

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

## Pop Culture and the Evolving Politics of the Right: The Potential of Interpretive Methods for Studying Gender, Race, and Politics

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### Introduction

Scholars of gender have long realized that questions regarding gender, women, and politics require a multi-method, nuanced approach. When a plurality of white women voted for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election, social scientists increasingly began to recognize the urgency of undertaking new approaches to understanding gender, race, and voting behavior in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Since then, researchers have helped us understand why so many white women support right-wing candidates and policies that aim to suppress their autonomy, offering explanations such as the influence of belief in traditional gender roles (Christley 2022), “possessive investments in white heteropatriarchy” (Strolovitch, Wong, and Proctor 2017, 354), and “gendered nationalism” in American politics (Deckman and Cassese 2021, 278). In more recent years — as election results and polling suggest growing numbers of men of color have shifted rightward — there has been increased interest in employing an intersectional approach to analyze the gulf between men and women of color.

Important work has been done to show, for example, that Latina and Black women hold a stronger sense of group solidarity and civic duty than Latino and Black men (Corral 2024; Slaughter, Crowder, and Greer 2024). Such comparative explanations have been offered to elucidate why women of color are more liberal on issues such as immigration and have remained loyal to the Democratic Party at a time when men of color have become increasingly open for political capture by the right. Still, they do not explain the forces — social, material, political, and

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cultural — that are fueling these new identifications and political alignments. In other words, if we rely on quantitative measures of gender attitudes or support for issues already deemed “political,” we miss crucial insights into the complex constellation of forces fueling the rise of the right.

Over the past two years, we have been studying the shifting racial dynamics of US politics as part of our work on an edited volume, *The Politics of the Multiracial Right* (Martinez-HoSang and Lowndes 2026). In the book, contributors approach the growth of the right with an expansive set of questions, seeking to explore the complex and contradictory factors drawing growing numbers of people of color into conservative formations and politics. As the terrain and boundaries of these politics are constantly evolving, such questions are difficult to answer through traditional survey methods and measurement strategies. Recognizing this, the vast majority of the essays in the volume employ interpretive methodologies and attend to non-traditional sites of politics, including conservative beauty and lifestyle magazines such as *Evie*, online spaces such as the neo-Nazi forum Stormfront and WhatsApp groups, and political campaigns in liberal cities like San Francisco and Minneapolis where one might not expect to find right-wing ideologies taking shape.

In December 2023, our research took us to Turning Point USA’s annual America Fest in Phoenix, Arizona. Advertised as the country’s largest multi-day conservative conference, America Fest is geared toward high school and college-aged students and is designed to introduce attendees to a wide variety of conservative ideas through speakers that range from GOP figures such as Vivek Ramaswamy and Marjorie Taylor Green, to influencers such as NBA player Jonathan Isaac and Blexit founder Candace Owens. As we attended panels over the three-day conference, we noticed that the diversification of the right has been facilitated, at least in part, by a dynamic gender politics that deserves far more attention from scholars.

While the right is not typically portrayed as a bastion of popular culture, we noticed that popular culture is both a key vehicle in driving right-wing political formations and a fruitful venue for studying the ways that new racial and gender dynamics are influencing the right. College students donned colorful sweatshirts that proudly proclaimed, “Aspiring Trophy Wife,” and handed out buttons and flyers stating, “Anti Joe Biden Club” and “Black Pre-Born Lives Matter.” Conservative influencers spoke about the importance of marriage and the dangers of birth control to an audience that looked like they were dressed for a Taylor Swift concert. Drawing from these observations and analysis of far-right cultural texts, we demonstrate that popular culture and social media are relevant sites of study not only because of their capacity to heighten already established partisan differences, but also because they function to produce new forms of political identification — the contingent, often contradictory formations fueling the rise of the multiracial right.

### **Wellness, Beauty, and TikTok**

One of the most revealing encounters we had at America Fest was with conservative influencer, podcast host, and founder of the #Cuteservative and

#Crunchservative movements, Alex Clark. While 31-year-old Alex Clark was almost certainly among the 47% of white women who voted for Donald Trump in 2016, she stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical middle-aged, Evangelical Christian white woman who believes in traditional gender roles and holds conservative cultural values. To the 18- to 25-year-olds who attended America Fest, Clark is a celebrity — a social media savvy, culturally aware, fashionable, and conventionally attractive role model for young conservatives. Clark certainly facilitates an anti-abortion and anti-birth control agenda and advocates for women to marry young, have children, and opt for stay-at-home motherhood, but her justification for holding such beliefs is quite different from what we typically expect from far-right figures.

Rather than pushing a moral “Christian” agenda, Clark focuses on health and wellness. At a time when Americans are suffering from a mental health crisis and rampant chronic illness and are under increased financial strain as income inequality worsens and multinational corporations see record profits, Clark advocates for a return to “ancestral” wisdom and traditional lifestyles.<sup>2</sup> Though the “granola” lifestyle she uplifts has traditionally been associated with the left — a rejection of capitalist careerism, consumption of farm-to-table food and organic beauty and home products, and reduction in use of pharmaceutical drugs and overreliance on the broken health care system — Clark has smartly rebranded it as #Crunchservative, creating space on the right for wellness-oriented young women who may not typically identify with conservative ideology.

After attending her America Fest panel and bearing witness to the #Cuteservative cultural formation, we quickly realized Clark was an important figure with whom to contend. We began listening to hours of her popular Turning Point-sponsored podcast “The Spillover With Alex Clark,”<sup>3</sup> on which she hosts what she describes as “counter-cultural” conversations with a wide range of influencers and “experts” on topics such as the pharmaceutical and processed food industries, mental health, maternal health, clean food and beauty, and political lobbying. By leveraging widespread distrust in institutions and pointing out the contradictions of a Democratic Party that she argues purports to support working-class families while increasingly aligning with the ultra-wealthy elites and big businesses that capitalize off of the poor health of Americans, Clark offers gendered self-reliance as not only a solution but also as a form of women’s empowerment that aligns with conservative politics.

Clark is not the only figure on the right creating new onramps to conservative politics for young women. In the past year, many journalists and scholars who study gender politics have drawn our attention to the popularity of “trad wife” social media influencers such as model Nara Smith and Hannah Neeleman, more popularly known as Ballerina Farm. These content creators post videos about homemaking, cooking, pregnancy, and childbirth, and are typically associated with Christianity and Mormonism. On the surface, their idyllic lifestyle content might seem hardly political, yet they have amassed massive social media followings and sparked sharp controversy over what critics argue is a glorification of traditional gender roles and the nuclear family structure.

Former model and founder of *Evie Magazine* — dubbed the “Gen-Z Cosmo for the Far Right”<sup>4</sup> — Brittany Martinez often uses her social media accounts to

defend these figures and speak to their power for the conservative movement. In an X post from January 2024, she shared an *Evie* article entitled “Sofia Richie Grainge Being Married And Pregnant At 25 Is Doing More For Traditional Values Than Anything The Right Is Doing.”<sup>5</sup> In keeping with *Evie*’s brand of right-wing feminism, the writer argues that conservatives too often “lecture” young women about the lives they should be leading, rather than uplifting conservative role models as inspiration for youth: “It’s no wonder that the likes of Ballerina Farm have become so popular. Hannah Neeleman doesn’t ever stand up on her soap box and preach to young women that motherhood and marriage are the best choices. She simply lives a mesmerizing life and shows snippets of herself living a happy, fulfilling life — and millions of people cannot look away.”<sup>6</sup>

Conservative influencers not only recognize the imperative of moving away from an overt policing of morality as their main approach to galvanizing support from young women. They also leverage the power of social media to help them rewrite the narrative of modern conservative womanhood, all while entrenching traditional gender roles. While quantitative measures of beliefs in traditional gender roles may capture some of these new politics, much will be missed if we do not also pay attention to dynamics at cultural sites where these politics are unfolding in real time that are better captured through ethnographic and interpretive approaches.

### **Hip Hop, Blackness, and Masculinity**

The intersection of hip hop and politics is another fruitful site for making sense of the shifting gender politics on the right, in this case for the ways in which conservatives aim to appeal to *men* of color. Though Donald Trump and GOP candidates received small fractions of the Black and Latino vote shares in 2020 and 2022, there have since been small but notable rightward shifts in these communities. It might seem contradictory for Black and Latino men to support a political party that is perceived by most Black Americans to be racist, or to support a candidate who has denigrated immigrants on many occasions, but when you consider Trump and his cultural position, it begins to make sense. Hip hop provides the right a unique cultural site to engage tensions around gender and masculinity and normalize conservative political ideology among a broader coalition of people.

Though conventionally portrayed as a space for progressive politics and even Black radicalism, hip hop has long been a site for anti-establishment politics — a space of resistance and repudiation toward both major parties. Indeed, during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, hip hop culture was largely associated with progressivism and the Democratic Party. But hip hop’s association with the political left is an unsettled question and is increasingly being leveraged in service of right-wing political projects. Some discounted the shift in 2020 when high-profile Black rappers, including Lil Wayne and Kanye West, announced their support for Republican candidate Donald Trump. But the 2024 election has seen even more rappers and contemporary hip hop figures align with the right. For example, at a 2024 campaign rally in the multicultural South

Bronx, Trump invited two rappers, Sheff G and Sleepy Hollow, on stage to rally the crowd. Interestingly, and in seeming contradiction with the right's emphasis on law-and-order politics, the two performers had been charged the week prior in a 140-count indictment that included accusations of "allegedly committing shootings, possessing guns, and using stolen cars during shootings, to eliminate" rival gang members.<sup>7</sup>

Though many liberal observers have dismissed these hip hop-based appeals as insincere or even offensive pandering, they point to important cultural and political shifts on the right. By relying on rappers and hip hop culture, politicians and commentators are leveraging hip hop's associations with Blackness and hypermasculinity to entrench conservative gender ideologies while simultaneously appearing inclusive of Black communities and their priorities. Debates about masculinity and family continue to shape political conversations and identifications, and hip hop culture and music provide a site for the GOP to become culturally relevant while advancing quintessential conservative gender politics.

While hip hop culture might seem at odds with conservatism (i.e., traditional family values), it has also been a site for the expression of hypermasculinity, with ideas of hustle culture, individualism, and capitalism as a means of Black uplift, making it a useful cultural site for promoting a vision of American masculinity — a vision that the right is fighting to preserve. Many young men of color targeted by these appeals are increasingly dissatisfied with the Democratic Party establishment and distrustful of institutions more generally, particularly the criminal justice system. By positioning the right as inclusive of the disaffected, the forgotten, and the men who will be left behind if the left's vision for the world succeeds, the right has found an effective approach to appeal to men of color.

Although women of color are less susceptible to these appeals, they are increasingly being called upon to authorize the right's agenda. At the 2024 Republican National Convention, Black Cape Verdean OnlyFans star and influencer Amber Rose performed a Donald Trump-inspired rap song, "Trump Trump Baby," with pro-Trump rapper Forgiato Blow. Rose went on to give a speech, where she spoke about how she came to realize that not only is Trump not a racist, but that he is the best candidate for the Black community. She explained that her identity as a mother is what drove her to support Trump. This performance of Black motherhood stands in stark contrast to the ways in which the party has used Black mothers in the past. Rather than portraying Black female promiscuity as the province of "welfare queens" and as a threat to the nation, today's Republican Party is happy to include a Black woman like Amber Rose into the fold. Of course, at the same time, the Republican Party is responsible for policies that result in demonstrably worse outcomes for Black women. A May 2024 analysis, for example, estimated that 57% of Black women ages 15 to 49 live in states with bans on or threats to abortion access.<sup>8</sup> Through uplifting Rose and her stakes as a Black mother, the right is able to rewrite their long history of demonizing Black women and seemingly include them, while also simultaneously passing policies that deepen inequality along gender, racial, and class lines.

## Conclusion

In this Notes from the Field, we provide a brief snapshot into the utility of expanding the questions and methods used to study the right by highlighting some of the ways in which interpretive analyses of popular culture reveal an assemblage of new ideas, priorities, and alignments in right-wing politics. Although measures of gender attitudes and issue positions are useful tools for understanding some of the new dynamics of American politics, they cannot fully capture how the right is leveraging and activating race and gender across a wide array of cultural sites as it tries to build a broad conservative coalition.

Conservatives are anxious about their political survival in the context of shifting racial and gender dynamics of US politics. While some of them are responding by doubling down on overt white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia, and nativism, others are working instead to broaden the appeal of conservative ideologies around gender, sexuality, and family to young people, people of color, and women. By incorporating culture into our study of gender and politics, many of the contradictions scholars and pundits are struggling to understand — the inclusion and elevation of Gen Z female wellness influencers in a party intent on restricting reproductive rights, the function of hip hop culture and Black masculinity in today's GOP — not only become legible, but also reveal themselves as central to the new movement-building strategies of the right.

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## Competing interest.

## Notes

1. Originally it was thought to be 52%, but the number ended up being 47% when the returns were finally in. The questions that ensued are still relevant, as 47% of white women voted for Donald Trump versus 45% for Hillary Clinton (Jones 2018).
2. *The Spillover*: “Ancestral Diet, Sunshine, and Wise Traditions.” With Hilda Labrada Gore. (January 11, 2024).
3. Clark’s podcast rebranded to become ‘Culture Apothecary with Alex Clark’ in late 2024 to highlight its focus on culture and wellness.
4. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/womens-magazine-gen-z-cosmo-far-right-evie-1234744617/>.
5. <https://www.eviemagazine.com/post/sofia-richie-married-pregnant-at-25-traditional-values>.
6. <https://www.eviemagazine.com/post/sofia-richie-married-pregnant-at-25-traditional-values>.
7. <http://www.brooklynda.org/2023/05/16/thirty-two-alleged-members-of-brooklyn-based-gangs-variously-charged-with-140-counts-including-conspiracy-to-commit-murder/>.
8. <https://nationalpartnership.org/report/state-abortion-bans-threaten-black-women/>.

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