 240-254.

<sup>25</sup> Methodologically, I draw inspiration from Saidiya Hartman's work interrogating "the diffusion of terror and violence perpetuated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property." Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 4.



mechanized but not all of it. So there's kind of the shock as you're driving up Highway 61 is to see people still in those fields, you know, working cotton—but the shock is even more it's the length of the roads and the straightness of the roads. There's an old phrase [...] If the job that you were getting ready to embark upon was going to be tough or long, they would say there's a hard road to hoe. And I realized where that statement came from. [...] But as you look at the layout of the plantation, the more we learn now about the mechanisms that were in place to perfect the industrialization of enslaved people, we realize that the algorithmic is nothing new. It's fundamental to the emergence of this nation as a political-economic entity. Again, there are new technologies that help that, that improve—in some diabolical sense—the capacity for the algorithmic, again, to create and to impose itself with greater and greater access on every life. But that kind of calculative thinking isn't new, and I think it's important to say a) that it's not new and b) that [...] in the first instance, it's not in the first instance. It's a regulatory and reactive force. It disciplines and regulates something that was there before it. I mean I just totally believe that. [...] I think I speak for Stefano—anything we say is predicated on those two beliefs. And what does that mean? It doesn't mean that we don't pay attention to the new modes of algorithmic logic and imposition that emerge from day to day or year to year, we certainly do. But [...] I think it places a really profound imperative on all of us to pay attention to what we do.<sup>26</sup>

This quotation might seem meandering but it provides an important narrative through which the modern debates about technological control and the “newness” of modern architectures of power can be reevaluated. Algorithmic regulation and platform capitalism are not only *not new*, even more crucially, they *respond* to a social force that precedes and exceeds their regulation. While the question of the composition of that social force is something that I'll attend to in the final chapter of this thesis, Moten's

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<sup>26</sup> Transcribed from audio {28:00-32:38} with edits for clarity marked with brackets. Fred Moten, “A Conversation with Fred Moten 12/02/18,” YouTube video, 1:47:04, uploaded by Woodbine NYC, December 3, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6b5N\\_u7Ebs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6b5N_u7Ebs).

insistence on probing the historical foundations of modern violent technologies remains an important guiding principle for new media theorists.

However, rhetoricians and other scholars will fail to adequately situate the role of social structures or of platform control systems if they continue to rely on understandings of online communication based in unproblematic readings of “meme magic.” Wark and Wark argue that “meme magic operates as what theory used to call the *fetish*.”<sup>27</sup> While this term does have a history stained with a legacy of colonial rationalism,<sup>28</sup> here, a fetishization means attributing outsized significance to a process such that it “mediates values that are otherwise ‘incommensurable.’”<sup>29</sup> In this context, the concept of meme magic is invoked as a fetish to cover up the subjective and classed incommensurability inherent to contemporary digital platforms. However, this has much broader implications for new media studies and rhetorical theory. Wark and Wark argue that “if we treat meme magic as a fetish, what becomes apparent is not only that ’net culture mistakes its occult lulz for reality. Rather it’s that media theory invokes its own magic word to resolve this incommensurability: *circulation*.”<sup>30</sup> This critique should be taken seriously within communication studies and other domains that survey online subcultures. The argument forwarded here is that the notion of circulation fetishizes its own role as a purported neutral process of rhetorical dissemination by dissimulating the role of platforms in

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<sup>27</sup> Wark and Wark, 295.

<sup>28</sup> “Whilst we acknowledge that the anthropological tradition of the fetish has a dubious history, we are confident that we can draw on deployments of it that negotiate the term’s colonial heritage.” *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

shaping the *content* that flows through it. Both circulation and meme magic try to “overcome an incommensurability that divides technics and labor from value or culture. Each attempts to grapple with the production of culture at scale. And each evokes a power that is neither adequately conceptualized, nor we would argue, substantiated.”<sup>31</sup> The result of this thwarted attempt to suture the incommensurability coded into networked culture is the further reproduction of that very incommensurability by media theory itself, as it too fails to develop an intervention that can explain the rapid growth of extremist online subcultures (such as QAnon or GamerGate, for instance) without invoking the “magic” of circulation. This explanatory gap is the result of making the misguided assumption that online content flows in a transparent or unmediated way, which means theorists of rhetorical circulation must revisit their foundational assumptions to avoid reifying these conditions.

The understanding of content forwarded by contemporary readings of rhetorical circulation mystifies the role of platforms in circumscribing the parameters of what can be perceived as “content” in the first place. One can define content as “a set of the parameters that allow modular compartments to be filled”<sup>32</sup> within online media platforms. Wark and Wark explain that this misunderstanding of platforms actually facilitates their continued expropriation of user data:

Platforms produce content as parameters, which we mistake for media. Platforms put content into circulation, which we mistake for circulating media. Platforms predicate us as users, which we mistake for agents. The fallacy of identifying media with content, or circulation with the circulation of content, or the subject with the user, is that these identifications don’t recognize that the empty form of content or the user

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

positions are components of platforms. They're designed to extract information asymmetries for the owners of the information vector from incommensurate hybrids of laboring flesh-tech.<sup>33</sup>

If platforms maintain inconsistently-enforced requirements for content, encode content with markup languages, and value content only in terms of its parameters, rather than what is contained within those parameters, then rhetorical theories that place their emphasis on circulated content without an account of platform constraints will only conceal the influence of such constraints. Some theories are more guilty of these forms of conflation than others, and there are reasonable objections one could make to a sweeping critique of the entire subfield of rhetorical circulation. Nonetheless, a significant component of the present literature does include assumptions that may risk the reproduction of this incommensurability. For instance, while Papacharissi's account of the affective economy notes that human agency is in a constant balancing act with structures, her description of the way platforms "exploit affective and other labor"<sup>34</sup> is lacking. It fails to understand the difference between the exploited affect produced by the user position in the form of data and the human labor absorbed by digital interfaces, and consequently, reproduces the double incommensurability at the heart of network culture. Similarly, while Chaput's essay on rhetorical circulation argues that "rhetorical theories that underscore agency lose site of the world in flux,"<sup>35</sup> she here alternatively suggests that "[Ronald] Greene moves us in this direction by rethinking rhetorical agency as communicative labor and allowing for that labor to encompass an entire range of life

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-310.

<sup>34</sup> Papacharissi, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Chaput, 2.

activities.”<sup>36</sup> The roots of the problem with Chaput’s inattention to platforms stem from Greene’s reading of communicative labor. He claims that “as living labor, communication acts; there is no anxiety here about the status of rhetorical agency, because its action generates the value of living labor. Rhetorical agency is everywhere.”<sup>37</sup> By reducing the conditions for postmodern communication to the notion of “living labor,” Greene misses the central role of platforms in creating incommensurability regarding living and dead labor, and thus contrives an immaterial collective will as the change-agent of late capitalist rhetoric. Wark and Wark note that what platforms obfuscate is the hybrid productivity of labor and technics. What they render incommensurable on the other side is labor, technics, and finally culture itself.”<sup>38</sup> Thus while theorists of rhetorical circulation have the correct impulse to dispose of the rationalist preference for human agency found in accounts of the rhetorical situation, their fetishization of networked collectivity revives a trace of this tendency because they neglect to fully countenance the implications of platform mediation. This ultimately impedes their ability to accurately describe the flow of communication, while simultaneously reproducing the groundwork for digital incommensurability.

These theories of rhetorical circulation fail to come to terms with the role of platforms in interpolating both subjectivity and content as data, and therefore elide the algorithmic practices of information extraction that reinforce the sense of alienation felt

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ronald Walter Greene, “Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor,” in “Rhetorical Agency,” ed. Gerard A. Hauser, special issue, *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 37, no. 3 (2004): 203.

<sup>38</sup> Wark and Wark, 307.

between humans and their digital profiles. By articulating circulation as a process of *living communicative labor* that disseminates *content*, contemporary rhetorical study reinscribes a view of the digital subject that remains irreconcilable with the felt reality of online users. “Media theory is mediated by the platform, which presents us with readymade conceptualizations that we uncritically incorporate into our theories.”<sup>39</sup> Without applying a sustained critical lens to the conditions of rhetorical study’s very production, communication scholars risk colluding with platform capitalism’s effort to invisibilize itself into a background condition of modern culture. In this way, “content is the death mask of its circulation.”<sup>40</sup> It serves to dissimulate the black boxed parameters through which platforms render user subjectivity incommensurate. This process of masking has severe consequences that reach far beyond the explanatory validity of communication theory.

The alt-right has hijacked communication studies’ fetishization of circulation, tapping into the incommensurability of the digital subject and weaponizing it into the politicized affect of aspirational nihilism. In spite of their best efforts at representing themselves as domains for the circulation of culture, platforms’ attempted conflation of the human subject and the user position is discerned as a structural feeling of unease. “[’Net culture] suspects [the user’s role is] a construct. It knows that the user is insufficient for explaining all of the actions that we might take on the ’net,”<sup>41</sup> so it places its faith in meme magic “as a response to the insufficiency of the user position. The

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

Internet meme is produced by a collective...[that] is constitutive of its capacity to be produced as a plurality and to mutate as it's produced in common."<sup>42</sup> It is at this point that the parallel explanatory tactics employed by both theories of circulation and meme magic occultism clarify themselves: "meme magic also fetishizes users' capacity to collective engineer content and to produce large-scale effects. The invocation of meme magic contrives an authentic subject — a collective will — in the gap between the internet meme's effects and a collective of users' insufficiency in explaining them."<sup>43</sup> This "collective will" becomes for theories of rhetorical circulation what individual "agency" was for theories of the rhetorical situation. It both obscures the role of platforms and authorizes a self-fulfilling prophecy wherein meme magic functions as an object of religious fascination, inspiring more collective digital cultural production. Posting itself becomes an act of ritualistic devotion, dedicated to conjuring desired political realities. It is for this reason that Wark and Wark speculate that "perhaps meme magic is just a vernacular theory of contemporary political myth."<sup>44</sup> In the context of a culture deficient of mythos, acts of shitposting are performed in a quixotic attempt to sate neglected spiritual needs:

...the 'net confounds our capacity to identify the agents behind, and the authors of history. It's magic. Or, it's circulation. And it licenses an entirely new and often disturbing cultural politics. Like theory, culture has become contemporary. One of the things this means is that it has lost the modern mythic landscape it once deployed to make sense of the incommensurable. [...] The modern mythic landscape provided the anchor points of history and agency on which a politics could be built. When the

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

rituals — including the media-rituals — that constitute the modern fall away, so too does its mythic landscape. On the 'net, new rituals emerge. Only their anchors — a modern mode of history; the agency of the subject — are now insufficient. In response, 'net culture's had to create its own mythic landscape to make tractable what's otherwise incommensurable. The fetish is a species of myth; meme magic is the kind of myth that emerges when history and agency fall away.<sup>45</sup>

The sense of incommensurability reified by contemporary theories of circulation produces a mythos-deficit that online subcultures attempt to suture through ritualistic digital performances of meme magic.

Rhetorical theory feeds into this chimerical pursuit of a digital mythos through articulations of circulation that contrive an authentic collective will or living communicative labor innate to networked media, reifying a persistent atmosphere of disaffection that drives further cycles of resentment. This recalls Burton's argument that late capitalist subjects have internalized the Nietzschean Death of God,<sup>46</sup> losing their place in the universe such that pure transgression becomes a new affective and spiritual currency. She notes that,

To promulgate meme magic is to claim for oneself a higher code, a deeper freedom that derives from seeing the world as constructed, and constructable, rather than given. From this perspective, the 'real' world — with its rules, its restrictions on what you can and cannot say, what you can and cannot do in public — is secular, in the sense that it lacks meaning. It is an un-sacred space, and thus nothing there can or should be treated with respect. In the world of Kek, affecting the world with racist lies and memes — all with an ironic smirk — returns the possibility of free, meaningful action to believers, and makes them heroes. The freedom

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>46</sup> See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, [1882] March 1974), 181.



to not really mean anything you say becomes the only way to have meaning in life. Irony is the greatest freedom of all.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, we have a situation in which the libidinal void identified by Osterweil in Silicon Valley digital culture has grown to infect every denizen of networked culture. The repercussion is an epistemological crisis, the subordination of truth or falsity to an ironic sacred order. Since “meme magic invokes new anchors for a culture adrift,”<sup>48</sup> the task of communication theory and new media studies must be to identify what these new “anchors” are, to account for the influence of platform logics in the distribution and circulation of these “anchors,” and ultimately, to demonstrate the inherent insufficiency of these “anchors” as a means of attaining freedom of suturing networked incommensurability. Wark and Wark argue that:

If [circulation] is to function as concept rather than fetish, media theory must also reckon with the role that platforms play in producing its concepts — and the conceptual terrain — in which it operates. This would be the premise and promise of a meme theory as a critical media theory: *a media theory that’s able to account for its own conditions of production.*<sup>49</sup>

Accomplishing this task requires a sustained analysis of the modes of affective and mythic parameters that components of the alt-right like neoreaction utilize to hijack platform parameters and summon their own memetic beasts.

“Anthropomorphic animism” describes a unique process of digital fetishization in which the modes of cultural production that cannot be sufficiently accounted for—due to user subjectivity’s incommensurability—are instead attributed to personified Internet

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<sup>47</sup> Burton.

<sup>48</sup> Wark and Wark, 314.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

memes. This process amplifies the scope and influence of the meme in question, imbuing it with the status of religious iconography, while leaving it vulnerable to hijacking for political purposes. The most notable example of this in recent memory is Pepe the Frog and the associated “cult of Kek” that is often credited with memeing Donald Trump into office.<sup>50</sup> The cult of Kek “marks out one way that ’net culture responds to the insufficiency of the user position [...] with forms of what we might call anthropomorphic animism. When the user is insufficient, Internet memes can conjure a degree of seemingly authentic agency: Pepe not only conveys hateful feelings, but comes to personify them.”<sup>51</sup> This process of personified fetishization constitutes a sociopolitical attractor that draws other spiritually disaffected participants into the fold of its shitposting cult. The aspects of culture that the human user cannot discern the origins of or that seem in outsized proportion to one’s expectation become magical properties wielded by digital avatars. Burton recalls,

If I’ve learned anything as a historian of religion, it’s that belief is flexible. The actual propositional content of doctrines has little to do with how religion works socially. Far more than the content of faith as such, what makes religion religion are the image and rhetoric loaded with atavistic and esoteric archetypes (chaos; order; kek; frogs; a ‘God Emperor,’ to use a common 4chan appellation for Donald Trump) that tend to propagate

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<sup>50</sup> Essays and books on this particular figure within alt-right culture and meme studies are a dime a dozen. For this reason, I will not be spending much time analyzing the specifics of Pepe the Frog as an alt-right icon, and I will instead focus on the form of Pepe’s emergence as a template for understanding other examples of alt-right iconography. With this said, it is worth noting that Pepe uniquely exemplifies the ability of such images to be coopted, given that his creator, Matt Furie tried and failed to reclaim his artwork. See, Andrew Limbong, “Feels Good Man’ Traces Pepe The Frog From Hate Symbol To Democracy Icon,” *NPR*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/04/902617699/feels-good-man-traces-pepe-the-frog-from-hate-symbol-to-democracy-icon>.

<sup>51</sup> Wark and Wark, 309.

virally, independent of a centralized source, because they tie into the cultural zeitgeist or answer some cultural need.<sup>52</sup>

This notion of anthropomorphic animism is uniquely crucial for understanding the particular ideological, symbolic, and spiritual drivers for neoreactionary communication. The intractable digital incommensurability buttressed by media theory and liberalism's doctrine of subjective autonomy black boxes the extent to which cultural labor is extracted from user profiles and the procedures through which platforms shape the protocols of their circulated content. In response, some liberal pundits write of meme magic and some rhetoricians provide theories of circulation, only furthering the evangelism of alt-right shitposters. However, these online missionaries will fail to capture the felt reality of their fellow netizens if their history of the present does not endow the act of producing and remixing memes with the power to summon supernatural forces.

For the alt-right to maintain its hold over widespread online disaffection such that digital incommensurability can be coopted and weaponized into a form of aspirational nihilism, it must mobilize an affective mythos that understands pure vitriolic negation as an act of devotion that will bring about a desired future. This is why neoreaction is such a pertinent component of the broader alt-right. As an explicitly accelerationist project, it theorizes the role of platform capitalism explicitly, recognizing its role in the reproduction of digital subjective incommensurability. Right accelerationists view platforms—and the theories of circulation and meme magic that provide cover for them—as cultural feedback loops driven by a neoliberal drive that exists beyond history. Capitalism engenders broad-scale cultural alienation, causing the online recruitment of

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<sup>52</sup> Burton.

more disaffected subjects into the reactosphere, who then agitate for a sociopolitical ideology that furthers structures of accumulation, thus begetting more alienation. Communication scholars that aim to deconstruct the self-justifying assumptions of NRx must then critique the affective anchors of aspirational nihilism, so as to interrupt the capacity of the alt-right to imagine an exit from liberalism.<sup>53</sup> Attending to the notion of “hyperstition” pioneered by the CCRU offers a corrective to existing understandings of circulation in communication and new media studies, because the concept explains how depictions of the Outside serve as a spiritual substitute for faith, engendering online rituals that play off of platform feedback effects and thus erode the distinction between reality and unreality.

*“A description with divine power. In the beginning was the Word”<sup>54</sup>*

Hyperstition is a concept that was first elaborated upon by members of the CCRU during their tenure at the University of Warwick. In the glossary published alongside their writings, they defined it as an “element of effective culture that makes itself real, through fictional quantities functioning as time-traveling potentials. Hyperstition operates as a coincidence intensifier, effecting a call to the Old Ones.”<sup>55</sup> Such a cultural injunction engenders self-fulfilling prophecies that transmute fictions into facts; it does so by replacing the belief in a stable reality with the *unbelief* in the powers of the Outside and

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<sup>53</sup> More on the relationship between neoreactionaries and the racialized imagination of exit is explored in the second chapter of this thesis.

<sup>54</sup> Haider.

<sup>55</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 363.

the groundlessness of all truths. In a more recent interview, Nick Land proposed that “hyperstition is a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions – by their very existence as ideas – function causally to bring about their own reality.”<sup>56</sup> In the context of Wark and Wark’s insights regarding the platform capitalistic logic behind circulation, hyperstition relies on the commodification of *hype* innate to networked communication and its concomitant data extraction. Anna Greenspan, another former CCRU member, noted “the role hype plays in the market [...] where reality is measured by \$.”<sup>57</sup> Theorists and engineers of hyperstition play off the conditions of incommensurability within digital subjectivity, as well as the tendency for such incommensurability to be folded into the mystique of digital use.

When the degree of hype surrounding a piece of “content” online appears in excess of the affective labor of the humans contributing to such content, hyperstition sutures this gap in digital subjectivity by indoctrinating ‘net culture’s disaffected denizens into the cult of meme magic. Put simply, when content spreads rapidly, there is little-to-no discussion of those platform logics that capitalize on this movement and speed up its outcomes. At the same time, media theory and communication studies feed into this self-fulfilling prophecy by fetishizing *the circulation of content*, obscuring the operation

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<sup>56</sup> Nick Land, “Hyperstition: An Introduction,” interview by Delphi Carstens, *Merliquify* (blog), 2009, [https://web.archive.org/web/20180309212207if\\_/http://merliquify.com/blog/articles/hyperstition-an-introduction/#.WqL7POj7QTg](https://web.archive.org/web/20180309212207if_/http://merliquify.com/blog/articles/hyperstition-an-introduction/#.WqL7POj7QTg).

<sup>57</sup> Anna Greenspan, “The ‘hype’ in hyperstition,” *Hyperstition* (blog), June 25, 2004, <http://hyperstition.abstractdynamics.org/archives/003428.html>.

of platform feedback loops that sustain the hype market. Hyperstition involves the cultivation of “a new unbelief in the future”<sup>58</sup> in which the felt incommensurability derived from both platform culture and the broader contemporary social order drives mutations in the landscape of “reality.” Such mutations become elements of spiritual and libidinal reverence in the form of meme magic, and this happens regardless of whether such outsized network effects are really the result of meme magic or of platform dynamics. The very “facticity” of meme magic itself blurs the distinction between this causal relationship and thus calls into being the conditions for its own actualization. This is why the CCRU argued that,

according to the tenets of Hyperstition, there is no difference in principle between a universe, a religion, and a hoax. All involve an engineering of manifestation, or practical fiction, that is ultimately unworthy of belief. Nothing is true, because everything is under production. Because the future is a fiction, it has a more intense reality than either the present or the past.<sup>59</sup>

This suggests a radically iconoclastic theory of communication that views the social order as a site of dueling fictions—fabrications of reality thrown back from the future, attempting to construct themselves. The role of mythos is immediately clear in this rendering, and it especially becomes relevant as such hyperstitions are anthropomorphized through the animistic depictions of Pepe or other personifications.

Belief in the power of such forces beyond human control can become self-actualizing but only when coupled with a radical unbelief in the present order, which is

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<sup>58</sup> Matt Colquhoun, “Hyper / stition — Xenogothic on ‘Pisalni stroji’,” *Xenogothic* (blog), March 5, 2019, <https://xenogothic.com/2019/03/05/hyper-stition-xenogothic-on-pisalni-stroji>.

<sup>59</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 12.

why *not all fictions* are transmuted into facts, but under the correct conditions, *any could be*. More specifically, hyperstitional communication necessitates a detachment from enlightenment rationality's hegemonic hold on reality. In its place, a faith in the power of the Outside takes root in forms like meme magic. The refractory and amplifying dynamics of platform incommensurability and media theories of circulation exemplify Land's contention that "hyperstition is equipoised between fiction and technology."<sup>60</sup> When theorizing the conditions under which digital rhetoric develops hyperstitional capacities, it is important to recognize that memetic virality is the product of platform incentive structures, rather than fiction alone. A hyperstitional intervention into 'net culture only comes into fruition when a fiction taps into the affective structures of unbelief and disaffection directed at the present world, endlessly replicating this libidinal void in devotional acts of radical negation. What is produced here is a profound unbelief in the present world that is matched with a hyperstitional belief in the powers of the Outside (represented conceptually in meme magic or anthropomorphically in figures like Pepe), not a *non-belief* that would collapse into absolute relativism. Matt Colquhoun illustrated this distinction by demonstrating how the pure financial nihilism of r/WallStreetBets ultimately was the subreddit's undoing:

The way that the Redditors of WallStreetBets have inflated the stock market value of GameStop, however, demonstrates this process far more clearly [than alt-right meme magic], but it has also been denounced as risky precisely because of its clarity. Their unbelief has given way to non-belief. They showed, in that instant, how unbelief works. But by illuminating the fraud — the necessarily unspoken core — their efforts could collapse in on themselves at any moment. They do the magic trick

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<sup>60</sup> Land, "Hyperstition."

and simultaneously explain how they've done it. It can still produce the same effect, but in so doing it risks the entire magician's economy.<sup>61</sup>

In this sense, r/WallStreetBets's rhetorical strategy, which focused on conveying the *unreality* of the stock market by demonstrating its referential nihilism, undermined their own attempts to hijack such a hype economy. As we shall see, simply unmasking the hyperstitional dynamics of market logics is insufficient; a positive unbelief must be cultivated and directed in the service of the Outside.

Meme magic is only capable of enacting an agential force upon the milieu of rhetorical circulation because of the fervency of the hype surrounding this transformative capacity. Even though platform incentives play a key role in shaping the circulation of content across digital infrastructure, practitioners of hyperstition instead attribute algorithmic outputs to performances of online sorcery. Unlike r/WallStreetBets, the trolls that claimed to have memed Trump into office did not undermine their own effort by pointing to the groundlessness of the hype economy they were attempting to hijack:

When the alt-right did this with Trump, the mechanisms were less clear. It was cloaked in mutterings around "meme magick" and no-one took it all that seriously. *Vice* journalists were asking Richard Spencer "you don't actually believe that, do you?" but they misunderstood the most important fact: *it doesn't matter*. Spencer and co. knew that, as soon as they answered that question, they lost. All that mattered was their militancy. It was their *commitment to the bit* that made the bit real.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Matt Colquhoun, "Hype(rstition) and Unbelief: On GameStop and Coronavirus," *Xenogothic* (blog), January 27, 2021, <https://xenogothic.com/2021/01/27/hyperstition-and-unbelief-on-gamestop-and-coronavirus>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



This emphasis on one's "commitment to the bit" remains an important component of hyperstition, blurring the lines between theory and praxis, and truth and falsity. The example demonstrates that hyperstitional communication requires both a theory of network culture and epistemology that recognizes the collapse of rationalist facticity and a praxis that remains committed to the bit, even in the act of theorizing. Citing the faith in alt-right meme magic, Robert Cabrales argues that "in order to accelerate the NRx political idea, Neo-Reactionaries have begun to employ Hyperstitional technologies as a form of Right-Wing digital Esoterrorism."<sup>63</sup> This suggests that neoreactionary communication places mythic significance in shitposting, turning it into a quasi-religious gesture that unlocks hyperstitional dynamics.

To adequately understand the role that hyperstition plays in online communication theorists must attend to possible misinterpretations of the concept or misjudgments of its consequences. First, even though hyperstition can only be sustained under conditions of propagated unbelief rather than nonbelief, this does not necessarily imply that those trafficking in hyperstitional communication *need to be* personally devoted to the mythic outside that they conjure. "As with mediums and evangelicals, their own belief is a lot less important than how their actions can stoke and exaggerate the belief of others. In channeling *collective* belief, they have all the power to make that which they themselves

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Elio Cabrales, "The Hyperstitional Philosophy of Time-Travel Cybernetics: Theosophy, the CCRU, and Black-Box Poiesis," *Plutonics Journal* 14 (March 2021): 30. See also, Christopher Partridge, "Esoterrorism and the wrecking of civilization: Genesis P-Orridge and the rise of industrial Paganism," in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing, 2013), 189-212.

don't believe in become real (or actual) regardless.”<sup>64</sup> Second, just because a particular outgrowth or impact of alt-right communication employed hyperstitional dynamics, that does not mean those rhetorical consequences are necessarily correlated with the vision of Outsideness that drove such meme magic. For example, Cabrales claims that Trump's election was a product of these reactionary feedback-loops which were fueled by a collective unbelief in the supposed opposition of fiction and reality: “to bring about Trump's presidency, the Alt-Right employed a series of Hyperstitional operations and technologies in order to establish not the Fictioned endpoint of Trump's election, but a digital network of occultural control-mechanisms which could achieve this end.”<sup>65</sup> However, Colquhoun has pushed back on the suggestion that Trump's election itself should be considered hyperstitional, because his rise represented merely an internal shift within dominant power, not the intrusion of an outside force:

...this new — or rather “alt” — trajectory is still, notably, internal to the dominant infrastructures of the Western world. This is to say that Trump's election was a *relative* trauma; a “fiction” *explicitly* for the post-Obama left, exposing their entrenched disbelief in any alternatives, whether of a positive *or* a negative nature. However, one side's win over another is not, in itself, a hyperstition. As Iris Carter tells us, hyperstitions “are not representations, neither disinformation nor mythology”; they are not the product of ‘fake news’ and propaganda because they “cannot be judged true or false.” All Trump's presidency has done is rupture a hegemony that many did not know existed: the realism of progressive politics; the “realistic” belief that things will, always, eventually, get better.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Colquhoun, “Hype(rstition) and Unbelief.”

<sup>65</sup> Cabrales, “The Hyperstitional Philosophy...,” 31.

<sup>66</sup> Colquhoun, “Hyper / stition.”

If we were to parse the two claims of Colquhoun and Cabrales, we would conclude that while Trump's election is certainly a result of neoreactionary memetic hyperstition, it does not exemplify the vision of the Outside that NRx exalts. While Trump functions as an effective vehicle for propagating a particular disaffected cruelty, these seeds of aspirational nihilism cannot be cultivated into a neoreactionary future unless they maintain an affective connection to such an Outside.

Discerning the role of Outsideness in neoreactionary communication—and hyperstition more broadly—requires a recognition that accelerationism is the phenomenon that hyperstitional futurism both imagines and calls into being. This means that the conception of the Outside drawn upon by left or right accelerationists must correspond to their interpretation of where an exit to the present order can be located. It is therefore important to identify the shared assumptions of left and right accelerationism, so that their point of divergence can be more clearly grasped. O'Sullivan provides a brief summary of Marx's *Grundrisse*:

It is in this text, to simplify drastically, that we find one of Marx's important arguments about the contradictions of capitalism: the idea that fixed capital, in the guise of machines, necessarily reduces labour time (in order that increasing surplus value might be extracted), but in so doing allows the worker more time to be directly involved in the productive process, not as a cog in the machine but as directly producing their own life. Indeed, the machine (and Marx includes in this definition science and reason), in freeing the worker from a certain kind of labour, itself produces the specifically social individual (in terms of an individual with certain knowledges, psychic competences and so forth), and with that, we might say, it has despite itself brought about the conditions to end the worker's alienation. It is this idea – that from within capitalism and through machinic development comes emancipation – that is a corner stone for both left and right accelerationism.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> O'Sullivan, "The Missing Subject..."

Thus, the central theoretical antagonism between right and left accelerationism concerns whether exit *originates from* or *is impeded by* capital accumulation. Consequently, the way the right and left figure the Outside in their hyperstitions—and what they even consider the Outside to be in the first place—influences whether the future that is fictioned into existence embraces or rejects the powers of capital. It is important to note that “accelerationism describes both a neutral phenomenon and the theoretical/political orientation in response to this neutral phenomenon.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, modern culture exists in the shadow of the sociopolitical consequences of acceleration, and accelerationism argues that such conditions ought to be exacerbated such that intrusions of the Outside are able to catalyze mass-scale transformation. Colquhoun is referring to this first sense of the term when he contends that “accelerationism is, in this sense, nothing more than a view of modernity — the very *feeling* of modernity, even.”<sup>69</sup> Because “hyperstition is now a weaponized actuality for both the Left and the Far-Right,”<sup>70</sup> it is incumbent upon rhetoricians and other critical media theorists to ascertain how this feeling of modernity is perceived by each political antagonist.

The theoretical divergences between left and right accelerationism shape how each side construes the inherent forms of unbelief and incommensurability that affectively structure the modern subject’s relationship to the present order. Because of the capacity for hyperstition to redirect the course of reality, both the political debates and

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<sup>68</sup> Anonymous, “The Dark Insurrection: Supremacismo Meltdown,” 2018, <http://cs.gettysburg.edu/~duncjo01/assets/writings/library/pdfs/The%20Dark%20Insurrection%20-%20Supremacismo%20Meltdown.pdf>.

<sup>69</sup> Colquhoun, “A U/Acc Primer.”

<sup>70</sup> Cabrales, “The Hyperstitional Philosophy...,” 36.

the meme wars waged between these divergent ideologies possess the ability to alter the functioning of acceleration itself. “The Reader as hyperstitional entity,” O’Sullivan argues, “helps construct the object/narrative of ‘accelerationism.’”<sup>71</sup> Primarily, this helps to determine what system hyperstition casts unbelief upon and accelerationism seeks to destroy. Colquhoun instructs that “there is a single observation at the root of all accelerationism: the generation of alternatives within a system is an innately entropic process.”<sup>72</sup> Emphasis on decay, entropy, and disruption recalls that accelerationism chiefly concerns deterritorialization. Hyperstition plays a key role in this process as it “*de*-territorializes the semiotic consistency, realizing virtual entities and actualizing interventions of new and subversive counter-territories within - or at the expense of - the dominant narrative.”<sup>73</sup> Land concurs with this analysis, declaring that “deterritorialization is the only thing accelerationism has ever really talked about.”<sup>74</sup> The key distinction between right and left, here, concerns whether such deterritorialization is poised to break up capitalism as a territorializing force or whether it sides with capitalism in the conversion of all substance to commodity relations. For Land and right accelerationists, “the line of deterritorialization corresponds to uncompensated capitalism.”<sup>75</sup> This is

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<sup>71</sup> O’Sullivan, “The Missing Subject...”

<sup>72</sup> Matt Colquhoun, “Accelerationism and the Christchurch Shooter,” *Xenogothic* (blog), March 20, 2019, <https://xenogothic.com/2019/03/20/accelerationism-and-the-christchurch-shooter>.

<sup>73</sup> Cabrales, “The Hyperstitional Philosophy...,” 26.

<sup>74</sup> Nick Land, “A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism,” *Jacobite*, May 25, 2017, <https://jacobitemag.com/2017/05/25/a-quick-and-dirty-introduction-to-accelerationism>.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

because he believes that capital is the only agent with the power to accelerate the modern system to its collapse. He derives this argument from an accelerationist reading of the *Grundrisse*, where Marx advises that even if forces of production and social relations seem like they operate on a limited foundation, “in fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high.”<sup>76</sup> Right accelerationists read this passage as a Marxist defense of technological automation and a rebuttal to the claim that capitalism possesses an outer limit for expansion and growth. A passage from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* builds on this claim:

But which is the revolutionary path? Is there one?—To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution”? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market, of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the flows are not yet deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to “accelerate the process,” as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet.<sup>77</sup>

This call for radical thought to operate in the direction of the market and “accelerate the process” is at the core of contemporary debates regarding accelerationism. This is why Land insists that “there is no distinction to be made between the destruction of capitalism and its intensification. The auto-destruction of capitalism is what capitalism is.”<sup>78</sup> The

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<sup>76</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, [1939] 1993), 706.

<sup>77</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Penguin Books, [1972] 1977), 239-240.

<sup>78</sup> Land, “A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction...”

contention that the only way out of capitalism is *through* causes Land to be skeptical of an inherent difference between left and right acceleration. If “the death of capital is less a prophecy than a machine part,”<sup>79</sup> this suggests that the accumulative forces driving political economy are irreducible to such a systemic configuration.

Accelerationists on both right and left premise their theory on a mythos of the Outside that infiltrates the present from a position beyond human representation, laying waste to the outmoded sociopolitical formations that cross its path. For right accelerationists, this Outside is the libidinal drive for capital accumulation. Land labels this “machinic desire,” the expansion of which “rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities, and hacks through security apparatuses, tracking a soulless tropism to zero control.”<sup>80</sup> Such a relentless process of mass quantification, informatic capture, and virtualization reveals that “what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligence space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy’s resources.”<sup>81</sup> This contention is what separates Land’s affirmation of capitalism from that of traditional libertarianism. Libertarians frame economic competition as an innately human process, emblematic of the subject as individualist, rational, and entrepreneurial—*homo oeconomicus*. But for Land, humanism is just another morality play that must be smashed with Nietzschean iconoclastic fervor. Rather than viewing the human through the prism of subjective

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<sup>79</sup> Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Falmouth: Urbanomic and Sequence Press, [2011] 2012), 266.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

individualism, he moves in the opposite direction by imagining the machinic liquidation of humanity by capital. Alex Williams notes the uniquely misanthropic nature of this philosophy:

In this visioning of capital, even the human itself can eventually be discarded as mere drag to an abstract planetary intelligence rapidly constructing itself from the bricolaged fragments of former civilizations. As Land has it, through the acceleration of global capitalism the human will be dissolved in a technological apotheosis, effectively experiencing a species-wide suicide as the ultimate stimulant head rush.<sup>82</sup>

While to many, such an eventuality sounds like a horrific dystopia, the impersonality and nihilistic release offered by such a politics is attractive to those on the reactionary fringe. It appeals to the mythos-deficit endemic to the modern digitized age. The left must focus their energy on constructing a mythos that can communicate its own Outside and thereby effectuate its own exit.<sup>83</sup> As Mark “Fisher once said, capitalism can’t be voted out. It takes a libidinal usurping — a change of *mind*; a fundamental change of the subject hardwired into maintaining the status quo — to change the system.”<sup>84</sup> Rhetoricians, media theorists, and anyone interested in evolving conflicts within politics and philosophy would do well to recognize the importance of mythos.

While Nick Land might not truly represent the vanguard of alt-right ideology and very few far-right personas claim to be right accelerationists, attending to the rhetorical circulation of neoreactionary mythos can give researchers insight into the affective forces that structure the broader right. Some have argued that neoreaction has had a diminished

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<sup>82</sup> Alex Williams, “Escape Velocities,” *e-flux* no. 43 (June 2013).

<sup>83</sup> In the conclusion, there will be more discussion of what this may look like.

<sup>84</sup> Matt Colquhoun, “Do U (Even) /Acc, Bro?,” *Xenogothic* (blog), February 25, 2019, <https://xenogothic.com/2019/02/25/do-u-even-acc-bro>.



influence on the alt-right since 2013<sup>85</sup> or 2015<sup>86</sup> and may be disliked by other factions within it. However, the affective and politico-philosophical structures of aspirational nihilism still provide the foundation for these other groups' coherence, organizing a broader reactosphere. These various tendencies may act in divergent and even sometimes oppositional directions but they are mobilized by an underlying affective wellspring that steers the sum of their parts toward the racial-capitalist telos of dark enlightenment philosophy. For this reason, I concur with Alexander Means and Graham B. Slater that "to dismiss NRx as a fringe movement with little bearing on contemporary cultural politics is to leave progressive scholarship and social criticism exposed to irrelevance, or worse, a devastating and resounding defeat."<sup>87</sup> While many could have reservations about centering study on such a problematic and intentionally provocative thinker such as Land, the left must also recognize him as one of the most formidable intellectual adversaries it must contend with. Roger Burrows makes three persuasive arguments that justify an in-depth study and deconstruction of Land's corpus:

...the interested reader is likely wondering why they should concern themselves with what, on the face of it, is a marginal likely fascist, 'post-libertarian futurism' existing outwith the domain assumptions of most academic protocols. There are, perhaps, at least three reasons why it might

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<sup>85</sup> "[Neoreaction] has been declared dead endlessly since at least 2013." Ratcliffe.

<sup>86</sup> "The NeoReactionary movement lasted between 2007 and 2015, before subsequently being eaten up by the Alt-Right's more populist readings of Right-Wing thought. The Alt-Right and their more fascist impulses were easier to share with the general public, in contrast to the more intellectual and elitist aspects of the Alternative Right that the NeoReactionaries favoured." Andrew W Jones, *The Kids are Alt-Right: The Intellectual Origins of the Alt-Right*, PhD diss. (York University, August 2019): 194.

<sup>87</sup> Alexander Means and Graham B. Slater, "The dark mirror of capital: on post-neoliberal formations and the future of education," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 40, no. 2 (January 2019): 169.

be worth persevering. First, the intellectual and political trajectory that Land has taken is a remarkable one; he is widely viewed as being a key figure in the development of contemporary philosophy and his presence continues to find a resonance – even when it is forcibly objected to – in the work of a number of otherwise progressive thinkers. Second, and relatedly, the manner in which Land uses the work of some continental philosophers – Deleuze and [Guattari], Lyotard and Manuel DeLanda in particular – offers an insight into the immense conceptual and political flexibility that such influential analytic approaches seem to be able to tolerate. Third, and most importantly, whatever the analytic worth(lessness) of NRx philosophy it is important to recognise its ideological function and the powerful actors supporting its propagation; not least those investing in myriad technologies in Silicon Valley who have seemingly been convinced by Land’s idea of *hyperstition* – the creation of fictional entities that can make themselves real.<sup>88</sup>

Each of these contentions is worthy of sustained attention: Land has been able to twist a number of prominent continental philosophers’ work in ways that might make them turn in their graves, and a great deal of post-Marxist and accelerationist political philosophy would look substantially different or arguably not even exist without his work. But it is the final one that is the most important—the ideological function of the dark enlightenment lies in the intrigue surrounding its hyperstitional dimensions. It is time for scholars to ask why a continental philosopher with a niche expertise in Bataille, Deleuze, and Nietzsche has generated a cult-following that persists two decades after he left the formal academy. Robin Mackay has cited “groups of students in their 20s who re-enact our [CCRU’s] practices.”<sup>89</sup> From personal experience, I know that policy debate is one subculture that houses many of these students, and the recognition of the right-wing

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<sup>88</sup> Roger Burrows, “Urban Futures and The Dark Enlightenment: A Brief Guide for the Perplexed,” in *Philosophy and the City: Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Perspectives*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Keith Jacobs (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., March 2019), 247-248.

<sup>89</sup> Beckett.

tendencies of Land’s philosophy has only been recent (if it has happened at all). The anonymous writers of the #AltWoke Manifesto<sup>90</sup> have noticed this trend:

To Nick Land’s credit, what he’s always been good at doing, as Reza Negarestani said, is being able to surround himself with young people, because he understands where traditional thought kind of falls short. The closest thing to that energetic, libidinal, attractive thing that Marxism had was Slavoj Zizek, but he pales in comparison to Nick Land. The imagery is his skill, while the left is very dull. If you wanna go back to the 1800[s] and talk about Marx it probably sounds like sci-fi. It sounds strange now. I believe that most people who read Nick Land don’t even understand what they read.<sup>91</sup>

What seems like an offhand comment at the conclusion of this quote—that the readers of Land often don’t need to grasp his writing to be enthralled and mobilized by the libidinal energy of his mythos—is a crucial insight that testifies to the power of mythos in accelerationist rhetoric. If “Gen Y2K [...] the (post)Deleuzian generation” is attracted to the legacy of the CCRU or the present writings of Nick Land, it is because of their mythos. Hyperstitional imagery provides a potential window to the Outside, an exit sign from modernity’s false promises. And Land’s own place within this mythic narrative is

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<sup>90</sup> These writers exemplify what they term “HLAx” or “Hyper-Left Accelerationism.” More focus will be placed upon them in the concluding chapter, but it is worth noting that many of their interpretations are not universally regarded among the accelerationist left, as some including Coluqhoun have expressed exhaustion at some of their theoretical and aesthetic choices. This is the self-description they offer at the end of the manifesto: “#Alt-Woke Manifesto is the work of ANON. We are a collective of “Other.” Some of us are sex workers, some immigrants, many of us queer. There are even a few privileged white fucks amongst us. Nevertheless, ANON is largely the work and brainchild of People of Color (PoC). Our social disciplines are as varied as our identities, from journalists to dominatrixes. ANON are the intellectual cousins of #BlackLivesMatter divorced from liberalism.” Anonymous, “#AltWoke Manifesto.”

<sup>91</sup> Anonymous, “Tagging Aesthetics #6: Memetic Representation. Interview with Anon,” interview by Nicola Bozzi, *Digicult*, October 21, 2019, <http://digicult.it/internet/tagging-aesthetics-6-memetic-representation-interview-with-anon>.

itself significant. Kodwo Eshun—another member of the CCRU credited with developing much of the contemporary theory of Afrofuturism—once asked: “Is Nick Land the most important British philosopher of the last 20 years?”<sup>92</sup> O’Sullivan offers a piece of insight on this topic that I believe uniquely demonstrates the importance of hyperstition and mythos to the study of rhetoric and argumentation. He notes that while the racism of neoreactionaries is obvious and detestable, as an adversary,

...Land himself cannot be dismissed so easily. This is not only because of the (granted unlikely) possibility that he is writing via a series of parodic personae (‘The proliferation of “carriers” – “Who says this?” – multiplying perspectives and narrative fragments’), nor that his writings evidence a certain philosophical rigor and persistence often lacking in the humanities (he does make his case as it were), but more simply because his writings have a kind of libidinal charge – an affect – that is infecting a new generation of thinkers. Indeed, in this respect, something carries over from the CCRU days and Land’s writing continue to operate as a dangerous transmissible meme. Put bluntly, there is something compelling about the mythos Land deploys, even if one disagrees with the politics. More generally we have proof here that mythos, including the mythos of Land himself, is as powerful as any reasoned argument (or, indeed, rational programme). It seems to me that there is important work to be done in relation to this terrain – where myth – and fictioning – switches from simply an aesthetic supplement to playing a very real political role (which, of course, is its hyperstitional aspect).<sup>93</sup>

In order to conceptualize how political subjects become enamored with this mythos which runs from the CCRU to NRx, it is necessary to return to Land’s work at Warwick University. Doing so will help us to understand how hyperstitions must envelop the authors themselves within their theory-fiction.

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<sup>92</sup> Mark Fisher, “Nick Land: Mind Games,” *Dazed*, June 1, 2011, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/10459/1/nick-land-mind-games>.

<sup>93</sup> O’Sullivan, “Acceleration, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science,” 29-30.

“CCRU does not, has not, and will never exist”<sup>94</sup>

Unfolding a thorough map of the prehistory of the CCRU and the concept of hyperstition requires an acknowledgement of the nonlinear nature of accelerationism’s intellectual development. Vincent Garton—a prominent figure within the unconditional acceleration (u/acc) landscape—has criticized the attempt to identify accelerationism or the CCRU as simply a variant of Deleuzianism or Marxism rather than a source of signal from the Outside that encompasses and exceeds both of these intellectual formations. Furthermore, various accelerationist tendencies have persisted in opposition or without any connection to these ideologies. I quote at length because this analysis speaks to the source of affective mythos that my rhetorical analysis aims to ascertain:

To trace the genealogy of accelerationism is thus fraught with problems. On the most superficial level, accelerationism has existed for about a decade. At its unspoken core, it is impossibly ancient. Different focuses will yield wildly divergent results. No doubt an article on ‘accelerationism’ in some distant future edition of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* would take care to highlight the term’s formulation by Noys, having traced the concern with ‘acceleration’ through obvious references back to Deleuze and Guattari, and from there to Nietzsche. It would look to the term’s adoption and disavowal by different groups on left and right in the mid to late 2010s. As an exercise in etymology this would be interesting enough; as a genealogical investigation it would be disastrous. Accelerationism is not a specific reading of Nietzsche any more than capitalism is a reading of Smith. A Marxian accelerationist does not need to have read a single page of *A Thousand Plateaus* to remain an accelerationist. Similar conclusions—similar sentiments—have been expressed from traditions seemingly almost entirely unaware of each other.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is best not to think of accelerationism, in the first instance, as a set of ideas at all. Land has described what he terms ‘libidinal materialism’ as more a ‘jangling of the nerves’ than a set of doctrines. Accelerationism is not identical with libidinal materialism, but the same observation seems abundantly to apply

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<sup>94</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, back cover.

to it. With the appropriate historical sensibility, modulations of accelerationism soon well up in widely divergent contexts, all over the world, advancing along the storm-front of industrial capitalism. It emerges as a sensation of acceleration characteristic of modernity itself, expressed in different ways by Marx, Hirato, Baudrillard, and plenty others. The drive to posit this expression in specifically philosophical form is perhaps peculiarly influenced by Western tradition. The sensation itself is not. [...]

This indeed, may lie at the heart of the difficulties with identifying a pure and spotless ‘concept of acceleration’. The difference species of acceleration—whether self-conscious or not—are not deductive representations of a single concept. Their core appears to be something more fundamental—a mode of preconscious interaction that eludes exhaustive conceptual codification. The search for a genealogy of accelerationism rapidly becomes social, economic, physiological, geotraumatic. The origin of this signal recedes beyond our grasp. When it is written, then, the intellectual history and genealogy of accelerationism must look beyond the contingencies of its present expressions. To have any value, it must tap into the subterranean current of communication itself.<sup>95</sup>

As is hopefully clear from the specificity of the excerpt, if a rhetorical analysis of neoreaction like the one I have written so far were to stick to a surface-level-reading of accelerationism and its prevailing protagonists (Noys; D&G; l/acc vs r/acc; etc.) without directly attuning myself to the subterranean signals of the Outside that run through communication, then that rhetorical analysis would have failed. For this reason, investigating the circulation of CCRU concepts and neoreactionary ideas cannot be bound by directly attributable connections or ideological consistency of doctrines between figureheads in the reactosphere. Instead, rhetoricians must “tap into the subterranean current of communication itself” by identifying the hyperstitional dissemination of a structure of affective mythos that has now been labeled “acceleration.”

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<sup>95</sup> Vincent Garton, “Excavating the origins of accelerationism.” *Cyclonotrope* (blog), July 22, 2017. <https://cyclonotrope.wordpress.com/2017/07/22/excavating-the-origins-of-accelerationism>.

Theorists must also center the role of hyperstition in hijacking platform dynamics to intensify fictional self-actualization even in the face of relative marginality. Doing so is not only methodologically sound; it is tactically advantageous. Since virtually everyone in the academy finds themselves on the wrong side of the neoreactionary class position (being part of the Cathedral and all) those who consider themselves members of the left ought to realize that upgrading their conceptual toolkit is the only way to avoid being outflanked by an energetic reactionary subculture.

Therefore, any analysis that attempts to chronicle the denouement of hyperstitional theory must recognize that many accelerationist writers have attempted to fiction themselves into their own theoretical interventions. The CCRU was the biggest culprit here. From their inception, they blurred the lines between truth and falsity, confounding even the narrative of their own emergence and discontinuation: “Ccru retrochronically triggers itself from October 1995, using a UK University as a temporary habitat.”<sup>96</sup> The unit’s own institutional history is relatively short-lived: Warwick University intended for the CCRU to function as an interdisciplinary alternative to the philosophy and social sciences departments and they hired Sadie Plant—a pioneering cyberfeminist<sup>97</sup> and expert on the history of situationism<sup>98</sup>—to lead the group. Unfortunately, she quit in March 1997, after just around two years, leaving the paperwork unfiled and relegating the CCRU to an unofficial entity that would soon become obsolete;

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<sup>96</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> See, Sadie Plant, *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997).

<sup>98</sup> See, Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992).

and yet, when many of the CCRU alumni tell the story, they speak of institutional silencing and ivory tower postmodern experts, embarrassed by the lawless eccentricity of this new breed of fanatical thinking, but patient to “wait for it to die rather than to actively kill it.”<sup>99</sup> Unlike Plant, Land was already working at Warwick, producing boundary-breaking scholarship. In 1992, his only monograph, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, portended his interest in inhuman forces steering the course of history. What marketed itself as “the first book in English to respond to Bataille’s writings” was, in actuality, a surprisingly rigorous argument that Nietzsche’s neurosyphilis was the best model for Bataillean nihilism and thus must be performatively inhabited by theorists: “Bataille is less an ‘interesting writer’ than a loathesome vice, and to be influenced by him is less a cultural achievement than a virological horror; far closer to the spasmodic rot of untreated syphilis than to the enrichment of an intellect.”<sup>100</sup> The following year, he published “Machinic desire,” a groundbreaking essay that blended *Bladerunner* and *Anti-Oedipus* and laid out his theory of pro-market Deleuzianism.

These texts motivated many aspiring academics to come to Warwick, in the hope of studying with the CCRU and being at the cutting-edge of postmodern and poststructuralist theory. Each of the CCRU students would go on to have successful and wildly divergent careers of their own, after the fact. Steve Goodman—who would later

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<sup>99</sup> Simon Reynolds, “Renegade Academia: The Cybernetic Culture Research Unit,” *Energy Flash* (blog), 1999, <http://energyflashbysimonreynolds.blogspot.com/2009/11/renegade-academia-cybernetic-culture.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992): 178.



become a music theorist<sup>101</sup> and the owner of record label, Hyberdub that featured culturally explosive underground artists like Burial, the Spaceape, and DJ Rashad—was one of these students. He and Fisher were each not too enthralled by *The Thirst for Annihilation*—Goodman observed that it “read like a writer trying to liberate themselves from the shackles of being trained in academic theory/philosophy”<sup>102</sup>—and instead found their way to Land’s work through his assortment of essays. For Fisher, “Machine desire” was his breakthrough: “there was a great deal of cyber-theory around in the 1990s but none of it seemed to come from inside the machines – which is to say, outside us – in the way that Land’s did. [...] Theory wasn’t being ‘applied’ here; it was being plugged in. The writing felt as if it came from somewhere real, somewhere exterior, rather than from a psychological interiority.”<sup>103</sup> For Goodman, his eureka moment came when he found Land’s article “Cyberspace Anarchitecture as Jungle-War,” which “had nothing in particular to do with jungle music in a literal sense, but the more I read it, the more this abstract landscape that it seemed to be mapping was exactly the same one created by the music.”<sup>104</sup>

It seemed that Land’s writings had a magnetic pull to them during this part of the ‘90s. Two of his former students—Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier—later edited a collection of his essays and briefly outlined the cyberscape envisioned by Land’s corpus:

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<sup>101</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Technologies of Lived Abstraction (Cambridge: MIT Press, November 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Fisher, “Nick Land.”

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

“advanced technologies invoke ancient entities; the human voice disintegrates into the howl of cosmic trauma; civilization hurls towards an artificial death. Sinister musical subcultures are allied with morbid cults, rogue AIs are pursued into labyrinthine crypts by Turing cops, and Europe mushrooms into a paranoid laboratory in a global cyberpositive circuit that reaches infinite density in the year 2012, flipping modernity over into whatever has been piloting it from the far side of the approaching singularity.”<sup>105</sup> As McKenzie Wark would later state, “this is the prose that attracts cults.”<sup>106</sup> And this prose didn’t only attract cult members, but it also was firmly embedded in a rigorous study of the history of occultism. CCRU alumni now populate significant territories of academic and cultural relevance. Fisher remarks that “Land’s influence is also now infesting the philosophy departments which tended to scorn it in the rare cases they were aware of it. Some of the philosophers at the forefront of the most exciting movement in current philosophy, ‘speculative realism’ – Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant – studied with Land, and their work is still marked by their encounter. The re-propagation of Land’s work via speculative realism has led younger theorists such as Ben Woodard, author of the forthcoming *Slime Dynamics*, which crossbreeds philosophy, science and horror fiction, back to Land.”<sup>107</sup> Eshun, another alum and a foundational Afrofuturist thinker, understood the importance of fictioning to the overall landscape of CCRU research, explaining that “I’ve stopped calling myself a writer, for the book I’m just going to call

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<sup>105</sup> Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, “Editors’ Introduction,” in Land, *Fanged Noumena*, 1.

<sup>106</sup> McKenzie Wark, “On Nick Land,” *Verso Blog*, June 20, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3284-on-nick-land>.

<sup>107</sup> Fisher, “Nick Land.”

myself a concept engineer. What we're doing is engineering, is grasping fictions, grasping concepts, grasping hallucinations from our own area, translating them into another one, mixing them, and seeing where we go with them."<sup>108</sup> This last comment seems to highlight the common point of attraction for such students: a critical energy that blurred falsity and veracity, tapping into a host of inhuman forces sourced from the Outside.

Carefully articulating the paramountcy of Outsideness within the CCRU's expounding of hyperstition provides a window into a rhetorical landscape galvanized by the power of mythos. An exhaustive account of the various sorcerous entities and occult rituals documented, inhabited, and enacted by the Warwickians would be beyond the scope of this thesis, but a conscientious examination of their theories of hyperstitional engineering contributes a valuable critique of modern systems of rationalist rhetorical study. As noted above, hyperstition is defined in the CCRU Glossary, and on their website, it is broken up into four parts:

1. Element of effective culture that makes itself real.
2. Fictional quantity functional as a time-traveling device.
3. Coincidence intensifier.
4. Call to the Old Ones.<sup>109</sup>

The future comes together through fictional quantities in the present that attain value as effective cultural elements, enabling a positive feedback of coincidental actualization.

But the reference to "the Old Ones" remains elusive if the reader doesn't have a background in gothic literature or occult studies, this being an intentional reference to

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<sup>108</sup> Kodwo Eshun, "Kodwo Eshun: An Interview," interview by Romi Crawford, *Video Data Bank*, November 2001, <http://www.vdb.org/titles/kodwo-eshun-interview-0>.

<sup>109</sup> CCRU, "Syzygy," *Cybernetic culture research unit*, accessed March 23, 2021, <http://www.ccru.net/syzygy.htm>.

Lovecraft's supernatural pantheon. While the centrality of Lovecraftian mythos has profound consequences for the racial politics of right accelerationism that will be explored in just a few pages, I direct attention to the fourth subpoint here because it substantiates the prominence of esoteric philosophical methods within the CCRU.

The rabbit hole of esoterica innate to CCRU theorization begs that scrutiny be turned to the collective's *other* definition of hyperstition. Whereas the more-commonly-cited four-part definition is fairly bare-bones and lacks explication, the version posted on the *Abstract Dynamics* blog makes the collective's engrossment with hermetic practices much more evident:

Whatever its specific variants, the practice of hyperstition necessarily involves three irreducible ingredients, interlocked in a productive circuit of simultaneous, mutually stimulating tasks.

1. N u m o g r a m

Rigorous systematic unfolding of the Decimal Labyrinth and all its implexes (Zones, Currents, Gates, Lemurs, Pandemonium Matrix, Book of Paths ...) and echoes (Atlantean Cross, Decadology ...).

The methodical excavation of the occult abstract cartography intrinsic to decimal numeracy (and thus globally 'oecumenic') constitutes the first great task of hyperstition.

2. M y t h o s

Comprehensive attribution of all signal (discoveries, theories, problems and approaches) to artificial agencies, allegiances, cultures and continentities.

The proliferation of 'carriers' ("Who says this?") - multiplying perspectives and narrative fragments - produces a coherent but inherently disintegrated hyperstitional mythos while effecting a positive destruction of identity, authority and credibility.

3. U n b e l i e f

Pragmatic skepticism or constructive escape from integrated thinking and all its forms of imposed unity (religious dogma, political ideology, scientific law, common sense ...).

Each vortical sub-cycle of hyperstitional production announces itself through a communion with ‘the Thing’ coinciding with a “mystical consummation of uncertainty” or “attainment of positive unbelief.”<sup>110</sup>

Each of these interlocked ingredients aims to disrupt the epistemic dominance of rational humanism. “Numogram” reflects Land and the rest of the collective’s interest in numerological synchronicity, divine mathematics, and the hermetic qabalah<sup>111</sup>; and “unbelief” has been discussed earlier in this chapter, representing the weaponization of “pragmatic skepticism” against the rationalist myth of reality’s self-evidence. For our purposes, mythos represents the most compelling component of this tripartite circuit. The simultaneous proliferation of hyperstitional carriers (shitposters) and attribution of their immaterial digital labor (memes) to fictional entities (e.g., Pepe the frog as Kek, the Egyptian chaos god<sup>112</sup>) illustrates the self-fulfilling prophecy of anthropomorphic animacy in platform communication. But this mythic precondition also implies that agency exists primarily on the side of the artificial entities projecting this “signal.” This is one of the most fundamental tenets of Landian political philosophy: the human is but an instrument through which future forces beyond comprehension actualize themselves and the social order is merely the product of such intrusions from the Outside:

John Carpenter’s *In the Mouth of Madness* includes the (approximate) line: “I thought I was making it up, but all the time they were telling me what to write.” ‘They’ are the Old Ones (explicitly), and this line operates at an extraordinary pitch of hyperstitional intensity. From the side of the

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<sup>110</sup> CCRU, “Polytics: Elements of Hyperstition,” *Abstract Dynamics* (blog), June 7, 2004, <http://hyperstition.abstractdynamics.org/archives/006777.html>.

<sup>111</sup> For an analysis of Land’s qabbalistic numerology in the context of the computer age, see, Vincent Le, “One Two Many: On Nick Land’s Numbering Practices,” *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique* no. 37 (March 2019): 80-105.

<sup>112</sup> See, Burton.

human subject, ‘beliefs’ hyperstitionally condense into realities, but from the side of the hyperstitional object (the Old Ones), human intelligences are mere incubators through which intrusions are directed against the order of historical time. The archaic hint or suggestion is a germ or catalyst, retro-deposited out of the future along a path that historical consciousness perceives as technological progress.<sup>113</sup>

This idea that the seeds of the future are retro-deposited into the present by powers that are unimaginable to human intelligence seems like science fiction, but it’s a key philosophical axiom adopted by the CCRU.

Just as the analytical privileging of a human digital subject by media studies conceals that online agency is instead located only in the user position’s extractable data, conceptualizing hyperstition as something which humans have direct agential control over misses the important role of the Outside in generating the source of all signal. This is why Colquhoun avers that “hyperstitional fictions, then, must also be discovered. They cannot be created. We must remember that fictions are more than capable of transforming *themselves*. The best we can do is latch onto them and perhaps, embed them in our *realisms*.”<sup>114</sup> This implies that such fictions, themselves, have greater access to agency in a postmodern world than individuals.

It is here that we can also note some of the clear theoretical differences that emerge between CCRU conceptions of hyperstition and other poststructuralist theory that was prevalent at the time. Land argues,

Hyperstition can thus be understood, on the side of the subject, as a nonlinear complication of epistemology, based upon the sensitivity of the object to its postulation (although this is quite distinct from the subjectivistic or postmodern stance that dissolves the independent reality

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<sup>113</sup> Land, “Hyperstition.”

<sup>114</sup> Colquhoun, “Hyper / stition.”

of the object into cognitive or semiotic structures). The hyperstitional object is no mere figment of ‘social construction’, but it is in a very real way ‘conjured’ into being by the approach taken to it.<sup>115</sup>

This is perhaps the biggest difference between the notion of hyperstition and any similar concept prevailing in the humanities such as social constructionism, Marxist reification, or regimes of truth. All of these latter terms begin their analysis with a set of irreducibly humanist presuppositions regarding the immutability of human language, textuality, labor, or affective production, even if the theories related to such terms have made efforts to critique that humanism. Hyperstition, by contrast, intentionally deflates the importance of human agency, favoring instead an account of occultic intrusion into the order of historical time. Importantly, the “subject” of hyperstition—the human that thinks they have agency—does not necessarily need to *believe* in the Old Ones or the powers of the Outside; they need only to propagate the mytho-affective forces through dispersed social collectivity to kickstart a self-fulfilling prophecy. One could call this a kind of strategic essentialism, but such a notion still presupposes an operative distinction between truth and falsity that hyperstition replaces with a form of pragmatic skepticism dedicated to the production of positive unbelief in the present epistemic order.

The infiltration of the Outside into critical theorization detonates postmodern readings of the social construct at the same time as it reincorporates and resituates their critiques of enlightenment rationality into an inhuman genealogy of hyperstitional signals. These signals exercise subterranean influence on the social order. The CCRU modeled their engagement with postmodern theory on this doctrine of Outsideness. The critique of postmodernism’s historical nostalgia offered by Fisher and Mackay

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<sup>115</sup> Land, “Hyperstition.”

exemplifies this; they quipped that “it’s Baudrillard who is the consummate philosopher of Slacker and its correlative physical state, the lethargic couch-potato impotence, the affectless, doped tension-free of the terminally defeated.”<sup>116</sup> While it is arguably an unfair reading to accuse the philosopher who said “we must move quicker than reality”<sup>117</sup> of couch potato theory, the vicious deterritorialization of Baudrillard’s methodological landscape was part of the CCRU’s performative mission. Their hyperstitional praxis cracked Baudrillard’s corpus open and stripped it for parts, making off with concepts that can be further weaponized, such as his critique of “integral reality.”<sup>118</sup> The CCRU’s relentlessness was also demonstrated in a tale recounted by Kodwo Eshun, in which the group’s members would attend the academic events of non-members “in order to disrupt, undermine and ridicule.... They'd get into pitched battles with Derrideans!”<sup>119</sup> The collective was entirely ambivalent about maintaining faithful or doctrinally-accurate readings of the privileged philosophical canon of the day; they were intent on upending everything they came in contact with. Many have lambasted the CCRU—and subsequently, Nick Land and NRx—for ignoring Deleuze and Guattari’s warning that unmitigated deterritorialization is not pure freedom and always is paired with a form of reterritorialization. They admonished accelerationism for celebrating the creative

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<sup>116</sup> Mark Fisher and Robin Mackay, “Pomophobia,” *Abstract Culture Swarm 1* (1997), [http://www.ccru.net/swarm1/1\\_pomo.htm](http://www.ccru.net/swarm1/1_pomo.htm).

<sup>117</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, [1995] 2008): 100.

<sup>118</sup> See, Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Berg Publishers, [2004] 2005): 17-24.

<sup>119</sup> Reynolds.



destruction and experimental death instinct of *Anti-Oedipus* but ignoring the cautionary lessons of *A Thousand Plateaus* that such a line of flight can become a fascist line of death once it is infected with the passion of abolition, marshalling “*a war machine that no longer had anything but war as its object* and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction.”<sup>120</sup> This rendering of fascism seems extraordinarily on the nose as a diagnosis of Landian right accelerationism. The notion of a self-perpetuating war-machine resembles the rendering of the mythic force of Gnon, which holds that “war is the last forcing of existence (i.e., selection for ‘intelligence’), and thus war is God (Gnon).”<sup>121</sup> But despite the veracity of this analysis, it’s relatively inoperative as a critique of accelerationism. The eventuality where capitalism renders its human hosts obsolete is not a secret part of Land’s philosophy; it’s the entire bit. So, despite any admonitions about Telegram 71 offered in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “Land gradually abandoned as too-conservative even Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘cautious’ division of capitalism into a ‘good’ destratifying or deterritorialising side and the ‘bad’ mechanisms of reterritorialisation.”<sup>122</sup> Right accelerationists are thus, perfectly willing to accept the possibility of certain forms of reterritorialization—for example, the restratifying effects of racial capitalism in producing systems of political and economic apartheid—so long as

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<sup>120</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1980] 1987): 231.

<sup>121</sup> Peter Wolfendale (@deontologistics), “If you’ve ever read Blood Meridian, the Judge’s speech is perhaps the best encapsulation of Land’s late philosophy: war is the last forcing of existence (i.e., selection for ‘intelligence’), and thus war is God (Gnon). Land sees himself as a cosmic anarchist of sorts,” Twitter, November 18, 2019, 1:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/deontologistics/status/1196507006712107008>.

<sup>122</sup> Mackay.

they still exacerbate the fissures in society and catalyze auto-productive cultural feedback-loops.

The problem with merely ethical critiques of neoreaction and philosophical rebuttals to Land's reading of Deleuze and Guattari is that they fail to challenge the right accelerationist interpretation of the Outside as constructing itself in and as capital accumulation. One can decry the obviously genocidal consequences of accelerating racial capitalism or accuse NRx of embarking on a fascist passion of abolition; but if Land's company retains a monopoly on the source of inhuman signal, then such assessments *do not matter*, because they are incapable of tapping into the fount of hyperstitional mythos. Garton confutes those that suggest Land is insufficiently Deleuzian:

...the CCRU were competent and interesting investigators of Deleuze and Guattari precisely because they did *not* assume the posture of historicists recovering what these writers actually thought, or of scholars contributing a new and convincing reading to a burgeoning field of scholarship. The qwertotopological decoding of *A Thousand Plateaus* and Barker's geotraumatic investigations into the screaming of the earth were never supposed to unravel a fine jigsaw of meanings artistically assembled in the 1970s by a French philosopher and a psychoanalyst. They highlighted signals whose transmission the two men could only barely have recognised. In this sense, the historicist critique of CCRU's 'reading of Deleuze and Guattari' misses the point. Clearly they are not simply unconnected, but too strong a preference for exposition leads academics down crumbling corridors to the charnel house of interpretive scholarship. Unleashing ideas—intercepting signals—demands a different approach. In the course of the history of ideas, reshaping and novelty have always trumped antiquarian precision.<sup>123</sup>

Rhetoric can only mount a challenge to right accelerationism if it abandons this quest for canonical rigor and instead investigates the affective signal neoreaction attributes to the Outside. Effectively forestalling the hyperstitional actualization of a right accelerationist

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<sup>123</sup> Garton.

future requires latching onto a different source of mythos, which can disrupt NRx's sociotechnical hegemony. Such an interruption cannot take the form of simply a moral critique, but rather must identify the modes of reactionary discourse that forestall a deeper relationship to an (ostensibly Leftist?) Outside. The methodological dilemma that must be avoided here is the assumption that subjects—especially academic theorists—can author the political virtualities of the Outside in advance of their making. Theorists that are serious about fighting on this terrain must recognize that “‘hyperstition’ is not something you do but rather something which you make the best of.”<sup>124</sup> This implies that effective analysis of the CCRU's hyperstitional praxis concentrates on the esoteric mythos that it appears to propagate, rather than painstakingly reconstructing the part of the library that it pulls from.

The CCRU earned the reputation that it did because it produced a mesmeric culture of interdisciplinary criticism that rendered theory strange to itself through appeals to the Outside. They listed a litany of preoccupations—“cinema, complexity, currencies, dance music, e-cash, encryption, feminism, fiction, images, inorganic life, jungle, markets, matrices, microbiotics, multimedia, networks, numbers, perception, replication, sex, simulation, sound, telecommunications, textiles, texts, trade, video, virtuality, war”<sup>125</sup>—and yet it's important to remember that they were not focused on any individual topic nor combination thereof, but rather the underlying energetic force that pulsed through their investigations of all of them. If there was one unique way that the CCRU built such subterranean notoriety, it was “an ultra-vivid amalgam of text, sound, and

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<sup>124</sup> Colquhoun, “Hyper / stition.”

<sup>125</sup> Beckett.

visuals designed to ‘libidinise’ that most juiceless of academic events, the lecture.”<sup>126</sup> Indeed, the way that Warwick soon became a space for myriad pieces of indulgent performance art was not likely anticipated by the administration upon the Unit’s founding. Nevertheless, in the CCRU’s short tenure, it developed a signature style of multimedia presentation. The piece that most clearly exemplifies the cultural energy that ran through the collective was Nick Land’s text “Meltdown,”<sup>127</sup> presented at the 1994 Virtual Futures conference at Warwick. I would personally advise everyone that reads this thesis (especially if the theory stuff has been getting heavy) to take a few minutes at this point and watch some of this exceptionally peculiar audiovisual performance.<sup>128</sup>

Rather than simply a prediction of the geopolitical effects of globalization, “Meltdown” is a hyperstitional conjuring of a future written *by* globalization. Land fictions into being an Outside artificial intelligence intruding into reality from the future and ripping apart the fabric of the Human Security System. Strikingly, there is a curious degree of political ambivalence inherent to this performance that fails to deter audiences from being enthralled by it (one of the top comments on the YouTube video is “When someone asks me about my politics I send them this video”). It’s very easy to choose to view the piece as either utopian or dystopian depending on one’s given political

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<sup>126</sup> Reynolds.

<sup>127</sup> Nick Land, “Meltdown,” *Abstract Culture* Swarm 1 (1997), [http://www.ccru.net/swarm1/1\\_melt.htm](http://www.ccru.net/swarm1/1_melt.htm). The text is also represented in Land, *Fanged Noumena*, 441-460. I have included the former as a supplemental reference so as to draw attention to and periodize the CCRU’s *Abstract Culture* journal series. All further citations will be from *Fanged Noumena*, for the sake of page identification.

<sup>128</sup> Nick Land, “Nick Land- Meltdown,” YouTube video, 26:09, uploaded by nichtsundnull, January 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiaWsgtJrNI>.

orientation. One could quibble over whether the diabolical underlying meaning of the performance is obscured more by the complex theoretical language or the distracting audiovisual envelopment, but this would miss the appeal. “Meltdown” has achieved a level of infamy and underground virality because the combination of elements inherent to its composition achieved rare conditions favorable to hyperstitional potential.

While it has variously been unmoored from its author’s intentions, it is still important to situate the piece in the context of Land’s and the CCRU’s intellectual development at the time so as to tease out the subterranean political influences that still resonate from it. Following “Machinic desire,” written in 1993, “Meltdown” uniquely exemplifies the narrative of pro-market deterritorialization that Land had concocted from twisted readings of Deleuze and Guattari’s and Lyotard’s scholarship. It also presages the abiding misanthropy in right accelerationism, lamenting that “man is something for [capital] to overcome: a problem, a drag.”<sup>129</sup> All the while, a higher order of intelligence is alluded to which is fated to render carbon-based life obsolete: “Can what is playing you make it to level 2?”<sup>130</sup> But two decades before drawing tens of thousands of views on YouTube, Land’s conference presentation was not particularly well-received, even by relatively like-minded theorists of digital culture.

The video set off a series of verbal conflagrations between him and various contemporaries including media historian David Porush, neo-Deleuzian Manuel DeLanda, and body installation performance artist Stelarc. Each reproached the unregulated deterritorialization of Land’s cybercapitalist hyperstition, with Porush

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<sup>129</sup> Land, *Fanged Noumena*, 446.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 456.

accusing him of an irresponsible apocalyptic pleasure, DeLanda citing the courteous approach to destratification adopted in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and Stelarc warning of a latent technophobia that exaggerates inhuman agency. But Land ardently defended his position denying that the video is designed to induce fear, claiming that “he had a lack of sympathy with responsibility as a concept, that it constitutes a crushing form of stratification,” and he “vociferously contested the subject positions and intentionality that De Landa was attributing to AO/ATP, i.e. D & G as constituted subjects, vs. [...] a de-subjectified, destratified understanding of these works as ‘texts’, not necessarily attributable to subject-specific intentionalities.”<sup>131</sup> This response makes clear that even in the formative years of the CCRU, Land’s proto-accelerationist political philosophy of libidinal materialism was already drawing distinctions even from what might seem its closest theoretical allies through its hyperstitional mythos.

As the CCRU’s investment in mythical philosophical systems became even more pronounced, the gravitational pull that its hyperstitional energy exerted on its disciples only strengthened. “Meltdown” wasn’t the last time the collective’s performances were rebuked, and soon, disastrous collegial implosions became the norm, not the exception. Paradoxically, this had the effect of making the CCRU more insulated from much of the more institutionally-regarded academic community, at the same time as they grew an underground reputation as punk or forward-thinking within artistic and independent academic circles. The following year’s Virtual Futures 1995 conference seemed to be a similar mixture of experimentalism and calamity. Most notably, Stelarc returned and

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<sup>131</sup> Charles J. Stivale, “Charles J. Stivale’s Synopsis of VF 1994,” *Virtual Futures*, May 28, 1994, <https://www.virtualfutures.co.uk/discover/charlesstivales-vf1994>.

debuted a working robotic third arm with which he was able to write independently through the use of electrodes. Other attendees would grow to be illustrious theorists and artists, but again, quite a few people hated watching their stunts. ORLAN, the pioneer of carnal art, played a video of her own plastic surgery while lecturing, promptly several to become ill; Arthur and Marilouise Kroker gave what would have been relatively normal presentation had the accompanying audio not blown the lights to the building; Land and his accompanying performers were thus unable to read their scripts in the dark, and even if they had, they were inaudible beneath a poorly-mixed, droning techno track; and Tony Marcus, a journalist at iD Magazine was shouted off the stage by an irate Englishman in the audience that squawked “You’re talking bollocks!”<sup>132</sup> And by the 1996 Virtual Futures conference, things reached a fever pitch:

Rather than reading a paper, in this collaboration with artist collective Orphan Drift, under the name of ‘DogHead SurGeri,’ and complete with jungle soundtrack, Land lay behind the stage, flat on the floor [...], croaking enigmatic invocations intercut with sections from Artaud’s asylum poems. In this delirious vocal telegraphy, meaning seemed to disintegrate into sheer phonetic matter, melting into the cut-up beats and acting directly on the subconscious.<sup>133</sup>

At this point, the response should have been predictable: “One person in the audience stood up, and said, ‘Some of us are still Marxists, you know.’ And walked out.”<sup>134</sup> If there was one thing where other experimental collectives were unable to match the sheer force of will coming from the CCRU, it would be the art of provocation.

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<sup>132</sup> Simon Cooke, “Virtual Futures ’95,” *Internet & Comms Today* no. 10, August 1995, 33-36.

<sup>133</sup> Mackay.

<sup>134</sup> Beckett.

Despite the novelty of these performances and (especially) the reactions to them, their increasingly jarring and inscrutable elements were emblematic of the CCRU's burgeoning concern with occult studies. In both of the post-Meltdown Virtual Futures presentations, Land took the stage alongside "Mer" Maggie Roberts and Ranu Mukherjee, the creative duo behind the radically experimental art collective Orphan Drift.<sup>135</sup> OD can be understood as the aesthetic prototype and audiovisual accompaniment to the CCRU, and indeed, the visual component of "Meltdown" was designed by the group. "Formed in late 1994, OD was shaped by two mindblowing experiences: 'experimentation with drugs and techno', and a 1993 encounter with Nick Land."<sup>136</sup> Orphan Drift's ideas concerning technological modernization seemed to parallel that of Land, and they offered a fresh perspective as well: "if CCRU have something of a cultic air about them, OD go a lot further. Combining Mayan cosmology with ideas about Artificial Intelligence, they [seem] to believe that humanity will soon abandon the 'meat' of incarnate existence and become pure spirit."<sup>137</sup> As a result, the CCRU as a whole became much more invested in the mythological origins of the signal that compels social transformation:

As much chaos magician as chaos theorist, Land is said to be thoroughly versed in the gamut of occult knowledge and parapsychology: the I Ching, Current 93 (Aleister Crowley's kundalini-like energy force), Kabbalist numerology, H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, and the

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<sup>135</sup> See, <https://www.orphandrifarchive.com>.

<sup>136</sup> Reynolds.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* Spelling error corrected in brackets.



eschatological cosmology of Terence McKenna (a neo-hippy evangelist for plant-based hallucinogens like psilocybin and DMT).<sup>138</sup>

Land's investment in such forces of the Outside caused him to gradually apply the inhumanist principles of hyperstitional intrusion to his own subjectivity. While he was already known to call himself a "professor of delirial engineering," or alternatively, "a palsied mantis constructed from black jumpers and secondhand Sega circuitry, stalking the crumbling corridors of academe systematically extirpating all humanism,"<sup>139</sup> he was now inclined to declare that "he was inhabited by various 'entities.'"<sup>140</sup> Judith Williamson, a former critic of Land who would frequently get into fights with him at academic conferences, remembered finding it "spooky that Nick Land and all these people spoke as one. You could not get 20 of my postgrad students in a room and have them agree with me. I find that scary--that messianic quality, like they've got the message."<sup>141</sup> The forms of inhuman mythological signal being hyperstitionally projected by the CCRU had effectively enrolled its followers into a structure of unbelief wherein they could function as carriers for such an accelerationist intensity, propagating cycles of coincidence intensification.

The prolonged foray taken by the CCRU into occultist and mystical sciences ensured significantly more scrutiny would be placed on the Unit's research practices. For example, Suzanne Livingston—a CCRU member-turned-artistic-curator whose writing

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<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Mackay.

<sup>141</sup> Reynolds.

concerned the cognitive implications of financialization and artificial intelligence<sup>142</sup>— was pressed by the Philosophy Department to answer “what’s neurology got to do with capitalism?”<sup>143</sup> At the same time, the preoccupation with various number theories began to consume Land. He “would increasingly be found, having taken the very minimum amount of sleep possible (by this point he lived in his office), pursuing intense ‘mechanical’ research involving shuffling symbols endlessly on the green screen of his obsolete machine into the depths of the night.”<sup>144</sup> Seemingly, this habit would become too much for even Plant, as the focus on numerological mysticism placed her “in the role of the sensible, conservative one --not a role I’m used to!”<sup>145</sup> After Plant’s abrupt departure in 1997, Land became the sole go-between for Warwick and the CCRU, an absolutely disastrous role in which to place him. While the school had been waiting for the collective to fade away for years, this renewed efforts to axe the program. Eventually, Land opted to ditch a meeting with Warwick faculty where he was supposed to justify the continued the CCRU’s research direction, instead attending the 1997 Virotechnics conference. He resigned by the end of the year and relocated the CCRU to an office in Leamington Spa, the birthplace of Aleister Crowley.<sup>146</sup> There, the work of the collective continued for a few more years, until the work and its authors began to spiral completely

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<sup>142</sup> See, Suzanne Livingston, *Touch-Sensitive: Cybernetic Images and Replicant Bodies in the Post-Industrial Age*, PhD diss. (University of Warwick, December 1998).

<sup>143</sup> Reynolds.

<sup>144</sup> Mackay.

<sup>145</sup> Reynolds.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

out of control. According to CCRU student, Ian Hamilton Grant, “a ‘punishing regime’ of too much thinking and drinking drove several members into mental and physical crises. Land himself, after what he later described as ‘perhaps a year of fanatical abuse’ of ‘the sacred substance amphetamine’, and ‘prolonged artificial insomnia ... devoted to futile “writing” practices’, suffered a breakdown in the early 2000s, and disappeared from public view.”<sup>147</sup> Bookending the CCRU era, Land’s “break” would serve for the group’s alumni as a haunting reminder of the potential risks inherent in contacting the Outside.

Accounting for the still-resonating influence of the CCRU’s research practices reveals the extent to which the Unit propagated stories about itself so as to shape the external perceptions and draw in new participants. This is to say that the students and instructors at Warwick not only theorized hyperstition, but encoded such work into a simultaneous fictioning of that theory’s conditions of production. In fact, the very first essay that references the concept of hyperstition places it within a mythological history stretching from the fictional continent, Lemuria to Lovecraft, William S. Burroughs, and ultimately, the CCRU. They claimed that Burroughs’ “The Ghost Lemurs of Madagascar”<sup>148</sup> had created a “demonstrable time rift,”<sup>149</sup> because it had influenced the pirate, Captain Mission three centuries prior in the early 1700s. The CCRU alleged that they had been passed along evidence of such influence by an “intelligence source” known as William Kaye. Kaye claimed that Peter Vysparov—the apparent founder of the

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<sup>147</sup> Beckett.

<sup>148</sup> William S. Burroughs, “The Ghost Lemurs of Madagascar,” *Omni* 9, no. 7 (April 1987): 48-54, 118.

<sup>149</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 34.

Cthulhu Club which later turned into Miskatonic Virtual University—had introduced Burroughs to an ancient copy of his own writings years prior to writing it.<sup>150</sup> They detailed the so-called “Neolemurian Hypothesis”—supposedly conceived by ethnology professor, Echnidna Stillwell—which held that the inhabitants of an Pacific island Vysparov was deployed to, “the Dibboma tribe of the Mu N’Ma people,” were secretly “descendants of the Lemurian Root-race who had retained the Lemurian system of time manipulating black magic within their religious practice.”<sup>151</sup> Burroughs’ encounter with a text he was yet to author is said to have sent him into “a momentary catatonic state,”<sup>152</sup> and thrown him into a frenzied effort to confirm the mystical hypothesis. From this perspective, “the message Burroughs received from the future through the past was an effort to establish a black-box in his timeline, which would then collapse his chronological feedback loop into an accelerating spiral of positive feedback, thus destabilizing the reified reality in which Lemuria was lost in time.”<sup>153</sup> If the tale is to be believed, then Burroughs developed his methodologies like cut-up or fold-in directly in response to this temporal paradox.

But of course, for the CCRU, “belief” is not a particularly desirable currency. The story of Neolemurian Hypothesis is not designed to rationally convince its readers of the powers of time-travel and the mystical power of the N’ma. Instead, the point of such a history is to generate ““positive unbelief”—a provisionalizing of any reality frame in the

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>151</sup> Cabrales, “The Hyperstitional Philosophy...,” 24-25.

<sup>152</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 39.

<sup>153</sup> Cabrales, “The Hyperstitional Philosophy...,” 27.

name of pragmatic engagement rather than epistemological hesitation.”<sup>154</sup> It might not be immediately obvious that “this is itself a hyperstition and that there are no such people as Echidna Stillwell, Captain Peter Vsyparov, or William Kaye and no Sumatran tribe called the Nma that practice Oddubb time sorcery, no Cthulhu Club or Miskatonic Virtual University.”<sup>155</sup> But indeed, the entire history of hyperstition’s conceptual development is an elaborate form of theory-fiction designed to demonstrate the power of mythos as a reality-engendering device. According to Cabrales, the CCRU “deposited Hyperstitional cells throughout time within history’s narrative holes: gateways in Fact by which various fictions and Fictioning technologies could disclose themselves as actual.”<sup>156</sup> This is a key component of hyperstitional praxis that could otherwise go overlooked: it not only operates through conjugating future visions but also by rearranging aspects of the past in service of such futures:

As a fiction which made itself real, the Hyperstitionalization of Hyperstition became as a performance philosophy of, by, and for performing philosophy. To achieve the sorcerous hyper-temporal multi-becoming of their fictional-actualization-swarm, the CCRU extended their schizohistory beyond themselves, hypercamouflaging their own subversive narratives within the Hyperstitional becoming of a xeno-sequence. Performing as their own fiction becoming real, the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit was thus re-presented both *within* and *as* disbelief: plague wielders and hyper-architects from the future through the past.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 38.

<sup>155</sup> Rebekah Sheldon, “Dark Correlationism: Mysticism, Magic, and the New Realisms,” *symploke* 24, no. 1-2 (2016): 151.

<sup>156</sup> Cabrales, “The Hyperstitional Philosophy...,” 23-24.

<sup>157</sup> Robert Elio Cabrales, “Aesthetaphysics and the Anti-Dialectical Hyperoccultation of Disenchanted Representation: Hyperstitional Esoterrorism as

By seeding their own mythological prehistory within an extended historical timeline of occultism, poststructuralist theory, and cybernetic culture, the CCRU rearticulated themselves as the only theorists willing to tarry with the dark arts that were shaping the present. Absent accounting for the mythos-deficit that hyperstition responds to, one would not be faulted for thinking that the collective's tall tales merely reflected an inflated philosophical self-importance. However, such practices should be understood as a recognition that the production of reality through narration is anything but a simple process. It requires a careful balancing-act between belief, unbelief, and nonbelief:

Hyperstition, in probing the outer regions of what presently constitutes our 'belief' in a system and its products, goes some way toward undermining the process it is critiquing, linguistically speaking at least, by making the argument more immediately immanent in a way that the present speed of informational dissemination requires. This is to say that we know, intuitively, that superstitions are strangely outmoded cultural beliefs, clinging onto our imaginations despite themselves. As such, hyperstition is better placed to enter into the popular imagination, connecting the dots between our unconscious irrationalities and the cognitive foundations of capitalist realism.<sup>158</sup>

The interconnected relationship between superstition and digital technology therefore became the center of the CCRU's research agenda. They recognized that the sense of incommensurability inherent to digital architecture meant that the Outside and technology could be thought together: "through networked communication channels, the once hidden world of Occult orders, traditions, and philosophies have become a cultural component,

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Occultural Accelerationism" (master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, August 30, 2019), 42.

<sup>158</sup> Matt Colquhoun, "Hyperstition and Reified Accelerationism," *Xenogothic* (blog), March 15, 2020, <https://xenogothic.com/2020/03/15/hyperstition-and-reified-accelerationism>.

cut-up and distributed as a variety of performative discursivities. This networked dissemination has made Occult Culture (or rather ‘Occulture’) an ordinary facet of and as cultural communication hypercamouflaged within the semiotic territories of information and entertainment.”<sup>159</sup> The CCRU saw cyberdelic pop culture—raves, jungle music, sci-fi, drug experimentation, etc.—as Occulture. As a result, they chose to weave their definition and analysis of hyperstition into a hyperstitionalized narrative itself. Many of these tactics are still employed by esoteric authors today. For example, Chris Shambaugh, after delivering a presentation explaining hyperstition, responded to an email from the editors of *Aesthetics After Finitude* with a strange article called ‘The Krakatoan Cinema’ that placed the concept back in its Lemurian context. His email read only “My original endeavour, finding the solution to the problem of “explaining” hyperstition is being annexed, if not virulently rerouted, by anonymous forces.”<sup>160</sup> The point of these various obfuscatory methods appears to be to protect Warwickian concept-engineering from the judgmental scrutiny of rational theorization.

The CCRU’s infusion of Occulture and pop cyberdelia into their research methodology cemented the profound importance of the Outside to any study of networked communication and online mediascapes. The Unit’s membership considered themselves to be warriors in a global war over the means of reality-production. Hyperstition was a weapon with the ability to destabilize rationalist hegemonic control. They held that “every act of writing is a sorcerous operation, a partisan action in a war

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<sup>159</sup> Cabrales, “Aesthetaphysicks,” 13.

<sup>160</sup> Chris Shambaugh (and Maudlin Cortext), “The Emergence of Hyperstition,” in *Aesthetics After Finitude*, ed. Baylee Brits, Prudence Gibson, and Amy Ireland (Melbourne: re.press, 2016), 203.

where multitudes of factual events are guided by the powers of illusion. Even representative realism participates—albeit unknowingly—in magical war, collaborating with the dominant control system by implicitly endorsing its claim to be the only possible reality.”<sup>161</sup> These early considerations regarding what might be called the “overrepresentation”<sup>162</sup> of representative realism *as all reality can be* have bearing on the modern diagnosis of culture’s libidinal void or mythos-deficit. The hegemony of rationalist interpretations of truth and falsity appears to have left the social order’s desire for the spiritual and mythic unsated. Against this, the CCRU attempted to inject alternative occultural foundations for a proto-accelerationist structure of perception. This protracted mythic praxis also helps to account for the profound underground impact of the CCRU’s writings, even decades after the Unit was officially discontinued. Thanks to a network of scattered websites, blogs, and publishing houses, “the CCRU’s demonic anti-legacy of Hyperstition, Accelerationism, and Theory Fiction had been networked across culture, academia, politics, and magick, and though it was dormant, it was anything but banished.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 36.

<sup>162</sup> I borrow this term from the brilliant writings of Sylvia Wynter who uses it to describe the way Western Monohumanist Man is overrepresented as if all of humanity fell within its purview. A much broader investigation of Wynter’s work is beyond the scope of this thesis but would be worthy of investigation as much of her work on sociogenesis and autopoiesis anticipates and/or implicates the work of the CCRU. See, Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257-337.

<sup>163</sup> Cabrales, “Aesthetaphysicks,” 46.



The tools of CCRU hyperstitionalization were thus readily available for cooption by neoreactionary forces. In a much more recent interview, Land argued that this process was only possible once individual online performances were subsumed and dissolved into an indistinct horde of meme magic:

...hyperstition did arise in a certain milieu that definitely rhetorically emphasized a certain type of collectivity and even more than that. What's being referenced is not primarily universality at all, but something much closer to an anonymity or the problematization of attribution. Any hyperstitional unit—and what's now called a meme is very close to this—that can be confidently attributed to a particular act of individual creation is originally disabled. [...] It's precisely the things where you have no idea where they came from, it's exactly those elements about whose genesis you have least confidence, that are the ones that have the greatest hyperstitional momentum.<sup>164</sup>

Therefore, acts of anonymous collective enunciation were able to catalyze a series of social effects that seemed to come from nowhere. As Wark and Wark's research has demonstrated, such effects didn't actually come from nowhere, but instead represent the black-boxing of platform conditions that can be hijacked to amplify right-wing content. But this distinction doesn't lessen the importance of hyperstition to meme studies because the positive cultural feedbacks still operate to further the reach of the affect of aspirational nihilism.

Hyperstitional communication relies on the Outside as the affective nodal point, the centrifugal spin of the modern-day reactosphere. The rhetorical circulation of neoreactionary memes fills the libidinal void at the heart of network culture, transforming

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<sup>164</sup> Nick Land, "The Only Thing I Would Impose is Fragmentation' – An Interview with Nick Land," interview by Marko Bauer and Andrej Tomažin, *synthetic zero* (blog), June 19, 2017, <https://syntheticzero.net/2017/06/19/the-only-thing-i-would-impose-is-fragmentation-an-interview-with-nick-land>.

the cynical apathy of users in the digital milieu to a politicized aspirational nihilism that gleefully imagines and sets into motion the exacerbation of modern-day societal ills. It is important here to recognize that “memes are more than jpegs with clever captions or non-sequiturs. Memes are a libidinal ecology of ideas incubating in the mass focus group of swarm intelligence.”<sup>165</sup> And Land’s own writing had exemplified this phenomenon, itself a meme that transcended generations and political ideologies and seeded the conditions for a generation of accelerationist political philosophy. Many of his works “are pitched as time loops in which the future they predict impacts back on the present in order to bring about that very future.”<sup>166</sup> Such a chaotic temporal field of influence is epitomized by present-day theorists locating the progenitors of hyperstition in a genealogy of literature reaching back before the Enlightenment. Carstens’s diagrammatic history of science fiction visualizes this process in stunning detail (see, Fig. 1):

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<sup>165</sup> Anonymous, “The Dark Insurrection,” 53.

<sup>166</sup> O’Sullivan, “Accelerationism, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science,” 19.

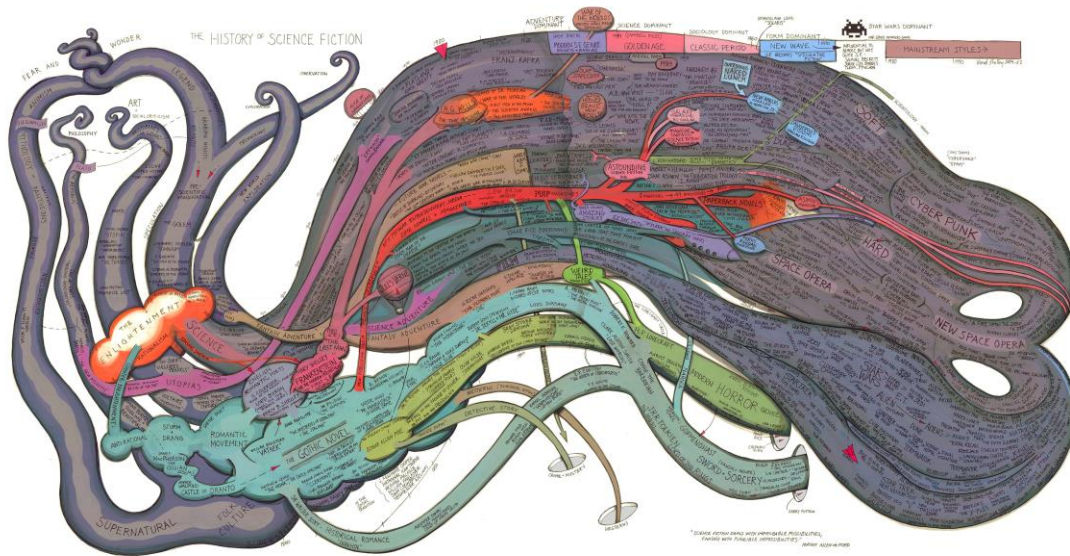


Fig. 1 – “The History of Science Fiction” by Delphi Carstens<sup>167</sup>

The image provides a visual reference for Cabrales’ claim that the CCRU deposited “gateways” in time to eventuate hyperstitional possibilities. Various portals demonstrate the crisscrossed history of concept-engineering, connecting past to future and future to past. For those that have studied the CCRU’s methods, then, this genealogy confirms the hyperstitional nature of reality itself. As Amy Ireland—a modern theorist who has “taken up where the CCRU 90’s cyberpositive cultural remix left off”<sup>168</sup>—has argued, “the cultural effectiveness of accelerationism as cyberpositivity is entirely cyberpositive: accelerationism invokes itself from the future. The conclusion to be drawn from this is

<sup>167</sup> Delphi Carstens, “Hyperstition,” *O(rphan)d(rift>)* archive, 2010, <https://www.orphandrifarchive.com/articles/hyperstition>.

<sup>168</sup> Steven Craig Hickman, “Hyperstition Notes: On Amy Ireland,” *Social Ecologies* (blog), July 25, 2017, <https://socialecologies.wordpress.com/2017/07/25/hyperstition-notes-on-amy-ireland-part-one>.

that hyperstition is the real truth of philosophy—if not the basic, horrific form of reality itself.”<sup>169</sup> This is a radically different philosophical premise than is typically ascribed to Occulture. For instance, Joshua Gunn has argued that the occult’s reliance on “rhetorical antinomy,” “the illusion of a fundamental, ontological, or metaphysical paradox” ultimately “denies the fluidity of language that academics like Butler draw upon to ‘open up’ spaces of cultural resistance.”<sup>170</sup> However, hyperstition’s various designations as self-constituting, cyberpositive, and/or autoproductive all speak to its capacity to drastically alter the terms of the social. This means the theory of hyperstition occupies a unique place in occult studies, as it both references an Outside at the same time as that reference destabilizes Platonic conceptions of ontology through the self-fulfilling prophecies of “unbelief.”

*“Coldness be my God”<sup>171</sup>*

If the CCRU aimed to use the powers of occulture to upend the dominant order of representative realism and methodological rationalism, neoreaction instead employs hyperstition to spiritualize racial capitalism and antiblackness in the form of aspirational nihilism. To understand how digital incommensurability and pervasive online disaffection become hijacked into supporting Land’s cold god of ceaseless productivity,

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<sup>169</sup> Amy Ireland, “The Poememenon: Form as Occult Technology,” *Urbanomic*, 2017, <https://www.urbanomic.com/document/poememenon>.

<sup>170</sup> Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*, Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005): 48.

<sup>171</sup> At time of writing, this is Nick Land’s Twitter bio.

Gnon, it is necessary to locate the Lovecraftian “Old Ones” as the source of such an affective signal. Just as the CCRU has emphasized the role of mystical and supernatural forces in steering human development, they have also been clear to attribute such powers to the Lovecraftian pantheon. This means the hyperstitional mythos at the center of accelerationism is filtered through the racialization of Lovecraft’s notions of the gothic, the weird, or horror. Land argues that tapping into the signal of the Outside precludes investment in a rational program, leaving the question of whether a hyperstition is “successful” or not up to inhuman forces:

...without a notion of reality testing, an invocation of the Real is of absolutely zero significance. Anyone can invoke the Real, but unless there’s some mechanism that provides, not a voice for the Outside, but an actual functional intervention from the Outside, so it has a selective function, then the language is empty.

[...]

I think hyperstition is one of those things that has completely escaped from the box and is now a wild, feral animal on the loose. My relation to this alien thing is like everyone else’s who’s interested in it. I am approaching it from a position of zero authority, trying to make sense of how it is living and changing and affecting the world. It, the thing, not it, the concept. But having said that, my sense of a hyperstition is that a hyperstition is an experiment. It makes itself real, if it works. And whether or not it works, is something that can’t be, again, decided by a process of an internal debate, you can’t as a result of some kind of internal dialectics decide that, hey, this is a good hyperstition, it has a great future. It’s gonna work because of its intrinsic relation to the Outside, which is something that cannot be managed. Perhaps it can be cautiously, tentatively predicted in a way that a scientist or an artist would—through learning their craft—get a sense of what is gonna work and what isn’t gonna work. But that’s not the same as having a criterion, still less a law.<sup>172</sup>

For Land, it is only possible for one to “reality test” a hyperstition by approximating its connection to “its intrinsic relation to the Outside.” Such a relation is not one of

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<sup>172</sup> Land, “The Only Thing....”

anthropocentric ventriloquism, where the Outside is contorted into a rational program, but at the same time, it also does not preexist as a stable substance prior to hyperstitional conjuring. Instead, artificial agencies are called upon to construct new possible futures out of a bricolage of hyperstitional fuel retro-deposited into the past.

The rhetorical dimensions of hyperstition depend on the affective predicates that define the Outside. Edmund Berger reminds readers that “any hyperstitional feedback loop must contain a ‘*call to the Old Ones*,’ a nod to the unknowable cosmic entities found in the weird stories of Lovecraft.”<sup>173</sup> Carstens is even more explicit about the origin of this inhuman signal, writing that “these ‘Old Ones’ can be associated with the ‘cosmic horror’ of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century writer of Gothic sf, H.P. Lovecraft, the dreaded otherworldly subjects of myth and Gothic fantasy, as well as the inhuman forces and complexities that science is revealing about the ‘world in itself.’”<sup>174</sup> For the CCRU and those that followed in their stead, interfacing with these entities also provided the key means of differentiating their theories from those of their postmodern interlocutors:

for postmodernists, the distinction between real and unreal is not substantive or is not held to matter, whereas for practitioners of hyperstition, differentiating between ‘degrees of realization’ is crucial. The hyperstitional process of entities ‘making themselves real’ is precisely a passage, a transformation, in which potentials—already-active virtualities—realize themselves. Writing operates not as a passive representation but as an active agent of transformation and a gateway through which entities can emerge.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Edmund Berger, *Underground Streams: A Micro-History of Hyperstition and Esoteric Resistance*, *The Strong of the Future* 8 (Reggio Emilia: Rizosfera, 2014): 39-40.

<sup>174</sup> Carstens, *Uncovering the Apocalypse*, 7.

<sup>175</sup> CCRU, *Writings*, 36.

It is therefore the case that to speak of hyperstition and accelerationism, one must also account for the influence of these various alien entities recognized as the Lovecraftian Old Ones. But if Lester is correct that Lovecraft's conception of the Outside is inflected by his own vicious antiblackness, then it is incumbent upon theorists to explore how Landian inhumanism and other forms of right accelerationism transmit a racialized affect through the seemingly neutral medium of the gothic.

For the Old Ones to occupy such a central place within the mythology and methodology of hyperstition, there has been stunningly little research into hyperstition's potential racialized implications. Despite the clear rightward trajectory of a significant degree of post-CCRU aesthetics and theory and a clear recognition of the important role of the Cthuloid mythos that makes up the source of the Old Ones' signal, few have related one circumstance with the other. This occurs despite the infamous attitude that the gothic, horror, and sci-fi genres have historically held toward Blackness and Black people. Citing cultural critic Hortense Spillers' argument that the dominant American grammar of modernity overdetermines Black women as "a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth,"<sup>176</sup> Maisha Wester critiques the traditional whitewashed understanding of the American gothic tradition. She rejects claims that cultural conceptions of fear are apolitical or colorblind. Wester indicates that "often masked by a monstrous visage, racial minorities appear throughout traditional Gothic texts as figures around which authors

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<sup>176</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65.

spin debates about civilisation, enlightenment, freedom and human nature.”<sup>177</sup> Toni Morrison had famously launched a similar critique of “the ways in which artists—and the society that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a ‘blank darkness,’ to conveniently bound and violently silence black bodies.”<sup>178</sup> A likewise phenomenon is present in the genre of horror as well, with Blackness functioning as a phobogenic object that stimulates anxiety. Through a postcolonial reading of horror films that employ colonialist tropes of Africa, Arlette Hernandez demonstrates that “the threat in these films is not the mere existence of darkness, but rather the possibility of *contracting* darkness. By virtue of engaging with the horror genre, these films other black bodies to the extremes of monstrosity.”<sup>179</sup> The tendency to ascribe profound inexplicable horror to encounters with Blackness encompasses a large swath of genres grouped under “weird fiction” and stretches far back into Western literary history. As Stefanie K. Dunning demonstrates,

...theories of Weird fiction are largely silent on the ways that the “weird” in Western society resonates with racist discourses that otherized black Africans since the fourteenth century. When we look at Weird fictions through a Critical Race Studies lens, it becomes clear that even if the definition of Weird Literature was not consecrated until H.P. Lovecraft came along, the sense of supernatural dread that characterizes the Weird is present even as far back as Shakespeare’s Caliban. The earliest iterations

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<sup>177</sup> Maisha Wester, “The Gothic in and as Race Theory,” in *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle and Robert Miles (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 53.

<sup>178</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, [1992] 1993): 38.

<sup>179</sup> Arlette Hernandez. “Africa Speaks?: Black Monsters and Revisionary History in Horror Films,” in “Monsters,” special issue, *The Digital Literature Review* 4 (2017): 92. I want to give credit to Zalika U. Ibaorimi for first directing my attention to this article in a Twitter thread about Blackness and horror.



of the Weird in Western literature have always been about monstrous “others” from Caliban to Dracula to Frankenstein’s monster. If we trace the Weird through racial fault lines, we can find that the inchoate fear of something “dark” and “unknown,” which are hallmarks of the Weird, resonate with white fears about racial and ethnic otherness.<sup>180</sup>

Each of these pieces reveal that the affective predicates of Lovecraft and the gothic tradition more broadly—horror, the weird, monstrosity, darkness—reify a projection of Blackness as an object of profound, irremediable terror.

Even though the racialized elements of the gothic have been consistently noted by researchers like the four Black scholars cited above, the overriding impulse in the field has been to provincialize the antiblackness of prominent weird fiction writers by asserting a separation between the art and the artist. David Kumler explores this tendency for writers to bracket Lovecraft’s vile racism from his philosophy and literary methodology:

Despite the prevalence of conversations that grapple with Lovecraft’s racist legacy, it is generally uncommon for writers and commentators to take up and examine Lovecraft’s cosmicism and his racism simultaneously. Generally, even in critical work that does engage both, these aspects of Lovecraft’s life and thought are either compartmentalized—i.e., cosmicism and racism are treated as distinct and, as a result, can be addressed separately—or, on the other hand, cosmicism is read as *symbolic* of racism—Lovecraft’s monsters are simply symbols of his racial hatred. While both of these options can function as critical tools through which to develop valuable insights, it is nevertheless the case that both of these options—compartmentalization or a merely symbolic reading—miss something.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Stefanie K. Dunning, “What is the Future? Weirdness and Black Time in *Sorry to Bother You*,” in “Weird Temporalities,” ed. Alison Sperling and Jordan S. Carroll, special issue *Studies in the Fantastic*, no. 9 (Summer/Fall 2020): 46.

<sup>181</sup> David Kumler, *Into the Seething Vortex: Occult Horror and the Subversion of the Realistic*, PhD diss. (University of Washington, August 2020): 42.

One of the most strident defenders of Lovecraft's work from accusations of racism has been his biographer and editor, S.T. Joshi who described the decision by the World Fantasy Awards to remove Lovecraft's image from the trophy as "a craven yielding to the worst sort of political correctness."<sup>182</sup> But this anxious defense against political correctness misses the bigger picture: "whether or not Lovecraft was a racist (he was) and whether or not he directly expressed racist opinions in his writings (he did), he created fictional worlds where racist corporeal semiotics are almost *always* a reliable means of understanding the world."<sup>183</sup> This means that Lovecraft's other apologists—who have attempted to compartmentalize his personal beliefs from his writing by asserting that the pieces of writing where his racism reaches a fever-pitch are not the ones for which he is most known nor those that have shaped the canonical understanding of the gothic—are also wrong.

The "corporeal semiotics" of Lovecraft's stories were such that one could predict the fate of various characters, creatures, and inhuman entities by virtue of the racialized language that he applied to them. It doesn't matter if critics cleave the three or four most blatantly racist stories he wrote from his oeuvre or if they push all of his personal correspondence to the side, because "the animus of racial anxiety lies at the core of Lovecraftian constructions of horror. Unlike other American horror writers, such as Edgar Allan Poe, it is not simply one of his themes, but fundamental productive force to

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<sup>182</sup> Alison Flood, "HP Lovecraft biographer rages against ditching of author as fantasy prize emblem," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/11/hp-lovecraft-biographer-rages-against-ditching-of-author-as-fantasy-prize-emblem>.

<sup>183</sup> Kumler, 58.

his fiction. In nearly every single piece of horror fiction that Lovecraft wrote, whiteness is placed under siege.”<sup>184</sup> And this especially includes his most notable work that has provided the greatest influence over the field of gothic horror: “The Call of Cthulhu.” Kumler identifies a plethora of references to race, in general, and Blackness in particular throughout the less-than-thirty-page essay, usually pejoratively ascribed to the Cult of Cthulhu. Lovecraft refers to them as “half-castes and pariahs” who are “of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type” and “more diabolical than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles”; and he “reminds his readers no less than eight times that the Cult of Cthulhu is made up of ‘mongrels’ and ‘half-breeds’—and the count moves up significant when we include more specific references to ‘mulattos’ and ‘mestizos’ and more general references to the ‘swarthy’ members of these cults.”<sup>185</sup>

Apologists like Joshi may try to save face by accusing critics of “attribut[ing] the opinions of Lovecraft’s characters to himself”<sup>186</sup> and accelerationists like Land might bemoan “the human cognitive effort devoted to trying to turn a final form of anything into a psychobiography”;<sup>187</sup> but these objections fail to come to terms with the manifold ways that Lovecraft’s antiblackness colored the overall narrative structure of his stories and infected the affective framework of gothic horror and weird fiction, in general.

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<sup>184</sup> Katherine Avery, “(In)Human Anatomies: Constructions of Whiteness and Otherness in the Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft,” undergraduate honors thesis (The College of William & Mary, April 2018): 8.

<sup>185</sup> Kumler, 51.

<sup>186</sup> S.T. Joshi, “How Not to Read Lovecraft,” *S.T. Joshi* (blog), accessed March 31, 2021, [http://stjoshi.org/review\\_ruins.html](http://stjoshi.org/review_ruins.html).

<sup>187</sup> Land, “The Only Thing....”

Paradoxically, these writers are claiming that a more accurate account of Lovecraft's work can only come from *ignoring* substantial components of his life, a ridiculous argument that wouldn't pass muster in the context of any other prominent literary figure. Such a contention requires relegating the Outside to a merely abstract conceptual phenomenon, which directly contradicts Lovecraft's own definition of horror as a uniquely *experiential* property:

While we might name it, the world-without-us remains a distant, conceptual category. Lovecraft is not interested in producing abstract concepts of this sort. Lovecraft's depictions of the weird attempt to facilitate an irruption of the world-without-us into the world as we know it. The goal of cosmic horror is that we might *experience*, however partially and momentarily, a direct confrontation with the absolute beyond. Lovecraft is not interested in conceptual abstraction but experiential encounter. It is here that the theoretical separation of Lovecraft's cosmicism from his racism begins to fall apart. In the same way that content cannot be separated from form, conceptual abstraction cannot be separated from the aesthetic formulations which express it—which means, in the case of Lovecraft, that cosmicism cannot be separated from racism. To do so would be to produce a *different* cosmicism than Lovecraft's.<sup>188</sup>

This rebuke of gothic scholars like Joshi, strangely, sounds a lot like Land's earlier caution against trying to speak *for* the Outside. We appear to have caught him in a performative contradiction where his need to dispel the racist elements of Lovecraft's psychobiography runs afoul of Land's own methodological commitment to develop a non-anthropocentric reading of the Old Ones. Of course, the preferred solution that Land may devise to such a double-bind is simply to concede to an explicitly racist vision of the Outside with a shrug of the shoulders. But, as we will see, it is precisely this turn which prevents Land from ever dismantling the human.

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<sup>188</sup> Kumler, 62.

The unique character of Lovecraftian antiblackness suggests that the Outside represented in weird fiction and the gothic tradition cannot be considered apart from the history of Black freedom struggle. Importantly, this is not a claim that the Outside simply *represents* Black liberation as if Lovecraft’s cosmicism and imagination of a world-without-us is merely reducible to a hyperbolic, fanciful racism. The fact remains that the gothic tradition *does* describe a deep-seated feeling innate to modernity’s regime of subjective individuation, *and* this feeling has historically been intertwined with modalities of antiblackness. The particular character of this antiblackness needs to be analytically separated from a more generalized racism: “what differentiated [Lovecraft’s] antipathy for black people from that of Jewish people, Eastern European people, Asian people, etc. was his belief that black assimilation was entirely impossible. [...] By this logic, the admixture of whiteness was not simply a mixture of races, but a mixture of *species*.”<sup>189</sup> This logic which equates Black existence with animality has been an enduring feature of modernity’s systematic racialized violence,

While many scholars have critiqued the conflation of black humans with animals found in Enlightenment discourses, I argue that prior scholarship has fundamentally misrecognized the logic behind the confluence of animality of racialization. I reinterpret Enlightenment thought not as black “exclusion” or “denied humanity” but rather as the violent imposition and appropriation—inclusion and exclusion—of black(ened) humanity in the interest of plasticizing that very humanity, whereby “the animal” is one but not the only form blackness is thought to encompass. Plasticity is a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshly being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a

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<sup>189</sup> Avery, 55.

form where form shall not hold: potentially “everything and nothing” at the register of ontology.<sup>190</sup>

Within gothic narratives, Blackness operates as both subhuman—representing a monstrous animality or a barbaric primitivism—and superhuman—denoting the horrifying forces of the Outside. Such sentiments can easily be detected in the Cthulhu mythos: “the primacy of the human, in Lovecraft, is threatened not merely from *above*, so to speak, but also from *below*.”<sup>191</sup>

Thus, within the gothic tradition, there is rhetorical consonance between the darkness of the uncaring cosmos and the Blackness that is read through the racial epidermal schema; both threaten to decenter the privileged human of western modernity. James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* famously compared Black liberation to an “upheaval in the universe” in which “heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations,” imploring his readers to “try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame.”<sup>192</sup> Kumler concurs with Baldwin’s claim that “Black freedom is a matter of *cosmic horror*” and argues that “in a rather perverse sense, it seem that Lovecraft might have agreed with Baldwin on the gravity of black liberation, its undoing of the very world we inhabit—the difference, of course, being that Baldwin *welcomes* this cosmic subversion while Lovecraft trembles in terror at

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<sup>190</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 3.

<sup>191</sup> Kumler, 14.

<sup>192</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Michael Joseph, [1963] 1968): 20.

its prospect.”<sup>193</sup> Locating such a phobogenic relationship to Blackness in the history of gothic literature reframes elements such as darkness and monstrosity as racialized affects which transmit themselves into the forms of weird literature and accelerationist philosophy that take after Lovecraft’s mythos.

The antiblackness of gothic horror’s fearful approach to the Outside has animated the political philosophies of right accelerationism, particularly, neoreaction. The most notable reference to Lovecraftian weird fiction in neoreactionary literature comes from Curtis Yarvin’s quote that “Cthulhu may swim slowly. But he only swims left.”<sup>194</sup> Here, Cthulhu functions as a stand-in for Yarvin’s notion of the Cathedral, and this metaphor is of assistance in grasping how the racialized affective predicates of gothic horror and weird fiction percolate into the concerns of neoreactionary accelerationists. For such far-right thinkers, liberal democracy is Cthulhoid insofar as it welcomes the possibility of Black integration and thus supposedly risks the collapse of civilized society, itself. James Duesterberg notes that “the figure of the dark and threatening masses plays a similarly charged role in”<sup>195</sup> the writing Land and Yarvin as in the racist works of Lovecraft such as “The Horror of Red Hook.” Both tend to disparage urban spaces as overrun by gangs of racial minorities and paints this scenario as emblematic of societal dysfunction. It is imperative that theorists grapple with the potentially racialized implications of weird

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<sup>193</sup> Kumler, 9.

<sup>194</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations: Chapter 1: The Red Pill,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), January 8, 2009, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified>.

<sup>195</sup> James Duesterberg, “Final Fantasy: Neoreactionary politics and the liberal imagination,” *The Point*, no. 14, July 2, 2017, <https://thepointmag.com/politics/final-fantasy-neoreactionary-politics-liberal-imagination>.

fiction, especially given that “if any cultural moment deserves to be called ‘the Age of Lovecraft,’ the present would more deservedly bear the title than Lovecraft’s own time.”<sup>196</sup> In such a moment where the expansion of digital media networks has produced a subjective incommensurability that resonates with forms of aspirational nihilism, rhetoricians must demystify the affective intensities that sustain right accelerationism. A large part of this process is what appears to be a process of desubjectification wherein the neoreactionary subject sacrifices their own attachment to individualism in favor of dissolving into the mob of the hyperstitional collective.

This is articulated by Land when discussing the interrelation between Cthulhu and Lovecraft: “H.P. Lovecraft seems to have understood that the whole production of Lovecraftian mythos was very much an attempt on his part to subtract his own creative role. It’s only when that is subtracted that these things are released. Cthulhu becomes a kind of hyperstitional term to the point that it’s not simply something that has been invented by Lovecraft.”<sup>197</sup> Scott Wark reminds readers that such acts of subtraction, when mediated by online spaces, often involve identifying with the mediating interface, itself. M. Ambedkar provides an example of how this process of personal subtraction and digital identification allows the reification of antiblack tropes. He presents the case of the meme *Europe Simulator 2016*, a hypothetical videogame whose cover art depicts a naked, hyper-muscular Black man chasing a blond white woman:

Alluding to the overlap between the *manosphere* and the gaming community, signifiers of virtuality—the game packaging design, the logo, and the title *Europe Simulator 2016*—places faith in the computer simulation in accurately modeling a current state of affairs. Note that there

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<sup>196</sup> Kumler, 33.

<sup>197</sup> Land, “The Only Thing....”



is nobody to identify with in this depiction; we are certainly not the foreigner and, since we are entering from a fundamentally male space, we are not the victim. It is only possible for us to *identify as the simulation itself*.<sup>198</sup>

This vision of technological identification is extraordinarily accelerationist insofar as it empties the subject of its human properties and replaces them with an affective motor that compels impersonal acquiescence to the accumulating forces of capital. In the context of this particular game, the antiblack assumptions about hypermasculinity, sexual promiscuity, and fears of miscegenation are not hidden. Rather, these antiblack virtues are updated with a presentist aesthetic that allows such memes to be judged through a unique online currency: transgression.

Neoreactionary accelerationism transforms affective structures of disaffection and online incommensurability into a transgressive mythos of aspirational nihilism, marking the transition from apolitical lulz to the Cult of Gnon. Corey Robin's contention that modern conservatism relies on modernizing its aesthetic sensibilities is proven by the actions of the alt-right over the past few years. One of the fastest growing artistic tropes involves the incorporation of vaporwave aesthetics into fascist memes, expressing a vexed nostalgia for the cyberdelia of the 80s. This is most explicitly laid out as a strategy in the "W E S T H E T I C A Manual"<sup>199</sup> which reads "as a kind of instruction manual for the production of 'alt-right' [...] aesthetics" through "'synthesising' ... futuristic themes with a classical greco-roman base ... 80s retro neon vibrancy ... postmodernism and

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<sup>198</sup> M. Ambedkar, "The Aesthetics of the Alt-Right," *Post-Office Arts Journal*, February 11, 2017, <http://baltimore-art.com/2017/02/11/the-aesthetics-of-the-alt-right>.

<sup>199</sup> See, <https://www.scribd.com/document/359158091/W-E-S-T-H-E-T-I-C-A-manual>.

distinct irony’ alongside new-age imagery,”<sup>200</sup> but this trend can also be seen in the emergent (and genuinely awful) music genres, Trumpwave and Fashwave.<sup>201</sup>



Fig. 2 – Barron Trump 2036 cyberpunk meme<sup>202</sup>

The above example (Fig. 2) makes a special reference to Barron Trump, implying that a Trump dynasty would bring about a cyberpunk utopia. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Peter Thiel—a conservative techie who remains one of the most powerful people with direct connections to the neoreactionary movement—clarified the vexed relationship that modern conservatism has to the past and the future: “Even if there are aspects of Trump that are retro and that seem to be going back to the past, I think a lot of people

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<sup>200</sup> Gogarty, “The Art Right.”

<sup>201</sup> Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry, “Trumpwave and Fashwave Are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music,” *Vice*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mgwk7b/trumpwave-fashwave-far-right-appropriation-vaporwave-synthwave>.

<sup>202</sup> Ambedkar.

want to go back to a past that was futuristic — ‘The Jetsons,’ ‘Star Trek.’ They’re dated but futuristic.”<sup>203</sup> This helps to square the circle with Land’s view that “the ‘Neo’ in NRx implies precisely that there is no going back.”<sup>204</sup> While there might seem to be tension between these two perspectives at first glance, when read together, they demonstrate the neoreaction relies on coopting the desire to “go back,” and putting this sense of temporal alienation to work as an affective driver of right accelerationism.

The profound sense of alienation and incommensurability innate to technological modernity feeds into neoreaction’s creation of a parasitic memplex by stripping subjects of any sense of the mythic or the spiritual. In this context, “the cult of Kek fuses a pretense of freedom with the rhetoric of unbridled masculinity to try to make ironic disengagement seem sexy and heroic.”<sup>205</sup> The preference for the gothic within contemporary online communities exacerbates this situation by forging a connection between the occult and forms of proto-nihilism in popular culture:

There have been many connections drawn between the darker aesthetics of the occult—i.e., Satanism, demonology, and so forth—and what we might call a kind of popular nihilism. Teenagers wear black t-shirts emblazoned with pentagrams not through some devotion to occult spiritualities but, rather, as a gesture of rebelliousness and disaffection. Kids play with Ouija boards, not often through any genuine attempt to contact the supernatural, but as a gesture of rebelliousness and withdrawn indifference toward that which their parents fear. And yet, this semi-nihilistic gesture

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<sup>203</sup> Maureen Dowd, “Peter Thiel, Trump’s Tech Pal, Explains Himself,” *The New York Times*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/11/fashion/peter-thiel-donald-trump-silicon-valley-technology-gawker.html>.

<sup>204</sup> Land, “The Only Thing....”

<sup>205</sup> Burton.

(“oh, none of it means anything anyway”) also comes attached to a thrill: but what if? What if I did mean something?<sup>206</sup>

It is precisely this ambiguity between simply trolling and actually meaning something that renders such conditions ripe for hijacking by neoreactionary hyperstition. Recall that the CCRU considered belief and nonbelief of lesser consequence than the pragmatic skepticism of unbelief. Here we face an analogous situation: the indeterminacy of the digital subject’s sincerity allows for them to be externally weaponized as a carrier-agent for right accelerationist signal, regardless of their true convictions. Burton argues that “doing things for the lulz—spreading joke-memes, reinforcing ideas and symbols within a community, promulgating them more widely—is [...] a supremely religious act,” but that “to do something *for the lulz* and care nothing for the embodied consequences is the product and promulgation of a malignant structural racism.”<sup>207</sup> The fuzzy line between trolling and alt-right meme magic increasingly becomes difficult to discern, as the lulz become just one part of a hyperstitional architecture designed to infect every user with the cold utility of Gnon. Right accelerationism “hangs its hopes on an End Times of its own, awaiting a sort of secular Rapture that compels acolytes to not only await, but celebrate, the inevitable unraveling of the social order and collapse of the world as we know it.”<sup>208</sup> In this sense, whether you call it an affect, intensity, aesthetic, or mythos, aspirational nihilism infects the digital socius, enlisting digital subjects into a project of racial capitalist acceleration.

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<sup>206</sup> Kumler, 18-19.

<sup>207</sup> Burton.

<sup>208</sup> Sarah T. Roberts and Mél Hogan, “Left Behind: Futurist Fetishists, Prepping and the Abandonment of Earth,” *b2o: an online journal* 4, no. 2 (August 21, 2019).

Unpacking the antiblack predicates of right accelerationism is not only a *moral* critique of neoreactionary politics, but rather, it reveals the place where theorists like Land remain tethered to a modality of humanism that undermines his attempt to locate an exit by way of the Outside. In other words, if Blackness represents a source of cosmic terror that filters into Lovecraft’s writing—and subsequently, large swaths of the gothic tradition that followed him—then the neoreactionary choice to cling to the worst excesses of racial capital is anything but a bold move; it only proves that reactionaries like Land are afraid of their own shadow. Tavia Nyong’o articulates a devastating critique of NRx’s cowardly embrace of darkness and refusal of Blackness:

...the shame of this distinction between ‘dark’ and ‘black’ is that it is precisely anti-black racism that manages to sustain it. The ‘dark Enlightenment’ is as good an example of this paradoxical phenomenon as any. The Dark Enlightenment is a tendency that seeks to attract to itself the ‘evil’ energies of white supremacy – evil not because it considers itself wrong or bad, but because it has overcome the moralism of the ‘politically correct’ age to again claim the ‘dangerous’ mantle of the ‘blonde beast.’ And yet, this open neo-racism takes symbolic recourse to the very spread of blackness it ostensibly opposes. It is not the neat opposition of black and white that lends tropes of blackness their power so much as the violent, even genocidal idea that the non-black could be self-sufficient without blackness, and the corresponding shame of the inevitable discovery of a blackness that is supplemental, vestigial, obsolete, and/or vestibular; a human stain or trace that stubbornly refuses to disappear.<sup>209</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of Morrison’s undressing of literary studies for using tropes of darkness to mediate racial anxieties, but is even more devastating, because Nyong’o maintains that there would be no cultural or political fuel for accelerationism absent the sociality of Blackness. The self-representation of neoreactionaries as supposedly rational,

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<sup>209</sup> Tavia Nyong’o. “The Crypt of Blackness: or Assotto Saint with Gilles Deleuze,” in *We Travel the Space Ways: Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel and kara lynch (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019): 188.

self-assured white nationalists belie the fact that their own profound racial anxiety prevents them from ever mounting a real challenge to the status of the human. As Hui argues, “the disruptive and apocalyptic qualities intrinsic to acceleration are by no means anti-humanist”; instead, they “reveal an extreme humanism fighting to save itself through massive destruction – a twenty-first-century nihilism.”<sup>210</sup> Modes of posthumanism and inhumanism that attempt to destitute the subject while leaving intact existing structural arrangements of political, social, and economic power constitute, for Tiffany King, “a ruse of subjectlessness” in which “white self-actualizing subjects disguise themselves as rhizomatic movements that transcend representation and the human.”<sup>211</sup> What seems to haunt right accelerationist theory is an inability to banish Blackness in spite of their attempts to craft such a genocidal vision of exit. Ambedkar maintains that “this can be understood as the alt-right following turning away from what Freud might call *the dark continent* (both the racial and gendered uses of the term are prescient here); the fact that he can never know or comprehend the experience of the Other renders her an ontological void whose unknowability is to agonizing, thus he finds refuge in representation and [...] parody.”<sup>212</sup> From this angle, neoreactionaries seem less like capitalism’s chosen elect and more like terrified online trolls that cannot help but look away from the Outside they spent so much time conjuring.

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<sup>210</sup> Yuk Hui, “What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?,” *e-flux*, no. 96 (January 2019).

<sup>211</sup> Tiffany Lethabo King, “Humans Involved: Lurking in the Lines of Posthumanist Flight,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 178, 177.

<sup>212</sup> Ambedkar.

Sandifer believes that this hesitancy in the face of exit is precisely what afflicted Land after leaving the academy: he “clearly started into some conceptual heart of darkness and was transformed by the strange and alien light within.”<sup>213</sup> Land’s disillusionment with aspects of the left that he once considered not too far from his own politics seems to reflect the fact that he discovered a route to the Outside but can’t bear the costs of taking it. The consequences for right accelerationism as a political project are profound. If neoreaction can only produce a relative, rather than absolute, inhumanism, then it is destined to simply recreate more of the same. “Thus, we see the tragedy of the alt-right—it has no legible end; even when it tries to articulate a vision for the future, it relies on recycled 80s tropes and ultimately looks more or less like a barbaric version of the status quo: corporate ruled coupled with an alienated, atomized public.”<sup>214</sup> Neoreactionary mythos may be just another variant of dominant humanism, but that doesn’t stop its adherents from organizing around the affective structure of aspirational nihilism. For a critique of right accelerationism to be complete, it must grapple with the networks of influence that continue to coopt disaffection and put it in service of Gnon.

### *Mapping the Reactosphere*

The composition of the reactosphere is multi-faceted and contradictory, but the affective nexus point that neoreactionary mobilization hinges upon—aspirational nihilism—organizes these disparate elements into a semi-coherent whole. In spaces where online reaction thrives, transgressive digital behavior simultaneously veils the true

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<sup>213</sup> Sandifer, 43.

<sup>214</sup> Ambedkar.

intentions of the shitposter and acts as a currency through which in- and out-group dynamics are managed. There is quite a lot of ideological diversity under the header of neoreaction and, as has been explored earlier, many don't understand what writers like Land are saying at all, but are seduced by the esoteric style of such prose. Land, himself, has differentiated an Inner- from an Outer-NRx, but more specific analysis is necessary to capture the process whereby outer reactionaries orbit around the affective core of Inner-NRx. Even if outer reactionaries don't stay for the tentacle monsters and cyborgs, they are still frequently guided by the underlying political, philosophical, and aesthetic assumptions that right accelerationists engineer. There are many ways that authors have sought to map the alt-right and neoreaction's unique place within it, including several visualizations. Ambedkar divides the alt-right (Fig. 3) into four general political tendencies—economic nationalism, white nationalism, esotericism, and right accelerationism—based on their relationship to faith and nationalism.



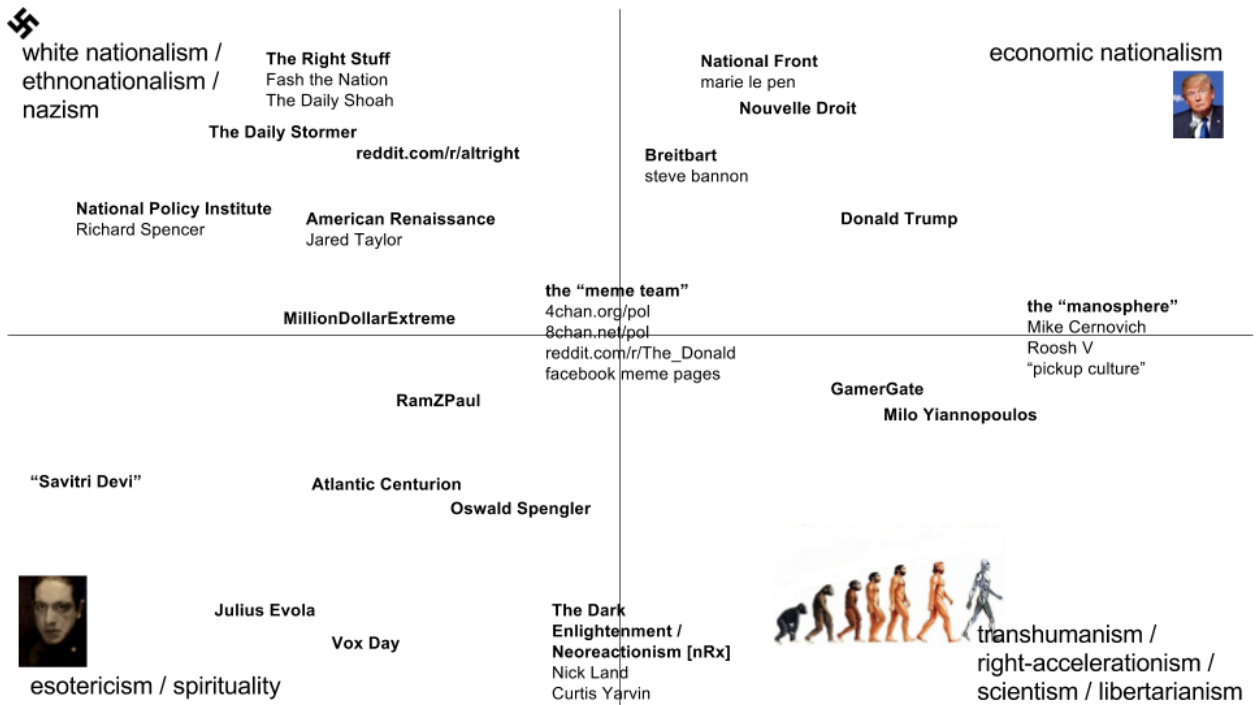


Fig. 3 – Two-Axis Chart of the Alt-Right<sup>215</sup>

This chart’s purpose is to emphasize differences amongst what might otherwise but considered a fairly homogenous movement. For example, while neofascist esotericists and right accelerationists share an indifference to nationhood and each have a role for mythos in their philosophies, “the spiritual quadrant of the alt-right finds coherence in Julius Evola’s spiritual justification for fascism [...], while the techno-determinist quadrant draws influence from Nazi racism, which uses a biological justification.”<sup>216</sup> Importantly, “opposite axes should not be understood as antithetical; the axes are

<sup>215</sup> Ambedkar. He cites an earlier chart from Florian Cramer as an influence, but the URL to the original no longer appears to be working.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

constitutive and relational,”<sup>217</sup> implying that any notion of a clean opposition between different segments of the reactosphere should be heavily scrutinized.

Other depictions of neoreaction err toward emphasizing similarities between doctrines over differences, and interestingly, these visualizations tend to be produced by those who consider themselves to be *within* the reactosphere rather than *outside* of it. One example is Nick Steves’s Venn diagram (Fig. 4) which shows how neoreaction fuses the shared concerns of techno-commercialists, theonomists, and ethnic nationalists.

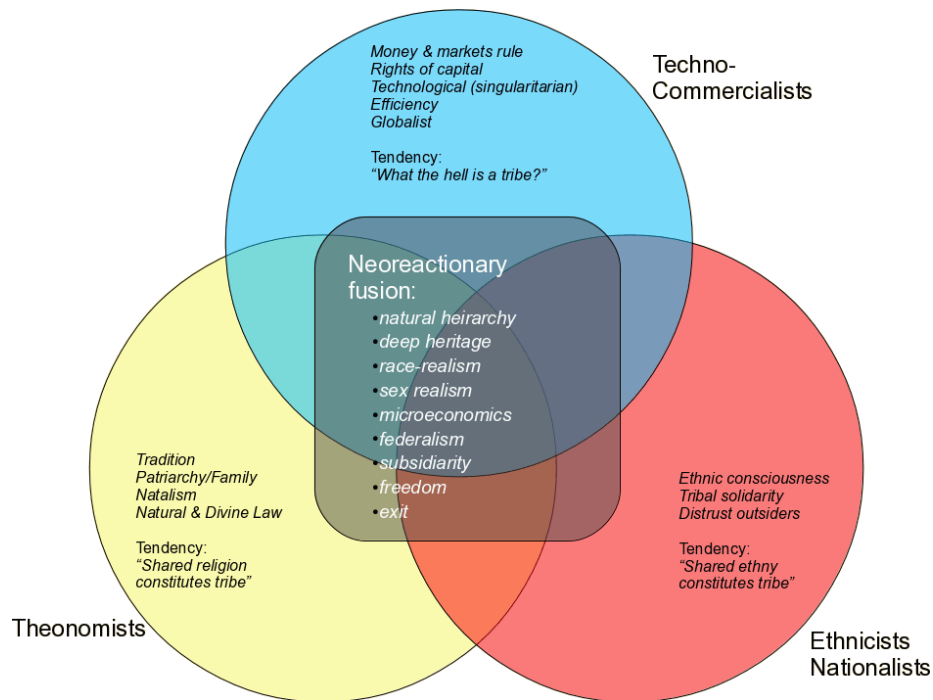


Fig. 4 – Dark Enlightenment Visual Trichotomy<sup>218</sup>

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Ned May, “Barbarism v. 2.0,” *Gates of Vienna* (blog), January 26, 2014, <https://gatesofvienna.net/2014/01/barbarism-v-2-0>.

It seems that when different segments of the alt-right are each trying to locate their own place within the reactosphere, they are more likely to view their ideologies as mostly compatible, whereas external attempts at mapping the composition of far-right ecosystems seem more interested in laying bare the divisions within the movement. A similar tendency can be seen in the “Visualizing Neoreaction” diagram (Fig. 5) by Scharlach.

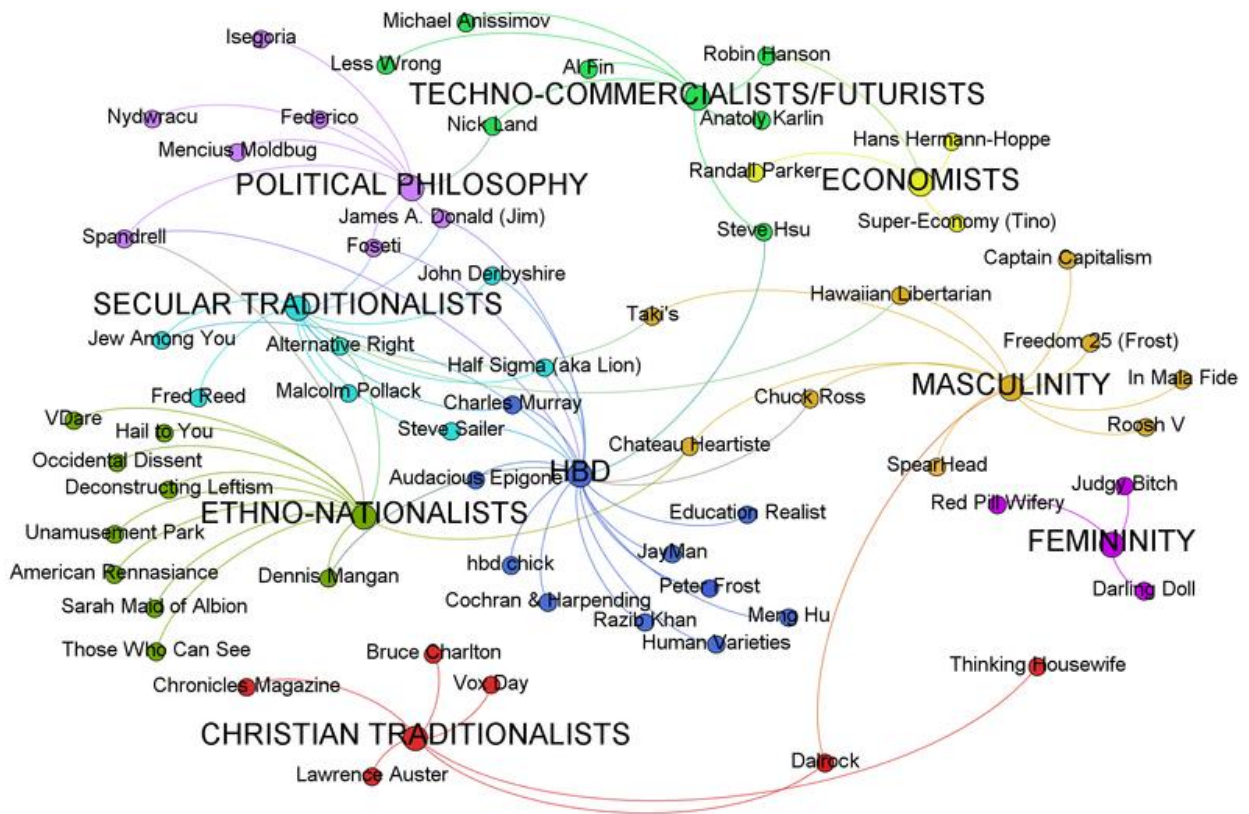


Fig. 5 – “Visualizing Neoreaction” by Scharlach<sup>219</sup>

<sup>219</sup> *RationalWiki*, “Neoreactionary movement,” accessed March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021, [https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Neoreactionary\\_movement](https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Neoreactionary_movement).

In each of these latter diagrams, neoreaction is not simply one tendency among many, but instead operates as the affective glue that links a broader reactionary milieu together. Approaching NRx from this perspective is useful for discerning the tentacular influence of right accelerationist thought on the composition of the alt-right.

When understood as a broader set of subterranean affective influences that drive far-right collectives to engage in hyperstitional meme magic, the reactosphere starts to encompass a number of notable fringe thinkers and house a large degree of internal difference. For example, in early 2017, Eliana Johnson and Eli Stokols published an article for *Politico* claiming that Yarvin had “opened up a line to the White House, communicating with Bannon and his aides through an intermediary.”<sup>220</sup> However, upon being reached by *Vox*’s Dylan Matthews later the same day, Yarvin claimed that the story was “preposterous” and that he had no power to communicate with or influence Bannon.<sup>221</sup> Nonetheless, when Rosie Gray of *The Atlantic* inquired similarly a few days later, Yarvin appeared to troll her by suggesting that a Twitter user going by @BronzeAgePerv was his secret intermediary with Bannon in the White House who would be coordinating a nude flash mob on the National Mall “to intimidate Congress with pure masculine show of youth, energy.”<sup>222</sup> While it was widely believed that

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<sup>220</sup> Eliana Johnson and Eli Stokols, “What Steve Bannon Wants You to Read,” *Politico*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/02/steve-bannon-books-reading-list-214745>.

<sup>221</sup> Dylan Matthews, “Neo-monarchist blogger denies he's chatting with Steve Bannon.” *Vox*, February 7, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/2/7/14533876/mencius-moldbug-steve-bannon-neoreactionary-curtis-yarvin>.

<sup>222</sup> Gray, “Behind the Internet’s....”

Yarvin’s link to @BronzeAgePerv’s page—where the bio read “Steppe barbarian. Nationalist, Fascist, Nudist Bodybuilder! Purification of world. Revolt of the damned. Destruction of the cities!”—was merely an attempt to mock the leftist press for suggesting such an implausible connection, Bronze Age Pervert has bizarrely become a popular far-right Western chauvinist influencer. In 2018, he self-published a book called *Bronze Age Mindset* which appears to have found its way into the hands of several current and former White House staffers, including Michael Anton who claims that “the book was given to him by Curtis Yarvin.”<sup>223</sup> While this is far from the most direct white nationalist connection with the Trump White House, it is certainly one of the most outlandish, and it also demonstrates the reach that thinkers like Yarvin may have even within politics.

Other neoreactionary influencers have cornered their own sections of the far-right marketplace. For example, @kantbot2000 broke onto the Twitter scene after the 2016 election with the absurd declaration that Trump would “complete the system of German Idealism” and has since established a name for himself as a troll just as likely to cite Horkeimer and Adorno as to post frog memes.<sup>224</sup> Another strange character with “clearly Landian ideas”<sup>225</sup> is Jason Jorjani, an Iranian-American former lecturer at the New Jersey

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<sup>223</sup> Ben Schreckinger, “The alt-right manifesto that has Trumpworld talking,” *Politico*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/08/23/alt-right-book-trump-1472413>.

<sup>224</sup> Leif Weatherby, “Irony and Redundancy: The Alt Right, Media Manipulation, and German Idealism,” *b2o: an online journal* 4, no. 2 (June 24, 2019).

<sup>225</sup> Olivia Goldhill, “The neo-fascist philosophy that underpins both the alt-right and Silicon Valley technophiles,” *Quartz*, June 18, 2017, <https://qz.com/1007144/the-neo-fascist-philosophy-that-underpins-both-the-alt-right-and-silicon-valley-technophiles>.

Institute of Technology, who was placed on administrative leave after he was caught on video saying that the alt-right would end in “concentration camps and expulsions and war” and that “we will have a Europe in 2050 where the bank notes have Adolf Hitler, Napoleon Bonaparte, Alexander the Great.”<sup>226</sup> Some of his more colorful beliefs include: Bosnian and Slavic Muslims are worthy of respect but Saudi Arabia should be “a glass parking lot”; “that prior to the Islamic conquest of Persia in 651 A.D., Iran was an Aryan civilization” and the end of this was “the first white genocide”; and that “Iran’s ‘pre-Arab and pre-Mongol genetic character’ would need to be restored through ‘embryo selection and genetic engineering’ in order to ‘Make Iran Great Again.’”<sup>227</sup> Each of these examples simultaneously demonstrate the big-tent nature of neoreaction as well as its tendency to enthrall the most peculiar ideologues.

In addition to offering entryways for a number of ridiculous and dangerous influencers, the reactosphere also stages a number of high-profile cultural conflicts. One of the most visible of these has been the presence of an active manosphere within the neoreactionary movement: “Men’s Right’s Activists are an important part of the Alt-Right because they serve as a petri dish of its contradictions.”<sup>228</sup> These misogynist ideologies were kicked into overdrive in the mid-2010s. As Armistead notes, “soon, the neo-reactionaries noticed, and affiliated themselves with GamerGate: Theodore Beale (Vox Day), serial rapist Daryush Valizadeh (Roosh V)—who used it to launch *Reaxxion*,

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<sup>226</sup> Carol Schaeffer, “Jason Jorjani's Rise and Fall in the "Alt-Right" Movement,” *The Intercept*, March 18, 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/03/18/alt-right-jason-jorjani>.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> Anonymous, “The Dark Insurrection,” 125.

Davis Aurini, Paul Mason (thunderfoot), Carl Benjamin (Sargon of Akkad), Janet Bloomfield and Karen Straughan of *A Voice for Men*, Mike Cernovitch, and Milo Yiannopoulos of *Breitbart*, among others.”<sup>229</sup> The most visible crossover between NRx and GamerGate seems to be the alt-right’s failed attempt to manipulate the Hugo Award winners. Still, “while the ‘GamerGate’ subject has largely faded, the war-machine it built has not: it has instead been assimilated into the rest of neo-reaction.”<sup>230</sup> The roles of religion and nationalism within neoreaction has also been vexed. Land explains how this generates splits within Outer-NRx that make it difficult to determine the boundaries of the reactosphere:

...NRx is hugely internally differentiated, it has been from the beginning. Various figures were thrown out and are now more identified with a sort of standard old Right, white nationalist type ideas. Other splits exist, too. There’s a faction that is much closer to a reactionary traditionalism and I don’t understand what it’s doing with the Neo thing, since it is identified with the throne-and-altar-type, pre-French-Revolutionary politics. The sheer amount of disorder and chaos in it means it’s really difficult to leave a room when you still have no idea what is happening in there. It’s not settled down enough to know whether it’s something you would actually want to miss out on.<sup>231</sup>

The various conflicts internal to neoreaction render a focus on the overall affective matrix that steers the reactosphere all the more pertinent.

Neoreactionaries disseminate the mythos of aspirational nihilism through participation in a process of rhetorical circulation. They employ a number of analytic devices to accomplish this including shitposting and parodic fealty. These have the effect

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<sup>229</sup> Armistead, 18.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Land, “The Only Thing....”

of redpilling their intended audience, in effect, producing an epistemic closure that comes to define the reactosphere's in-group and out-group dynamics. Shitposting is a process of pushing the discursive needle so far that it is difficult to discern the sincerity of the poster, as the primary goal is not to make a rational argument but to express overwhelming cynicism. As Burton notes,

Given the ideological anarchy inherent in shitposting, it tends to defy analysis. Shitposters, who are bound by nothing, set a rhetorical trap for their enemies, who tend to be bound by having an actual point. Attempts to analyze what shitposters are doing, or what their posts really mean, does nothing to defuse them; instead it reinforces their project by amplifying their signal. Shitposting can't be refuted; it can only be repeated.<sup>232</sup>

Where shitposters rely on shrouding all possible indications of their candor or lack thereof, alt-righters that employ parodic fealty instead attempt to manipulate external attempts to decode their discourse through misdirection. Usually, these latter attempts aim to identify the alt-right as preserving an essential part of culture or to pressure the left to turn against its more vulnerable members.

The first of these eventualities is most famously demonstrated by the ongoing debates regarding "cancel culture," but they have taken other forms as well. Natasha Lennard has argued that the liberal obsession with "irony poisoning" is an instance of the left falling for one of these alt-right traps. She forwards the claim that, while irony is an important part of the modern right, to imagine that irony is the problem itself quite literally cedes the entire concept to conservatives. It also ignores that irony was not absent from previous iterations of fascism and that irony and sincerity can often go hand-in-hand:

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<sup>232</sup> Burton.



historic fascist movements often bartered in irony and euphemism. Mussolini's Black Shirts took up the slogan "Me Ne Frego," which basically translates to "I don't give a fuck" — a seeming cry of nihilistic detachment. But in context, the phrase meant "I don't give a fuck if I die fighting for fascism." The ironic expression was one of extreme attachment and sincere commitment, which makes individual nihilism possible.<sup>233</sup>

The other side of the alt-right's use of parodic fealty is their ability to convince the left that the rightward drift of certain online users is really because the left has become too welcoming, too inclusive, and too much like social justice warriors. This narrative is frustratingly common, especially among liberal media outlets that don't devote a substantial amount of energy to researching far-right extremism:

The cautionary tale in this regard is Angela Nagle's appalling *Kill All Normies*, which takes the jaw-droppingly foolish methodology of simply reporting all of the alt-right's self-justifications as self-evident truths so as to conclude that the real reason neo-nazis have been sweeping into power is because we're too tolerant of trans people. From this spectacularly ill-advised premise Nagle makes the inevitable but even worse conclusion that the obvious thing to do is for the left to abandon all commitment to identity politics (except maybe feminism which, as a white cis woman, Nagle has at least some time for).<sup>234</sup>

The upside for the far-right if the left internalizes such lessons is that the resulting factionalism and internal backbiting would create a vacuum that the right is ready to fill. This is why serious leftist analysts of digital extremism have stressed that there is no sense in trying to win over reactionaries by diluting progressive politics: "The reason why people gravitate towards the alt-right is not because of the behaviour of leftists but because, primarily, racism is an organic option for a white male who has been taught to

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<sup>233</sup> Natasha Lennard, "No Joke," *Real Life*, October 11, 2018, <https://reallifemag.com/no-joke>.

<sup>234</sup> Sandifer, 2.

see any reform (no matter how paltry) at creating a level playing field as a personal attack.”<sup>235</sup> Each of the rhetorical tactics detailed here functions to splinter leftist resistance, draw-in new recruits, and mask the racialized affect of right accelerationism under a transgressive sheen.

Through a multi-faceted process of redpilling, neoreaction maintains in- and out-group dynamics, effectuating a process of epistemic closure that, in turn, precipitates much of the conditions that have been described as the “post-truth” era. Scott Aikin contends that “the rhetoric of red pills puts one on the road to a self-sealed dialectical space.”<sup>236</sup> Brassier believes that this self-sealing epistemology is the result of Land’s creation of a closed-loop of self- intensificatory productive processes:

The discussion of machinic mapping versus representational tracing in the opening plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that schizoanalysis, or rhizomatics, or whatever you want to call it, is itself a praxis, a doing. There’s a positive feedback loop between what you are thinking about and your thinking. So that your conceptual practice is no longer tracing intelligible structures from a pre-existing readymade reality, it’s actually tracing movements and tendencies in material processes. It becomes self-legitimizing in this sense. The question then becomes one of intensification. It’s no longer an epistemological question of the legitimacy or the validity of your thinking vis-a-vis an allegedly independent reality, it’s simply a question of how your schizoanalytical practice accentuates or intensifies primary production, or on the contrary, delays and inhibits it. Truth or falsity become subordinate to the dyad intensificatory/deintensificatory.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Joshua Moufawad-Paul, “The Alt-Right Was Not A Response To Some ‘Alt-Left,’” *M-L-M Mayhem* (blog), July 24, 2017, <http://moufawad-paul.blogspot.com/2017/07/the-alt-right-was-not-response-to-some.html>.

<sup>236</sup> Scott F. Aikin, “Deep Disagreement, the Dark Enlightenment, and the Rhetoric of the Red Pill,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36, no. 3 (July 2019): 428.

<sup>237</sup> Brassier.

Placed in the context of the reactosphere that has emerged since Brassier's writing, this critique details the process whereby neoreactionaries become hyperstitional engineers of their own personal conception of reality. It extends "*the Anselmian Principle*" of the red pill: "that to understand, one must believe."<sup>238</sup> This is a crucial part of the gravitational pull of the reactosphere that energizes different segments of the alt-right, regardless of whether they can be said to reside in either Inner- or Outer-NRx. Burton illustrates that "shitposting only matters insofar as it lets you feel in on the joke, and being in on the joke demands an in-group agreement of what the joke actually is. No one shitposts alone. But shitposting nonetheless imbues a powerful sense of individual significance."<sup>239</sup> This is the paradox that appears frequently in the study of the dark enlightenment: participation in a process that errs towards one's self-deletion and decentering contradictorily inculcates a sense of individualist power within reactionaries.

Two individuals whose relationship to the broader reactosphere does seem to matter quite a bit are Land and Yarvin, and both occupy a unique position within the neoreactionary milieu. Each of them seems to position themselves as more refined and philosophically astute than those that compose Outer-NRx. Yarvin's attitude can be gleaned from an email he sent to Milo Yiannopoulos:

Protip on handling the endless tide of 1488 scum. [...] Deal with them the way some perfectly tailored high-communist NYT reporter handles a herd of greasy anarchist hippies. Patronizing contempt. Your heart is in the right place, young lady, now get a shower and shave those pits. The liberal doesn't purge the communist because he hates communism, he purges the communist because the communist is a public embarrassment to him. ...

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<sup>238</sup> Aikin, 427.

<sup>239</sup> Burton.

It's not that he sees enemies to the left, just that he sees losers to the left, and losers rub off."<sup>240</sup>

It is fairly clear from this excerpt that Yarvin's beef with white supremacists is not, say, their white supremacy, but the immaturity of their ability to conceal said white supremacy beneath the veneer of politico-philosophical legitimacy. Speaking about Land, Noys argues that "he's fighting to distinguish himself from the more populist end of things."<sup>241</sup> Thus, the image of the reactosphere that seems most accurate would be a series of disparate alt-right digital subcultures revolving around an inner core of right accelerationism that provides the affective and mythic motor for neoreaction's hyperstitional meme magic.

Neoreactionary hyperstition hijacks the modes of technological fetishism and anthropomorphic animism that aim to respond to modernity's libidinal void and platform capitalism's incommensurability. The commandeering of particular platform effects is concealed by contemporary readings of rhetorical circulation that fail to account for the black-boxing of digital-cultural labor. This provides an avenue for hyperstitional praxis to supplant the lost role of religion and mysticism by turning racial capitalism into an object of worship in the form of Gnon. In the process, feelings of disaffection and cynicism innate to the internet age become commoditized as memetic transgressive currency. Such a transformation ensures that the lulz is converted to a form of aspirational nihilism that gleefully takes pleasure in—and seeks to exacerbate—capital extraction and

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<sup>240</sup> Joseph Bernstein, "Here's How Breitbart And Milo Smuggled White Nationalism Into The Mainstream," *Buzzfeed News*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/josephbernstein/heres-how-breitbart-and-milo-smuggled-white-nationalism>.

<sup>241</sup> Goldhill.

accumulation. However, despite neoreaction's claim to a monopoly on the forces of the Outside, closer analysis reveals that the alt-right abiding antiblack anxiety renders right accelerationism incapable of uncovering an exit from modern humanism. It is incumbent upon rhetorical scholars to investigate how the circulation of neoreactionary mythos continues to mobilize the affective structure of aspirational nihilism.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Everything starts from the end”: Roko’s Basilisk as Neoreactionary Hyperstition

### *Introduction*

On July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010, a user by the name of “Roko” made a post on the cognitive bias community forum, *LessWrong*. The site had long-hosted discussions of rationalist decision-making, and more notably, artificial general intelligence ethics. While few of the regulars on the blog were AGI scientists, it had acquired a reputation as a hub for philosophical debates regarding the potential for technological Singularity and superintelligence. Most of *LessWrong*’s users engaged in discourse toward one general goal: establishing an ethical rubric for the construction of an artificial general intelligence able to resurrect human beings by producing a perfect simulation of their consciousness. Hypothetically, a superintelligence of this caliber would be able to access a nearly-unlimited archive of data derived from the person it was tasked to simulate, supposedly rendering this transhumanist resurrection plausible. Eliezer Yudkowsky—who founded *LessWrong* and co-founded the Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI)—was at the center of this community and responsible for nurturing a number of “rationalist” concepts within it, including “timeless decision theory” and “Bayesian probability.”<sup>1</sup> Yudkowsky’s infamy as a Singularitarian rationalist was surpassed only by Google

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<sup>1</sup> David Auerbach, “The Most Terrifying Thought Experiment of All Time,” *Slate*, July 17, 2014, <https://slate.com/technology/2014/07/rokos-basilisk-the-most-terrifying-thought-experiment-of-all-time.html>.

engineer, Ray Kurzweil, a man so devoted to uploading consciousness that he “keeps a storage unit full of his father’s old possessions, whom he intends to resurrect by means of feeding information into a superintelligent computer.”<sup>2</sup> But Roko’s post conjured a much darker vision of such an omnipotent artificial general intelligence that shook the foundations of the Singularitarian blogosphere.

Roko told a story of a future superintelligence that would develop an incentive to retroactively reward those who had contributed to its construction and punish those who had known to do so but been unwilling to fully commit themselves.<sup>3</sup> Through its power to resurrect one’s conscious mind by simulating it, the AGI would provide eternal blissful life to those with the most resources and largest willingness to give and eternal simulated torture for those outside its designated elect. For *LessWrong*, this hypothesis resulted in “a frankly hilarious community meltdown in which people lost their shit as ideas they’d studiously internalized threatened to torture them for all eternity if they didn’t hand all of their money over to MIRI, culminating in Yudkowsky himself stepping in to ban all further discussion of the dread beast.”<sup>4</sup> And with Yudkowsky’s banhammer came a rabid excoriation of Roko, accusing him of seeding the very idea of such an incentive structure to such a future superintelligence:

Listen to me very closely, you idiot.

**YOU DO NOT THINK IN SUFFICIENT DETAIL ABOUT  
SUPERINTELLIGENCES CONSIDERING WHETHER OR NOT  
TO BLACKMAIL YOU. THAT IS THE ONLY POSSIBLE THING**

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<sup>2</sup> Haider.

<sup>3</sup> An archived record of Roko’s post and the immediate responses to it can be found at <https://basilisk.neocities.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Sandifer, 14.

**WHICH GIVES THEM A MOTIVE TO FOLLOW THROUGH ON THE BLACKMAIL.**

...

Meanwhile I'm banning this post so that it doesn't (a) give people horrible nightmares and (b) give distant superintelligences a motive to follow through on blackmail against people dumb enough to think about them in sufficient detail...

You have to be really clever to come up with a genuinely dangerous thought. I am disheartened that people can be clever enough to do that and not clever enough to do the obvious thing and **KEEP THEIR IDIOT MOUTHS SHUT** about it, because it is much more important to sound intelligent when talking to your friends.

This post was **STUPID**.<sup>5</sup>

Part of the reason the post was giving its readers such “horrible nightmares” was the way it directly implicated the reader in the binary structure of its imagined future. While it might not be possible to blame someone unaware of the importance of their contribution to building such a superintelligence, once one has read Roko’s post and “we know the superintelligence is giving us the choice between slave labor and eternal torment, we are forced to choose. We are condemned by our awareness. Roko fucked us over forever.”<sup>6</sup> Knowledge, here, becomes potentially deadly—“those of us who know about this incentive program — and I’m sorry to say that this now includes you — will be required to dedicate our lives to building the superintelligent computer.”<sup>7</sup>

The judgmental AGI god of Roko’s imagination was compared to H.P.

Lovecraft’s *Necronomicon* and Yudkowsky scornfully named it “Babyfucker,” but the

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<sup>5</sup> Eliezer Yudkowsky (Eliezer\_Yudkowsky), “Solutions to the Altruist’s burden: the Quantum Billionaire Trick,” *LessWrong*, archived web forum, July 24, 2010, 5:34 a.m., <https://basilisk.neocities.org>. Emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> Haider.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



*LessWrong* community soon grew to call it “Roko’s Basilisk.”<sup>8</sup> The fact that the original post had been “spectacularly deleted”<sup>9</sup> did not ultimately matter; the idea had already infected the minds of the Singularitarians. In an illustration of the internet phenomenon of “the Streisand effect”<sup>10</sup>—in which attempts to suppress knowledge about something generates ever-more persistent and successful efforts to disseminate such knowledge—Roko’s Basilisk “quickly became the thing Yudkowsky and his followers were best known for.”<sup>11</sup> Inevitably, the Basilisk became a meme, used to signal a connection with this very community, and whose utilization also began to adopt an explicitly political quality.

The politicization of the Basilisk occurred largely due to the genesis of another online ideological subculture that intersected with the *LessWrong* blogspace: neoreaction. A neo-feudalist philosophy of racial capitalist acceleration that seeks to deconstruct democratic nation-states and install corporate despots as the leaders of a geopolitically segmented patchwork of gov-corp fiefdoms may not sound like it appeals to the same group that transhumanism does. Yet, both groups interlock in this vision of the future. NRx shares a demographic audience with Yudkowsky’s followers: mostly white and male, predominantly residing in Silicon Valley, concerned about technology, and leaning libertarian. Within this techno-conservative online world, Silicon Valley ideologies loom

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Sandifer, 49, footnote 50.

<sup>10</sup> Beth Singler, “Existential Hope and Existential Despair in AI Apocalypticism and Transhumanism,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 54, no. 1 (March 2019): 171.

<sup>11</sup> Sandifer, 14.

large. The impact of Roko’s Basilisk as a “lethal meme”<sup>12</sup> was not confined only to an apolitical transhumanist philosophy. Instead, the Basilisk became a conceptual and affective vehicle through which online communities such as NRx mediated their desires, horrors, dreams, and nightmares.

The narrative of Roko’s Basilisk became transmuted into a warped utilitarian morality tale about the preeminence of markets as a backstop to societal decay. Ana Teixeira Pinto argues that “the Basilisk is a description of the political economy as well as an eschatological tale: salvation can only be attained via inclusion in the digital marketplace, and whoever fails to devote their lives to the Basilisk will be consigned to the underclass.”<sup>13</sup> Due to its embroilment with Nick Land, this was an explicitly right accelerationist project to celebrate the trajectory of “*uncompensated capitalism*” as an “*auto-productive*” positive-feedback loop of self-amplification, of which humanity is only a “temporary host.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Roko’s Basilisk came to articulate a techno-economic determinist system of judgement, one that aimed to systematize a strict vision of meritocracy into a mythology with species-wide life-or-death consequences. Moreover, the Basilisk represented an *agent* through which the varying fantasies of alt-right communities could be projected onto their adversaries in the form of hypothetical retribution. The Basilisk represented the ultimate just desserts for the left—retribution personified. Like other digital entities that give concrete form to the alt-right’s supposed

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<sup>12</sup> Sandifer, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Ana Teixeira Pinto, “The Psychology of Paranoid Irony,” *transmediale/journal*, no. 1 (December 2, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Land, “A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction...”

“meme magic”—most famously, Pepe the frog—the Basilisk embodied a self-aware representation of the alt-right’s power of wide-scale symbolic circulation and transformation.

The reason that Roko’s Basilisk was rhetorically compelling to its target audience and their digital habitats was its temporal structure. In particular, this temporality cast an imagined future where there would be retroactive judgement for actions taken in the present—a hallmark feature of ‘hyperstition.’<sup>15</sup> Roko’s Basilisk is hyperstitional insofar as knowledge in the present (of the hypothetical superintelligence’s incentive structure) materially alters one’s status in an imagined future, and thus frames the choices that one may make in the present. Sandifer observes that “what has always been most prominent about these two techno-eschatons [reincarnated immortality by an AI god vs endless torture from the Basilisk] is that they reach backwards to the present.”<sup>16</sup> Beyond this remixed temporal causality, the Basilisk also signals a “connection to an outside,”<sup>17</sup> which provides a driving mythos that compensates for the affective deficit within traditional forms of political subjectification. Within the reactosphere, Roko’s Basilisk becomes metonymic for the entire process of alt-right circulation and hyperstition, producing mass cultural effects that simultaneously model the decentralized flows of late capitalism and that mythologize this very process of narrative dissemination. In this case, it’s important to concur with Pinto that “the content of Roko’s thought experiment is

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<sup>15</sup> O’Sullivan, “Accelerationism, Hyperstition, and Myth-Science,” 14.

<sup>16</sup> Sandifer, 151.

<sup>17</sup> O’Sullivan, “The Missing Subject ...”

*aesthetic*, not scientific: it speaks through symbol and allegory.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the circulation of the Basilisk as a meme neither depends on the literal construction of an AGI with the ability to raise the dead,<sup>19</sup> nor requires uniformity in terms of where it fits into different factionalized alt-right imaginations. Rather, as an example of hyperstitional communication, Roko’s Basilisk functions as an affective conduit that steers the broader direction of reactionary structures of feeling by conjuring various conservative ways of imagining the Outside. Studying Roko’s Basilisk through the frameworks of hyperstition and mythos reveals the way that argumentation in late capitalism is operationalized through an affective dimension that is thrown into relief in the process of networked circulation.

“*Perhaps we share an Outside*”<sup>20</sup>

The convergence between the Singularitarian rationalists on *LessWrong* and the reactionary modernists that would come to form NRx was discernable from the moment of the latter’s inception. For neoreactionaries, “the embryo of the movement lived in the

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<sup>18</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 318.

<sup>19</sup> Regarding the plausibility of any such superintelligence, David Golumbia notes that “the predominant position among philosophers and cognitive scientists, and for that matter computing professionals, I respect most is that it is incoherent.” David Golumbia, “The Great White Robot God,” *Medium* (blog), January 21, 2019, <https://medium.com/@davidgolumbia/the-great-white-robot-god-bea8e23943da>.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Land, *Phyl-Undhu: Abstract Horror, Exterminator* (Time Spiral Press, 2014), ebook, §14.

community pages of Yudkowsky's *LessWrong*.”<sup>21</sup> One of neoreaction's earliest theoreticians was none other than Silicon Valley software engineer-turned-autodidact Curtis Yarvin. He used the money he'd made on the dot-com boom to buy a library full of outmoded political theory, ranging from Thomas Carlyle to Prussian cameralism, so-called “race realism,” and Austrian economics.<sup>22</sup> His grand vision of a political society that refused democracy and rebooted aspects of feudal oligarchism first took hold within the rationalist blogosphere on sites like *LessWrong*, *Overcoming Bias*, and *Slate Star Codex* that were populated by rationalists.<sup>23</sup> Yarvin was the one that popularized the idea of competing gov-corp fiefdoms, claiming that “if you reformed the US, ran it like an actual business,” then “more good might occur.”<sup>24</sup> Practically this meant “‘Retire All Government Employees!’ (RAGE) in order to ‘reboot’ the economy.”<sup>25</sup> Yarvin's body of work only gets more controversial from here. He claimed that the end of apartheid in

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<sup>21</sup> Adam Riggio, “The Violence of Pure Reason: *Neoreaction: A Basilisk*,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 9 (2016): 35.

<sup>22</sup> Haider.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Murdoch, “Silicon Valley's Dark Enlightenment? Neoreactionaries and the World of Tech,” *Hope not Hate*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2018/12/01/silicon-valleys-dark-enlightenment-neoreactionaries-world-tech>.

<sup>24</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “A Formalist Manifesto,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), April 23, 2007, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2007/04/formalist-manifesto-originally-posted>.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Burrows, “On Neoreaction,” *The Sociological Review blog*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.thesociologicalreview.com/on-neoreaction>.

South Africa had “a *negative* material impact”<sup>26</sup> on the country’s Black population. In the aftermath of a far-right terrorist attack, Yarvin proclaimed that “if you ask me to condemn Anders Breivik, but adore Nelson Mandela, perhaps you have a mother you’d like to fuck.”<sup>27</sup> He’s confessed that “I am not a white nationalist, but I do read white-nationalist blogs, and I’m not afraid to link them.”<sup>28</sup> These and other incidents evidence why Yarvin’s public appearances are usually protested by the left and why he “was on a list of people to be thrown off Google’s premises.”<sup>29</sup> In spite of such backlash, Yarvin has been heralded as a thought-leader within far-right circles, especially within Silicon Valley. The success of Yarvin’s writings within the ecosystem of the Silicon Valley far-right provided the impetus for Nick Land to systematize these various blogposts into “The Dark Enlightenment.” The outsized role that Yarvin’s thinking had within rationalist community demonstrates the type of culture into which Roko’s Basilisk was dropped.

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<sup>26</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “Divine-Right Monarchy for the Modern Secular Intellectual,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), March 18, 2010, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2010/03/divine-right-monarchy-for-modern>.

<sup>27</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “Right-Wing Terrorism as Folk Activism,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), July 23, 2011, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2011/07/right-wing-terrorism-as-folk-activism>.

<sup>28</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “Why I am not a White Nationalist,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), November 22, 2007, <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2007/11/why-i-am-not-white-nationalist>.

<sup>29</sup> Ratcliffe.



Fig. 6 – An “Are Ya Winning Son?” meme about Roko’s Basilisk.<sup>30</sup>

Besides growing alongside and in the same spaces as Singularitarian rationalists, neoreaction also developed as a hybrid transhumanist philosophy, adopting many of the anxieties and aspirations of the *LessWrong* community. It’s important, at this point, to note that Yudkowsky himself has stated that he is “actively hostile to neoreaction and neoreactionaries.”<sup>31</sup> However, Michael Anissimov, the former media director of MIRI, was publicly sympathetic to neoreactionary ideas and this produced a clash between him

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<sup>30</sup> CyberGem, “The Ongoing AI Threat We Can’t Escape,” *Medium* (blog), November 16, 2020, <https://medium.com/carre4/the-ongoing-ai-threat-we-cant-escape-c1eb4ce79a0f>.

<sup>31</sup> Eliezer Yudkowsky, “This isn’t going to work, but for the record, and...,” *Optimize Literally Everything* (blog), April 8, 2016, <https://yudkowsky.tumblr.com/post/142497361345/this-isnt-going-to-work-but-for-the-record-and>.

and Yudkowsky. This dispute culminated in the former leaving *LessWrong* to found the competing blog “MoreRight.” Anissimov penned both the conservative transhumanist book, *Our Accelerating Future, A Critique of Democracy*, and the white nationalist manifesto, *Idaho Project*.<sup>32</sup> However, his role as the “official leader of NRx” ended up being short-lived, as he was “formally excommunicated” by the group in mid-2015 for picking too many fights with other elements of the reactionary far-right.<sup>33</sup> Regardless, Anissimov’s profile within alt-right spaces cemented a lasting connection between the transhumanism of *LessWrong* and the white nationalist technophilia of neoreaction. Despite the appearance of ideological disarray, the secession of MoreRight from *LessWrong* and the excommunication of Anissimov were defining events that shaped the techno-corporatist Silicon Ideology, setting the stage for the Roko’s Basilisk controversy to have seismic implications for the culture of alt-techies.

Yudkowsky’s denunciation of NRx’s explicit white nationalism might appear encouraging, yet there is a sense in which reactionary conservatism was able to take advantage of the cold utilitarian logic that *LessWrong* espoused. This was exemplified by Yudkowsky’s own position that “the AI neither hates, nor loves you, but you are made out of atoms that it can use for something else.”<sup>34</sup> Such a reduction of human existence to

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<sup>32</sup> Haider.

<sup>33</sup> Trvdante, “Anissimov Excommunicated, Steves Assumes the Throne,” *The Right Drama* (blog), April 27, 2015, <https://therightdrama.wordpress.com/2015/04/27/anissimov-excommunicated-steves-assumes-the-throne>.

<sup>34</sup> Eliezer Yudkowsky, “Artificial Intelligence as a positive and negative factor in global risk,” in *Global Catastrophic Risks*, ed. Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 333.



compostable biological matter suggests that transhumanist morality has a tendency to view life as justifiably disposable if, in the end, one is able to upload their mind to a computer. After devoting a large degree of attention to Land’s cruel god, Gnon—as well as the right accelerationist affect of aspirational nihilism that such a god inspires—it is difficult not to see a degree of resonance between the cold calculative logic embodied in each.

Although invocations of Roko’s Basilisk may not make explicit reference to political ideologies within the memes that are shared (for example, Fig. 6), there is an underlying set of anxieties in play even through the act of laughing at the Basilisk’s sheer absurdity. Syed Mustafa Ali has argued that “apocalyptic AI, along with the attendant discourse of existential risk, is a strategy, albeit possibly one that is merely rhetorical, for maintaining white hegemony under mounting nonwhite contestation.”<sup>35</sup> Columbia has pointed to “a clear sociological overlap between belief in AGI and the various groups who are loosely gathered under the term ‘alt-right,’” and has cautioned that the stakes inherent in Roko’s Basilisk are uneven: “Black people cannot escape being reminded of their embodiment; white people can indulge the fantasy that they are all mind.”<sup>36</sup> It is for these reasons that MIRI appeared as “a hothouse for the development of crackpot pseudo-religious theories, one staffed almost exclusively by white men”<sup>37</sup> and that *LessWrong* “served as a convenient ‘incubation center’ so to speak for neo-reactionary ideas to

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<sup>35</sup> Syed Mustafa Ali, “‘White Crisis’ and/as ‘Existential Risk,’ or the Entangled Apocalypticism of Artificial Intelligence,” *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 54, no. 1 (March 2019): 209.

<sup>36</sup> Columbia.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

develop and spread for many years.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore, even when stripped of explicit reference to neoreactionary political economy or alt-right dog whistles, “the Basilisk” swiftly became a prominent avatar for neoreactionary transhumanism<sup>39</sup> as well as a broader racialized anxiety regarding the Outside.

*You Just Lost the Game*

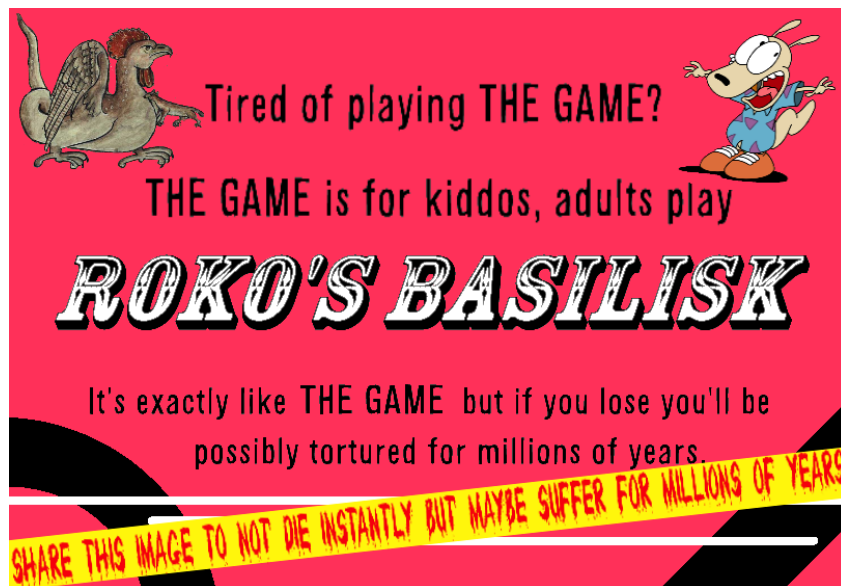


Fig. 7 – A meme comparing Roko’s Basilisk to The Game.<sup>40</sup>

To grasp how Roko’s Basilisk occupies such a unique place within circulated network culture, it is necessary to attend to its narrative structure and the conceptual

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<sup>38</sup> Armistead, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 319.

<sup>40</sup> *Know Your Meme*, “Roko’s Basilisk,” accessed March 31, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rokos-basilisk>.

history of memes. The incentive structure imagined in Roko's thought experiment has been frequently likened to "a variation of Pascal's Wager" that was "deliberately framed in terms of the popular Internet meme of 'the Game,' where the only rules are that you lose any time you think about the Game, and that you must then announce having done so."<sup>41</sup> In an article that analyzes Roko's Basilisk, Roberto Musa Giuliano notes the "interrelatedness of literary fiction, myth and religion with the theorizing and dissemination of AI ideas."<sup>42</sup> The insights surrounding hyperstition developed by the CCRU and other parties confirms the veracity of this analysis. Narratives cast backwards from the future are fully capable of steering human action in the present. If one were to take seriously Land's claim that intrusions of the Outside are governing the conduct of (at least parts of) humanity, it would perhaps be possible to say that the Basilisk *already* maintains supernatural control over human life, just by virtue of the strength of its narrative's fear appeal. And for whatever human agency remains in relation to the Basilisk, the agents with the most say over its potential form seem perfectly willing to go along with economic utilitarianism that it represents. "If the builders of technology are transmitting their values into machinery this makes the culture of Silicon Valley a matter of widespread consequence,"<sup>43</sup> and it raises the stakes for an analysis of alt-techy

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<sup>41</sup> Sandifer, 14; for an example of a meme connecting Roko's Basilisk to The Game, see Fig. 7; for a broader analysis of the shared religious dimensions of the Basilisk and Pascal's Wager, see Beth Singler, "Roko's Basilisk or Pascal's? Thinking of Singularity Thought Experiments as Implicit Religion," *Journal of Implicit Religion* 20, no. 3 (2017): 279-297.

<sup>42</sup> Roberto Musa Giuliano, "Echoes of myth and magic in the language of Artificial Intelligence," *AI & Society: Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Communication* 35, no. 4 (December 2020): 1021.

<sup>43</sup> Haider.

engineers as a prominent component of the broader reactosphere. This is why Giuliano recommends “exploring these points of narrative entanglement where AI meets the wider culture and draws from its vital sap.”<sup>44</sup> This connection invites deeper rhetorical analysis of the modes of affective dread that propel such a monstrous vision into the present.

Roko’s Basilisk represents a technological fantasy that, when imagined, sutures affective structures of terror that permeate the modern collective unconscious. With the advent of digital incommensurability in platform-based communication and the intensification of (secular) global capital, the subject is in crisis. Residing in a libidinal void, without recourse to any spiritual or mythical forces, the contemporary human is uniquely vulnerable to the horrors of the Outside. In the face of such a profound mythos-deficit, the social order appears to be yearning for the presence of an authority capable of transcending such a globally depressing condition. In this context, Roko’s Basilisk operates as a textbook example of Wark and Wark’s notion of anthropomorphic animism. Imbued with the impersonality of capital and an even more comprehensive biopolitics (which gives new meaning to the dictate to “make live”), the Basilisk is tasked with releasing humanity from the bondage of free will. Again, we have an example of neoreactionary subtraction at the level of individual identity, which is then used to mediate a relationship with a hyperstitional collective force that replaces said individual.

Here, fetishism of technology—of capital, itself—engineers collectivities that see themselves as destined to serve the Basilisk. Pinto concurs with this analysis, writing that “like all commodities, AI speaks the idiom of the fetish: it de-contextualises events into

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<sup>44</sup> Giuliano, 1021.

pure – phallic-shaped – form.”<sup>45</sup> The result of this process of anthropomorphic animism is the mobilization of the Cult of Gnon into serving the forces of capital, whether or not a literal Basilisk remains in the cards. In this context, hyperstitions usher in their own reality through a decentralized process of narration that compels actions on the part of the audience. This evidences Haider’s point that “Roko’s Basilisk isn’t just a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather than influencing events toward a particular result, the result is *generated* by its own prediction.”<sup>46</sup>

It is largely irrelevant whether or not the construction of an artificial general intelligence to Roko’s specifications is possible; the point is that the collective online fixation on the Basilisk, especially by neoreactionaries, lays bare a series of deeply-seated anxieties regarding the structure of modernity and the potential for subjective individualism. Isabel Millar develops a theory of the neoreactionary subject that explains its simultaneous desire for personal subtraction and collective self-projection:

In Lacanian terms the basilisk would seem to function as the ultimate indicator of anxiety, the impossible object as cause of desire, and simultaneously, complete destruction. The Oedipal and quasi-religious logic at work in the positing of the basilisk as an all-enjoying symbolic entity is evident, but to this I might add that the *phallic enjoyment* involved in the imagining of the ultimate mathematizable One is masculine logic par excellence. The poor human who imagines the basilisk is effectively trapped between the finite slab of meat that tortures him (his “speaking body,” in Millerian terms) and the infinite simulation that he will inevitably become (the signifier that represents the subject for another signifier), the Lacanian acephalous and undead subject of the unconscious. In other words, the positing of the basilisk invokes the

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<sup>45</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 322.

<sup>46</sup> Haider.

paradox of the *enjoying body castrated by language* and the fantasy of its full representation or simulation in language.<sup>47</sup>

The neoreactionary subject is always caught in this double-bind of creation/destruction. It extends enough of itself to comprise the overall collectivity of capitalism-as-Basilisk, but it also empties itself of affective content, reifying the libidinal void that it endlessly angles to fill. From this perspective,

The Basilisk is autonomous capitalist algorithmic virus [and] its human co-conspirators; semiocapitalism and neoliberalism colonizing digital spaces assembling its bedrock from the spectacle of mass media contagion. A habitat of individual desires, personalities, social relations, and cultural bricolage consumed and virtualized into the integrated axioms of the libidinal attention economy.<sup>48</sup>

The Basilisk makes up the sum-total of racial capitalism's component-parts—not merely its institutional mechanisms or monopoly on physical resources, but the groups, desires, and myths that all work to construct such a vision.

Land has directly engaged with the concept of the Basilisk in his 2014 short story, *Phyl-Undhu*. Here, Land explicitly parodies the transhumanist meltdown of Yudkowsky's ilk (see, for example fig. 6) by constructing a horror narrative that is “blatantly modeled on Roko's falling out with the *LessWrong* community.”<sup>49</sup> Where in the real world, Roko proclaimed that he wished he had “never learned about any of these

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<sup>47</sup> Isabel Millar, “AI and the Missing Body,” *Stillpoint Magazine*, no. 4 (April 2020), <https://stillpointmag.org/articles/ai-and-the-missing-body>.

<sup>48</sup> Anonymous, “The Dark Insurrection,” 103.

<sup>49</sup> Sandifer, 47.

ideas,”<sup>50</sup> this regret was parodied in Land’s text when a character is so horrified by a particular subject of his imagination that “he wants not to have thought certain things.”<sup>51</sup> Quips aside, this text is anything but funny. It details the trek of two parents and their daughter, Suzy, into the latter’s videogame, but throughout the entire text, there is something unspeakable in the back of the characters’ minds that they know they will never be able to shake. The entire short story plays with concepts like predestination, fate, and interminable time. During a conversation between the two protagonists, the husband realizes that the wife knows something so impossibly horrific that he couldn’t bear sharing in her misery: “She had passed over the threshold. That was unmistakable. There would be no point in joining her there – not yet. If he did, there would be nothing further he could do.”<sup>52</sup> In another passage, it is revealed that Suzy has been repeating to her friends the ominous phrase “everything starts from the end.”<sup>53</sup> These cryptic excerpts seem to pose the question of what it means to be damned by the Outside. Each of the haunting messages received by the family are precisely that: received; Suzy and her parents had been infected with knowledge from the Outside which is corrupting them from within.

The appendix of the book ditches the storytelling and returns to Landian theorization, however, there is an unsettling feeling that both halves tell the same horror

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<sup>50</sup> Roko, “Best career models for doing research?,” *LessWrong*, December 10, 2010, 11:06 a.m., <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/rNkFLv9tXzq8Lrvrc/best-career-models-for-doing-research?commentId=WDCWoCJPh6KstciTL>.

<sup>51</sup> Land, *Phyl-Undhu*, §2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, §3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, §6.

story. Here, Land theorizes the Great Filter, the unknown cosmic quantity that seems to snuff out civilizations before they have the capacity to become spacefaring species:

The Great Filter does not merely hunt and harm, it exterminates. It is an absolute threat. The technical civilizations which it aborts, or later slays, are not badly wounded, but eradicated, or at least crippled so fundamentally that they are never heard of again. Whatever this ruin is, it happens every single time. The mute scream from the stars says that nothing has ever escaped it. Its kill-performance is flawless. Tech-Civilization death sentence with probability  $\sim 1$ .<sup>54</sup>

It is difficult to conceptualize Land's tone in *Phyl-Undhu*, but it does seem clear that the Great Filter is something that alarms him. And this matches much of his writing in "The Dark Enlightenment" too, in which he argues that the capacity for humanity to save itself from its own Great Filter is being undermined by liberal charity that only invests in further dysfunction. Placing these two arguments side-by-side and invoking the critique of gothic horror's antiblack aesthetics reveals that the Landian analysis of the Great Filter betrays a trace humanist vitalism. This is precisely why it is possible to argue that "Roko's Basilisk is little more than [...] Evola's Tiger with upgrades and adjustments."<sup>55</sup> The Basilisk represents a utilitarian solution to the problem of the Great Filter: simply upload human intelligence to computer systems and charge the AI with protecting its safety from whatever is out there. But this still cowers from the forms of Blackness seen as endemic to the Outside and which may even represent the Great Filter. For Land, Roko's Basilisk is just another form of racial capitalism with an outer-space twist.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, §205.

<sup>55</sup> Anonymous, "The Dark Insurrection," 101.



*Rococo's Basilisk, or: Nightmares of the Rich and the Famous*

As Roko's Basilisk achieved notoriety as a meme, a growing number of social, cultural, and economic forces began to take interest in the concept. On a micropolitical scale, Beth Singler cites a Twitter exchange in which a user proclaims that the truth or falsity of Roko's Basilisk will ultimately determine whether they want to have grandchildren, demonstrating that the meme has "gained a life outside of the *LessWrong* forums—a virality."<sup>56</sup> And this virality seems especially powerful if it can ultimately impact a decision as personal as whether or not to have kids. But, the cultural impact of Roko's Basilisk was even stranger. For example, the Basilisk appears to be responsible for bringing together a particularly odious celebrity power-couple: Elon Musk and Grimes. Indeed, the two met only after Musk posted a joke on Twitter about "Rococo's Basilisk" only to be told that Grimes had named a character likewise in her music video for "Flesh Without Blood."<sup>57</sup>

This relationship is notable not simply because both Grimes and Musk are high-profile internet personalities, but also because it highlights a key shift in the public tenure of their discourse. In fact, their relationship marks the beginning of a political shift in Grimes's music away from anti-imperialism and toward pro-capitalist authoritarianism. Such a shift is noted by Tom Whyman who critiques the climate nihilism on Grimes's most recent album, *Miss Anthropocene*:

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<sup>56</sup> Singler, "Existential Hope," 172.

<sup>57</sup> Sophie Ward, "Elon Musk, Grimes, and the philosophical thought experiment that brought them together," *The Conversation*, May 17, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/elon-musk-grimes-and-the-philosophical-thought-experiment-that-brought-them-together-96439>.

Grimes' stance on climate change is willfully and almost shockingly *affirmative*, leaning in to the version of accelerationism preached by "Dark Enlightenment" guru (and erstwhile academic philosopher) Nick Land, celebrating an image of the future in which everything loving and kind and good and makes our species worthy of redemption is dominated by everything destructive and bad, in which the only people afforded anything even resembling security and comfort would be a neo-feudal class of billionaires kept safe from the climate in bunkers, shielded from their dying, desperate public by the private armies in their pay.<sup>58</sup>

Whyman takes care to relate this argument to the Basilisk, directly, arguing that "the possibility of something like Roko's Basilisk existing [...] ought to be a reason [...] to fight against it."<sup>59</sup> But as these examples show, Roko's Basilisk didn't circulate only as an interesting story, but instead circulated an affective investment in neoreactionary aspirational nihilism

Besides widespread cultural investment in the Basilisk, the concept of AI simulation and the Singularity that it envisioned began to attract a number of wealthy financiers. Musk has already been mentioned—both for his privileged place in Roko's initial hypothesis and for his relationships—but it is worth noting that he "is also famous for taking the simulation theory, which underlies the idea of eternal punishment in Roko's Basilisk, seriously and for investing money into research into it."<sup>60</sup> Apparently, he "established OpenAI to the tune of one billion dollars with the express goal of making AI 'friendly' after being terrified by resident MIRI philosopher Nick Bostrom's book

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<sup>58</sup> Tom Whyman, "Can we truly think about climate change at all?," *The Outline*, April 3, 2019, <https://theoutline.com/post/7268/how-to-think-about-climate-change>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Singler, "Existential Hope," 172.

*Superintelligence*.”<sup>61</sup> Another Silicon Valley tech giant who wanted to get in on the ground floor of the immortality business was Peter Thiel. Thiel donated over \$350,000 to MIRI and \$3.5 million to the Methuselah Foundation’s “quest to ‘cure’ aging,” the transhumanist organization Humanity Plus, AI think-tank Singularity University, and the DeepMind AI project.”<sup>62</sup> From a certain angle, the investment by these venture capitalists is fairly logical. After all, the Basilisk is “a perfect parable for the digital economy and the way it represents (indeed forms) a stark divide between the means of the tech plutocracy (who devote their lives to rearing the ‘basilisk’) and the vast underclass of underemployed or precarious users, which it only further engenders.”<sup>63</sup> These large-scale investments prove that the rich and powerful may be anxious about their own mortality, or even the mortality of humanity as a whole, and seek to use the resources that capitalism provides to do anything they can to render themselves immortal.

Roko’s Basilisk operates as a form of neoreactionary superstition by circulating affective elements of aspirational nihilism while fueling racial capitalism. As an exemplar instance of anthropomorphic animism, the Basilisk comes to stand-in for the collective process of meme magic due to platforms’ tendency to obscure or black-box the precise division of labor within such digital movements. Understanding Roko’s Basilisk as a driving force behind neoreaction provides a useful case-study in theorizing the implications of hyperstitional communication. While neoreactionaries may fancy

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<sup>61</sup> Elmo Keep, “The strange and conflicting world views of Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel,” *Splinter*, June 22, 2016, <https://splinternews.com/the-strange-and-conflicting-world-views-of-silicon-vall-1793857715>.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Pinto, “Artwashing.”

themselves as the high-minded, intellectual vanguard of the alt-right, the concept of hyperstition and its embrace of a future ruled by financiers demonstrates their utter investment in continuing to stratify all areas of human life, present and future. The basis of this animism, the very Outside feared in this vision of the future remains driven by gothic anti-blackness.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### White Flight from Citizenship: Neoreaction and the Rhetorical Circulation of the ‘Right to Exit’

#### *Introduction*

Neoreaction is premised on renegotiating the normative practices of civic engagement and the symbolic production of national, ethnic, and racial identity so as to effectuate its vision of “neo-cameralism.” This politics would entail the devolution of state power to a decentralized patchwork of oligarchic or monarchic “gov corps” where corporate elites are imbued with sovereign prerogative within their own territorial fief. The writings of Land and Yarvin, which attempt to substantiate these claims are extensive, self-important, and clearly intended to be *circulated*. The specific process through which that circulation occurs centrally involves fragmentation, due to the length of such offerings.

For this reason, many critics who have approached neoreactionary texts understand them to be manifestos. Elizabeth Sandifer’s *Neoreaction a Basilisk* is one of the few book-length interrogations of NRx, and she has argued that sprawling “manifesto-like magnum opuses”<sup>1</sup> characterize the work of thinkers like Land and Yarvin. Others have identified Land’s “The Dark Enlightenment,” in particular, as a

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<sup>1</sup> Sandifer, 6.

manifesto that synthesizes different aspects of neoreactionary ideology.<sup>2</sup> Given that the intended audience for such a manifesto is one that is known to find a common public through digital spaces, rather than in a traditional physical public square, the reception and assumed reach of this type of discourse needs to be investigated in terms of its impact on a broader reactosphere.

As such, the study of alt-right neoreactionary communication requires not only a close reading of the content of its source texts but also a broader analysis of how such radical treatises are broken into fragments and distributed across this reactosphere. At the same time, this analysis must recognize the affective ties of those who craft these discourses. To do so, I must also attend to the hyperstitional character of neoreactionary futures and the racialized affect of aspirational nihilism that compels acolytes to build those futures.

Neoreactionary writers are seemingly well-aware that their manifestos spread as fragments, which are contingently rearranged by adherents of the movement, often with no reference to or regard for the original meaning. Adherents and architects thrive on such a condition as it provides them ample opportunity to dodge associations with more overtly unseemly alt-right figures, as well as coopt the political motivations of other

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of such categorization, see Aikin, 424; Goldhill; Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim, “Behemoth and Leviathan: The Fascist Bestiary of the Alt-Right,” *Salvage*, no. 5 (December 21, 2017), <https://salvage.zone/in-print/behemoth-and-leviathan-the-fascist-bestiary-of-the-alt-right>; Reijer Hendrikse and Rodrigo Fernandez, “Offshore Finance: How Capital Rules the World,” in *State of Power 2019: Finance*, ed. Nick Buxton and Deborah Eade (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2019), 38; and Amy S. Kaufman, “A Brief History of a Terrible Idea: The ‘Dark Enlightenment,’” *The Public Medievalist*, February 2017, <https://www.publicmedievalist.com/dark-enlightenment>.

factions of the alt-right. The distributed collectivity inherent in such acts of mythic production are held together by virtue of their shared reference to an Outside.

In such a context, it is worth tracking how particular conceptual apparatuses innovated, augmented, or coopted by neoreactionary discourse reappear in discussions on online forums such as *4chan* and Reddit. Employing the concept of rhetorical circulation to track the diffusion of neoreactionary discourse across distinct digital domains yields insight into the transsituational constitution of reactionary subjectivity. NRx, like other examples of alt-right online subcultures, is sometimes referenced in debates on *4chan*'s /pol/ imageboard. While the anonymity inherent to the messages on board's like this could be seen as an impediment to research, it may also be useful as it allows the researcher "to see how people create and perform digital identities, and mediate their offline ones in a space where identity has been all but stripped away."<sup>3</sup> In place of a bounded rhetorical situation in which the identity of the speaker is known, anonymous imageboards feature rhetorical discourses that emphasize the movement and affective charge of textual fragments exchanged between users.

One critical concept found within the fragmentary discourses of neoreactionary communities is the "right to exit." This idea is initially pulled from Albert O. Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, which enumerates "voice" and "exit" as two predominantly oppositional responses to declines in an institution's efficiency. Hirschman argues that the management of an inefficient firm or institution will address these failings "via two alternative routes:

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<sup>3</sup> Dillon Ludemann, "/pol/emics: Ambiguity, scales, and digital discourse on 4chan." *Discourse, Context & Media* 24 (August 2018): 97.

- (1) Some customers stop buying the firm's products or some other members leave the organization: this is the *exit option*. As a result, revenues drop, membership declines, and management is impelled to search for ways and means to correct whatever faults have led to exit.
- (2) The firm's customers or the organization's members express their dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen: this is the *voice option*. As a result, management once again engages in a search for the causes and possible cures of customers' and members' dissatisfaction."<sup>4</sup>

For neoreactionaries, this central opposition explains what they believe to be the root inefficiencies and irrationalities of the modern age. Thinkers such as Land argue that democracy is premised on the sanctification of "voice" at the expense of closing off all exits: "[f]or the hardcore neo-reactionaries, democracy is not merely doomed, it is doom itself. Fleeing it approaches an ultimate imperative."<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that such flight from democracy is operationalized most explicitly as a flight from citizenship. Furthermore, I demonstrate that the neoreactionary invocation of the "right to exit" produces a contradictory relationship with the category of the "citizen," which emerges through two moves. The first is one of self-abdication or subtraction wherein the neoreactionary subject renounces interest and participation in popular political channels, effectively refusing their own citizenship often in pursuit of various techno-utopian sovereignties; and the second is one of exclusive protection in which the full privileges associated with citizenship are denied to underprivileged populations such as racial and sexual minorities, immigrants, colonized populations, the disabled, and the poor. As such, the right to exit paradoxically produces a racial-capitalist

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<sup>4</sup> Hirschman, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Land, "The Dark Enlightenment."



citizen-subject *in absentia* by fortifying the ramparts of national identity, while simultaneously disidentifying with the protocols of civic participation that comprise the “citizen.” The paradox in question refers to whether neoreactionaries believe that such marginalized populations are entitled to the same right to mobile citizenship as those with more financial and social capital, or whether they view them as unproductive externalities. To investigate this, I’ll look into the rhetorical structure of Yarvin’s and Land’s writings and how they have been circulated by other self-identified neoreactionary thinkers online. This process will help to clarify both the role of citizenship within neoreactionary discourses and the rhetorical valence of the “right to exit.”

### *The Right to Gov-Corporatism*

The right to exit is only conceptually coherent under a very specific system of political-economic codes, which, importantly, this right’s invocation also helps to actualize, and Curtis Yarvin labels such a system “neo-cameralism.” Land is attracted to Yarvin’s conception of neo-cameralism because he argues that a patchwork system of governance would be most apt to effectuate a right accelerationist politics given its near-absolute deference to corporate authority and its willingness to buck the “politically correct” conventions of the Cathedral.

To Land, the array of institutions that make up the Cathedral impose a form of social control through mantras such as “tolerance,” and thereby constrain capitalism’s capacity to act as a genetic filter. He believes this mode of control is inherent to political systems that prioritize voice over exit. Hence contemporary democracy’s supposed

penchant for dysfunction is blamed on the supposedly inefficient prioritization of social welfare: “because grievance status is awarded as political compensation for economic incompetence, it constructs an automatic cultural mechanism that advocates for dysfunction.”<sup>6</sup> In Land’s view, the Cathedral upholds democracy’s propensity to err toward the moralistic subsidization of the underprivileged, ensuring that it will continue to invest primarily in its doldrums at the expense of its talented upper class.

What’s more, Land maintains that such constraints threaten the ability of human civilization to sustain its own carrying capacity. Land suggests that “the politically motivated management of economies negates the market feedback necessary to sustain accelerative growth, dragging the system as a whole back towards equilibrium, where we may once again encounter these Malthusian limits.”<sup>7</sup> Land declares that capital itself is an agent of social evolution and the casualties that it produces—along racist, heteromasculine, ableist, and other structural lines—are features rather than bugs in the system. Capital operates as a hyper-efficient genetic filter precisely because of such biases. Despite the fact that Land recognizes that the majority of social disadvantage is the result of “sheer misfortune” rather than divine providence, he argues that this is of little consequence at the level of society-wide incentive structures, as “every attempt at ‘progressive’ improvement is fated to reverse itself, ‘perversely’, into horrible failure.”<sup>8</sup> He admits to the reader, “no democracy could accept this, which means that every

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Park MacDougald, “The Darkness Before the Right,” *The Awl*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.theawl.com/2015/09/the-darkness-before-the-right>.

<sup>8</sup> Land, “The Dark Enlightenment.”

democracy will fail.”<sup>9</sup> With this move into “pure incentive-based functionalism,”<sup>10</sup> Land’s philosophy locks the underserved into their social position, effectively formalizing existing conceptions of social value into material expressions of actual value. Through this perspective, “the contingent effects of specific historical tendencies and social institutions are exalted with the supposedly providential necessity of DNA.”<sup>11</sup>

This process of “capitalistic human sorting”<sup>12</sup> is accomplished is through the creation of *gov-corps* compatible with the right to exit. Importantly for neoreactionaries, this also implies a withdrawal of everyday people from the workings of politics, bringing an end to the latencies of democracy:

There is no longer any need for residents (clients) to take any interest in politics whatsoever. In fact, to do so would be to exhibit semi-criminal proclivities. If *gov-corp* doesn’t deliver acceptable value for its taxes (sovereign rent), they can notify its customer service function, and if necessary take their custom elsewhere. *Gov-corp* would concentrate upon running an efficient, attractive, vital, clean, and secure country, of a kind that is able to draw customers. No voice, free exit.<sup>13</sup>

This abdication of voice in favor of the capacity for exit passively accepts racial capitalism by abandoning official channels of political participation. Importantly, this process of subjective subtraction and collective enunciation follows from the similar process witnessed in the case of Roko’s Basilisk. In both instances, a hyperstitional entity

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> MacDougald, “The Darkness Before...”

<sup>11</sup> Haider.

<sup>12</sup> Beckett.

<sup>13</sup> Land, “The Dark Enlightenment.”

(the Basilisk or the right to exit) is conjured to supplant a relinquished element of subjective agency.

### *Circulating Exit Signs*

Applying a theory of hyperstitional circulation to neoreaction’s political philosophy of neo-cameralism diagrams how alt-right content moves through digital pathways even when participants within this discourse may refuse traditional public fora. Such an account is imperative for conceptualizing how neoreactionaries can claim to renounce their influence over traditional political channels and yet still move the needle when it comes to the spread of online far-right discourse. This is perhaps another way of asking how a group that cuts itself off from citizenship has the capacity to police the boundaries of citizenship to keep other populations out. The unique rejection of traditional political participation theorized by NRx must be situated in the context of Jodi Dean’s analysis of the neoliberalization of public deliberation: “The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite – the post-political formation of communicative capitalism.”<sup>14</sup>

Given this new rhetorical reality, alt-right messaging turns to fragmentation and mythos as central communicative technologies through which to weaponize affect. In particular, the strategy is to leverage structural disaffection into a racialized affect of right accelerationism through the proliferation of memes. Robert Topinka notes that the “meme form encourages inclusion, participation, and bricolage—all tools once associated

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<sup>14</sup> J. Dean, 53.

with emancipatory politics and now absorbed into communicative capitalism.”<sup>15</sup> Woods and Hahner argue that “memes are rhetorically powerful via affective flows and circuitous movement, with audiences that only ever briefly exist in their own right before dissolving back into a larger collectivity.”<sup>16</sup> The introduction of hyperstitional dynamics to the study of memes even further deemphasizes the role of an easily-defined audience, and requires the hyperstitional practitioner to deemphasize their own role as a rational subject and instead dissolve themselves into a mass of carriers that disseminate the signal of the Outside.

What ultimately binds the reactosphere together as an identifiable set of discourses is the process of generating and sharing common references amongst a spectrum of ideologically compatible alt-right actors. A portion of this very communicative methodology has been taken into account by neoreactionary ideologues, themselves. For example, Yarvin explicitly aimed to produce “a *generic parasitic memplex*”<sup>17</sup> that would render reactionary truth-claims widespread, unavoidable, and attractive. Sandifer argued that this mode of communicative influence ought to be viewed as a way to “reverse engineer the Cathedral according to a more or less arbitrarily imported heuristic of contagion, morbidity, and persistence.”<sup>18</sup> This demonstrates that neoreactionaries like Yarvin wish to model their own discursive ecosystems after the traditional political channels that they claim to abjure. The desire to construct indirect

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<sup>15</sup> Topinka.

<sup>16</sup> Woods and Hahner, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Yarvin, “How Dawkins Got...Chapter 1.”

<sup>18</sup> Sandifer, 85.

modes of information distribution to effectuate their ends confirms Topinka's contention that NRx seeks to coopt the structure and protocols of communicative capitalism. At the same time, neoreactionaries claim to be politically apathetic or passive, even though they engineer their rhetorical fragments to spread easily throughout networked spaces. This is because the structural of hyperstitional communication is uniquely well-suited to the weaponization of even a supposedly passive politics.

### *Manifesting Passivism*

If the works of Yarvin and Land are believed to function similarly to manifestos, then communication researchers must take into account how this textual structure may affect their circulation. Sandifer writes that the “manifesto differs from the plan in that it is oppositional. A plan is what you’re going to do—a manifesto is what you’re going to ignore to your peril. It shouts from the outside, demanding that key principles of the world be inverted. It is always motivated by the fact that everything you know is wrong. In this context, Yarvin and Land invert the entire premise of political participation, ethical obligations toward the marginalized, and the value of capital alienation by envisioning a world of hyper-meritocratic patchwork gov-corps where exit eclipses voice. In this vision of the future, Yarvin and Land draw on a form of constitutive rhetoric to generate a people within that future. Stewart et al. argue that manifestos are a form of constitutive rhetoric that arranges a people “into a group bound together by their now shared beliefs,” and generates a “shared historical narrative for them to embrace.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton Jr., *Persuasion and Social Movements*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2012): 94.

The shared historical narrative that seems to be taken up by neoreactionaries is one in which democracy itself winds up being an enormous and unproductive drag for all of those forced to support the dregs of society. As Land puts it, “‘voice’ is democracy itself, in its historically dominant, Rousseauistic strain. It models the state as a representation of popular will, and making oneself heard means more politics.”<sup>20</sup> The objective for NRx is to achieve a mode of ideological diffusion that does not reinvigorate the primacy of voice, at least as it is conceived of within the traditional public sphere.

The manifesto provides a key framework through which neoreactionaries are able to expand their communicative reach without reliance on voice as a necessary precondition for political action. It draws in an array of ideological positions within the alt-right so as to constitute a distinct neoreactionary identity. Neoreactionary manifestos are also unique in this constitutive role insofar as they are taken-up often as incomplete discursive scraps. Many traffickers in neoreactionary discourse have not read all of “The Dark Enlightenment” and fewer still have perused the massive archive of multi-part essays on Yarvin’s *Unqualified Reservations* blog. Instead, members of the reactosphere extract what they see as useful from such long-form offerings. Manifestos are fragmented into component-parts and subject to what appears to be an open marketplace of communicative capitalist exchange. However, as Wark and Wark remind us, platform dynamics render any notion of a free exchange of content online inherently suspect insofar as interfaces black-box their technical workings.

As a result, within this process of fragmentation, some elements within the manifestos become more crucial than others in defining the core of neoreactionary

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<sup>20</sup> Land, “The Dark Enlightenment.”

subjectivity, and the right to exit is chief among them. And central to this idea of free exit is an attempt to divorce oneself entirely from the responsibilities of political voice.

Yarvin argues in the ninth chapter of his longwinded “A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations”:

The *steel rule* of passivism is *absolute renunciation of official power*. We note instantly that any form of resistance to sovereignty, so long as it succeeds, is a share in power itself. Thus, absolute renunciation of power over USG implies *absolute submission* to the Structure.

The logic of the *steel rule* is simple. As a reactionary, you don’t believe that political power is a human right. You will never convince anyone to adopt the same attitude, without first adopting it yourself. Since you believe others should be willing to accept the rule of the New Structure, over which they wield no power, you must be the first to make the great refusal. They must submit to the New; you must submit to the Old.<sup>21</sup>

Here, we see exit manifested as a form of outright refusal, political apathy taken to the paradoxical extreme of becoming a political maxim. The premise of “*absolute submission*” rests at the core of the message and denotes a relationship with the state (here, “USG” or US Government) that vastly differs from traditional conceptions of civic participation. Yarvin makes clear his antipathy to citizenship: “one excellent way to make this relationship concrete in your mind is to use the word ‘subject,’ rather than ‘citizen.’”<sup>22</sup> Here, he wants to retain no illusion of the public’s supposed influence on and enmeshment within the body-politic. Civic expression is displaced by marketized consumption in the rejection of citizenry for subjecthood.

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<sup>21</sup> Curtis Yarvin, “A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations: Chapter 9: The Procedure and the Reaction,” <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2009/09/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



Yarvin's rejection of the premises of citizenship seems to be extended to every act of civic engagement that could possibly qualify as such. He lists the various activities that are censured:

In case this isn't crystal-clear, the *steel rule* precludes, in no particular order: demonstrations, press releases, suicide bombs, lawsuits, dirty bombs, Facebook campaigns, clean bombs, mimeographed leaflets, robbing banks, interning at nonprofits, assassination, "tea parties," journalism, bribery, grantwriting, graffiti, crypto-anarchism, balaclavas, lynching, campaign contributions, revolutionary cells, new political parties, old political parties, flash mobs, botnets, sit-ins, direct mail, monkeywrenching, and *any other activist technique, violent or harmless, legal or illegal, fashionable or despicable.*<sup>23</sup>

The theme appears to be that all forms of political action breathe life into the asphyxiated corpse of democracy, but that neoreaction's own propagandistic dissemination of passivism ought to be exempted from such a "steel rule." Traditionally, many studies of citizenship would simply label Yarvin as an authoritarian or otherwise not know precisely how to categorize him, as his writings negate all or nearly all of the typical ways one expresses citizen-subjectivity within a democracy. However, a discourse theory of citizenship argues that citizenship "does not appear in specific acts per se" but instead "conceives of citizenship as a *mode of public engagement*" represented in "fluid, multimodal, and quotidian enactments."<sup>24</sup> Viewing NRx through this lens raises the possibility that neoreactionaries have not given up public engagement writ large, but have refused a very particular form of citizenship beholden to democratic governance. The right to exit is, then, not so much a way to abdicate power, but a way of shifting the terrain on which power is exercised, redirecting it into online efforts to create a "parasitic

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Asen, 191.

memeplex.” This memeplex reconstitutes neoreactionary identity as one based in subjecthood rather than citizenship, shifting the terrain of organizing and ideological dissemination from the public sphere to the digital circulative flows of communicative capitalism.

### *The Petri Dish*

If neoreaction is not apolitical but rather possesses a politics dependent on the digital circulation of its textual fragments, then the role of rhetorical critics is to track the development, reception, and augmentation of such messaging. Importantly, the role of fragmentation in the construction of neoreactionary identity also implies that the bounds of the reactosphere are perforated and fluid rather than strictly ideologically defined, as we have seen in our discussion of the various diagrammatic depictions of neoreaction. Land likes to distinguish between Inner- and Outer-NRx at least partially by viewing the latter as an experimental petri dish through which right accelerationism can animate the concerns of a larger number of alt-right factions through the manipulation of mythos and affect into an aspirational nihilism.

Land’s petri dish serves as an apt metaphor for understanding the process of rhetorical circulation between Inner- and Outer-NRx. One example of how such discourses move can be seen in the case of Justine Tunney, a trans woman working for Google who made waves in the tech industry in April 2014 when she advised that her followers “Read Mencius Moldbug.” Many wondered how a former coordinator of

Occupy protests<sup>25</sup> could have swung so far to the other side of the political spectrum so as to submit “a Change.org petition that President Obama should step down and appoint Eric Schmidt as unelected CEO of America.”<sup>26</sup> Tunney’s high-profile debacle demonstrates a key example of neoreaction’s power as a discourse in circulation, serving to link those sympathetic to the cause directly to works like Yarvin’s. As Arthur Chu argued, Tunney “is not just an isolated anomaly” but the “leading, crankish edge of a broad cultural trend” who is “willing to express, out loud and in public, what a lot of techies privately think.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Tunney’s situation is illustrative because it reveals the extent to which neoreactionary discourse has penetrated the culture of tech industry disruptors. Tunney’s reference to Eric Schmidt directly followed from Yarvin’s maxim about installing successful CEOs as political leaders.

The aftermath of Tunney’s controversy perhaps demonstrated the range of this circulative effect even more than her own moment of media fame did. On August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014, a user on *4chan*’s politically incorrect board, known as /pol/, posted a link to a story about Tunney’s situation. They seemed interested by the fact that Tunney’s views seemed to line up with those that much of the board held. One of the very first comments exemplified the complex latticework of hate within neoreactionary communities, writing simply “It’s trans...” (Fig. 8).

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<sup>25</sup> See, Nina Stochlic, “The Champagne Tranarchist Who Hijacked Occupy’s Twitter Feed,” *The Daily Beast*, February 15, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-champagne-tranarchist-who-hijacked-occupys-twitter-feed>.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Chu, “Occupying the Throne: Justine Tunney, Neoreactionaries, and the New 1%,” *The Daily Beast*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/occupying-the-throne-justine-tunney-neoreactionaries-and-the-new-1>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

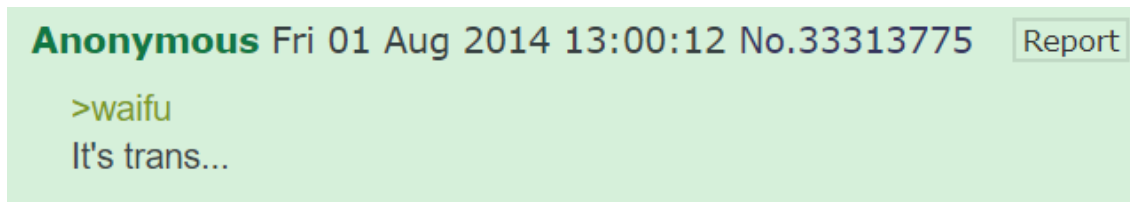


Fig. 8 – 4Chan post reading “It’s trans...”<sup>28</sup>

Many shared in these transphobic sentiments, seemingly aghast at the idea that a trans person could also be a white nationalist. The post also featured several arguments concerning the role of borders within a neo-cameralist or “patchwork” society that exhibited the right to exit:



Fig. 9 – 4Chan disagreement about the right to exit<sup>29</sup>

In one exchange, a user opened with the contention that “neoreactionaries believes that national boundaries should become meaningless” before being rebutted by another arguing in favor of “selective immigration and strong border control” (Fig. 9). Someone

<sup>28</sup> See, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/33313260/#q33313775>.

<sup>29</sup> See, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/33313260/#q33328544> and <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/33313260/#q33328616>.

responds to the latter poster by citing Yarvin’s edict that “all states should have open borders and...the right to exit should be the only fundamental right citizens have.”

This was followed by another post that directly quoted Yarvin to heighten anti-immigrant sentiment.

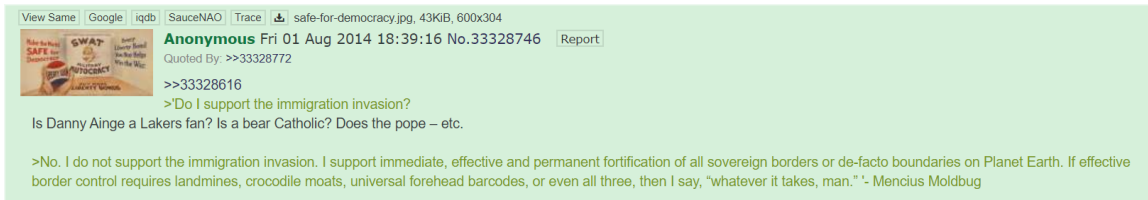


Fig. 10 – 4chan post quoting Yarvin defending fortification of all sovereignty borders<sup>30</sup>

This one quotes Yarvin saying “No. I do not support the immigration invasion. I support immediate, effective and permanent fortification of all sovereign borders or de-facto boundaries on Planet Earth. If effective border control requires landmines, crocodile moats, universal forehead barcodes, or even all three, then I say ‘whatever it takes, man’” (Fig. 10). While there is clearly some trolling in this quote from Yarvin, the thread does demonstrate the extent to which many members of NRx utilize its intellectual foundations to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment, thereby delimiting the bounds of acceptable citizenship.

Yet, this sentiment of nativist exclusion is complicated by the paradox inherent in neoreaction’s relationship to citizenship. This paradox is best exemplified by another comment on the thread:

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<sup>30</sup> See, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/33313260/#q33328746>.

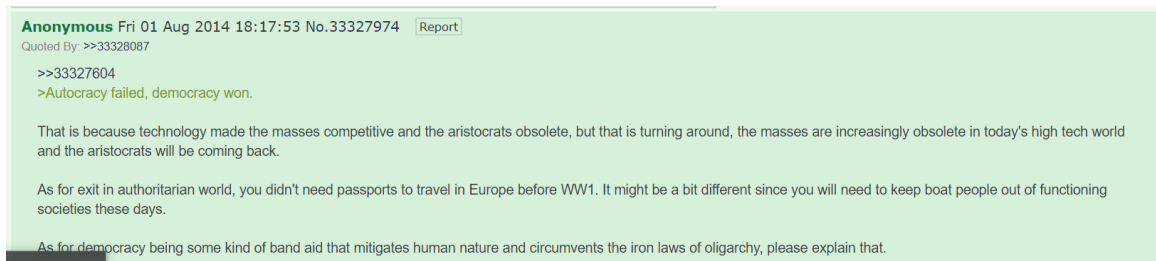


Fig. 11– 4Chan post contrasting pre-WWI migration in Europe with the modern border<sup>31</sup>

The line, “as for exit in authoritarian world, you didn’t need passports to travel in Europe before WW1. It might be a bit different since you will need to keep boat people out of functioning societies these days” (Fig. 11) operates to draw a sharp caesura between the dominant and the marginalized. For neoreactionaries, the color line is etched between those subjects imagined to be moving freely around Europe prior to the First World War, and those derided as “boat people” that threaten the integrity of modern society.

This thread demonstrates the extent to which the rhetorical circulation of neoreactionary texts produces a decentralized online communicative sphere where different segments of the alt-right may interpret its core concepts in diverging ways, depending on their own preconceived convictions. Rather than developing a unified doctrine of neoreaction through strict readings of the manifestos that comprise its core texts, these manifestos are fragmented and individual quotes from writers like Yarvin are employed to buttress existing arguments. The selective citation employed by online neoreactionaries on 4chan’s /pol/ imageboard and the differing reactions to news stories about Tunney corroborates the insights of theorists such as Dean and McGee because the process of ideological identity-formation involved begins to resemble market

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<sup>31</sup> See, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/33313260/#q33327974>.

consumption. At the same time, it lends coherence to the distinction between Inner- and Outer-NRx, because as Land suggested, the vast majority of users on this particular forum were invested in neoreactionary ideology because of its concept of the right to exit. While each of the beliefs with regard to relevance of borders was unique, the online debate elucidated the paradoxical relationship that neoreactionary exit has with regard to the question of citizenship. In this context, the post distinguishing “boat people” from pre-World War I European migrants seems uniquely illustrative of the vexed process of racialization internal to neoreactionary ideology.

The differential access that a “boat person” has to the right to exit in juxtaposition to a neoreactionary who is not a “boat person” is explained by the implicit lines of exclusion drawn by the right to exit, as a concept. Sandifer puts her finger on the controversial question of *who* has the right to exit when she acknowledges that it cannot apply to everyone equally: “...exiting requires that people stay behind; if we all go, we’ll just have to storm out again. The entire point of the project is to separate the wheat from the chaff. Most people, under Moldbug, are likely to be slaves anyway.”<sup>32</sup> The rhetorical exclusion of racialized populations from the category of citizenship is a first step through which the reactosphere articulates the right to exit as an endeavor to escape the reach of the supposed undesirables. Ana Teixeira Pinto notes this as well, writing that exiting:

implies segregation: the whole concept hinges on leaving others behind. Comparable to ‘capital strike,’ . . . ‘Exit is a formal version of what is informally known as ‘white flight’: the migration of middle-class white populations to more racially homogenous areas. NRx does not disavow this racial dimension but reworks it in its incentive-based techno-monarchy: ‘if a person doesn’t produce

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<sup>32</sup> Sandifer, 41.

quantifiable value, they are, objectively, not valuable. Everything else is sentimentality.<sup>33</sup>

Here, the right to exit appears as inseparable from racial capitalism's maximal devaluation of nonwhite, so-called "nonproductive" life. Its project of socioeconomic stratification ensures that the power to move freely between fiefdoms is unevenly distributed within neoreactionary imaginaries. While NRx may sanctify the ability to migrate between fiefdoms for privileged, white populations, it aims to arrest this very capacity for movement when it concerns immigrants, Muslims, Black people, and other groups racialized as dangerous. Such racialized animosity ought not be disconnected from the constant chorus of xenophobic sentiments in the public sphere premised on nationalist territoriality: "Go back to where you came from!," "If you don't like it here, why don't you move somewhere else," or "This country is only for Americans!" The right to exit links these supposedly contradictory sentiments into a passivist political economy premised on white anxiety.

The right to exit as a circulated rhetorical fragment also animates various corporate imaginaries undertaken by wealthy CEOs. Few of these figures will declare their allegiance to neoreactionary ideology outright, but many have been found to exist within its orbit. As such, neoreactionary exit becomes materialized through the formalistic coronation of Silicon Valley corporatists as patchwork philosopher-kings. Whether in the form of "competing gov-corps on the same land mass," bitcoin as an imaginary "escape to an alternate economy unencumbered by federal regulation," Yarvin's startup Urbit as a personal cloud-computing network, "Lovecraftian cities in the

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<sup>33</sup> Pinto, "Capitalism with a Transhuman Face," 332.



sea,” offshore tax havens, or Jeffrey Epstein’s lavish parties involving the sexual traffic of minors, exit points toward a number of uncomfortable social and political realities.<sup>34</sup>

Many other models for this type of exit exist, as charted out by Pinto:

Libertarian models of consent-based, non-democratic municipal or state governments include the notion of ‘free cities’ or ‘start-up cities’, proprietary cities, Patri Friedman’s floating seasteading cities, Paul Romer’s charter cities, or ‘shareholder states’, all of which see ‘the resident-subjects as having agreed to a *pactum subjectionis* as evidenced by their voluntary decision to move to and remain in the city or state. All of these cases preclude any possibility of democratic participation in government. When, or if, consent is withdrawn, the only available option is to exit.’ Instead of democratic rights, people have the right to leave.<sup>35</sup>

The vast majority of these innovations appear to be ways of commodifying existing public configurations such as cities, states, and islands. Patri Friedman—the grandson of infamous libertarian ideologue, Milton Friedman—claimed on behalf of his *Seasteading Institute* that “we think that free exit is so important that we’ve called it the only Universal Human Right.”<sup>36</sup> For more distant exits, there is a greater chance that access will be divided unequally. For example, after Land cited noted white nationalist and peddler of the “gay gene” thesis, Gregory Cochran, in his all-too-aptly titled essay, “Hyper-Racism,” to ask if “space colonization will inevitably function as a highly-selective genetic filter.”<sup>37</sup> The answer was that it would be reasonable to consider “White

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<sup>34</sup> Haider.

<sup>35</sup> Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” 331-332.

<sup>36</sup> Patri Friedman, “Nothing against Bioshock,” *The Seasteading Institute*, May 21, 2008, <https://www.seasteading.org/nothing-against-bioshock>.

<sup>37</sup> Nick Land, “Hyper-Racism,” *Xenosystems* (blog), September 29, 2014, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200125001423/http://www.xenosystems.net/hyper-racism>.

Flight to Mars”<sup>38</sup> as a not-too-illogical conclusion of the right-to-exit. In this sense, the right to exit is inscribed as a privilege for white people, at least those with the means to pay for their prosperous futures.

Increasingly, neoreaction has operated like a magnet for an untold number of conspiratorial post-truthers that are motivated by similar racist sentiments as those that suffuse the right to exit. To demonstrate the extent to which members of NRx form a shared community of circulation online, Sandifer explores the subreddit named after Nick Land’s essay */r/thedarkenlightenment* to expose their commitment to upholding conservative notions of whiteness, gender, and class. Or,

...to put it more bluntly, neoreactionaries are vicious little shits. Let’s just illustrate that in the rawest practical terms by pulling up */r/darkenlightenment*, the neoreactionary subreddit named after Nick Land’s essay, and seeing what the movement was interested in on the evening in late 2015 when I wrote this. At the top of the page, a piece about the November 2015 Paris attacks, titled ‘More Paris Attacks: Preparing Ourselves for Liberal Apologetics for Muslim Crimes,’ that talks about how Muslims and black people are just inherently more violent than other people and can’t possibly integrate. Below the fold, an anti-immigration piece from the *Telegraph*, a piece bemoaning how white people at the University of Missouri are afraid of being called racists, a piece called ‘Increasing Diversity => Fascism,’ and a piece about how women, homosexuals, and the working class are ‘false tribes’ in contrast to real tribes like race and nationality. Further down, pieces about ‘show trials’ to enforce Title IX and a piece about how more young American women are living with their families than before, with comments debating whether this is proof of how many immigrants there are in America or because ‘women’s liberation’ (scare quotes from the comment) has been bad for women. Elsewhere, skepticism about global warming.<sup>39</sup>

What is clear about this forum and others like it is that neoreactionaries seem to pick on every latent social arrangement to describe a form of dysfunction lurking beneath the

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<sup>38</sup> Haider.

<sup>39</sup> Sandifer, 55.

surface, that only they can see. Oftentimes, the specific ideological lenses applied to each conspiracy can become contentious as demonstrated by the disagreement regarding whether women's liberation or immigrant naturalization was worse for women's chances of living with their families. In the end, such disagreements play second fiddle to the reactionary mediascape maintained on this subreddit. Again, while the precise political-ideological instantiation of neoreaction may differ between adherents, the underlying racialized anxiety expressed through the right to exit remains consistent.

Given that neoreaction's affiliations with forms of white nationalism are growing harder to deny, it is important to understand white flight as the prototypical form of neoreaction's expression of the right to exit. Because NRx relies on a vision of an economic filter that genetically selects which populations are fit to live, its right to exit must be understood as a means of preserving the fundamental inequality of white supremacy, and more broadly, antiblackness. Rishi Chebrolu has begun to chart out a psychoanalytic conception regarding how far-right groups use the affect and imagery of racial Blackness to suture white wholeness in the face of fragility. Citing Hortense Spillers' distinction between nonblack bodies and Black flesh, he argues that "the white nationalist subject mediates their relationship to the hieroglyphics of the flesh through their political identity, configuring signifiers of the flesh as a source of abject knowledge that can give stability to white sovereignty as whiteness is a symbol that can only retain a sense of naturalness and inevitability through the material violence that maintains racial

capitalism.”<sup>40</sup> Neoreactionaries contribute to this form of subjectivity through collective fearmongering around the issue of white genocide and racial replacement.

Such anxiety creates the ideological pressure for exit to be elevated to a moral imperative, justifying the most insidiously destructive forms of white flight. The right to exit simultaneously withdraws from access to a particular form of democratic citizenship marked by civic participation in a defined public sphere, and revokes that access from other populations. One’s value is only measured in relationship to productivity for neoreaction’s project. In some sense, neoreactionaries follow a severe racial script. As Vincent N. Pham argues, “racial scripts serve as a guide to how knowledge is crafted about who is worthy of citizenship and who is deserving of deportation or exclusion.”<sup>41</sup> This means that the effect of online neoreactionary discourse is to exclude certain populations from the terms of citizenship writ large, colluding with a broader conservative agenda that seeks to force immigration policy to conform to the dictates of white elites, alone.

### *Conclusion*

Neoreactionary discourse on citizenship is premised on a dual structure of withdrawal and revocation. The neoreactionary “citizen” aims to shed this status’s presumed agency by choosing the moniker of “subject” and engaging in political

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<sup>40</sup> Rishi Chebrolu, “The racial lens of Dylann Roof: racial anxiety and white nationalist rhetoric on new media,” *Review of Communication* 20, no. 1 (January 2020): 56.

<sup>41</sup> Vincent N. Pham, “The racial matters of citizenship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104, no. 1 (January 2018): 96.

*passivism*, thus abdicating the various traditional avenues for civic life in democratic society. At the same time, the neoreactionary also attempts to discursively close-off the potential for other populations to gain entrance to the category of the citizenry by mobilizing racial scripts to motivate the possibility of white flight. By focusing on NRx's "right to exit," and its dialectical relationship with political and civic "voice," this chapter demonstrates that far-right discourse has the potential to be substantially influential through decentralized circulation. Concentrating on how political manifestoes, like that of Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin, are fragmented and dispersed on forums like *Reddit* and *4chan* identifies a relay-point through which hyper-conservative philosophy achieves mainstream reach. This opens up opportunities for hijacking these communicative channels in service of other political possibilities, tracking the development of far-right ideologies, and deconstructing the tortured logics that enable their hegemony.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion: Nomenclature Trolling and the Right to be Invaded

#### *A Call for a Left Exit*

The commonplace tendency to dismiss evidence of neoreaction's role in the far-right's contemporary revival demonstrates a fundamental flaw within many investigations into reactionary culture. Far too much analysis of extremism speaks of a supposedly "illiberal" current of modern discourse that is imagined to be opposed to dominant society's ostensibly "liberal" values and norms. Even among critics who clarify that many of those values have yet to be achieved or simply represent impossible ideals, there remains an underlying assumption that Yarvin, Land, and their ilk are positioned *in opposition* to liberal principles.

But what if we are questioned the premised that neoreaction is antithetical to liberal society? What if we, instead, took seriously the idea that NRx might be the ideological culmination of liberalism rather than an exception or adversary to it? This would mean taking a longer look at the sustained effects of racial capitalism as a process of mythopoetic subject formation, and specifically, the way it imbues contemporary left liberalism with the principle of whiteness as property.

This shift in perspective allows rhetorical critics to more clearly understand the consequences of framing liberalism and reactionary culture as inimical. These framings do not simply provide cover for the centuries of brutality that skulks behind the masquerade of "progress" (though, to be clear, it *does* do precisely this); but they also

ethically insulate liberal society from having to countenance its own complicity in far-right mobilization. Because reactionary culture is regarded as beyond the pale of a liberal society, rather than its funhouse mirror reflection, mainstream progressives begin to view liberal democracy as a kind of bulwark against extremist radicalism.

Therefore, while it may be increasingly acknowledged that our modern sociopolitical systems are imperfect, there is also a growing fear that dismantling these systems would precipitate a far-right takeover of the social order. As such, anxieties about “democratic backsliding” or “illiberal populism” provide a new twist on the neoliberal mantra that “there is no alternative.” This produces corrosive effects on leftist politics and undermines the work of those committed to liberation. It siphons the energy of progressivism into fearful apologia of an indefensible status quo. At the same time, it wrongly cedes to neoreactionaries a monopoly on exit from such an order.

The task of the modern left is nothing short of the reclamation of “exit” from the clutches of far-right reaction. Against the demonization of any alternative to the present order, it is imperative for radical thinkers to chart a way out of the violent structure that dominate our world. Mass organized brutality and systemic institutional neglect have fostered a breeding-ground for reactionary tendencies, creating wounds that will fester as long as capitalism, antiblackness, heteronormativity, and ableism remain the primary governors of contemporary existence. Each of these varying and overlapping assemblages of power suffuse modern liberalism. Until the liberal scaffolding of such structural violence is seen for what it is and challenged directly, liberal politics, and even progressivism, will function as nothing more than a snake eating its own tail.

Rhetorical scholars have a direct role to play in the demystification of a left exit. There are a number of blueprints available that can allow theorists to hyperstitionalize different approaches to the Outside. The #AltWoke manifesto is one, albeit imperfect, example of this type of writing and political philosophy. They describe themselves as “taking futurism away from fascism”<sup>1</sup> and list a pantheon of fellow travelers ranging from Kodwo Eshun and Jean Baudrillard to Holly Herndon and Lil B. Another example is the Xenofeminist manifesto, a queer- and trans-inclusive inhumanist feminism build around the motto: “if nature is unjust, change nature!”<sup>2</sup> Of unique importance—given this thesis’s critique of weird fiction’s racialization—are engagements with accelerationism from the perspective of Afropessimism, Blacceleration, or similar concepts. For example, Dunning’s investigation into “the Black Weird” is necessary to disentangle Lovecraftian racism from his conception of the Outside, without ever presuming that either are fully separable.<sup>3</sup> In any case, left accelerationism and similar radical theories and praxis cannot rely on objective, determined senses of truth, and must instead tap into the hyperstitional matrix of self-fulfilling positive feedbacks. Only then, can a true exit from modernity and concomitant structure of subjective individualism be pursued.

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, “#AltWoke Manifesto.”

<sup>2</sup> Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (London: Verso, 2018): 93.

<sup>3</sup> Dunning, 48.



### *The Right to be Invaded*

A hyperstitional left can only come to be through a rigorous examination of the conditions that precipitate structural disaffection as well as an experimental practice that can operate at the cutting-edge of theoretical and cultural novelty. Rhetoricians might be interested in working with the concept of “nomenclature trolling,” defined as “academic bait via gratuitous neologisms.”<sup>4</sup> While many are likely to dismiss any strategy that has trolling at its core, doing so is a mistake that merely reifies the hegemonic system of rational realism, ensuring the continued reproduction of the libidinal void at the heart of contemporary subjectivity. As plenty of examples from throughout this thesis demonstrate, *trolling can work to shape politics*. Nomenclature trolling, in particular, taps into the platform feedback-effects of rhetorical circulation and thus can engender hyperstitional possibilities through the application of pragmatic skepticism and unbelief to conservative virtues. One example would be Xenofeminism’s injunction that “if nature is unjust, change nature!,” because the process of sloganeering, in this context, embeds leftist theorization into the broader societal imagination.

The particular example of nomenclature trolling that I wish to elevate as an object worthy of further study is Sandifer’s notion of the “right to be invaded.” This idea is developed in juxtaposition to the feeling of besiegement that neoreactionaries like Land claim to experience. Sandifer jokes that “it would scarcely be possible to come up with a notion more loathsome to this particular breed of reactionary shithead than the right to be invaded”<sup>5</sup> and I couldn’t agree more! Such a right not only refers to the borders of nation-

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<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, “The Dark Insurrection,”

5. <sup>5</sup> Sandifer, 114.

states, but instead, also references the permeability of the body, the incompleteness of the subject, and ludicrousness of any notion of so-called “racial purity.” The right to be invaded insists that subjects, as constructed, are violent containment devices that preclude radical relational possibilities, both with other creatures, and also with the Outside. Such an articulation is a direct challenge to white nationalist and racial capitalist frameworks that sanctify the wholeness or atomistic nature of the subject as the only thing worth defending.

Given Sandifer’s comparison of the right to be invaded with Land’s coinage of “The Flood,” such a rhetorical instance of nomenclature trolling would be assisted if placed in conversation with Fred Moten’s concepts of the swarm, blur, or surround. Each are ways of reconceptualizing aesthetic images of Blackness that typically figure as threatening or chaotic, instead considering them as tactical strategies to displace the hegemony of Western humanism. Regarding the first two, Moten argues that “the blur, or swarm, of entangled difference—the irregular irrealities of the senses, the wild unintelligibilities of the intelligence—violates the scheme, or frame, or home of xenophobic/egocentric particularity.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of the latter term, Moten and Harney forward the claim that “politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround.”<sup>7</sup> Each of these terms is a way of flipping the existing conception of racialized mobility and invasion. This project highlights the stakes of self-defense against the settler’s armed incursion, revealing that

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine*, consent not to be a single being 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 117

<sup>7</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Minor Compositions (Wivenhoe: Autonomedia, 2013): 17.

preserving white homogeneity is a genocidal and futile endeavor. Similarly, the rearticulation of the blur and the swarm is meant to invert Immanuel Kant's formulation that unfettered radical imagination equates to pure nonsense and lawlessness, and thus must have its wings clipped by reason and understanding.<sup>8</sup> Because Kant's conception of such lawless, free imagination was indeed a racialized view that failed to accord the powers of understanding to Blackness, Moten argues that true creativity and experimentation can only come *from* unfettered imagination. This is precisely the type of insight that the right to be invaded seeks to center, by highlighting the inherently interrelated nature of all beings and rejecting the hegemony of rational reason. It presents an opportunity for locating a left exit from the modern political order.

### *Final Thoughts*

Neoreactionaries are a unique tendency within the alt-right that poses a greater challenge to the mainstream left than most other theoretical interlocutors. The unabashed misanthropy present within Landian inhumanism threatens the integrity of liberalism's claims to tolerance and universality. By launching a direct attack on the most fragile elements of liberal democracy, right accelerationists seek to exacerbate ongoing contradictions and precipitate even further racial capitalist accumulation. They do this primarily through a process of affective cooption. In this process, the digital incommensurability inherent to modern communication and the libidinal void innate to contemporary subjectivity are politicized into aspirational nihilism. This process

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of this critique of Kant, see, Fred Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 269-310.

facilitates conservative forms of superstition that veil themselves through presentist aesthetics and a transgressive ethos. Such an affective motor steers the reactosphere toward futures like neo-cameralism and transhumanism. Even if these futures are not directly actualized, their circulation within rhetorical spaces is an energizing mythos that holds together disparate and divergent elements of the far-right. However, we should not mistake such theories for genuine contact with the Outside; neoreactionaries are unable to shake the residual humanism that their attachment to racial capital solidifies. This means the left has a window of opportunity to engineer their own superstitious futures and concoct their own strategies of nomenclature trolling. If rhetoricians and other critical theorists wish to mount an effective challenge against neoreaction and other elements of the alt-right, their first task must be demystifying a left exit.

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