

Tracing Blue: A Burkean Cluster Analysis of Websites Selling the Thin Blue Line Flag

Bryan Lutz*

Carson Babbit**

The Thin Blue Line (TBL henceforth) is a phrase often invoked by law enforcement and their supporters. In 2014, the TBL became a contentious image when a college student embedded a blue line within a black and white American flag while, not coincidentally, Black Lives Matter activists enacted anti-racist efforts across the United States. The controversy now involves legislature in Florida, which in 2023, legislated similar protections for the TBL flag that exist for the American flag, state flags, and POW/MIA flags. Policymakers uneasy about racial unrest need to hear evidenced arguments and take decisive action. Scholars can make such arguments because they have examined racist discourse and Whiteness using Burkean Methods. This study analyzes twenty-five websites selling the TBL flag and related merchandise. Over 1,000 images collocating with the TBL flag are cataloged, sorted for frequency, and compared to reference sources such as the US government's catalog of police symbols and the Anti-Defamation League's database of hate symbols. The analysis shows what meanings are being sold by TBL retailers compared to competing interpretations of the TBL as either a symbol of White Nationalism or a symbol honoring police.

Keywords: Kenneth Burke, Cluster Analysis, The Thin Blue Line, White Nationalism, Racism

The Thin Blue Line (TBL) is a long-standing phrase associated with various campaigns supporting US law enforcement;¹ however, visual portrayals of the TBL are new and enveloped in controversy. The Thin Blue Line flag (TBL flag) emerged in 2014 when then-college student Andrew

* Dr. Bryan Lutz, Ohio Northern University (b-lutz@onu.edu - corresponding author). Bryan A. Lutz is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Ohio Northern University. His research examines digital activism, or how activist organizations use technology and writing to define an identity, argue, and act to solve problems. His teaching incorporates digital activism into academic writing and professional writing courses. Dr. Lutz has published with the journals *Computers and Composition Online*, *The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, and *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, as well as with the academic publishers Pearson, Routledge, and the ACM Digital Library. Dr. Lutz also serves as chair of the Ohio Council of Writing Program Administrators, as a member of the board of directors for Grey Matter Media, and as a communications consultant with both non-profit groups and private businesses.

** Mx. Carson Babbit, Ohio Northern University (c-babbit@onu.edu). Carson Babbit is a senior Political Science major with minors in Geography and Literature at Ohio Northern University. In addition to *Tracing Blue: A Burkean Cluster Analysis of Websites Selling the Thin Blue Line Flag*, Carson is researching tensions between right-wing populism and liberal democracy. Carson serves in an executive capacity with numerous organizations such as Pi Sigma Alpha, the Ohio Northern Fencing Club, College Democrats, Amnesty International, and others. Carson is also active in Ohio politics and serves on several campaigns such as Claire Osborne for State House, Craig Swartz for House, Jeffrey Sites for House, and others, and as the representative of College Democrats to the Hardin County Democratic Executive Committee. Carson is looking forward to attending Law School in 2024 and continuing their research to better understand modern political systems.

¹ Lauren Frias, "The 'Thin Blue Line': How a Simple Phrase Became a Controversial Symbol of the Police," *Insider*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.insider.com/how-thin-blue-line-became-controversial-symbol-to-represent-police-2021-2>; James E. Clapp, ed., *Lawtalk: The Unknown Stories behind Familiar Legal Expressions*, Yale Law Library Series in Legal History and Reference (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Jacob embedded a blue line within a black and white American flag. Today, TBL flag products are sometimes worn by members of law enforcement, thereby prompting national media interest as sales of the image grew and law enforcement officials became defensive about public concerns over the image and its meaning.² The controversy now involves legislatures. In 2023, Florida passed a bill providing the same protections for the TBL flag that exist for the American Flag, State flags, and POW/MIA flags.

Perhaps more important is how the TBL flag exists as a fault line running through racial tensions in the United States, revealed by the efforts of the activist group Black Lives Matter (BLM). Since its formation after the death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, supporters praised BLM for making the extrajudicial killing of Black people impossible for the broader American public to ignore. In this context, while supporters of police confidently assert that the TBL flag is a symbol honoring police killed in the line of duty, the flag could be a reaction to BLM with connotations that extend beyond supporting police.

The significance and the economic proliferation of the TBL flag warrants scholarly inquiry about what the TBL flag means. It may seem easy to dismiss the controversy by accepting that the TBL reflects polysemous meanings among competing interests; however, scholars of mass media have warned against such ahistoricism and imprecision.³ Journalists work largely from inference by collecting conflicting testimonies about the TBL flag. Informative, yes, but not analytical at a time when policymakers, compelled to action by public interest in the TBL flag, are ready to hear evidenced arguments and take definitive stances. Police forces may be ready to abandon symbols for the way they compromise public relations. For example, in January 2023, LAPD Chief Michel Moore boldly banned displaying the TBL flag at public events and station lobbies.⁴ The move was met with fierce opposition from the former LAPD captain and former deputy commissioner for the Baltimore Police Department⁵ and the Los Angeles Police Protective League Board of Directors (the latter described their “utter disgust” with the move).⁶ Other police chiefs have been met with similar opposition.⁷ Clearly, a careful study would benefit policymakers and empower them to take action, especially when the proliferation of the TBL flag may further compromise community relations with police. The following questions guide this research: What prevalent meaning

² Chammah Maurice and Cary Aspinwall, “The Short, Fraught History of the ‘Thin Blue Line’ American Flag,” June 9, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/06/09/the-short-fraught-history-of-the-thin-blue-line-american-flag-309767>.

³ Celeste Michelle Condit, “The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6, no. 2 (June 1989): 103–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295038909366739>.

⁴ Vivian Chow, “LAPD Chief Bans Police Displays of ‘Thin Blue Line’ Flag,” *KTLA* 5, January 21, 2023, <https://ktla.com/news/local-news/lapd-chief-bans-department-displays-of-thin-blue-line-flag/>; Robert Higgs, “Los Angeles Police Chief Michel Moore Bans ‘Thin Blue Line’ Flag Public Displays in Department,” *Cleveland.Com*, January 23, 2023, <https://www.cleveland.com/nation/2023/01/los-angeles-police-chief-michel-moore-bans-thin-blue-line-flag-public-displays-in-department.html>.

⁵ Taylor Delandro, “LAPD Chief Bans Public Displays of ‘Thin Blue Line’ Flag,” *Nexstar Media Inc: The Hill*, January 24, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/3828224-lapd-chief-bans-public-displays-of-thin-blue-line-flag/>.

⁶ Michael Flores, “Listen To What LAPD Chief Moore Says About His Decision To Ban The Thin Blue Line Police Flag From Department Use,” *LAist 89.3 Radio*, January 18, 2023, <https://laist.com/news/criminal-justice/why-lapd-chief-moore-banned-the-thin-blue-line-police-flag/>; Sandy Malone, “LAPD Chief Bans Thin Blue Line Flag In Police Stations Because It Doesn’t Make Them Safe Spaces,” *Warrior 12, LLC: The Police Tribune*, January 16, 2023, <https://policetribune.com/lapd-chief-bans-thin-blue-line-flag-in-police-stations-because-it-doesnt-make-them-safe-spaces/>.

⁷ Janelle Griffith, “Police Chief Bans ‘Thin Blue Line’ Imagery, Says It’s Been ‘Co-Opted’ by Extremists,” January 29, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/police-chief-bans-thin-blue-line-imagery-says-it-s-n1256217>.

can be argued for the TBL flag? And what methods can be used to evidence meaning in ways that are understandable for writers of policy?

Defining the Thin Blue Line

While the TBL flag is new, the phrase “the thin blue line” has long existed as a slogan adopted at different times for various purposes. In their book *Law Talk: The Unknown Histories Behind Legal Expressions*, Clapp and Thornburg document how the TBL began as a European import from the Battle of Balaklava during the Crimean War. At the time, the “thin red line” described how outnumbered Scottish Infantry Forces defied the odds and held back Russian forces. The indecisive battle was immortalized in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “Charge of the Light Brigade” in 1854 and later in Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Tommy” in 1890. Sometime in the late 19th to early 20th century, the line’s color changed from red to blue, symbolizing support for any form of law enforcement within the United States. Its earliest supporters would cite a poem written in 1911 entitled “Thin Blue Line,” where a little-known poet named Nels Dickmann Anderson used the TBL as a metaphor for those who defend their “native land.”⁸

Later, the phrase would change to refer not only to foreign threats, but also American domestic ones. In the US, the use of the TBL can be traced to New York police commissioner Richard Enright in 1922. Enright used the TBL for his PR campaign to rebrand his police force as a line of defense against prohibition-era criminality involving alcohol use, sex work, and gambling. Historian Robert Fogelson chronicled how Enright’s campaign had racial implications because Enright categorized these forms of vice as “chaos” wrought by Black and Irish Americans, thus placing his police as the line between the “chaos” represented within these marginalized communities and the “order” of Enright’s police force.⁹ Historians expanding on Fogelson’s work connect the TBL as a phrase to campaigns reforming the public image of the police. Alisa Kramer documents how Los Angeles Police Department Chief William H. Parker was repeatedly accused of racism during his tenure as Chief.¹⁰ At one point, several of Parker’s officers were convicted of lawlessly beating Mexican American citizens during an event the tabloids called *Bloody Christmas*. Parker was also quoted as making disparaging and racist remarks about Mexican Americans, “some of those people were not too far removed from the wild tribes of the inner mountains of Mexico;” in addition, Parker spoke harshest of Black residents even as he denied any discrimination against minorities in his city. In response to public scrutiny, Parker entitled a radio show *The Thin Blue Line* to ostensibly define and defend Parker’s police department. In Parker’s media appearances, he lamented what he saw as “criminal protecting” where criminality was excused and where “the hapless police officer is a defenseless target for ridicule and abuse from every quarter.”¹¹

In addition to campaigns reforming public perceptions of police, the TBL is a prevalent title for documentaries, TV, drama, and books produced in the last four decades. In 1988, documentary

⁸ Nels Dickmann Anderson, “The Thin Blue Line,” in *Voice of the Infinite, and Other Poems* (Boston, Sherman, French & company, n.d.), 20, <https://archive.org/details/voiceofinfinite00ande/page/6/mode/2up?view=theater>.

⁹ Robert M. Fogelson, *Big-City Police*, Urban Institute. Urban Institute Study (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977).

¹⁰ Kramer Alisa Sarah, “William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line: Politics, Public Relations and Policing in Postwar Los Angeles” (American University Washington, D.C., 2007), <https://dra.american.edu/islandora/object/thesesdisser-tations%3A3293/datastream/PDF/view>.

¹¹ Kramer Alisa Sarah, “William H. Parker and the Thin Blue Line” 114.

filmmaker Errol Morris directed a dramatized documentary about the murder of Dallas police officer Robert Wood and the subsequent trial and wrongful conviction of Randall Dale Adams.¹² The film's title comes from prosecutor Doug Mulder, who described the police as the "thin blue line" separating society from anarchy as part of his case to fallaciously convict Adams. The documentary itself is a notable cultural artifact for how the film led to reopening the case and overturning the original conviction, freeing Adams, who is white, from death row after 13 years of incarceration. Substantially different in impact and tone, the 1995 British comedy *The Thin Blue Line* chronicled the misadventures of a police unit stationed at Gosforth in West Yorkshire.¹³ Starring Rowan Atkinson of *Mr. Bean* fame as Inspector Raymond Fowler, the series begins with Atkins assuring fellow officers of two forces, one order and one chaos, with the TBL "standing between them." The comedy marks that at some point, the TBL shifted from an American appropriation of a British phrase to a US export back to Great Britain.

Contrary to the Fowler's comedy, a serious invocation of the TBL is delivered in a monologue by Jake Gyllenhaal in the 2012 police drama *End of Watch*.¹⁴ The series' opening begins with Gyllenhaal's character, Officer Brian Taylor, describing the TBL as consubstantial with police themselves by saying, "We are the thin blue line, protecting prey from predators, the good from the bad. We are the police."¹⁵ Of similar tone are two notable books published under the title of the TBL. First, James Treyman's 2013 prose novel *Thin Blue Line* tells of Providence Police Officer Robert Hamlin Jr, an Officer who tries to be moral while facing corruption within his department.¹⁶ Second, Mike Baron's 2021 graphic novel *Thin Blue Line* positions two police officers as a literal line between order and chaos, as activists threaten to depose the mayor and bring anarchy to Hagen, Illinois.¹⁷ For reasons revealed later in this article, it is notable that Baron is famous for writing Marvel Comic's *The Punisher* for five years and that his project began as a Kickstarter campaign promoted by the talk show *Fox and Friends*.¹⁸ Baron has since received an Eisner award for the series' first-year run.

Moving beyond fictitious portrayals of the TBL and policing, the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) is one of the largest and most enduring unions in the United States, and they have tacitly embraced the TBL as emblematic of their order. According to their website, the TBL is incorporated into their star-shaped logo to represent how police defend the public.¹⁹ While similar, the FOP's visualizations of the TBL are distinct from the TBL flag. One of the TBL's most vocal proponents is Dallas Police Sgt. Stephen Bishopp, who has a doctorate degree and has published prolifically on subjects like police stress, uses of force, and officer misconduct. To Bishopp, the "thin blue line" symbolizes respect and understanding for the families of officers killed in the line of duty, including suicides. Bishopp stated in a Politico article, "I don't really care if it bothers people or hurts their feelings to see that flag. I absolutely could care less. I am proud of what I do,

¹² *The Thin Blue Line* (An AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE Theatrical Presentation, 1988), <https://www.errolmorris.com/film/tbl.html>.

¹³ "The Thin Blue Line" (BBC, 1995).

¹⁴ *End of Watch* (Open Road Films, 2012).

¹⁵ Tyler Wall, "The Police Invention of Humanity: Notes on the 'Thin Blue Line,'" *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 16, no. 3 (September 17, 2019): 319–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659019873757>.

¹⁶ James Treyman, *Thin Blue Line* (XLIBRIS, 2013).

¹⁷ Mike Baron, *Thin Blue Line*, 2021, <https://thinbluelinecomics.com/#section1>.

¹⁸ "'Thin Blue Line' Graphic Novel Honors Law Enforcement Heroes," *Fox and Friends* (NewsCorp, January 10, 2022), <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6290765909001>.

¹⁹ "History of the FOP" (The Fraternal Order of Police), accessed June 10, 2022, <https://fop.net/about-the-fop/history-of-the-fop/>.

the people I work with, and the ones who have died defending the rights of strangers.”²⁰ Thus the phrase, in Bishopp’s view, is a symbol of mourning to be defended with the same zeal as the officers themselves.

The TBL flag appeared in 2014, not coincidentally, when Black Lives Matter activists enacted anti-racist efforts in response to the killing of Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Michael Brown in Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York. The TBL flag was invented Andrew Jacob, then a college student who sold the merchandise under an endorsement of policing. After creating the TBL flag, Jacob would go on to create *Thin Blue Line USA* in 2016, an online retailer of the TBL flag and related merchandise. The TBL flag dubiously appeared a year later at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. While Jacob denounced this use of the flag, his opposition did not prevent use of the flag for political action. In October of 2020, the TBL flag adorned the stage at Donald Trump’s campaign rally in Oklahoma as the then-president rejected the methods of activists calling for greater oversight and accountability after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.²¹ Perhaps particularly because of the former president’s efforts to appropriate the TBL flag for his campaign, the TBL flag is seen as a repudiation of BLM protests, thereby inviting journalists and politicians to debate how the TBL flag may be a hate symbol rather than an expression of respect for police. The analysis presented here focuses on these two central concerns about the TBL flag because they are of significant concern to the American public and are the subject of legislation in 2023.

Rhetoric, Composition, and Racial Divides

Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe advocate that rhetoric and composition scholars should engage with race, particularly at sites where race operates as “slippery tropes” that functions differently within different times and across different cultural logics.²² In practice, there is an implicit duty for scholars within the rhetorical tradition to engage with sites of racial unrest and appraise the effects of any attempt to make meaning through the available means. Outside of the academy, activists have called for all citizens with racial, gendered, and class privilege to engage in anti-racist actions and do the work of educating themselves and the public so that this substantial labor does not fall exclusively on the marginalized.

There are notable scholars who have answered this call by utilizing methods of Rhetoric and Composition to examine racist writing and speech, particularly where White Nationalist rhetoric threatens the public. Ben Harley examines community building and resistance at the site of the Ghost Ship warehouse fire.²³ The fire destroyed a concert venue in Oakland, California that was home to a large conglomerate of musical artists. In the wake of the event, users calling themselves the “Right Wing Safety Squad” capitalized on the tragedy by organizing on the social media site 4chan and campaigning to close similar do-it-yourself venues that they saw as “hotbeds of liberal radicalism and degeneracy.” By examining text collected online primarily from 4chan, Harley shows how provocateurs clashed with artists who effectively resisted rhetorics of fear of the

²⁰ Chammah Maurice and Cary Aspinwall, “The Short, Fraught History of the ‘Thin Blue Line’ American Flag,” np.

²¹ Laura Schulte, “Fact Check: Thin Blue Line Flag Has Taken a Prominent Place at Trump Rallies,” *USA Today*, October 28, 2020.

²² Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe, “The Matter of Whiteness: Or, Why Whiteness Studies Is Important to Rhetoric and Composition Studies,” *Rhetoric Review* 24, no. 4 (2005): 359–73.

²³ Ben Harley, “Music against Fascism: DIY Versus the Right Wing Safety Squad,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2022): 138–51.

“other” with rhetorics of diverse communities affirming each other through singing, dancing, and cheering. Harley argues that the activists’ performance art effectively counteracted racially motivated, verbal attacks on a vulnerable community both within and outside of the digital space of 4chan.

Similarly, Andrew Ridgeway examines tweets shared by former President Donald Trump and his supporters during the Brexit vote in Europe.²⁴ Using key concepts defined by Sara Ahmed’s work on affective economies and Charles W. Mills’s work with the Racial Contract, Ridgeway uses *in vivo* coding to plot “the trajectory of the right-wing populist rhetoric animating the general response to Donald Trump’s tweets about Brexit the day after the Brexit vote” to determine how Whiteness and citizenship are rhetorically made coterminous for “the purpose of claiming a nation-state for whites.” Ridgeway argues that their qualitative snapshot shows how the affordances of Twitter provided Trump supporters with the means to create a “digital culture of ambient racism that trades in dog-whistle rhetoric, coded race-baiting, historical amnesia, and racist conspiracy theories,” which Ridgeway aligns with Ibram X. Kendi’s work on how “racist thought emerges retroactively, to justify existing laws, structures, institutions, and policies designed to prioritize the material interests of a small group of wealthy, white, male subjects at the expense of everyone else.” Contrasted with Ridgeway’s *in vivo* coding, Laurie Gries and Phil Bratta posit the racial politics of circulation “as a critical concept for elucidating how Whiteness, nationhood, and *doxa* intertwine to reinforce and amplify white supremacy within a context of White Nationalist postracialism.” Gries and Bratta investigate how two popular slogans associated with Donald Trump drive the production and circulation of digital doxicons called “Trumpicons” and how such Trumpicons, in turn, feed back into a socio-political loop of White Supremacist logic.²⁵ In each of these cases, scholars have enacted a sparse but sustained effort to resist racism as it is coded within White Nationalist rhetoric by examining digital texts using rhetorical methods.

Burkean cluster criticism may be particularly useful for examining the racist rhetoric of White Nationalists and other hate groups due in part to its quantification of signs into clusters. Rebecca M. Townsend shows how in his first major address in Europe, former President Donald J. Trump relies upon visual and historical scenic elements to argue for a battle in a clash of civilizations. Townsend demonstrates how using Burkean cluster criticism can be used to examine artifacts like the Warsaw address “for its scenic development of identity as the location for this symbolic battle with material consequences.”²⁶ Townsend pays special attention to place as situated speech acts in context. They examine how the speakers refer to scenery or setting at the time the speech is delivered, where “observations, active examination of the place, and the specific site where Trump spoke, lends other layers of detail to the scene as reported.” The references to scene or setting are imagined by the hearers to be authentic or the speech would “not be well received, and authenticity is contingent on public memory of the location.” Townsend is a model for how Burkean methods can exposit meanings that can be reasonably interpreted through the grammar of closely clustered signs; and in so doing, Townsend shows how Trump broadens the notion of the “West,” which relies upon a purified perspective, one exclusively whitened and Christianized.²⁷

²⁴ Andrew Ridgeway, “Affective Economies of White Nationalism,” *Journal of Critical Symposium* 5, no. 1 (2020): 417–31.

²⁵ Laurie Gries and Phil Bratta, “The Racial Politics of Circulation: Trumpicons and White Supremacist Doxai,” *Rhetoric Review* 38, no. 4 (October 11, 2019): 417–31.

²⁶ Rebecca M. Townsend, “Trump’s Warsaw Address, or How the ‘West’ Was Widened,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 88–106.

²⁷ Rebecca M. Townsend, “Trump’s Warsaw Address” 103.

Burkean Cluster Analysis

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke posits that human agents use symbols to form attitudes and induce actions in other human agents.²⁸ According to Burke, it is the use of symbols to denote things in the world that separates humans from other animals. Burke also shows that signs are made consubstantial with what they represent, which is to say they are both joined with the thing they represent while also being separate from it. Consubstantiality is further complicated by identification, where people paradoxically create unity amongst themselves by distinguishing between themselves and “others” through the use of signs. Each identification—that which is like—involves categorical distinctions from what is unlike, and those identifications are symbolic mechanisms for conveying social and economic power.²⁹

Cluster analysis is one Burkean method that recognizes consubstantiality and identification as humans use symbols to create meaning and spur action. The method also recognizes that symbols derive meaning from other symbols and that all symbols are aligned with human actions both intended and not. Sonja Foss instructs on how cluster analysis is performed as a method for analyzing rhetorical texts and determining symbolic potentials for action.³⁰ The first step is to pick a central symbol and then examine other symbols that collocate around it based on proximity (symbols close to each other), frequency (how often they appear), and intensity (whether they are emphasized or seem central to the main point).

In the case of language, researchers identify “the clusters of terms that showed patterns of meaning insofar as they referred to broad and more complex narratives.”³¹ In the case of images, “a complex concordance” can be assembled for interpretation “by indexing key images and their associations, opening interpretation to a level of composition beyond mere montage.”³² Images can be captured, cataloged, and interpreted by taking screenshots of the images’ digital presence in online spaces and then graphed to determine what symbols frequently collocate around the original image—and thus determine the intended meanings. Neither texts nor images derive meaning from an *a priori* state. Instead, the symbols work to co-create meaning within context. To determine the meaning of any symbol is to closely examine what other symbols exist in the context that create meaning while also observing what human agents *do* while employing such signs.

Cluster analysis begins with a key term that guides the search for other terms. In this study, the TBL flag serves as the key term and central image. To create the “text” for examination, we used Google’s image search to find as many instances of the TBL flag as Google had indexed. We then recorded on a Google spreadsheet the URL of each instance of the TBL flag that appeared in the search. Once page fifty was reached in the search results with nothing but repeated URLs, we supposed that the most prominent retailers of the TBL flag had been cataloged. Thirty-two website URLs were collected on the spreadsheet, and then all were archived using Archive.org’s Wayback Machine. The thirty-two websites were eventually winnowed to twenty-five. One website was culled because its inventory was so large that it significantly dwarfed all others. We omitted some

²⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950).

²⁹ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Louisiana State University Press, 1941).

³⁰ Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, 4th ed (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2009).

³¹ Adriana Angel and Bates, Benjamin, “Terministic Screens of Corruption: A Cluster Analysis of Colombian Radio Conversations,” *K - B Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2014), <https://www.kbjournal.org/book/export/html/1032>.

³² Richard Thames, “All Hands on Deck: A Cluster Analysis of Key Images/Terms in James Cameron’s *Titanic*,” *KB Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 15, no. 1 (2021).

smaller websites because not every website revealed a pattern of images substantial enough for creating clusters.

The rhetor and their motive is difficult to define for twenty-five retail websites. Most of the websites sell clothing and apparel, such as Liberty Tees, Duty Honor Courage, and Thin Blue Line Heroes, while others sell niche merchandise, such as the coffee retailer Blue Line Roasting or the wine retailer Thin Blue Wine Sellers. Twenty-three of the twenty-five websites rely on anonymizing services like Cloud Flare, Square Space, and Domains By Proxy LLC, which provide private domain services, while the remaining two are hosted on the e-commerce company Etsy. All these platforms prevent the creators from being reliably identified; yet, some information about each TBL retailer can be gleaned from their About Me pages. Six of the twenty-five retailers specifically name themselves as current or former members of law enforcement, while the remaining nineteen call themselves either supporters of law enforcement and their families, or enthusiasts for “patriotism,” “guns,” or “freedom.” Many smaller retailers, such as Blue Line Roasting, state that they specifically sell products to “provide a quality product that supports our law enforcement community and honors our fallen officers.” Others claim to donate a portion of their sales to charities benefiting police and first responders. In some cases, the websites showcase the founders’ names and include pictures of their families. In sum, while TBL retailers are anonymized by domain hosting services, retailers self-report that they are either current or former law enforcement or professed supporters of police selling merchandise to other law enforcement and their supporters.

We searched each website looking for symbols that collocated around the TBL flag. Over 1,000 images were coded and counted as frequent (occurring often in the corpus) and proximal to the original image (appearing on the same retail website). We coded the images by hand and then corroborated each other’s findings until agreement was reached that each image was part of a cluster. Some images were counted twice because they combined two or more symbols that occurred frequently in the corpus. The result is something like a word cloud that quantifies symbols in ways that allow for reasonable certainty in both the intended meanings for the TBL flag and its associated symbols.

Clusters are contextualized in four ways. Because the TBL flag could mean honoring the police, we first consulted government and non-governmental websites that catalog symbols used in mourning protocols for police. The non-profit memorialization site Officer Down was particularly useful because of its mission to honor police killed in the line of duty without any apparent commitment to partisanship.³³ Officer Down states that a black stripe across a shield has historically been the symbol adorned by mourning officers at the funerals of killed officers. However, some police forces have expanded that protocol, which will be discussed in the discussion section of our study. Because many police have served in the armed forces, we also consulted governmental websites cataloguing symbols used by the Army, Navy, Marines, and National Guard.

Second, we consulted the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) *Hatewatch* campaign database,³⁴ and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) database of hate symbols *Hate on Display*.³⁵ If the TBL flag could be defined as a symbol of racism, it was presumed that the clusters would contain images associated with White Nationalism and White Supremacist groups. It was, of course, possible that collocating images would not align with either hypothesis. For images that occurred

³³ Chris Cosgriff, “The Officer Down Memorial Page,” 2023, <https://www.odmp.org/>.

³⁴ The Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hatewatch,” 2023, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch>.

³⁵ The Anti-Defamation League, “Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database,” n.d., <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbols/search>.

frequently but did not arouse from an obvious source, we consulted symbol dictionaries like *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*.³⁶

Finally, we used news websites to find evidence of the symbols worn by police officers or hate groups directly at the fault lines of political action organized by known White Nationalists. For example, we looked at images of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville to see if any of the symbols clustering around the TBL flag appeared to be worn by participants in that event. In aggregate, the process was to collect and catalog symbols that cluster around the TBL flags sold by online retailers and analyze the meaning of the symbols by consulting external sources to determine which of the competing interpretations of the TBL flag—as either a symbol of White Nationalism or a symbol honoring police killed in the line of duty—is most likely.

Analysis

Sixteen symbols frequently collocated with the TBL flag on all twenty-five retailer websites were catalogued in the *corpus*. For brevity's sake, we paired down the list of sixteen symbols to the top seven most numerous. Listed here are the symbols in order of how frequently they appear: 1) Skulls, 2) Chi-Cross Logos, 3) Norse Imagery, 4) Spartan Imagery, 5) The Punisher Logo, 6) Irish Imagery, and 7) Templar Imagery.³⁷

| Tiers of TBL Retailers | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1 (One to five total clusters) | blue line roasting, swinegearcoffee, patriotwood1, thinbluwinesellers, thinbluelinemetalsign, herosupporthq, thirteenfiftyapparel, jekservices |
| 2 (Six to Seventeen total clusters) | nfgshop, libertyteesshop, patriotcave, proudrightwinger, behindbluelinesdesigns, dutyhonorcourage, thinbluelineusa, thinbluelineheroes |
| 3 (Nineteen to Sixty total clusters) | bluelinebeasts, patriotic.1nationdesign, wethepeopleholsters, myherowearsblue, egotactical, nelineapparel, thinbluelineshop, warrior12 ^{38 39} , familyloves |

Figure 1: Three tiers of websites categorized by the number of clusters in their inventory

The figures below show how many images were collected from each website and compiled into the corpus. The figures are organized into three tiers, as shown in Figure 1. We collected smaller websites with less merchandise into Figure 2. Websites with an inventory in between the large and small tiers are compiled in Figure 3, and websites with the largest inventories are compiled into Figure 4. This section defines and analyzes each symbol in order of its frequency within the corpus.

³⁶ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, and John Buchanan-Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, Reprint edition (Penguin Books, 1997).

³⁷ Not all symbols collocating around the TBL flag were discussed in the article. The full list of images is: 1) Skulls, 2) Chi Cross Logos, 3) Norse Imagery, 4) Spartan Imagery, 5) Punisher Logos, 6) Irish Imagery, 7) Firearms, 8) 'Don't Tread on Me' Logos, 9) Templar Imagery, 10) Handcuffs, 11) Eagles, 12) Hawaiian Patterns, 13) St. Michael the Archangel, 14) Numbers, 15) the TBL Hidden, and 16) Minutemen.

³⁸ Warrior 12 LLC owns both the retail website examined in this study and *The Police Tribue*, the latter which is cited here publishing responses to bans on the TBL Flag.

³⁹ "According to Hate on Display, 'The number 12 is a numeric symbol for Aryan Brotherhood groups (as are the Numbers 1 and 2 separately), especially the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas. Substituting letters for numbers, 12 equals AB, i.e., Aryan Brotherhood.'

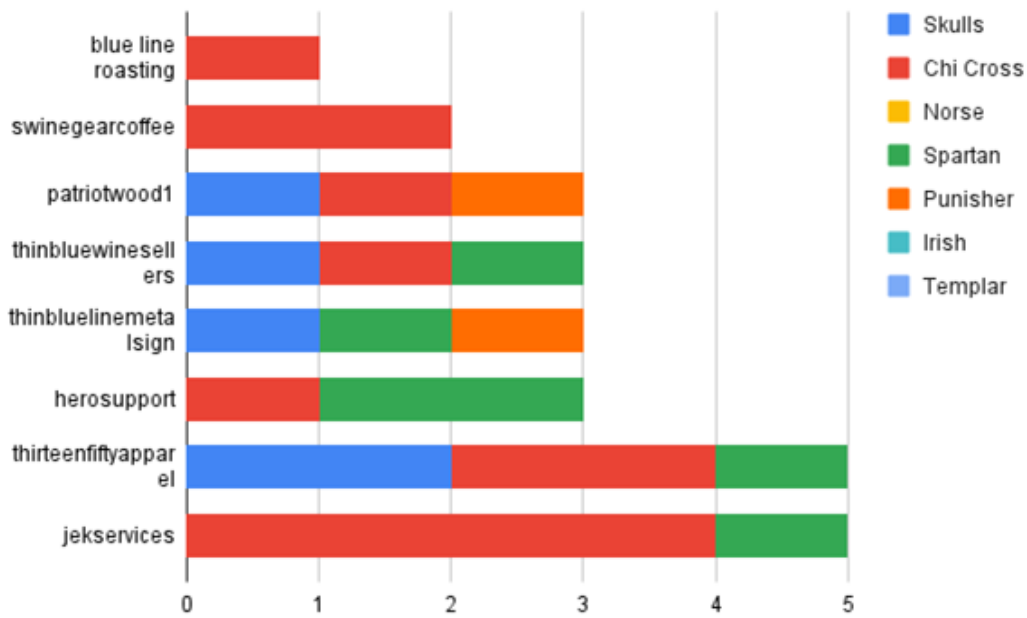


Figure 2: TBL retail sites with small inventories

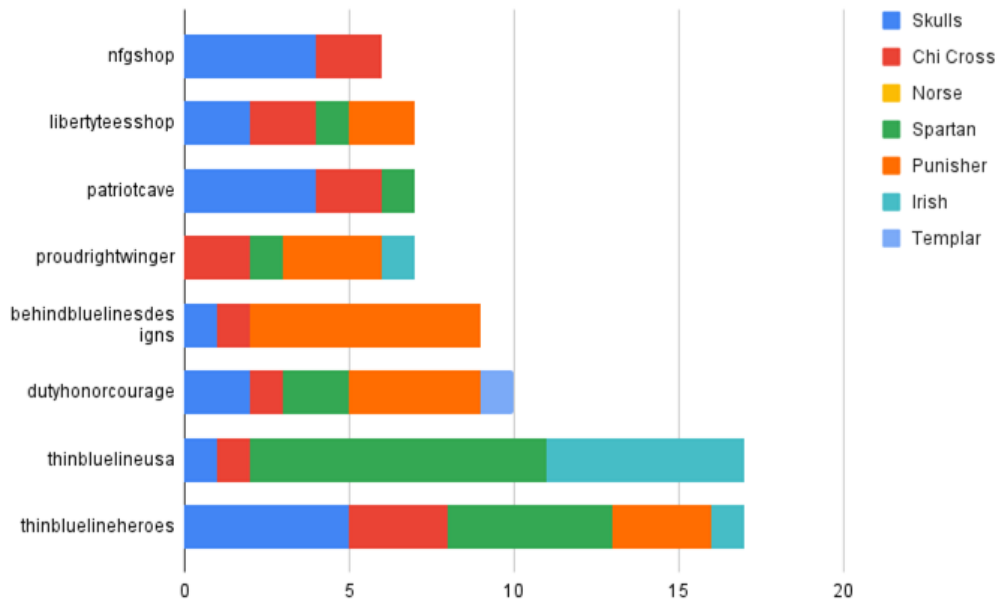


Figure 3: TBL retailers with medium-sized inventories

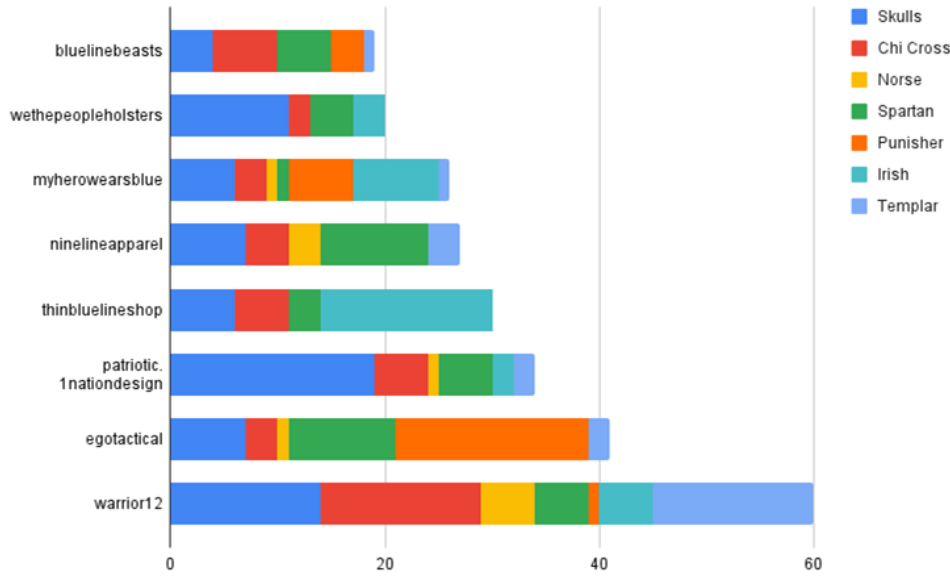


Figure 4: TBL retailer websites with large inventories

1) *Skulls*. The most common image collocating around the TBL flag is illustrations of skulls, which appear a total 112 times across nearly all websites in the corpus. Skulls have a number of symbolic associations in American culture. Skulls can mean death, disease, or toxicity and are generally used as a warning in various signs archived by the International Standards Organization. The skull can denote that the person wearing the skull wants to be perceived as dangerous or threatening, such as in the case of the Jolly Roger used in pirate imagery at the beginning in the 18th century.⁴⁰ In the *corpus*, many items containing a skull sold on TBL retail websites contain slogans that threaten the reader: “Dirt Nap Approved,” “May God Have Mercy on my Enemies Because I Won’t,” and “We Have Not Yet Begun to Fight.”

According to the Anti-Defamation League, skulls are a component of gang signs used by hate groups like The Aryan Terror Brigade, the Aryan Cowboy Brotherhood, the Rock Against Communism, the Totenkopf, German for “death’s head” which is typically a skull-and-crossbones image used in the Nazi era, the White Aryan Resistance or WAR, and the Texas-based White Supremacist prison gang The White Knights.⁴¹

By contrast, skull images are not customary for any police mourning protocol, nor is it customary in the US to use skull images to memorialize the dead. Skulls are prevalent, however, in US military emblems, particularly images of the Jolly Roger adorning several ships in the Navy. Since skulls can be a common symbol used in a myriad of ways, the presence of skulls in the clusters is not particularly conclusive of either hypothesis, but it is notable that skull imagery is not associated with mourning protocols or funerals, which suggests that the TBL flag has more connotations akin to warning or threat than of mourning.

2) *Chi-Cross Logos*. A chi-cross is any image where objects cross to make a chi shape, or non-alphabetical “x” intersecting at a ninety-degree angle. The chi-cross is the second most abundant

⁴⁰ Jack Tresidder, *Dictionary of Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Traditional Images, Icons, and Emblems* (Chronicle Books: San Francisco, California: Duncan Baird Publishers, 1998).

⁴¹The Anti-Defamation League, “Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database.”

symbol in the corpus, appearing 108 times across the twenty-five websites. A chi-cross is a nearly universal symbol of spatial orientation, including “physical being in relation to the self; spatial orientation in respect of celestial and cardinal points; and lastly celestial orientation in respect of the celestial and cardinal points.”⁴² In the corpus, the objects crossed varies widely. Some crosses are made with simple lines, while others are comprised of either firearms, like assault rifles or handguns, or cold weapons, like arrows, axes, swords, or knives.

In the United States, the Coast Guard is one of the few governmental agencies that utilize a chi-cross, which features two crossed anchors symbolizing seafaring operations.⁴³ Chi-crosses are also rare on State Police emblems, but there are few. Colorado, for example, has two crossed hammers adorned over a shield.⁴⁴ Chi-crossed arrows, firearms, and artillery are common symbols used by US Special Forces and Green Berets. The symbol for distinguished marksmanship in the armed forces, for example, features chi-crossed rifles.⁴⁵ In the US, it is not common to use the chi-cross for any mourning protocol, but it is common to adorn funerals with Christian crosses, angels or angel’s wings, or looping ribbons.

The ADL has archived several chi-cross logos as symbols used by hate groups. During WWII, the symbol of a Nazi suicide force called the Dirlewanger Brigade featured two chi-crossed grenades, and several American Neo-Nazi groups still utilized crossed grenades for their emblems. The emblem for the 211 Crew features chi-crossed lightning bolts, and the now inactive Neo-Nazi publication group *The Daily Stormer* used chi-crossed spike clubs in their emblem. The Hammer-skins, one of the oldest and most violent racist skinhead groups in the United States, appropriated two crossed hammers from Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* album to use as their emblem. The secessionist League of the South utilizes a black and white version of the stars and bars while the White Knights utilize the same pattern with red lines and stars over a blue background and often adorned with a skull in front of chi-crossed swords. In many cases, cold weapons such as swords and clubs are coupled with artillery. A chi-cross made with twin-bladed axes symbolizes human nature as both destroyer and protector, and such chi-crossed weapons are sometimes associated with the caduceus, the hammer of the Nordic god Thor, and “of the two natures within one person in Christ.”⁴⁶

Overall, the presence of the chi-cross does not suggest mourning police officers, as that symbol has no known association with police mourning protocols. Weapons are not typically what is crossed in emblems used by police. Here, the chi-cross and its spatial connotations may mean that there is a direction or cause associated with the TBL flag; however, crossing artillery and cold weapons strongly suggests an orientation towards armed violence or defense. Since armed defense is seen as the eventual necessity of the US armed forces, it is possible that many police officers and their supporters would embrace the chi-cross for a similar acceptance of inevitable armed conflict against an outside threat. Ergo, the question becomes *who or whom* is the perceived threat. In the case of many White Supremacist and White Nationalists groups, it is anyone not White, Christian, or heterosexual.

3) *Norse Imagery*. Norse images appeared a total of ninety-two times in the corpus. The most common forms of Norse imagery were Thor’s hammer, Odin’s eye, Loki’s helm, and runes. Nordic

⁴² Chevalier, Gheerbrant, and Buchanan-Brown, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*.

⁴³ United States Coast Guard, “U.S. Coast Guard Trademark and Licensing Program,” Database, n.d., <https://www.uscg.mil/Community/Trademark/insignia/>.

⁴⁴ Colorado State Patrol, “The Badge” (State of Colorado), accessed November 29, 2023, <https://csp.colorado.gov/the-badge>.

⁴⁵ Michael Molinaro, “Soldiers Have Chance to Distinguish Themselves,” December 16, 2009, https://www.army.mil/article/31928/soldiers_have_chance_to_distinguish_themselves.

⁴⁶ Chevalier, Gheerbrant, and Buchanan-Brown.

symbols are often coupled with references to Vikings and to Valhalla, the Nordic afterlife reserved as the destination for warriors killed in battle.

According to the SPLC's 2001's report, the Norse pantheon has been co-opted in ways the fall outside of Neopagan faith.⁴⁷ The ADL has likewise chronicled how Norse imagery was coopted to represent Wotanism, which is "a term sometimes given to a more racist form of the Norse pagan religion known as Asatru." Runes, in particular, have been catalogued as a common image among neo-Nazi groups in the 20th century "as part of their attempt to reconstruct a mythic "Aryan" past."⁴⁸ One such runes with a history of Nazi and neo-Nazi associations is the Valknut, a knot made of three interlocking triangles. The Valknut is commonly associated with Germanic funeral rituals to honor those who died in battle. But according to *Hate on Display*, White Supremacists such as the Odinists have appropriated the Valknut to use as a racist symbol to connote bravery in their perceived race war. The Valknut coupled with the Hammer of Odin has been appropriated by several White Supremacist groups such as Bound for Glory, a White Power music band. The Valknut and the hammer of Thor are symbols worn by those involved in the January 6th riot at the US Capitol, signaling an embrace of Wotanism among Trump-loyal insurrectionists.⁴⁹ Interviews with alt-right leaders in the US have revealed that the use of runes as icons is a way to effectively code White Supremacist thinking by appropriating religious symbols in ways akin to how the swastika and Nordic runes were once appropriated by the Nazi party in Germany.⁵⁰

There are scant examples of Norse imagery that were used in the US armed forces. Beginning in the 1980s, the US Marine scout snipers had been using the double Sig rune (𐌆𐌆, "SS") in its Armanen form (Runic "ᚷᚷ") to symbolize their function. It was in 2012 that the Marine Scouts were ordered to cease using the runes within their emblem.⁵¹ The same stylized double rune was the symbol of the SS, the Nazi organization that was instrumental in conducting the Holocaust. It is perhaps obvious that Norse imagery does not appear in any known mourning protocol for police, or that symbols associated with Neopaganism do not appear on any known police emblem. Thus, the presence of Norse imagery suggests that the TBL flag has a strong and dubious collocation with the appropriation of such symbols by White Nationalist and White Supremacists.

4) *Spartan Imagery*. A Spartan head features an illustration of a Corinthian-style helmet adorned with a feather crest on the top of the head. Spartan heads that cluster around the TBL flag in the corpus are usually facing forward, but they are sometimes gazing to the left or right. Spartan heads appear sixty-nine times in the corpus and occur most often in websites such as egotactical.com, ninelineapparel.com, thinbluelineUSA.com, bluelinebeasts.com, thinbluelineheroes.com, and warrior12.com, all of which sell athletic and military-style tactical gear and apparel.

The Spartan head is not common in police mourning protocols or in US military imagery, but the Spartan head is a common mascot in American sport. Eleven college teams name the Spartan

⁴⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Racist Music, Neo-Paganism and Nationalism Drive Growth of Hate Movement," SPLC's Intelligence Report, March 21, 2001, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2001/racist-music-neo-paganism-and-nationalism-drive-growth-hate-movement>.

⁴⁸ The Anti-Defamation League, "Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database," n.d., <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbols/search>.

⁴⁹ Staff, "Identifying far-right symbols that appeared at the U.S. Capitol riot," January 15, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/far-right-symbols-capitol-riot/>.

⁵⁰ James Wilkinson, "The 'new Swastika' and Other Symbols of Hate Hidden in PLAIN SIGHT: How to Spot the Secret Images That Far-Right Extremists Use to Recognize Each Other," February 22, 2017, sec. The Daily Mail.

⁵¹ Dan Lamothe, "'Sons of Anarchy' Actor Proposes New Marine Sniper Logo," *Marine Times: Battlerattle*, March 23, 2012, <http://battlerattle.marinecorpstimes.com/2012/03/23/sons-of-anarchy-actor-proposes-new-marine-sniper-logo/>.

as their mascot, perhaps most famously at Michigan State University (MSU) and at San José State University. In addition, around three dozen high schools use some variation of Spartan as their mascot. Spartan heads can be understood as meaning strength, resiliency, and stamina, as well as dedication to simply winning games, but the meanings here are part of a complex branding strategy which is largely viewed as essential to successful athletic programs.⁵²

Beyond the US to Western culture more broadly, *laconophilia* describes obsession with Spartan imagery and a romanticized version of Roman Society where the Spartan is the ideal warrior within an economically prosperous and militarily powerful state.⁵³ In her book *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome*, Julia Hell demonstrates how the Third Reich in particular romanticized Roman society and studied the fall of Rome so that the Reich may prevent their own empires from meeting a similar fate.⁵⁴ The Reich were likewise fascinated with the work of Karl Otfried Müller, who linked Spartan ideals to the supposed racial superiority of the Dorians.⁵⁵ Writing in 1926, historian Frank Hamilton Hankins chronicles Müller's belief that white people could attain the "Greek bodily ideal [...] the result of both nature and nature" and eventually become "the Fascist Superman – sport and militarism [coming] together." Hankins wrote as if he was mystified by the phenomenon: "By some mystical facile alchemy, this combined self-esteem transforms itself into a consciousness of pooled superiority."⁵⁶ Later scholars would show how the "negative aspects of Spartan society were seen to be a result" not of the people, but "of its government [...] the prototype of a restrictive police state."⁵⁷ Such a view would perhaps collocate with modern beliefs of White Nationalists and White Supremacists that the US government is an evil that threatens their superiority, especially when it works toward any semblance of racial or social justice.

The racist legacy of appropriating Spartan imagery is documented within the United States by the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Hatewatch*. In particular, the SPLC has chronicled how the extremist group The Oath Keepers founded "Spartan Training programs" for the purpose of violent intervention against politically left groups that have no documented history of violence.⁵⁸ Several

⁵² Annika Linsner et al., "Athlete Brand Identity, Image and Congruence: A Systematic Literature Review," *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing* 21, no. 1/2 (2021): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSMM.2021.114166>.

⁵³ Mike Cole, "The Sparta Fetish Is a Cultural Cancer," *The New Republic*, August 1, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/154563/sparta-myth-rise-fascism-trumpism>.

⁵⁴ Julia Hell, *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2018), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/C/bo29202736.html>.

⁵⁵ James A. Mangan and Kustrin Orestis, *Militarism, Sport, Europe War without Weapons*, [Online-aus.] (London [u.a.]: F. Cass, 2003).

⁵⁶ Frank Hamilton Hankins, *The Racial Basis of Civilization: A Critique of the Nordic Doctrine* (A. A. Knopf, 1926), <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupid?key=olbp36276>.

⁵⁷ Mangan and Orestis, *Militarism, Sport, Europe War without Weapons*.

⁵⁸ David Neiwart, "Oath Keepers Announce National 'Spartan' Training Program Aimed at 'violent Left,'" *Hatewatch: Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/08/23/oath-keepers-announce-national-%E2%80%98spartan%E2%80%99-training-program-aimed-%E2%80%98violent-left%E2%80%99>.

journalists have photographed Oath Keepers wearing Spartan helmets⁵⁹ and armor,⁶⁰ Spartan helmet-adorned gun straps,⁶¹ Spartan-head flags,⁶² and Spartan-head tee shirts.⁶³ The SPLC also shows how Spartan sports mascots were appropriated for the racist activities. The Traditionalist Worker Party (TWP) “gained notoriety across the White Supremacist movement,” according to *Hatewatch*, and the SPLC captures how the Golden State Skinheads (GSS) appropriated a logo of MSU’s Sacramento Spartans to show allegiance to the Spartan training program. They also wore the logo as a patch “on the flight jackets of GSS members.”⁶⁴

While the prevalence of the Spartan as a mascot should encourage caution when interpreting the symbols in context, it is unlikely that police as a general population are significantly associated with Spartan mascots. Instead, as a symbol clustering around the TBL flag with two disputed meanings, one as honoring police officers and one as a hate symbol, the known associations with White Supremacists and White Nationalists as chronicled by the SPLC, the ADL, and several historians and journalists, suggest that the TBL flag more likely derives meaning from the racist connotations associated with Spartan imagery: racial superiority, a race war, and glorification of fighting. The association of Spartan imagery with the Oath Keepers in particular is so well-known that the international e-commerce site AliExpress sells an “Oath Keeper 300 shirt” adorned with the Spartan helmet.⁶⁵

5) *The Punisher Logo*. The trademarked logo of The Punisher appears forty-six times in the corpus. The Punisher is a comic book antihero created in 1974 by Gerry Conway as an antagonist for Marvel Comic’s Spider-man. The overall image is a skull that creates the familiar shape of a superhero’s torso, with large pectorals for the eyes and cranium and defined abdominal muscles for the teeth. Conway was inspired to create the character by stories of Vietnam Veterans who returned from war facing mental health issues and an American politic disillusioned with the atrocities of the war. As a character, The Punisher embodies the tactics of military personnel estranged from the institution they once served, a trope of the one-man army personifying hyper-individualism and vengeance dispensed through violence on-par with, or more gruesome than what is enacted by criminals. While The Punisher is portrayed in opposition to the supervillains of Marvel’s comic and TV universes, Conway states that the character is not a hero like Spider-man because The Punisher does not see preserving life as a responsibility of his power. Instead, the extrajudicial killing of criminals is the path to “justice.” In short, the Punisher kills his villains with prejudice,

⁵⁹ Cole, “The Sparta Fetish Is a Cultural Cancer.”

⁶⁰ Stephen Hodkinson, “Sparta and War: Myths and Realities,” *History.Org*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.history.org.uk/publications/resource/9797/sparta-and-war-myths-and-realities>.

⁶¹ Tom Fiedler, “#NC11: Cawthorn Takes A Hard-Right Turn,” *Bpr.Org: Blue Ridge Public Radio*, August 10, 2020, <https://www.bpr.org/news/2020-08-10/nc11-cawthorn-takes-a-hard-right-turn#stream/0>.

⁶² Matthew Rosenberg and Ainara Tiefenthäler, “Decoding the Extremist Symbols and Groups at the Capitol Hill Insurrection,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/video/extremist-signs-symbols-capitol-riot.html>.

⁶³ Jessica Parrot and Jessica Miller, “Who’s on Utah’s Hacked Oath Keeper Rolls? Police, Veterans and a Top Government Official,” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2021/10/13/whos-utahs-hacked-oath/>.

⁶⁴ Hatewatch Staff, “Golden State Skinheads Arrested, Fear More to Come,” np.

⁶⁵ The Oath Keepers Shirt from Ali Express Has Been Archived at the Following URL: https://Web.Archive.Org/Web/20230227213433/https://www.aliexpress.us/item/2251832720714571.html?GatewayAdapt=glo2usa4itemAdapt&_randl_shipto=US.

acts outside the bureaucratic system of law, and believes justice means certain death for criminality that is beyond reform.⁶⁶

The Punisher logo has been appropriated by military and police who potentially viewed the character as emblematic of the kinds of difficult decision making that happens in situations of violent conflict.⁶⁷ It is possible this practice has existed since 1988, but the most famous case would be Chris Kyle, the famed soldier and author immortalized in the movie *American Sniper* in 2003.⁶⁸ In the corpus, the symbol is accompanied by slogans like “evil is powerless if the good are unafraid,” “Sī vīs pācem parā bellum,” Serve Honor Protect, “God will judge our enemies, we’ll arrange the meeting,” and “I Hunt the Evil You Say Doesn’t Exist.” It is important to pause and consider each one of these phrases and the common theme amongst them. The phrase “evil is powerless if the good are unafraid” is a quote often attributed to Ronald Reagan during his “Evil Empire” speech delivered in 1983 at the Annual Convention of National Evangelicals. Sī vīs pācem parā bellum⁶⁹, which is Latin for “If you want peace, prepare for war,” and “Serve Honor Protect” are common adages in police and military training philosophy and are sometimes the official mottos of squadrons in the US Air Force or regiments in the US Army. (Sī vīs pācem parā bellum, most famously, is the motto of the British Royal Navy.) The phrase “God will judge our enemies, we’ll arrange the meeting” originates in a series of chainmail and memes endorsing the US invasion of Iraq, but it is often misattributed to General Norman Schwarzkopf during the US invasion of Iraq.⁷⁰ The phrase “I Hunt the Evil You Say Doesn’t Exist” has no clear origin, but the phrase sounds eerily similar to opponents of anti-racist action who claim that anti-racists are naive about the intentions of people of color. In all cases, the sentiment is the justified killing of threats both foreign and domestic, positing some “other” as an irredeemable evil worthy of killing.

As a trademarked logo of a major publishing company, of course The Punisher logo has no precedent in police mourning protocols, though the logo informally appears among logos for US armed forces regiments. In 2020, Conway became angered on the appropriation of the character he created as defined in opposition to social movement like BLM, so the creator began a fundraising drive called “Black Lives Matter: Skulls for Justice,”⁷¹ declaring that “This character and symbol was never intended as a symbol of oppression. This is a symbol of a systematic failure of equal justice.” But The Punisher’s emblem has been used as official branding for right-wing racist groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers.⁷² The frequency of the Punisher logo in the corpus affirms that retail sites are a source for apparel for police officers, military personnel, and White

⁶⁶ Jesse Scheeden, “Punisher Co-Creator Gerry Conway Wants to Reclaim Iconic Skull Logo for Black Lives Matter,” *IGN.Com*, 2020, <https://www.ign.com/articles/punisher-co-creator-gerry-conway-skull-logo-black-lives-matter>.

⁶⁷ James Clark, “The Punisher’s Relationship With The Military — ‘He’s Like The Single Marvel Universe Operator,’” *Task and Purpose - Military News, Culture, and Analysis*, January 1, 2016, <https://taskandpurpose.com/culture/relationship-between-punisher-military/>.

⁶⁸ Brian Cronin, “A History of The Punisher Logo Being Used By Police, Military & Politicians,” *Comic Book Resources*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.cbr.com/punisher-history-logo-used-police-military-politicians/>.

⁶⁹ “Si Vis Pacem, Para Bellum,” in *Merriam-Webster.Com Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster), accessed June 7, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/si%20vis%20pacem%2C%20para%20bellum>.

⁷⁰ David Mikkelsen, “Is Norman Schwarzkopf’s ‘Arrange the Meeting’ Quote Real?,” *Fact Checker, Snopes.Com* (blog), February 13, 2002, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/schwarzkopf-arrange-the-meeting-quote/>.

⁷¹ Jesse Scheeden, “Punisher Co-Creator Gerry Conway Wants to Reclaim Iconic Skull Logo for Black Lives Matter,” *IGN.Com*, 2020, <https://www.ign.com/articles/punisher-co-creator-gerry-conway-skull-logo-black-lives-matter>.

⁷² Kyle Salee, “Decoding Hate: Understanding the Far-Right Symbolology of January 6,” *American University Blog* (blog), July 1, 2021, <https://www.american.edu/sis/centers/security-technology/decoding-hate-understanding-far-right-symbolology.cfm>.

Supremacists and Nationalists alike, with a myriad of associated meanings that can be succinctly defined as the belief in extrajudicial killing as necessary for “justice.”

6) *Irish Imagery*. Irish Imagery describes the presence of shamrocks, Irish flags, and references to Irish ancestry. As previously mentioned, the TBL as a phrase is enveloped in PR campaigns to argue for the necessity of police to keep order, and Irish immigrant populations, once spurned as undesirables, joined police forces to essentially become “white.” Historian Robert Fogelson documented how Irish communities would evade police persecution by joining the police force and, after two decades, Irish identity became essentialized as no longer a crime-prone immigrant, but as the “the best damn cops in the world.” The effect at the time was that one marginalized community, the Irish immigrants of the time, assimilated into whiteness while Black communities found themselves nearly absent from police ranks and concurrently at odds with the police. In the words of one reviewer of Fogelson’s work, “The Yankee aimed at the Irishman, but the black man caught the blow.”⁷³ This Irish legacy seems apparent in retailers of the TBL flag. The presence of Irish imagery may support the TBL flag as meaningful for police given the legacy of Irish heritage that is strongly associated with policing; however, that legacy is rooted in the purchase of White Privilege for Irish immigrants.

Moreover, Natasha Casey, writing for the *Canadian Journal of Irish History*, chronicles how Irish heritage has been appropriated by White Supremacist groups to make Whiteness more appealing.⁷⁴ They write, “Irish iconography [was used] in tattooing, festivals, and St. Patrick’s Day events by deviant groups (hate/nationalist/White Supremacist groups) throughout the 1990s and 2000s, many of which used the mainstream fascination with Irishness to boost membership and appeal to wider, more general, white audiences.”⁷⁵ Given this history, the presence of Irish imagery supports both hypotheses, and demonstrates how the TBL flag has adopted much of the legacy of the phrase “the thin blue line.”

7) *Templar Imagery*. The term *Templar Imagery* is used here to label imagery that invokes the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, an order of Christian warrior missionaries founded in 1118 who considered themselves guardians of Christian pilgrims and who participated in The Crusades.⁷⁶ The Templar Imagery clustering around the TBL flag includes a bright red Templar crosses either standalone or on the armor or shield of a knight-looking figure. The style of armor and shielding varies wildly, as the TBL flag retailers were not committed to historically accurate portrayals on their clothing—only the Templar Cross itself is consistent.

The ADL has not archived the Templar Cross specifically as an example of a hate symbol, but numerous hate groups have used an almost indistinguishable style of cross as emblematic of their movement, such as the “Blood Drop Cross” used by Ku Klux Klan groups generally and the MI-OAK (an acronym for “Mystic Insignia of a Klansman”) in particular. Scholars of history have chronicled “pagan-Christian” mysticism and amalgamation of faiths as prominent in Neo-Nazi groups emerging from Europe.⁷⁷ Templar imagery has appeared at numerous rallies attended by White Nationalist and White Supremacists from the Charlottesville Rally to the more recent

⁷³ Ego Bittner, “The Rise and Fall of the Thin Blue Line,” *Reviews in American History* 6, no. 3 (September 1973): 421–28.

⁷⁴ Natasha Casey, “Beyond the Pale : Irishness and White Supremacy in 1990s America,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 43 (January 2020): 146–71.

⁷⁵ Natasha Casey, “Beyond the Pale.” 147–48.

⁷⁶ Gordon Napier, *The Rise and Fall of the Knights Templar: The Order of the Temple 1118-1314 - A True History of Faith, Glory, Betrayal* (The History Press, 2006).

⁷⁷ Samuel Koehne, “Religion in the Early Nazi Milieu: Towards a Greater Understanding of ‘Racist Culture’,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 4 (2018): 667–91.

demonstrations against drag queen performances. A *New York Times* interview with Matthew Heimbach, who leads a group who advocates “replacing the United States with nation-states based on ethnicity and religion,” shows pictures of Templar Knights showcased in his home.⁷⁸ The SPLC has documented White Supremacists appropriating images of the Templar Knights within anachronistic stories of Christians opposing the “evil” wills of “foreign” invaders of whatever land the White Supremacists deem “holy,” most often Great Britain and the continental United States. Similar to appropriating the Spartan head, White Nationalists and White Supremacists seem infatuated with the Templars as opponents to Islam, a significant but relatively superficial detail in the real Templar’s long history. The most notable examples of invoking the Templar Knights as anti-Muslim sentiment are in the written accounts of Anders Breivik, the terrorist who killed seventy-seven people in bomb-and-gun massacres in Norway, and Timothy McVeigh, who killed 168 people in bomb attack on a federal building in Oklahoma.⁷⁹

Templar Knights have no known association with police mourning protocols or funerals, and thus the presence of Templar Imagery supports the hypothesis that the TBL flag has stronger associations with White Supremacist connotations than with mourning police. Despite their Christian origins, Templar Knights as a whole are a relatively uncommon image in the US apart from their popularization in Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code*. We found only one brief example of Templar Knights appearing in military emblems. In 2012, the Fighter Attack Squadron 122 based in Yuma, AR, were called “The Crusaders” between the 1960s and 2008.⁸⁰ After a brief change to the name “The Werewolves” after deployment in Afghanistan, the group tried to change the name back to “The Crusaders” before drawing fierce criticism from civil rights groups for its anti-Muslim connotations. At the time of publication, the squadron is named “The Flying Leathernecks.”

Templar Knights were similarly accompanied with slogans about defense of self or of one’s homeland, broadly defined. Phrases like, “I Am a Warrior,” “Stand Brave and Upright,” and “For Those I Love I Will Do Great and Horrible Things” collocate around Templar Imagery to deepen its meaning to purchasers. These sentiments perhaps reinforce the “us versus them” mentality and associated meanings present in White Supremacist and White Nationalist ideology, as well as the idea of protecting “order” from “chaos.”

Discussion

At the time of writing, Florida State passed legislation affording the same protections for the TBL flag as the American and POW flags.⁸¹ Legislators in Ohio are considering similar measures,⁸² while efforts made by home owners associations seeking to ban the TBL flag in Pennsylvania have

⁷⁸ Serge Kovalski et al., “An Alt-Right Makeover Shrouds the Swastikas,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/10/us/alt-right-national-socialist-movement-white-supremacy.html>.

⁷⁹ Ryan Lenz, “Christian Crusader: The Terrorist Who Slaughtered Norway’s Children Was Heavily Influenced by American Anti-Muslim Extremists,” SPLC’s Intelligence Report, August 24, 2011, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/christian-crusader>.

⁸⁰ Kari Haus, “Marine Werewolves Transform into Crusaders, and Back Again,” *NBC News*, May 24, 2012, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/marine-werewolves-transform-crusaders-back-again-flna793567>.

⁸¹ “Property Owners’ Right to Install, Display, and Store Items,” 437 HB § (2023), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2023/437/BillText/er/PDF>.

⁸² Tim Ginter and Miller, Kevin, “Prohibit Restrictions on Display of the Thin Blue Line Flag,” HB 712 Ohio §, accessed November 29, 2023, https://search-prod.lis.state.oh.us/solarapi/v1/general_assembly_134/bills/hb712/IN/00/hb712_00_IN?format=pdf.

been deemed unconstitutional in Pennsylvania courts.⁸³ Journalists have collected testimony from numerous stakeholders to show how debates over the TBL rage with passion and conviction, and historians have shown the TBL as a phrase has existed as PR for police, especially in defense of publicly denounced racist actions. It is perhaps unsurprising to see the TBL flag collocating with Irish imagery given the history of the TBL as a phrase.

Moreover, scholars have argued that the TBL as a phrase exists as a perpetual defense for police and policing that resurges each time a given state power needs to defend its violence as always necessary and always protective of police and the general public. As Tyler Wall argues, “To accept the ‘thin blue line’ on its own terms [...] is to naturalize the violence of racial capitalist order as the necessary and inevitable violence of cops and cages” [...] it is through its inability to fully eradicate the bestial trace that police claim a license to endless war in the name of humanity.”⁸⁴

In their analysis, Wall draws from the theoretical work of postcolonial scholars like Franz Fanon and Paul Gilroy. But Wall does not distinguish between the TBL as a flag or a phrase, viewing visual representations as simply the aesthetics of the TBL as a concept. Wall also does not engage with questions of hate speech, nor do they explore the possibility that the TBL is a part of morning protocols for police killed in the line of duty. To meet both public and scholarly gaps in knowledge, this study expands Wall’s work and seeks to resolve American discord regarding the TBL *flag*.

Burkean Cluster Criticism has been expanded to assess not only language, but also performative acts⁸⁵ and images.⁸⁶ Significantly, this study demonstrates how Burkean cluster criticism can move the discussion of White Nationalist symbols beyond inference to evidence an aesthetic of covert racism in the United States. Like Kennedy, Middleton, Ratcliffe, Harley, Ridgeway, Gries, and Bratta, this project suggests that rhetorical methods can inform policymakers by evidencing how symbols have measurable meanings—and consequences—that can inform law enforcement in particular on how the TBL flag may undermine public trust even while it may superficially appear to be an expression of police support and mourning.⁸⁷ The analysis here shows the flag is consubstantial with racial animus and symbolic action that works both like the TBL phrase, and in ways that invokes stronger synergistic meanings with other images associated with White Nationalists and Supremacist thinking. Viewed in confluence, embedding a blue line within the American flag may not be just a change in meaning in the wake of BLM, but the advancement of racial animus in the United States that both implicates and transcends police.

Legal dictionaries define hate speech as speech, writing, or nonverbal communication that attacks, threatens, or insults marginalized persons or groups based on national origin, ethnicity,

⁸³ Brooke Schultz, “Barring ‘Thin Blue Line’ Flag on Pennsylvania Township Property Is Unconstitutional, US Court Rules,” *Associated Press*, November 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/pennsylvania-thin-blue-line-flag-lawsuit-73b143c751ec24088768fe64a0f84c9f>.

⁸⁴ Wall, “The Police Invention of Humanity: Notes on the ‘Thin Blue Line.’”

⁸⁵ Valerie Lynn Schrader, “Analyzing a Performative Text through Cluster Criticism: Hegemony in the Musical *Wicked* as a Case Study,” *KB Journal: The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 11, no. 2 (2016), <http://kbjournal.org/schrader>.

⁸⁶ Thames, “All Hands on Deck: A Cluster Analysis of Key Images/Terms in James Cameron’s *Titanic*,” np.

⁸⁷ Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe, “The Matter of Whiteness”; Harley, “Music against Fascism”; Gries and Bratta, “The Racial Politics of Circulation.”

color, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability.⁸⁸ Hate symbols are a subset of hate speech, but defining a hate symbol can be difficult because hate symbols can be an appropriation of religious or cultural symbols. The swastika is the most famous example. A swastika hanging from a set of bamboo prayer beads is an adornment symbolizing good luck and fortune in Buddhism, but a swastika embedded in a white and red flag indisputably symbolizes the Nazi Party, especially as they adorned the symbol while burning books and committing genocide. Hate symbols like the Nazi emblem are definitively racist from a scholarly point of view, but classifying new hate symbols in real time can stir controversy. The ADL drew criticism when classifying the “Okay” hand gesture as a hate symbol. The “Okay” gesture can be used for the benign purpose of signaling a temperate mood, but the ADL determined that the sign too often collocates with other known White Supremacists’ slogans and phrases within online spheres such as 4chan and Reddit. As the ADL warns, symbols—like language—must be evaluated in context. This does not mean that any random use of the “Okay” gesture constitutes hate speech. But its uses and associations are evidence its meanings as a rally cry to if not overtly persecute people of color, then at least politically oppose any measure that would foster racial justice.⁸⁹

The ADL is not descriptive about their methods for determining hate speech. But like the ADL, this study acknowledges that when a symbol collocates with other acts of speech, writing, or non-verbal communication associated with hate speech and hate groups, the likelihood of its nefarious meaning is significant. By demarcating retailers of the TBL flag and cataloging which symbols collocate in clusters around it, the TBL flag seems to have little association with mourning police. There are almost no badges wrapped in black lines sold on the websites in our corpus, as the database *Officer Down* instructs and as many police organizations dictate in their mourning protocols, and there are almost no symbols that signal the purposes expressed by Bishopp. Instead, the TBL flag is sold alongside other dubious symbols that have been appropriated by know White Nationalists and White Supremacists. Those who adorn the TBL flag, knowingly or not, signal a web of meanings that may include signaling one’s self as toxic or dangerous (skulls), oriented toward violent defense (chi-cross), reaching toward an idealized superior race (Norse or Spartan), subscribing to the extrajudicial killing of deemed deviants (The Punisher), or defending a perceived homeland from a foreign invader of a different faith (Templar Knights). While the creators of the TBL flag assert that the flag “has no association with racism, hatred, bigotry,”⁹⁰ the symbols that clusters around the TBL flag are used by White Nationalists and White Supremacists, particularly the chi-cross, the Spartan head, and the Templar Knights. Thus, whatever supportive sentiment for police may exist is lost as the TBL flag principally conveys that anyone not white, Christian, and conservative as an occupying force worthy of suspicion, disdain, and death.

While hate itself is hard to measure, it can be quantified by analyzing retail spaces selling symbols while observing the actions of who wears those symbols. Such a view foregrounds racism as measurable through market forces. Unlike the Nazi party, or any fascist group that was as much a government as it was a movement, modern White Supremacist and White Nationalist groups do not possess obvious means to produce their own apparel, nor is it in their advantage to brazenly do so. To adorn unifying symbols signifying their identity, someone must be willing to discreetly

⁸⁸ “The Legalities Of Hate Speech,” in *Black’s Law Dictionary, 2nd Ed.* (TheLawDictionary.org), accessed June 12, 2023, <https://thelawdictionary.org/article/the-legalities-of-hate-speech/>. “Hate Speech,” in *Merriam-Webster Legal Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster.com, June 12, 2023), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hate%20speech>.

⁸⁹ Anti-Defamation League, “Okay Hand Gesture,” in *Hate on Display*, n.d., <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/okay-hand-gesture>.

⁹⁰ Chammah and Aspinwall, “The Short, Fraught History of the ‘Thin Blue Line’ American Flag.”

manufacture and sell it. It is not the intent of this project to exalt a focus on markets above the felt sense of stereotyping and prejudice. But understanding the TBL flag as a market force foregrounds not only how the web can enable hate to corporally spread, but also how web-based tools can effectively map symbols' racist associations. Free speech prevents governments from any curtailment of citizens from wearing such symbols. But naming hate symbols may empower public policymakers to make evidence-based decisions about if or when to permit their use among public servants, or enable private interests to disallow such symbols from adornment by those under their employ.

It is important to analyze symbols in aggregate. Any image alone, such as a Punisher Logo on a backpack or a Spartan symbol on a hat, is plausibly deniable as having other meanings, but the collocation of these images with the TBL flag and each other constitutes a powerful messaging strategy that signals, intentionally or not, solidarity between supporters of police, opponents of anti-racist action, and unapologetic racists. Our study does not seek to identify any one TBL retailer as a White Supremacist or White Nationalist. Instead, the clusters demonstrate how the different symbols collocate and gain meaning from each other, thus the images combined are not simply a guilt by any single association, but as a coalescence of all these symbols and their connotations into a White Supremacist and White Nationalist aesthetic with the TBL flag at its center. More than the recent manifestation of a long-running, albeit disjointed campaign supporting police, the TBL flag can be adorned easily to demonize any "other" that the wearer deems a threat and worthy of death. The TBL wearers, almost more than the TBL retailers themselves, are unified in an identity that believes at its core the confluence of all the associated meanings.

As Ridgeway has shown, to be a racist in the U.S. involves dog whistles and covert messaging, a veneer of deniability that serves racists ends with professed motives that are on their surface may sound innocent: protecting a place or person or even a society. The symbols and their adornments are only possible in commercial retail spaces, and those spaces would have to be covert in their sales strategy or risk incurring legal trouble. In this context, the TBL flag functions like a symbol that can become mainstream with plausible deniability of any White Supremacist and White Nationalist associations. But the TBL flag is sold in the same retail spaces with other known invocations of those ideas. With no single tailor or centralized campaign to homogenize adornments that signal loyalty, TBL flag retailers instead create approximations that signal a unified political ideology opposing anything named left-wing and social justice related. In other words, if racism is not the intended product, racists are likely the primary customer.

As James Baldwin wrote, "I can't believe what you say because I see what you do."⁹¹ It is in the doing, the preponderance of speech and meaning, that this project examines in complement to assessments of meaning and intent, placing the "doing" of political action alongside clusters of meaning. The TBL flag and its associated movement is neither unified nor is it fully disjointed, yet wearers are motivated by a shared history of uniting for violent action to preserve a deemed superior class of people and their property. This rhetorical space also serves to absolve the self of any guilt, because it signals a defense against what it deems to be inhuman creatures worthy of destruction and warranting a cheer or sigh of relief. "Murder" is consequently a verb reserved for only White victims of violence in the mythology of supremacy, but the murder of others—the kinds of murder BLM was created to oppose—is justified by the TBL flag as not murder, but *theriocide*. Wearing these symbols can be a social-semiotic act building alliances between disparate groups and unifying them under endorsement of the extrajudicial killing of Black people under the guise

⁹¹ James Baldwin, "A Report from Occupied Territory," *The Nation Magazine*, July 11, 1966, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/report-occupied-territory/>.

of honoring police. Policymakers should be persuaded by being informed about how symbols not only derive meaning through collocation with other symbols, but also by observing people and their actions while wearing them.⁹²

Conclusion

By contextualizing the TBL flag within the history of the TBL as a phrase, by cataloguing the proliferators of the image, by performing a cluster analysis to discover associated imagery with the support of databases on hate speech and dictionaries of images, and by corroborating the clusters with the actions of known White Nationalist and White Supremacist groups, this study advances the conversation about the TBL flag beyond polysemy. For rhetoricians, cluster analysis affords the measure and the judgment to show the TBL flag's most prevalent meaning is one of racism. For policymakers, abandoning the TBL flag and associated imagery may be necessary if law enforcement wishes to meet their commitment to "protect and serve."

⁹² "The Following Links Present Police Mourning Protocols That Are Available Online: Officer Down Memorial Database (2022): <https://www.odmp.org/info/mourning-band-protocol> Mesa, AR (2018): <https://public.powersdms.com/MESAPD/Documents/1298020> Seattle, WA (2020): <https://web.archive.org/web/20201027065059/https://www.seattle.gov/police-manual/title-3---employee-welfare/3170---honoring-fallen-officers> Columbus, OH (2015): <https://www.columbus.gov/workarea/downloadasset.aspx?id=2147485037> Cleveland, OH (2015): <https://www.clevelandohio.gov/sites/default/files/gpo/1.3/1.3.04%20Death%20and%20Funeral%20Procedures.Pdf> Lexington, KY (2013): <https://www.lexingtonky.gov/sites/default/files/2017-03/GO%202005-02B%20Funeral%20Protocol.Pdf> El Cerrito, CA (2022) <https://www.el-cerrito.org/documentcenter/view/13379/funeral-manual-combined-doc---final>," n.d.