Alt-White: Conceptualizing the "Alt-Right" as a Rhetorical Bridge between White Nationalism and Mainstream Public Discourse

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Contemporary scholarship on race from critical rhetorical perspectives has revealed the dominance of a colorblind racial ideology and its accompanying norms of race-evasive discourse in the post-1960's United States. In the "Age of Trumpism," however, there has been a marked resurgence of explicitly pro-white rhetoric and a rise in public displays of various formations of white supremacy, including the emergence of a loose group of disgruntled pro-white, far-right reactionaries who have strategically adopted the label of "alt-right." To help make sense of articulations among "alt-right," far-right, and pro-white ideologies in the Trump-era, this essay investigates the emergence and early evolution of the "alt-right" to reveal how appeals to intellectualism and political correctness have been deployed to make space for overtly pro-white rhetoric in mainstream U.S. American public discourse. Along the way, I reveal (dis)connections among contemporary formations of pro-white ideologies to illuminate strategic constructions of rhetorical distance between these formations and white supremacy. Ultimately, I argue that "alt-right" rhetoric is positioned as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse.

Keywords: Alt-Right, white nationalism, white supremacy, whiteness, critical rhetoric

On a warm Friday evening in August, 2017, a group of approximately 100 tiki-torch-wielding people—nearly all of them white men—descended upon the University of Virginia's campus in Charlottesville, VA to protest the planned removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E Lee.[1] Chanting slogans such as "white lives matter," "you will not replace us," and "blood and soil," participants taunted a small group of counter-protesters with Nazi salutes and racial slurs before instigating a violent brawl that led police to disband the demonstration.[2] The following day, an even larger group of pro-white[3] demonstrators infiltrated the town of Charlottesville for a "Unite the Right" rally, at which Confederate flags, Nazi insignia, and various other symbols associated with white supremacy were on full display.[4] Violence erupted here, too, culminating in

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[1] Dara Lind, "Nazi Slogans and Violence at a Right-Wing March in Charlottesville on Friday Night," *Vox,* August 12, 2017, https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138132/charlottesville-rally-brawl-nazi
[2] Ibid.
[3] As discussed in the next section, I cautiously use the term "pro-white" as an umbrella term to signal a number of closely related ideologies that explicitly promote "white pride," including white supremacy, white nationalism, neo-Nazism, and the "alt-right." For a brief explanation of the similarities and differences among these groups, see John Daniszewski, "How to Describe Extremists Who Rallied in Charlottesville," *Associated Press,* last modified August 16, 2017, https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/how-to-describe-extremists-who-rallied-in-charlottesville.
[4] Rosie Gray, "The Alt-Right's Rebranding Effort Has Failed," *Atlantic,* August 13, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/alt-right-charlottesville/536736/.

murder when a 20-year-old white man with known white supremacist views intentionally plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and injuring at least 19 others.[5]

This eruption of overt and violent white supremacy in Charlottesville speaks to a larger contemporary resurgence of overt racism and highlights an increasingly explicit articulation between pro-white ideologies and far-right politics that has come to characterize the "Trump-era." Organized by a self-proclaimed white supremacist, the "Unite the Right" event was cloaked superficially in the rhetoric of unification and conservative politics while functioning in practice as a rally around overt celebrations of white identity and unapologetic proclamations of white pride.[6] In addition to attracting representatives from longstanding pro-white groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and various white nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations, the "Unite the Right" rally attracted many proponents of a relatively new pro-white group known as the "alternative right" or "alt-right."[7] Several featured speakers at the rally were infamous "alt-right" figures, and many other demonstrators have been tied to the "alt-right," including the organizer of the rally as well as the man who murdered one counter-protester and injured many others with his car.[8]

Despite some proponents' attempts to argue otherwise,[9] it is clear that there are significant connections between the "alt-right" and radical pro-white movements. Yet, as a relatively new and amorphous group whose proponents include open and proud white supremacists and white nationalists,[10] far-right political pundits,[11] and anonymous online trolls,[12] there is significant confusion surrounding what the "alt-right" is, where it came from, and how—if at all—it is distinct from more established ideologies that fall under the "pro-white" umbrella.[13] To help make sense of articulations among "alt-right," far-right, and pro-white ideologies in the Trump-era, this essay investigates the emergence and early evolution of the "alt-right" to reveal how this group has deployed appeals to intellectualism and political correctness to make space for overtly pro-white rhetoric in mainstream U.S. American public discourse.

I begin by pointing to key articulations between the "alt-right" and white nationalism and attending to concerns around how to most productively write about the "alt-right" in efforts to both expose and interrogate the group's attempts to obscure its articulations to white nationalism and

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[5] Joe Ruiz, "Ohio Man Charged With Murder in Fatal Car Attack on Anti-White Nationalist March," *NPR,* August 13, 2017, http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/13/543176250/charlottesville-attack-james-alex-fields-jr

[6] Kristine Phillips, "The Man Who Organized the Charlottesville Rally is in Hiding—And Too Toxic for the Alt-Right," *Washington Post,* August 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/08/22/the-man-who-organized-the-charlottesville-rally-is-in-hiding-and-too-toxic-for-the-alt-right/?utm_term=.9d3571f31d2d.

[7] Richard Fausset and Alan Feuer, "Far-Right Groups Surge Into National View in Charlottesville," *New York Times,* August 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/far-right-groups-blaze-into-national-view-in-charlottesville.html.

[8] Jason Hanna, Kaylee Hartung, Devon M. Sayers, and Steve Almasy, "Virginia Governor to White Nationalists: 'Go Home … Shame on You,'" *CNN,* August 13, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-white-nationalists-rally/index.html.

[9] See Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Breitbart,* March 29, 2016, http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

[10] "From Alt Right to Alt Lite: Naming the Hate," *Anti-Defamation League,* Accessed October 1, 2017, https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/from-alt-right-to-alt-lite-naming-the-hate.

[11] Sarah Posner, "How Donald Trump's New Campaign Chief Created an Online Have for White Nationalists," *Mother Jones,* August 22, 2016, http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/stephen-bannon-donald-trump-alt-right-breitbart-news/.

[12] Evan Malmgren, "Don't Feed the Trolls," *Dissent,* Accessed September 28, 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/dont-feed-the-trolls-alt-right-culture-4chan.

[13] See Jeet Heer, "Conservatives Are So Confused About the Alt-Right," *New Republic,* February 24, 2017, https://newrepublic.com/article/140861/conservatives-confused-alt-right.

white supremacy. Then, I discuss contemporary scholarship on race and whiteness from critical race studies and critical rhetorical perspectives to demonstrate how the resurgence of overtly pro-white rhetoric that the "alt-right" has helped mobilize signifies a shift away from the ways that racialized power has functioned through rhetorics of race evasion in contemporary mainstream discourse. Next, I contextualize the mainstream emergence of the "alt-right" within the broader resurgence of pro-whiteness that has come to characterize the Trump-era and point to Trump's presidential campaign as a *kairic* moment for the explicit articulation of far-right politics with a pro-white racial ideology. Finally, I turn toward an analysis of pre-Trump formations of "alt-right" rhetoric to reveal how the "alt-right" emerged from white nationalists' attempts to engineer a youthful, intellectual, far-right, pro-white movement. Here, I demonstrate how "alt-right" rhetoric has mobilized appeals to intellectualism alongside the trope of "political correctness" in attempt to move mainstream white folks away from a colorblind racial ideology and toward pro-white racial consciousness. Ultimately, I argue that the "alt-right" has been constructed and positioned as a rhetorical bridge between mainstream public discourse and white nationalism. Before moving too quickly ahead, however, a grounding discussion of language use, terminology, and ideology is necessary, both to clarify my own language choices and because there has been significant controversy around how to report on and write about the "alt-right."

On Language Use: White Supremacy, White Nationalism, & the Pro-White "Alt-Right"

Many critics (and some proponents[14]) have argued that the "alt-right" is virtually indiscernible from the various other ideologies that fall under the umbrella of "pro-whiteness"—including white supremacy, neo-Nazism, and white nationalism.[15] The significant connections between an "alt-right" ideology and other pro-white ideologies have led some to argue that "[t]he 'alt-right' is just another word for white supremacy"[16] and has prompted prominent media outlets to speak out against the uncritical adoption of the language and framing of the "alt-right." For example, the Associated Press has advised journalists that "the term 'alt-right' should be avoided because it is meant as a euphemism to disguise racist aims" and should only be used in direct quotations and/or when referencing how the group describes itself.[17] Similarly, liberal media outlet *Think Progress* has said that they "will no longer treat 'alt-right' as an accurate descriptor of either a movement or its members" and, other than in direct quotations, "will use terms [they] consider more accurate, such as 'white nationalist or 'white supremacist."[18] Scholars studying pro-white groups and rhetoric have also tended to group various formations of pro-whiteness together under the label of "white supremacy," offering relatively little analytic consideration of the language that particular

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[14] See Andrew Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Daily Stormer,* August 31, 2016, http://www.dailystormer.com/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/; Greg Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism & the Alt Right," *Counter Currents,* October 19, 2016, https://www.counter-currents.com/2016/10/interview-on-white-nationalism-and-the-alt-right/.

[15] Harrison Jacobs, "Former Neo-Nazi: Here's Why There's No Real Difference Between 'Alt-Right,' 'White Nationalism,' and 'White Supremacy,'" *Business Insider,* August 23, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/why-no-difference-alt-right-white-nationalism-white-supremacy-neo-nazi-charlottesville-2017-8.

[16] Christopher Ingraham, "The 'Alt-Right' is Just Another Word for White Supremacy, Study Finds," *Washington Post,* August 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/08/16/the-alt-right-is-just-another-word-for-white-supremacy-study-finds/?utm_term=.c9b42fc22580.

[17] John Daniszewski, "How to Describe Extremists Who Rallied in Charlottesville," *Associated Press,* last modified August 16, 2017, https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/how-to-describe-extremists-who-rallied-in-charlottesville.

[18] "EDITOR'S NOTE: ThinkProgress Will No Longer Describe Racists as 'Alt-Right,'" *ThinkProgress,* November 22, 2016, https://thinkprogress.org/thinkprogress-alt-right-policy-b04fd141d8d4

groups have deployed to strategically construct and frame themselves outside of white supremacy.[19]

The underlying logic informing the use of "white supremacy" as an umbrella term for all pro-white rhetoric, ideologies, and groups is that all pro-white groups share a foundational commitment to a white supremacist ideology but attempt to gain mainstream legitimacy and acceptance by branding themselves with language that obscures their connection to race and racism.[20] In turn, those reporting on and writing about such groups unwittingly contribute to this process by using the groups' preferred labels and language. There is, therefore, good reason to follow the practice of rejecting the language and framing of "alt-right" in favor of descriptors that more clearly elucidate the group's pro-white ideology. Indeed, as I will continue to discuss below, "alt-right" rhetoric has maneuvered into mainstream public discourse by cloaking its distinctly white nationalist arguments in appeals to intellectualism and a rhetoric of "alternatives" to mainstream politics and political correctness. Rejecting the "alt-right's" framing thus helps to resist its mainstreaming efforts by revealing its white nationalist roots and illuminating how "alt-right" rhetoric ultimately works to uphold a white supremacist ideology. However, I am also concerned that the proposed practice of erasing "alt-right" and simply replacing it with "white nationalist" or "white supremacist" elides sustained, nuanced investigation into the strategic ways that white supremacy maneuvers rhetorically into mainstream public discourse by disarticulating pro-whiteness from white supremacy. In other words, although the "alt-right's" pro-white ideology is rooted in white nationalism and white supremacy, attempts to rebrand pro-whiteness through the rhetoric of "alt-right" warrant critical inquiry precisely because they are doing rhetorical work.

On the one hand, then, calls to reject the language and framing of the "alt-right" are undoubtedly important and provide a productive mode of resistance against attempts to mainstream white supremacy—particularly for journalists, who are responsible for quick and concise reporting for broad mainstream public audiences. On the other hand, critical scholars must take care to avoid treating the language and framing deployed to construct differences among various pro-white groups as insignificant and/or unworthy of sustained analysis. In this contemporary moment characterized by proliferating racism and attempts to rearticulate white supremacist arguments by mobilizing new labels and framings, there is a critical need for increased investigation of the ways in which contemporary pro-white groups strategically construct rhetorical distance between themselves and white supremacy as they attempt to infiltrate mainstream public discourse. In particular, "alt-right" rhetoric has attempted to construct rhetorical distance between itself and other pro-white ideologies by adopting strategies mobilized by white nationalist rhetoric to construct rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy. Understanding the rhetorical (dis)articulations constructed between white nationalism and white supremacy is thus foundational for attempts to understand "alt-right" rhetoric.

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[19] See Meddaugh and Kay, "Hate Speech or 'Reasonable Racism?,'" 251–268; Moon and Hurst, "'Reasonable Racism,' 125–145; Bostdorff, "The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan 340–361; Brown, "WWW.HATE.COM," 189–208; Simi and Futrell, "Cyberculture and the Endurance of White Power Activism,"115–142; Daniels, *Cyberracism*; Stern, "Hate and the Internet," 57–99.

[20] See Jacobs, "Former Neo-Nazi."

What *is* White Nationalism?

White nationalism is a pro-white ideology "that calls for a separate territory and/or enhanced legal rights and protections for white people."[21] White nationalists have argued that they represent a distinct branch of the "white power" movement and have attempted to separate themselves from white supremacists, typically by framing white nationalism in terms of protecting and preserving the "white race" and framing white supremacy as the oppression and domination of other races.[22] As one self-avowed white nationalist argued,

> A White Nationalist believes in the value of diversity & the beauty of every race's [*sic*] & ethnicity's God-made characteristics. We want to preserve those. The so-called Liberals who claim to value them are really destroying them by allowing them to mix with each other & destroy their differences. A White Nationalist wants every Nation to be populated by its own Folk, & them alone; this will obviously involve making more nations than there are today & closing them off to immigration. …Now, contrast this with a White Supremacist, who believes that Whites should control everyone. …A White Nationalist wants freedom for the White race (& really for all races, but we consider that their own responsibility). A White Supremacist wants to create a master-slave relationship.[23]

This argument exemplifies how white nationalist rhetoric attempts to construct rhetorical distance from white supremacy by working within and against a contemporary milieu in which liberal multiculturalism has become mainstream. Here, white nationalist rhetoric appropriates the language of "diversity," affirming its abstract value but claiming that the liberal left has adopted a dangerous understanding of diversity through the promotion of multiculturalism. Once that abstraction is made, white nationalism can be reimagined as the "true" protector of diversity by promoting separatism as a way to preserve difference across distinct cultures.

Constructing rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy further enables white nationalist rhetoric to deflect accusations of hatred and racism by (re)positioning pro-white arguments within a larger discourse of identity politics and arguing that if other groups are able to make identity-based claims to particular rights and protections, white people should be able to make similar claims. It is here that "alt-right" rhetoric most clearly appropriates the rhetorical strategies of white nationalism. For example, self-proclaimed white nationalist and prominent "alt-right" figure Richard Spencer has urged white people to "have an identity," arguing,

> I don't need to tell black people in this room to have an identity because you all have got it. You know who you are. …But I will tell that to white people. Have a goddamn identity. Have a sense of yourself. Be a part of this family. You are not an individual, you are not just an American, you are not just a citizen, you are part of this family.[24]

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[21] John Daniszewski, "How to Describe Extremists Who Rallied in Charlottesville," *Associated Press,* last modified August 16, 2017, https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/how-to-describe-extremists-who-rallied-in-charlottesville; Also see Oliver Willis, "What is the 'Alt-Right'? A Guide to the White Nationalist Movement Now Leading Conservative Media," *Media Matters,* August 25, 2016, https://www.mediamatters.org/blog/2016/08/25/what-alt-right-guide-white-nationalist-movement-now-leading-conservative-media/212643#whitegenocide.

[22] See "What's the Difference Between a White Supremacist and a White Nationalist" (thread) *Stormfront,* June 18, 2014 (6:27 p.m.), http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t819574/.

[23] CeltandProud, reply to "What's the Difference Between a White Supremacist and a White Nationalist" [Msg. 8], *Stormfront,* July 27, 2011 (12:46 p.m.), http://www.stormfront.org/forum/t819574/.

[24] Richard Spencer, "Richard Spencer at Texas A&M 12/6/16," [28:16–29:39], *YouTube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlbLNWIFEY0.

Here, Spencer mobilizes an argument common in both white nationalist and "alt-right" rhetoric around the need for white folks to discover and accept themselves *as* white as a way to retain cultural relevance and, implicitly, dominance. Notably, even this overtly pro-white argument avoids the overtly hateful language often associated with white supremacy in favor of a tempered articulation of white racial consciousness to familial and communal belonging.

White nationalism's tempered formation of pro-white rhetoric provides an ideological and rhetorical foundation for the "alt-right," and understanding these connections is key to resisting the ways that both formations of pro-white rhetoric attempt to maneuver into mainstream public discourse. As with white nationalist rhetoric, "alt-right" rhetoric imagines itself in opposition to the perceived erosion of dominant whiteness in U.S. American society. This ostensible erosion is constructed as material in the sense that increased racial mixing, immigration, and the general promotion of a more racially and ethnically diverse population are articulated with the perceived decline of a "pure" white population, which both groups refer to as "white genocide."[25] Further, as with white nationalist rhetoric, "alt-right" rhetoric takes issue with the perceived symbolic erosion of whiteness in mainstream public discourse, mobilizing opposition to a culture of "political correctness" in which "[a]ny discussion of white identity, or white interests, is seen as a heretical offense."[26] And, like white nationalists, proponents of an "alt-right" ideology perceive the material and symbolic erosion of whiteness to be directly related to the promotion of ideologies, practices, and policies that promote colorblind multiculturalism and suppress pro-white racial consciousness.[27] Thus, both white nationalist and "alt-right" rhetoric attempt to promote pro-white racial consciousness and make space for overt celebrations of white pride in mainstream public discourse by disarticulating whiteness from its position of domination to reimagine white U.S. Americans as disadvantaged and disenfranchised.[28]

Yet, where white nationalist rhetoric explicitly constructs white nationalism *as* a pro-white racial ideology, "alt-right" rhetoric attempts to construct an "alternative" political ideology using key tenets of white nationalism as its foundation. I argue that by constructing an "alt-right" ideology in opposition to mainstream politics and "political correctness" in general, rather than as an affirmation of pro-whiteness in particular, "alt-right" rhetoric is able to construct rhetorical distance between the "alt-right" and white nationalism while simultaneously making white nationalist arguments. This process of constructing rhetorical distance between the "alt-right" and white nationalism mimics white nationalists' attempts to construct a separation between white nationalism and white supremacy and underscores the importance of attending to the rhetorical strategies deployed by various formations of pro-white rhetoric to reveal their fundamental interconnections.

In sum, contemporary formations of pro-white rhetoric have attempted to construct rhetorical distance between themselves and white supremacy—both by resisting the label of "white supremacist" and by deploying rhetorical appeals that violate traditional expectations of white supremacist rhetoric—as they work to promote pro-white racial consciousness among mainstream U.S. Americans. Revealing *how* these rhetorical maneuvers function to uphold a white supremacist ideology in ways that require this rhetorical distancing is important for the ways we understand and resist attempts to mainstream white supremacy. Whereas efforts to resist these attempts by rejecting the

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[25] See Willis, "What is the 'Alt-Right'?"; Andrew Anglin, "A Normie's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Daily Stormer,* August 31, 2016, http://www.dailystormer.com/a-normies-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

[26] Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide."

[27] Greg Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism & the Alt Right," *Counter Currents,* October 19, 2016, https://www.counter-currents.com/2016/10/interview-on-white-nationalism-and-the-alt-right/.

[28] Ibid.

strategic labeling and framing deployed by pro-white groups and (re)labeling these groups *as* white supremacist are productive and necessary in many contexts, the analysis at the heart of this essay prevents me from making that same move.

Throughout this essay, then, I cautiously use the term "pro-white" as a way to signal the promotion of white racial identity politics and white pride common across these ideologies and to avoid collapsing all formations of pro-white rhetoric under the label of "white supremacy," even as I recognize and affirm the importance of ultimately understanding all of these ideologies *as* white supremacist. I use the term "white nationalist" when referring to arguments that directly promote the tenets of white nationalism outlined above or to self-proclaimed white nationalists. I continuously place "alt-right" in quotation marks to affirm the importance of avoiding uncritical appropriations of this problematic term that is, ultimately, central to my analysis.

Before turning to an analysis of the emergence and evolution of "alt-right" rhetoric, however, a discussion of how critical scholarship on race, racism, and rhetoric has understood the contemporary relationship between racism and rhetoric is needed. This discussion will illuminate how the "alt-right's" mobilization of explicitly pro-white rhetoric signifies a shift away from the race-evasive rhetoric and implicit racism that has, until recently, characterized mainstream public discourse on race.

Race, Racism, and Critical Rhetoric

Critical studies of race focused on contemporary U.S. American contexts have revealed that, whereas a white supremacist ideology operated in overt, explicit formations prior to 1960's-era civil rights movements, the waves of social change mobilized by these movements compelled major shifts in the ways that racialized power functions. Specifically, in the post-Jim Crow United States, whiteness has maintained a status of dominance and centrality by operating primarily under the radar, masking itself through race-evasive discourses of normativity and universality rather than making explicit claims to superiority and domination.[29] Critical race scholars across disciplines have conceptualized this shift as a response to the rise of a "colorblind racial ideology,"[30] or the belief that people should be seen and treated "as individuals only, not as persons or groups whose identities or social positions have been shaped and organized by race."[31]

Advocates of racial colorblindness tend to point to the elimination of explicitly racist laws to argue that the U.S. is a "post-racial" society that has moved beyond its racist past. As Ian Haney López explains, colorblindness is:

> [A]n ideology that self-righteously wraps itself in the raiment of the civil rights movement and that, while proclaiming a deep fealty to eliminating racism, perversely defines discrimination strictly in terms of explicit references to race. Thus, it is 'racism' when society uses affirmative race-conscious means to respond to gross inequalities, but there is no racial harm no matter how strongly disparities in

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[29] Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, (1995): 291–309.

[30] This use of "colorblind" has provoked controversy due to its appropriation of language rooted in a medical condition (the inability to see/distinguish certain colors) to refer to a problematic racial ideology (See Shae Collins, "Here's Why Refusing to 'See Color' Doesn't Actually Mean You're Not Racist," *Everyday Feminism,* June 26, 2016, http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/06/refusing-to-See-color-still-racist/). I continue to use this term because it is overwhelmingly the preferred term for this ideology across contemporary critical race and whiteness studies scholarship and intend no offense to the medically colorblind.

[31] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation,* 2; "Colorblindness" is

health care, education, residential segregation, or incarceration correlate to race, so long as no one has uttered a racial word.[32]

A colorblind racial ideology thus purports to oppose racism while suggesting that race is no longer a meaningful social identity, even as racialized assumptions are mobilized through coded rhetoric that purports to be race-neutral.[33] In turn, this race-evasive rhetoric enables persisting racial inequalities to be (re)constructed as products of cultural problems within communities of color and accusations of racism to be (re)framed as "playing the race card"—a trope deployed to deflect accusations of racism and shut down direct discourse on race.[34]

Research on race from critical rhetorical perspectives illuminates how a colorblind racial ideology has been articulated to a race-evasive rhetoric that upholds systemic racism and white supremacy while avoiding direct engagements with racism and actively denying the significance of race.[35] This scholarship demonstrates that, under the guise of racial colorblindness, "contemporary race and racism function more subtly and inferentially than overtly" and demonstrates how assumptions of white superiority are mobilized through discourse that purports to be race-neutral.[36] Collectively, this scholarship speaks to the role of absence in discourses of power,[37] demonstrating that by remaining discursively invisible, whiteness functions as the universal, de-racialized standard of normativity against which other racial formations are particularized and compared.[38]

Yet, as I continue to illustrate below, the current resurgence of overtly pro-white rhetoric that has characterized the Trump-era suggests that explicit formations of racialized power are proliferating. In response, it is urgently important to investigate the rhetorical mechanisms through which a radically racist ideology has maneuvered into mainstream public discourse through rearticulations with a less overtly racist—yet still explicitly pro-white—rhetoric to reveal how racialized power is functioning in the present moment. This essay joins others in this special volume to contribute to the investigation of contemporary formations of explicitly pro-white rhetoric by adopting a critical rhetorical perspective to interrogate how "alt-right" rhetoric has been constructed and positioned as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse.

Critical rhetoric is a useful perspective for this analysis because it attunes critics to the simultaneously productive and repressive functions of power and provides a framework for interrogating the underlying ideological impulses of rhetorics that appear to be advocating for freedom.[39] From

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[32] Ian Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York University Press, 2006), xviii.

[33] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1993), 139.

[34] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America,* 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 15–17; Christopher J. Gilbert and Jonathan P. Rossing, "Trumping Tropes with Joke(r)s: *The Daily Show* 'Plays the Race Card,'" *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 1 (2013): 97. See also Megan E. Morrissey and Christy-Dale L. Sims, "Playing the Race Card: Antiracial Bordering and Rhetorical Practices of New Racism," *The Review of Communication* 15, no. 2 (2015): 82.

[35] See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists;* Nakayama and Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric"; Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (eds.), *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999); Carrie Crenshaw, "Resisting Whiteness' Rhetorical Silence," *Western Journal of Communication* 61, no. 3 (1997): 253–278

[36] Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono, "Introduction," in *Critical Rhetorics of Race,* eds. Michael G. Lacy and Kent A. Ono (New York University Press, 2011), 3.

[37] Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989): 107.

[38] Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, "Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, (1995): 291–309.

[39] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 91–111.

a critical rhetorical perspective, it is significant that the "alt-right" has been constructed in opposition to the dominant racial ideology of colorblindness and its accompanying norms of racially coded and race-evasive public discourse. As I continue to reveal below, it is this articulation that enables "alt-right" rhetoric to masquerade as a rhetoric of resistance by orienting the "alt-right" in opposition to colorblind political correctness while purporting to advocate for free speech. Evaluating "alt-right" rhetoric from a critical rhetorical perspective reveals that, rather than promoting freedom, the "alt-right" seeks to uphold the existing racial order wherein whiteness occupies a dominant, central position that affords symbolic, social, and material privileges at the direct expense of communities of color.

The "Trump-Era" & the "Alt-Right"

As contributions to this special issue demonstrate, the era ushered in by the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump has been characterized by a resurgence of white supremacy in various formations. Numerous sources have reported that "racist incidents" and "hate crimes" have risen dramatically since Trump launched his presidential campaign and spiked significantly after his election.[40] Additionally, sustained analyses have concluded that racial resentment and fear of racial diversity were strongly correlated to support for Trump in the 2016 election.[41] Further, Trump's use of explicitly and implicitly racist appeals has enabled him to garner the enthusiastic support of self-avowed white supremacists.[42] For example, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke called the night of Trump's election "one of the most exciting nights of my life," adding, "[M]ake no mistake about it, our people have played a HUGE role in electing Trump!"[43] For his own part, Trump has been hesitant to disavow his most explicitly pro-white supporters and, when he has done so, it has come after repeated requests and under extreme pressure.[44]

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[40] See Melanie Eversley, "Post-Election Spate of Hate Crimes Worse Than Post-9/11, Experts Say," *USAToday,* November 12, 2016, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2016/11/12/post-election-spate-hate-crimes-worse-than-post-911-experts-say/93681294/; Brian Beutler, "Trump Has Made America More Racist. Republicans Are OK With That," *New Republic,* July 18, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/135148/trump-made-america-racist-republicans-ok-that; Katie Reilly, "Racist Incidents Are Up Since Donald Trump's Election. These Are Just a Few of Them," *Time,* November 13, 2016, http://time.com/4569129/racist-anti-semitic-incidents-donald-trump/.

[41] Brenda Major, Alison Blodorn, and Gregory Major Blascovich, "The Threat of Increasing Diversity: Why Many White Americans Support Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* (2016): 1–10; Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel, "Fear of Diversity Made People More Likely to Vote Trump," *The Nation,* March 14, 2017, https://www.thenation.com/article/fear-of-diversity-made-people-more-likely-to-vote-trump/; Sean McElwee and Jason McDaniel, "Anatomy of a Donald Trump Supporter: What Really Motivates This Terrifying Political Movement," *Salon,* May 16, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/05/16/anatomy_of_a_donald_trump_supporter_what_really_motivates_this_terrifying_political_movement/; Ben Judah, "Donald Trump's Greatest Weapon is White Americans' Fear That They're Quickly Becoming a Minority—Because They Are," *Independent,* November 7, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/donald-trump-us-elections-hillary-clinton-race-hispanic-black-vote-white-americans-fear-minority-a7402296.html.

[42] David R. Graham, "Why White Supremacists Find Comfort in Trump's Erratic Messaging," *Atlantic,* August 15, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/dr-trump-and-mr-donald/536925/.

[43] David Duke, Twitter post, November 8, 2016, https://twitter.com/DrDavidDuke/status/796249464826687488?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.politico.com%2Fstory%2F2016%2F11%2Fdavid-duke-trump-victory-2016-election-231072.

[44] See Associated Press, "Donald Trump Disavows Alt-Right, White Supremacists," *Hollywood Reporter,* November 22, 2016, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/donald-trump-disavows-alt-right-white-supremacists-950109; Dan Merica, "Trump Calls KKK, Neo-Nazis, White Supremacists 'Repugnant,'" *CNN,* August 14, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/14/politics/trump-condemns-charlottesville-attackers/index.html.

The "alt-right" burst onto the mainstream U.S. American political scene within this context of proliferating racism and proponents quickly positioned themselves among Trump's most fervent pro-white supporters.[45] As others have noted, support between Trump and the "alt-right" has been mutual. Trump has done his part by promoting key tenets of an "alt-right" ideology and bringing "alt-right" ideologues such as former Breitbart editor Steven Bannon into his inner circle, and the "alt-right" has done its part by campaigning enthusiastically for Trump and supporting his presidency.[46] For example, acclaimed "alt-right" spokesperson and self-avowed white nationalist Richard Spencer has referred to Trump as an "alt-right hero," proclaiming,

> [Donald Trump] had a sense of height, of upward movement, of greatness. Of that thing that makes the white race truly unique and truly wonderful. That striving toward infinity, that however vulgar he might be, that he had a sense of it. And that's what inspired the alt-right. That's what made Donald Trump an alt-right hero.[47]

As Spencer illustrates, the "alt-right" was inspired by Donald Trump and saw in him an affirmation of their articulation of far-right political ideology to a pro-white racial ideology. Fellow self-proclaimed white nationalist and "alt-right" proponent Greg Johnson echoed Spencer, noting, "The Trump candidacy is tapping into a change in consciousness that is being produced by white demographic displacement, and the Alt Right deserves a great deal of credit for making people aware of this fact."[48] And, as many journalists have noted, by articulating itself with Trump's campaign and presidency, the "alt-right" has gained a sense of mainstream legitimacy, attention, and recognition, and, in the process, bolstered its political power and extended its reach to a wide, mainstream audience.[49]

The "alt-right," which often brands itself as an "edgy" alternative to mainstream conservative politics, has thus taken advantage of a *kairic*—or opportune—moment[50] by articulating itself to a president who has similarly positioned himself outside of traditional party politics.[51] Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate below, the articulation of a pro-white racial consciousness to far-right conservativism through the language of an "alternative right" precedes Donald Trump's political persona and bears no necessary articulation to his presidency. It is important, then, to investigate the emergence and early evolution of "alt-right" rhetoric to illuminate how the "alt-right" has exploited this political moment in attempts to appeal to mainstream white audiences with a pro-white ideology (re)articulated to an edgy opposition to mainstream conservatism and political correctness.

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[45] Ben Schreckinger, "The Alt-Right Comes to Washington," *Politico,* January/February, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/alt-right-trump-washington-dc-power-milo-214629.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Spencer, "Richard Spencer at Texas A&M," [20:45–21:06].

[48] Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism."

[49] See Patrick Strickland, "What is the Alt-Right and What Does it Stand For?," *AlJazeera,* March 4, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/02/alt-stand-170218115042196.html; Michael D'Antonio, "Is Donald Trump Racist? Here's What the Record Shows," *Fortune,* June 7, 2016, http://fortune.com/2016/06/07/donald-trump-racism-quotes/; Nicholas Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance," *New York Times,* July 13, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/us/politics/donald-trump-white-identity.html?_r=1; Ben Schreckinger, "The Alt-Right Comes to Washington," *Politico,* January/February, 2017, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/alt-right-trump-washington-dc-power-milo-214629.

[50] See Dana L. Cloud, "The Materialist Dialectic as a Site of Kairos: Theorizing Rhetorical Intervention in Material Social Relations," in *Rhetoric, Materiality, & Politics,* eds. Barbara A. Biesecker and John Louis Lucaites (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 294.

[51] Andrew Marantz, "The Alt-Right Branding War has Torn the Movement in Two," *New Yorker,* July 6, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-alt-right-branding-war-has-torn-the-movement-in-two.

The Emergent "Alt-Right" and the White Nationalist Intelligentsia

Back when Donald Trump was best known as a businessman and reality television personality—long before Bannon proclaimed *Breitbart* to be "*the* platform for the alt-right,"[52] prior to the rise and fall of Milo Yiannopoulos as an "alt-right" celebrity,[53] when anonymous online trolls were more irksome than dangerous[54]—a small group of well-educated white men attended an academic-style conference to discuss the need for an "alternative right."[55] For years thereafter, they worked to construct this far-right, pro-white "alternative" to mainstream conservative politics as an intellectually grounded ideology as they attempted to intervene in both contemporary politics and mainstream public discourse.[56]

In this section, I demonstrate how an "alt-right" ideology was constructed in the rhetoric of this group of well-educated white nationalists, who I have termed the "white nationalist intelligentsia." To do so, I trace the pre-Trump-era construction of an "alternative right" through fragments from fringe-conservative and white nationalist online media outlets to situate the mainstream proliferation of "alt-right" rhetoric as an extension of white nationalists' longstanding attempts to reach mainstream white U.S. American audiences through articulations between far-right and pro-white ideologies.[57] This discussion will illuminate key themes running through early "alt-right" rhetoric—appeals to intellectualism and the construction of academic legitimacy for pro-white views, mobilizing opposition to "political correctness" to call for white identity politics, and constructing the "alt-right" as a broad far-right political ideology to obscure its connections to white nationalism. Ultimately, my analysis illuminates the strategic construction of the "alt-right" as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse.

Although it is frequently (mis)attributed to Richard Spencer's 2010 launch of *AlternativeRight.com,*[58] the term "alternative right" was coined in November 2008—just weeks after the

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[52] As quoted by Sarah Posner, "How Stephen Bannon Created an Online Haven for White Nationalists," *The Investigative Fund,* August 22, 2016, http://www.theinvestigativefund.org/investigations/politicsandgovernment/2265/how_stephen_bannon_created_an_online_haven_for_white_nationalists/.

[53] Dorian Lynskey, "The Rise and Fall of Milo Yiannopoulos—How a Shallow Actor Played the Bad Guy for Money," *The Guardian,* February 21, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/21/milo-yiannopoulos-rise-and-fall-shallow-actor-bad-guy-hate-speech.

[54] See Feminist Frequency, "I Usually Don't Share the Really Scary Stuff…," Twitter post, August 27, 2014, https://twitter.com/femfreq/status/504718160902492160.

[55] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right," *Taki's Magazine,* December 1, 2008, http://takimag.com/article/the_decline_and_rise_of_the_alternative_right/print#axzz4InOGAwpd.

[56] My focus here is the construction of a pro-white far-right group through the earliest explicit use of "alternative right." There is, of course, a longer history of articulations between far-right groups and pro-white ideologies. For insight into this history, see Robert C. Smith, *Conservatism and Racism, and Why in America They Are the Same* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

[57] To trace the emergence and early evolution of the alt-right, I searched the archives of Google News and ProQuest—comprehensive databases for mainstream news media publications—for the earliest mentions of "alt-right" and "alternative right." I also searched for "alt-right" and "alternative right" using Fagan Finder's "search by date" feature which searches the entire Google archive. These searches yielded a robust set of results, which I was able to use to locate the earliest relevant use of "alternative right," identify key online media outlets for early "alt-right" rhetoric, and discover themes running through early "alt-right" rhetoric. My analysis here draws from touchstone moments and discursive fragments from early "alt-right" rhetoric.

[58] See "Alt Right: A Primer About the New White Supremacy," *Anti-Defamation League,* Accessed January 17, 2017, https://www.adl.org/education/resources/backgrounders/alt-right-a-primer-about-the-new-white-supremacy.

(first) election of Barack Obama, the United States' first (half) Black president—in a speech delivered by Dr. Paul Gottfried.[59] Gottfried, an Ivy League-educated professor emeritus of humanities, has published on a range of topics under the general umbrella of European intellectual history and has commonly signaled his opposition to contemporary mainstream Republican politics by identifying as a "paleoconservative" (*paleo* = Greek for *old*)—a term which Gottfried coined in the 1980s.[60] Paleoconservatives are a far-right reactionary group who distance themselves from mainstream Republicans and conservatives most clearly through their opposition to interventionism and their support for nationalism.[61] In turn, paleoconservatives take hard isolationist positions on American economic and foreign policy and by adopting anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist positions that, by implication, are oriented toward maintaining a majority white United States.

In 2008, Gottfried joined forces with Richard Spencer—a self-proclaimed white nationalist who has a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Music from the University of Virginia, a master's degree in humanities from the University of Chicago, and a few years of doctoral study at Duke under his belt[62]—to form the H. L. Mencken club. Gottfried and Spencer imagined the Mencken Club "as an organization for independent-minded intellectuals and academics of the Right."[63] In keeping with this goal, the Mencken Club organizes annual conferences that commonly host far-right conservative scholars, including several self-avowed white nationalists, and are framed around panels and presentations similar to those of a traditional (albeit small) academic conference.[64] For example, of the fourteen presenters at the inaugural Mencken Club meeting, seven were professors, two were attorneys, and the other five were writers, either of racist pseudoscience (e.g. Charles Murray and John Derbyshire) or for far-right publications (e.g. Richard Spencer and Taki Theodoracopulos).[65] Mencken Club meetings are thus not positioned to hail either a broad white nationalist audience or an audience of mainstream white folks. Rather, these meetings are constructed for a relatively small group of pro-white, far-right intellectuals and academics—the white nationalist intelligentsia.

It was in the academic conference-style context of the first annual Mencken Club meeting that the call for the formation of a far-right pro-white group was first made using the language of an "alternative right." In his brief keynote address titled "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right," Gottfried tapped into his audience's white nationalist leanings and familiarity with racialized pseudoscience to call for the formation of an intellectual far-right alternative to mainstream conservative politics grounded implicitly in white nationalism. Throughout, Gottfried decried

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[59] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right," *Taki's Magazine,* December 1, 2008, http://takimag.com/article/the_decline_and_rise_of_the_alternative_right/print#axzz4InOGAwpd.

[60] Helen Chernikoff, "Meet the Jewish 'Paleoconservative' Who Coined the Term 'Alternative Right,'" *Forward.com,* August 29, 2016, http://forward.com/news/national/348372/meet-the-jewish-paleoconservative-who-coined-the-term-alternative-right/.

[61] A longer history and deeper exploration of a "paleoconservative" ideology can be found in Michael Foley, *American Credo: The Place of Ideas in US Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2007): 318 as well as in Joseph Scotchie, *Revolt From the Heartland: The Struggle for an Authentic Conservatism* (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers, 2002). See also Samuel Francis, "The Paleo Persuasion," *The American Conservative,* December 16, 2002, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-paleo-persuasion/.

[62] Graeme Wood, "His Kampf," *Atlantic,* June 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/.

[63] "About," *The Mencken Club,* accessed November 4, 2016, http://hlmenckenclub.org/about/.

[64] Ibid.

[65] "Theme: The Egalitarian Temptation: November 21–23, 2008," *The Mencken Club,* accessed April 20, 2017, http://hlmenckenclub.org/2008-conference/.

growing divisions among paleoconservatives and called for disgruntled paleoconservatives com-mitted to anti-multiculturalist values to (re)assemble a strong "independent intellectual Right" ca-pable of waging strong opposition to both the Left and, especially, the mainstream Right.[66] Aside from remarking on his distaste for the tendency of mainstream conservatives to lump his brand of radical white populism together with "black nationalists, radical feminists, and open-borders ad-vocates," there were no explicit invocations of race in this speech—and yet, there were veiled affirmations of a pro-white ideology throughout.

For example, in discussing the decline of paleoconservatism, Gottfried argued that traditional paleoconservatives had been committed to sociobiology (or the study of biological influences in human social life) but that the contemporary "paleo camp looks markedly different as well as much older, and it shows little interest in the cognitive, hereditary preconditions for intellectual and cul-tural achievements." Here, Gottfried signaled the foundational white supremacist belief that white people are cognitively, hereditarily predisposed for higher intellectual and cultural achievement than most other races—yet, he did so in a way that avoids explicating the particularities of the hierarchy invoked, which constructs rhetorical space for the possibility of maneuvering around accusations of racism. Similarly, Gottfried later called for the rejection of the growing belief on the Left and Right that "everyone would perform up to speed if he/she could avail himself/herself of the proper cultural tools" and accept the "fact that not everyone enjoys the same genetic pre-condition for learning," calling the push toward equality a "politically motivated experiment in wishful thinking." By framing "human cognitive disparities" as "stark fact[s]," Gottfried made vague references to decontextualized pseudoscience to lend credibility to his assumptions regard-ing the common-sense reality of race, racial difference, and, by extension, racial hierarchy.

In other words, Gottfried's use of academic language and appeals to science might, for a main-stream audience, mask the assumptions of white superiority implicitly referenced in his speech. On the one hand, it seems as though Gottfried is making a reasonable, race-neutral argument—his explicit claim was, essentially, that not *everyone* has the same capabilities—which should be a *common-sense* statement. Yet, as Ian Haney López demonstrates, slippery invocations of white superiority through coded rhetoric couched in an air of common sense reasonability and articulated to abstract references to science are common in contemporary public and political discourse and function to uphold a pro-white ideology under the guise of race-evasive discourse.[67] Among Gott-fried's white nationalist intelligentsia audience, then, his veiled references to "sociobiology" and "cognitive, hereditary preconditions for intellectual and cultural achievement" are likely to be un-derstood as arguments for essential, natural racial differences that biologically predisposition white people as intellectually and culturally superior.

According to Gottfried, most paleoconservatives were growing old and complacent, becoming too quick to compromise with mainstream politics. Thus, far-right conservatives were in need of a new youthful and energetic "alternative"—an "*alternative right.*" Gottfried, who was himself in his late 60's when he delivered this speech, made numerous references to the "youth," "exuber-ance," and energy of the alternative right he was attempting to call into being, simultaneously (dis)identifying with the aging paleoconservatives from whose ashes the "alternative right" was presumed to emerge. The Mencken Club was thus constructed as an incubation space for an intel-lectualized pro-white ideology, where the white nationalist roots of a crumbling paleoconservatism

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[66] Paul Gottfried, "The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right."

[67] Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism & Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

could be transplanted into younger, more energetic vessels, positioned to become leaders of the revived white nationalist intelligentsia—the "alt-right."

Yet, precisely how the younger generation would be compelled to identify with a fringe far-right ideology was unclear at this point. Despite Gottfried's multiple references to the Mencken Club's "young thinkers and activists," "well-educated young professionals," and "younger members," the guest list for the Mencken Club's annual conferences reads like a roll call for old pro-white far-right intellectuals (speakers at the 2008 conference included Charles Murray, John Derbyshire, Paul Gottfried, and Peter Brimelow, all of whom were over 60 at the time). In fact, the only noteworthy "well-educated young professional" on the roster for the first several Mencken Club meetings was Richard Spencer, who had turned 30 a few months before the inaugural 2008 meeting.

It is noteworthy, then, that appeals to youth were foundational in the early articulation of an alternative right because they signal the white nationalist intelligentsia's keen awareness that interpellating a younger base of supporters was crucial to their movement while acknowledging that the old pro-white far-right intellectuals were ill-equipped to actually reach a youthful audience. In an attempt to realize this vision, the white nationalist intelligentsia's youngest member began attempting to harness the power of the Internet to reach a wider audience in ways that continued to make appeals to intellectualism and articulate the "alt-right" as a broad political ideology with white nationalist roots.

The "Alternative Right" Moves Online

In March 2010, Richard Spencer launched *AlternativeRight.com*[68]—a webpage that billed itself as "an online magazine of radical traditionalism. …[marking] an attempt to forge a new intellectual right-wing that is independent and outside the 'conservative' establishment."[69] Despite its strategically broad framing, content on *Alternative Right* focused primarily on exposing the "illusion" of racial equality and arguing for the importance of embracing pro-white racial consciousness, often using racialized misinterpretations of science and critical theory to attempt to legitimize its claims. On *Alternative Right*, Spencer and other contributors lamented the mainstream Republican Party's perceived acquiescence to the political left's push toward multiculturalism, equality, and affirmative diversity and echoed Gottfried's earlier call for a revival of youthful, intellectually grounded, pro-white far-right politics.

Yet, where the rhetoric of Gottfried and other white nationalist intellectuals had been circulated primarily in the relatively insular context of Mencken Club meetings and other white nationalist gatherings, *Alternative Right* was created for and marketed to a broader, more mainstream public. Armed with multiple degrees from respected institutions, Spencer—who was 32 at the time—was well positioned to spearhead this first evolution of "alt-right" rhetoric.[70] Careful to frame *Alternative Right* in terms that elided his strong commitments to white nationalism, Spencer attempted to harness the power of the Internet to reach mainstream white U.S. American audiences with radical pro-white rhetoric billed as the musings of far-right white intellectuals.

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[68] From this point on, I capitalize and italicize *Alternative Right* to signal this fringe online media outlet which, after having gone through several shutdowns and rebirths, has evolved into http://www.altright.com. The original content of *Alternative Right* can be viewed in its original formatting using the "Wayback Machine" (https://archive.org/web/).

[69] "About Us," *Alternative Right,* accessed January 20, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20100504201511/http://www.alternativeright.com/about-us/.

[70] Wood, "His Kampf."

In this way, *Alternative Right* imagined the "alt-right" as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and the mainstream public—a way to reach white folks who might not seek out "white nationalist rhetoric" but would perhaps be sympathetic to white nationalist arguments. As Greg Johnson noted, "[T]he *Alternative Right* webzine was founded as a vehicle by which White Nationalists could interact with dissident Rightists who were closer to the mainstream in order to convert them to our way of thinking."[71] In "alt-right" rhetoric, this conversion process is known as "red-pilling," which is a nod to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which the main character takes a red pill to awaken from the comforts of an illusory world and see things as they "really" are—to recognize the external influences that control human thought and action. In the film, the external influences exerting control on and power over human perception and experience are sentient, parasitic machines. In "alt-right" rhetoric, these external forces are (re)framed as ideological influences, such as colorblind multiculturalism, anti-racism, and feminism, that deny the "reality" of natural, hereditary differences between people of different races and sexes and trick people into believing that we are all the same.[72]

In an effort to "red-pill" mainstream white conservatives and convert them to a white nationalist orientation, contributors to *Alternative Right* attempted to expose the reality of race and rationalize a pro-white ideology through appeals to intellectualism, invocations of racialized pseudoscience and philosophy, and opposition to colorblindness and political correctness. In general, this approach reasoned that the realities of race and white superiority *should* be obvious to everyone but, because of a rampant proliferation of political correctness among both intellectuals and the mainstream public, scientific evidence and philosophical arguments are necessary to expose the illusion of racial equality. For example, in one of the first articles published on *Alternative Right*, contributor Richard Hoste argued that mainstream conservative politics have largely failed white U.S. Americans, and a movement that centers the needs and values of white U.S. Americans is needed.[73] Here, Hoste attempts to demonstrate that mainstream Republicans have done nothing to stop the political left's "March of Diversity" despite "irrefutable evidence" that some races are, by nature, simply "better than others." "If the races are equal," Hoste asks in a tone of faux-innocence, "why do whites always end up near the top and blacks at the bottom, everywhere and always?"

As examples of "irrefutable evidence" that some racial groups are naturally superior to others, Hoste cites a handful of decontextualized crime statistics, rattles off anecdotal observations about the proliferation of anti-white violence as he rails against the growing acceptance and promotion of a multicultural ideal, and nods to a variety of racially charged scholars, including Charles Murray, the well-known affirmer of whites' innate intellectual, psychological, and moral superiority[74], and John Derbyshire, who was fired from longstanding conservative media outlet *National Review* after penning an overtly racist article.[75] This practice—of citing highly controversial, misleading,

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[71] Johnson, "Interview on White Nationalism."

[72] Harold Smyth, "I Was Never Red-Pilled: The Case Against the Metaphor," *Radix,* August 17, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20160820103729/http://www.radixjournal.com:80/journal/2016/8/17/i-was-never-red-pilled-the-case-against-the-metaphor.

[73] Richard Hoste, "Why An Alternative Right is Necessary," *Alternative Right,* February 24, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100304153048/http://www.alternativeright.com:80/main/the-magazine/why-an-alternative-right-is-necessary/.

[74] Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, (New York: Free Press, 1994).

[75] John Derbyshire, "The Talk: Nonblack Version," *Taki's Magazine,* April 5, 2012, http://takimag.com/article/the_talk_nonblack_version_john_derbyshire#axzz1rJPlABLB.

disputed, and refuted[76] research that constructs "natural" racial differences and hierarchies as unquestionable truths—is one way that "alt-right" rhetoric deploys appeals to intellectualism alongside opposition to political correctness to call for white identity politics.

Elsewhere, *Alternative Right* contributors focused on attempting to expose other ways that a mainstream culture characterized by political correctness and colorblindness has skewed the reality of contemporary and historical social life. For example, Paul Gottfried's "The Patron Saint of White Guilt: The MLK Cult" attempts to argue that Martin Luther King Jr. was a "badly flawed public figure" and "a notorious philanderer," all of which would be plainly obvious had King not been made into "a martyred deity" by a culture characterized by "white guilt."[77] Here, again, Gottfried mobilizes appeals to intellectualism positioned to hail an educated audience. For example, Gottfried writes,

> Lest I be accused of being unfair to my subject, let me stress that he was not really responsible for this glorification. As far as I know, King could never have imagined how he would be used after his death, any more than Karl Marx could have imagined that his ideas would be cited to justify Soviet tyranny.

This article—which trades accessible everyday language for words such as "nexus," "beatified," and "plethora"—hails an audience of educated white people with an argument that appeals to intellectual elitism. Everyone *should* be able to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. as a fraud, but "white guilt" has clouded the vision of most, such that only the smart/educated and *proud* white people are able to connect the dots. In this way, Gottfried's article illustrates how "alt-right" rhetoric positions intelligence in opposition to racial progressivism while pro-white racial consciousness is articulated to intelligence and clarity of thought.

The argument that political correctness and racial colorblindness have clouded mainstream white peoples' understanding of the world is common across articles on *Alternative Right*. For example, Colin Liddell's "Sub-Racism" argues that "the rise of 'political correctness'" has forced contemporary U.S. Americans to "repress all conscious racial feeling" or be "made to feel like freaks and outsiders" and remain bound to the "guilt over the 'original sin' of slavery." Closely related to political correctness, a colorblind orientation to race is, Liddell suggests, a product of emotional repression. White folks are not *actually* colorblind—they have merely succumbed to the guilt imposed by a culture of political correctness and have suppressed their "true feelings" about race. Yet, Liddell notes, statistical data demonstrates that people still prefer "associating with their own kind": "This is just the way the world works, as anybody not tied in knots by 'political correctness' knows."[78] Like Gottfried, Liddell makes an appeal to common sense ("*anybody*" who has not succumbed to political correctness knows that this is "just the way the world works") articulated to intellectualism—Liddell's essay is also quite long and makes heavy use of references and language that would likely be inaccessible to folks without at least some college education.[79]

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[76] See Claude S. Fischer, Michael Hout, Martín Sánchez Jankowski, Samuel R. Lucas, Ann Swidler, and Kim Voss, *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth,* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press: 1996); "Charles Murray," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, n.d., https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/charles-murray.

[77] Paul E. Gottfried, "The Patron Saint of White Guilt: The MLK Cult," *Alternative Right,* January 17, 2011, http://web.archive.org/web/20110118081309/http://www.alternativeright.com:80/main/blogs/untimely-observations/the-patron-saint-of-white-guilt/.

[78] Colin Liddell, "Sub-Racism: The Return of the Repressed," *Alternative Right,* December 8, 2010, http://web.archive.org/web/20110208212851/http://www.alternativeright.com:80/main/the-magazine/sub-racism/.

[79] For example, Liddell explores the construction of a "Western cosmopolitan state" (WCS), which he refers to as a "microcosm of the macrocosm of Globalism" and a result of "the overextension of capitalism." Liddell argues that

And, like Gottfried, Liddell also articulates racial progressivism to negative affects (guilt, repression), implying that moving toward a pro-white orientation to racial consciousness is both more honest and more pleasant. On *Alternative Right*, then, a far-right orientation to politics is explicitly articulated to a pro-white orientation to race to form the "alt-right"—which is, ultimately, positioned as a racially conscious alternative to mainstream political correctness and its accompanying unpleasant affects such as shame and guilt.

By articulating an ideology of white superiority to appeals to common sense, contributors to *Alternative Right* suggest that pro-white racial consciousness *should* be an obvious and natural orientation for white folks to take toward race. However, because race neutrality has become the normative and expected orientation to race under a culture of colorblind political correctness, direct discourse on race is discouraged in mainstream public discourse and white people have been compelled to trade their common-sense perceptions for the illusion of equality. The emphasis on appeals to intellectualism circulating through rhetorical formations of pro-whiteness on *Alternative Right* positions a colorblind racial ideology as both dangerous and stupid while using sophisticated language, racialized philosophy, and pseudoscience to frame pro-white racial consciousness as an educated, enlightened position. In other words, *Alternative Right's* articulation of appeals to common sense to appeals to intellectualism reasons that if white folks were able to "see things as they really are," they would inevitably understand that they should take pride in their whiteness and fight for the protection and preservation of white culture. Because this common-sense awareness has been obscured by "political correctness," however, a revival of intellectually rooted white identity politics is needed.

In contrast to earlier paleoconservative discourse on the "alt-right," content published on *Alternative Right* was more clearly and explicitly oriented toward affirmations of whiteness. In keeping with the paleoconservative tradition, the tone and content of the early discourse on *Alternative Right* remained relatively intellectualized. In many ways, then, *Alternative Right* was positioned to fulfill Gottfried's 2008 vision for a youthful, intellectual revival of far-right pro-white politics. With the formation of *Alternative Right,* the torch was passed from the old paleoconservative vanguard to the younger far-right generation. The more youthful and more explicitly pro-white Richard Spencer became the voice and face of the "alt-right," as the older paleoconservatives stepped into the background (where they remained influential—Gottfried became a senior contributing editor of *Alternative Right*, as did the similarly aged head of the white nationalist, anti-immigration website *VDARE*, Peter Brimelow). [80]

However, the emergence of *Alternative Right* as an online platform for the "alt-right" and the crowning of Richard Spencer as an "alt-right" leader appeared to do little to actually extend the reach of "alt-right" rhetoric toward the audience of *young* intellectuals imagined by Gottfried in 2008. Instead, as with Mencken Club meetings, the jargon-and-theory-heavy content on *Alternative Right* hailed a relatively elitist academic audience and appeared, as evidenced by the list of early contributors and commenters, to circulate within a similarly insular fringe group. The white nationalist intelligentsia continued to publish long think pieces and hold annual academic-style conferences—which *Alternative Right* began to promote and publicize—but the archives show

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the "WCS" is fraught with "political correctness" and, from a "Freudian" perspective, constitutes the "realm of the sub-racist"—"a vast, subterranean shadow land or an invisible empire that matches the surface world."

[80] Jeffrey Imm, "VDARE Friend Richard Spencer Starts New Group 'Alternative Right,'" *Real Courage,* March 11, 2010, http://www.realcourage.org/2010/03/richard-spencer-alternative-right/; Stephen Piggott, "Peter Brimelow Starts New Anti-Immigrant/White Nationalist Website," *Imagine2050*, March 4, 2010, http://imagine2050.newcomm.org/2010/03/04/peter-brimelow-starts-new-anti-immigrantwhite-nationalist-website/.

that contributors and attendees were consistently comprised of the same relatively small group of far-right pro-white older intellectuals.[81] In other words, everyday white U.S. Americans—young or old—were not yet engaging with "alt-right" rhetoric mobilized in intellectualized formations through *Alternative Right's* online ivory tower.[82] Yet, despite circulating within a relatively insular online network, the emergence and early evolution of an "alternative right" in these early intellectualized formations provided a foundation for the far-right pro-white "alt-right" rhetoric currently proliferating through U.S. American public discourse in the "Age of Trumpism."

Conclusions & Implications

By articulating itself with Donald Trump's anti-establishment political persona and exploiting mainstream frustrations with politics-as-usual, the "alt-right" has drastically expanded its relevance and influence beyond the confines of the white nationalist intelligentsia's insular network. Further, more recent iterations of "alt-right" rhetoric have been mobilized in a variety of formations—many of which deviate significantly from the intellectualized rhetoric of the white nationalist intelligentsia—that have been more effective at reaching the youthful audience envisioned by Gottfried. For example, anonymous online trolls have taken key premises of "alt-right" arguments and rearticulated them to purportedly "playful" or "ironic" images, symbols, and slogans, which are deployed across mainstream social media in the form of "alt-right" memes. These memes essentially communicate the same substantive arguments—that the dominance of a naturally superior white population and white culture is being threatened by the evils of liberal multiculturalism and political correctness—using a style that reaches and resonates with a younger, broader audience.[83] It is clear, then, that the "alt-right's" ability to increase its influence and ranks has been premised, in part, on its descent from the white nationalist intelligentsia's ivory tower. Yet, the significance of the "alt-right's" rootedness in white nationalists' appeals to intellectualism should not be discounted.

The strategic, purposeful construction of an intellectually grounded "alt-right" provides an air of legitimacy to the ideological assumptions of white superiority informing various formations of "alt-right" rhetoric. In its intellectualized formations, "alt-right" rhetoric exploits the spaces between coded, race-evasive discourse and overtly white supremacist rhetoric to imagine the "alt-right" as a broad political ideology grounded in pro-white interpretations of philosophy and science, positioned in opposition to political correctness, and oriented toward the goal of unification (of white people). This framing enables the "alt-right" to construct rhetorical distance from its material and ideological white nationalist roots, offering mainstream white people a point of identification with pro-white racial consciousness without necessarily identifying *as* white nationalist—yet.

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[81] Programs for past Mencken Club conferences are available at http://hlmenckenclub.org/.

[82] Where Spencer and *Alternative Right* did receive some mainstream recognition prior to the "alt-right's" 2015 articulation to Trump's campaign, it was for their association with other fringe pro-white online figures and communities, not for any particular influence *on* mainstream discourse.[82] And, although the now-redirected site has consistently averaged over 10,000 visitors since July 2010, traffic history suggests that visitors spent an average of just 3 minutes on the site and typically left after viewing just one page—not nearly long enough to engage deeply with the intellectualized, long-form content featured on the site. See "Traffic and Alexa Rank History," accessed September 30, 2017, http://www.rank2traffic.com/alternativeright.com.

[83] Asher Schechter, "No More Funny Business: 'Alt-right' Reinventing Itself as a Leaner, Meaner White Nationalist Power," *Haaretz,* September 25, 2017, https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-1.814077.

As argued above, the rhetorical distance constructed between the "alt-right" and white nationalism mimics the construction of rhetorical distance between white nationalism and white supremacy—and it is here that the implications of this series of strategic rearticulations of white supremacy become clear. For decades, the dominance of whiteness has worked within the framework of a colorblind ideology, deploying race-evasive discourse to mask its persisting structural power by promoting the illusion of a post-racial society and imagining white supremacy as an evil of the distant past. As that illusion continues to crumble, the dominance of whiteness increasingly requires that mainstream U.S. Americans be awoken from their perpetual racial unconsciousness in ways that move them gradually toward pro-white racial consciousness (and avoid sending them running in retreat from extremist formations of white supremacy). Conceptualizing the "alt-right" as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream public discourse helps illuminate how the rhetorical distance constructed between various formations of pro-whiteness and white supremacy is negotiated.

Further, while it may appear as though the violent actions perpetrated by many "alt-right" proponents—as with the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville—contradict the conceptualization of the "alt-right" as a bridge between mainstream public discourse and white nationalism, these events actually help to illustrate how this rhetorical bridge functions. In moments when the "alt-right" itself becomes "too extreme" to be acceptable to mainstream white audiences, it is arguably *white nationalism*—with its arsenal of intellectualism and veil of academic legitimacy—that emerges as a comparatively reasonable alternative. In other words, the construction of the "alt-right" as a rhetorical bridge does not *just* enable white nationalist arguments to maneuver into mainstream public discourse via the language and framing of the "alt-right." This rhetorical bridge also enables white nationalism to move away from the "alt-right" when doing so is necessary to maintain rhetorical distance from white supremacy.

In a contemporary context characterized by the weakening of a colorblind racial ideology, pro-white groups are actively attempting to move mainstream white U.S. Americans toward pro-white racial consciousness in ways that demonstrate a recognition that explicit affirmations of white supremacy are unlikely to be effective in these efforts. The rhetorical formations of pro-whiteness mobilized toward this end are stylistically distinct, both from the race-evasive rhetoric that upholds the dominance and centrality of whiteness by refusing to speak openly about race *and* the formations of hate speech and overtly violent rhetoric typically associated with white supremacy. Instead, these formations of pro-white rhetoric attempt to reason that open affirmations of white pride and pro-white political positions are not necessarily white supremacist but, rather, are justifiable expressions of white racial consciousness for a sociopolitical context in which the argument that *race does not matter* has become an increasingly unjustifiable position. Considered within this context and alongside the publicity and legitimacy provided by Trump's political persona, it is clear that intellectualized formations of "alt-right" rhetoric have enabled the "alt-right" to influence mainstream audiences and politics in ways that would not have been possible without this *kairic* confluence.

Understanding white supremacy in the "Age of Trumpism" thus requires an understanding of how various rhetorical formations working to uphold the dominance of whiteness are adapting strategically to this context. By investigating the emergence and early evolution of "alt-right" rhetoric, this essay has demonstrated the importance of attending to *how* pro-white groups label and construct themselves strategically to appeal to mainstream white audiences. Efforts to reject the language and framing of the "alt-right" must therefore be deployed alongside careful analysis *of* that language and framing in order to more productively resist its strategic appeals. To this end,

additional research from a diverse array of theoretical and experiential perspectives is needed to reveal how mainstream white audiences are interpellated into pro-white racial consciousness through various rhetorical formations that uphold white supremacy while obscuring these connections. Through sustained analysis, we can work to demolish the rhetorical bridge the "alt-right" has built and develop more nuanced modes of resistance against attempts by pro-white groups to infiltrate mainstream public discourse with arguments grounded in white supremacy.