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## From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys

### Race, Gender, and Tropes of 'Plant Food Masculinity'

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# From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys: Race, Gender, and Tropes of 'Plant Food Masculinity'


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## **Abstract**

Tropes of ‘effeminized’ masculinity have long been bound up with a plant-based diet, dating back to the ‘effeminate rice eater’ stereotype used to justify 19th-century colonialism in Asia to the alright’s use of the term ‘soy boy’ on Twitter and other social media today to call out men they perceive to be weak, effeminate, and politically correct (Gambert and Linné). This article explores tropes of ‘plant food masculinity’ throughout history, focusing on how while they have embodied different social, cultural, and political identities, they all serve as a tool to construct an archetypal masculine ideal. The analysis draws on a wide range of material from the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as a qualitative media analysis of #SoyBoy tweets posted between October 2010 and August 2018. It argues that, given that we live in a world steeped in ‘coloniality’ (Grosfoguel), it is no wonder that sexist and racist colonial-era tropes are alive and well today, packaged in a 21st-century digital culture form. In the digital politics of the alt-right, dairy milk has become a symbol for racial purity, connecting pseudo-scientific claims about milk, lactose tolerance, race, and masculinity. The term ‘soy boy’ provides a discursive counterpoint, relying heavily on colonial-era stereotypes of so-called ‘effeminate’ plant eating, often linked to Asian and other non-white cultures. The article concludes by arguing that for those working to reframe centuries-old norms and tropes related to race, sex, and humankind’s relationship to other animals, part of that work may take place online using the tools of social media and reappropriation of derogatory language. However, ultimately the power of social media to change norms and minds depends on the power of the social movements driving those changes; success is likely to only come through a robust anti-racist, color-conscious, and gender-conscious vegan movement (Harper)

## **Keywords**

dairy, milk, plant milk, soy, vegan, masculinity, gender, racism, sexism, social media, alright, rhetoric, cultural studies, media studies, food studies, critical animal studies

# From Rice Eaters to Soy Boys: Race, Gender, and Tropes of ‘Plant Food Masculinity’

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**Abstract:** *Tropes of ‘effeminized’ masculinity have long been bound up with a plant-based diet, dating back to the ‘effeminate rice eater’ stereotype used to justify 19th-century colonialism in Asia to the alt-right’s use of the term ‘soy boy’ on Twitter and other social media today to call out men they perceive to be weak, effeminate, and politically correct (Gambert and Linné).*

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## Introduction

Tropes of ‘effeminized’ masculinity have long been bound up with a plant-based diet, dating back to the ‘effeminate rice eater’ stereotype used to justify 19th-century colonialism in Asia (Stănescu). At the core of these colonial-era tropes was the depiction of people – in particular those that were coded as men and as non-western – as weak both physically and intellectually, tying those qualities to a feminine presence, a counterimage to the archetypal western masculine ideal (DuBois). In today’s digital cultures, these old stereotypes have taken on a new life and a broader target.

The so-called alt-right<sup>1</sup> is credited with perpetuating many sexist, racist, and otherwise offensive tropes in digital media spaces today, with members frequently using social media and ironic humor<sup>2</sup> to promote their views (Gambert and Linné). Some of those tropes are constructed around narratives relating to particular types of food consumption, with dairy milk vs. soy milk and meat-eating vs. veganism being two common themes of alt-right rhetoric. A notable example is #MilkTwitter, the Twitter hashtag that went viral in February 2017 after an incident that has since been dubbed the ‘milk party’, in which a large gathering of white men – many shirtless carrying cartons of milk – descended on an anti-Trump video art installation shortly after Trump’s inauguration, linking milk-drinking to whiteness and idealized masculinity and voicing everything from off-color taunts to explicitly racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and homophobic rants.<sup>3</sup> After that night, pro-Trump supporters began carrying cartons of milk to rallies; Richard Spencer and other prominent figures of the alt-right movement added milk-bottle emojis to their Twitter profiles. Milk had gone viral, joining the ranks of Pepe the Frog and the ‘okay’ emoji as symbols of 21st century, post-Obama era white supremacy (Freeman, ‘Milk, a Symbol of neo-Nazi Hate’; Gambert and Linné). A few months later #SoyBoy, another milk-related hashtag, went viral. Where #MilkTwitter focused on the perceived strengths of dairy milk, #Soyboy focused on the perceived emasculating qualities of drinking soy milk (Gambert and Linné).<sup>4</sup> Soy and soymilk has been targeted by the alt-right both because of soy’s association with traditional and current Asian popular culture and for claims based on

discredited science about phytoestrogens in soy foods leading to a reduction in testosterone and therefore weaker, more effeminate men.

This article explores tropes of ‘plant food masculinity’ throughout history, from the colonial era of the late 19th century to the alt-right’s use of Twitter and other social media today, where acts like maintaining a plant-based diet, drinking soy milk, or being vegan are tied to norms of masculinity and to ideas and beliefs about bodily and racial purity. The analysis is centered on how the tropes of plant food masculinity that have been a recurring phenomenon from the colonial era to today have come to embody different social, cultural, and political identities, serving as a tool to construct an archetypal masculine ideal. It also examines examples of that ideal being challenged by the men who fail to embody it, from *soshokukei danshi* – herbivorous boys – in Japan to vegans who proudly tweet images of themselves with the #SoyBoy hashtag.

The analysis draws on a wide range of material from the 19th and 20th centuries, including medical texts, newspaper editorials, labor union reports, and congressional debates. For the analysis of the contemporary use of the tropes linking plant food consumption to masculinity by the alt-right in social media, a qualitative media analysis of #SoyBoy tweets between October 17, 2010 and August 30, 2018 has been made. For this analysis, all the tweets from these dates using this hashtag were initially read and examined in order to get an in-depth familiarization of the content associated with the hashtag (Hine). Tweets were then selected for a closer analysis, based on them being of particular interest in terms of the tropes and narratives being communicated.<sup>5</sup> These tweets were categorized and arranged into three broad themes, each of which connects to and expands on the theoretical concepts and narratives identified during the analysis of the 19th- and 20th-century materials (Gray).

## A 'wretched, impotent, and effeminate race': the gendered and racial politics of plant eating

Food items like milk, rice, or soy take on various meanings and compositions in different historical and cultural contexts and become cultural, social, and political symbols situated in intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and species (Gaard 596; Adams, 'Feminized Protein'; Gurel 67).<sup>6</sup>

The confluence of institutionalized racism, sexism, and colonialism in the late 19th century led to widespread sentiments connecting animal-eating (ie, meat and dairy) to intellectual superiority and virile masculinity exemplified by the white western man (DuPuis, 'Angels and Vegetables'). Plant-eating, on the other hand, was associated with Asian and other non-white cultures, and was thought to represent emasculation and to confer weakness of both mind and body. As E. Melanie DuPuis noted in *Angels and Vegetables: A Brief History of Food Advice in America*, 'the racial rhetoric of the day ... portrayed Asians as effeminate and enfeebled and the Chinese 'leaf diet' as a cause of degeneracy' (41).

Colonial tropes of effeminized 'plant food masculinity' were widespread and mainstream. In 1884, a twenty-nine-year-old American neurologist named James Leonard Corning published *Brain Exhaustion, With Some Preliminary Considerations on Cerebral Dynamics*, in which he sought to explore the numerous 'demands upon the thinking apparatus' as well as possible remedies for a range of 'mental phenomena' (5, 195). Corning spoke in one chapter of 'defective brain nutrition' and the role between various types of food on the brain's development, health, and disease (195-205). In a passage bolstered by his credibility and authority as an esteemed medical doctor, Corning echoed and reinforced an established colonial stereotype linking the perceived intellectual inferiority of people living in colonized countries to the (supposed) plant-based nature of their diets:

Where mental courage, tenacity of purpose, and concentrated energy are required the introduction of large quantities of fibrin and albumen into the system produces the most marvelous results. Thus, flesh-eating nations have ever been more aggressive than those peoples whose diet is largely or exclusively vegetable. The **effeminate rice-eaters of**



**India and China** have again and again yielded to the superior moral courage of an infinitely smaller number of meat-eating Englishmen. (196; emphasis added)

Not only were colonized people intellectually weak because they ate plants, argued Corning, but colonizers were intellectually superior because they ate animals, noting that the ‘most wonderful instance of the intellectual vigor of flesh-eating man is the unbroken triumph of the Anglo-Saxon race’ (197).<sup>7</sup>

Corning’s medical opinions were shared by many of his peers: a year before he published *Brain Exhaustion*, a respected Australian doctor named Stephen Mannington Caffyn published *How, When, and What to Eat: A Guide to Colonial Diet*, in which he cautioned that ‘[w]e might expect to find rice-eaters everywhere a wretched, impotent, and effeminate race, and such is the case’ (11).

The fact that Corning, Caffyn, and others linked notions of race to a particular kind of weakness characterized by effeminacy is significant, as it perpetuated long-standing sexist tropes connecting femininity and weakness and wove them together with racist tropes and rhetoric around idealized forms of masculinity. This tactic of connecting weakness to both feminine-coded and non-white-coded people was not uncommon at the time: in 1852 an editorial in the *New York Herald* asked:

How did woman first become subject to man as she now is all over the world? By her nature, her sex, just as the negro, is and always will be, to the end of time, inferior to the white race, and therefore, doomed to subjection; but happier than she would be in any other condition, just because it is the law of her nature. The women themselves would not have this law reversed... (cited in Kraditor 190)

The notion that women were weaker than men permeated western culture, and was echoed even in the halls of the United States Congress; a legislator commenting during a debate in 1866:

It seems to me as if the God of our race has stamped upon [the women of America] a milder, gentler nature, which not only makes them shrink from, but disqualifies them for the turmoil and battle of public life. (Flexner)<sup>8</sup>

That medical experts like Corning and Caffyn perpetuated these racist and sexist tropes and grounded them in ‘science’ gave significant legitimacy to these sentiments, leading to what Carol Adams describes as a ‘racialized politics of meat’ that worked to split the ‘world into intellectually superior meat eaters and inferior plant eaters’ (*The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 54). As Vasile Stănescu explained in *The Whopper Virgins: Hamburgers, Gender, and Xenophobia in Burger King’s Hamburger Advertising*, the trope of the ‘effeminate rice eater’ was ‘a concept that reiterated the biases of colonialism and sexism under a supposedly non-racist and non-colonialist worldview based on the mutable characteristic of diet instead of an immutable genetics’ (Stănescu 95, citing Corning). Notably, western nutritionists’ assessment of the Asian diet during this time was ‘downright incorrect’ (DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 40-41).

Anti-Asian sentiments were widespread among everyday working class people as well, many of whom turned their hostilities not towards people thousands of miles away, but toward non-white immigrants who lived alongside them, competing for the same jobs. DuPuis explains how working class US-Americans at the turn of the 20th century pushed back against prominent nutritionists who argued that ‘[t]he fact that workers in some nations got by on fewer calories was not a sign of malnourishment; rather, it meant that American workers ate too much’ (‘Angels and Vegetables’ 39). According to DuPuis, ‘[t]he working class responded [to such nutritional arguments] by defending its right to eat meat, as a privilege of white citizenship’ (‘Angels and Vegetables’ 39).

At the heart of ‘the overlap between racial nativism and working-class demands’ was the white working class’ animus toward Chinese immigrants, with the ‘newly organized and newly vocal [white] working class [regarding] Chinese immigration as an attack on their meat-centered diet’ (‘Angels and Vegetables’ 40). A 1902 report published by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) supporting the Chinese Exclusion Act ‘expressed the union’s views on Chinese immigration in terms of ingestion’, titling it ‘Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood vs. Asiatic Coolieism, Which will Survive?’ (DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 40; Gompers and Gustadt).

During and immediately after World War I, US animus toward Asian people took on a renewed significance, as the ‘need for strong and aggressive bodies to fulfill national imperial ambitions’ led to the ‘politics of ingestion [becoming] caught up in questions about the physical

strength of the armed forces'. In the process, bodies 'were compared across races and nations, and so it was that the Asian body came to represent nutritional deficiency in American gastropolitical discourse at this time' (DuPuis, 'Angels and Vegetables' 40). Specifically, explains DuPuis:

[t]he Asian body became the sign of colonial subjection and effeminacy, while the tall, meat-eating and milk-drinking masculine American working-class body signified the superiority of the white diet. This characterization served as justification for white imperial projects in the post–World War I era. Colonial non-meat eaters were viewed as conquered peoples, defeated by diet. In their shared disdain for nonwhite races, the working and middle classes found a common identity as members of a powerful nation. ('Angels and Vegetables' 40)

As the next section makes clear, it wasn't just meat-eating – or the lack thereof – that framed the sexist and racist rhetoric in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: another key part of the discourse was milk.

### **'Milk makes men': dairy milk's role in crafting modern tropes of idealized white masculinity**

Among the many animal foods that have been used to signal western superiority and traditional western masculine ideals, milk stands out as one particularly poignant example, one that was seen as the cornerstone of a healthy diet and the white northern European identity, as well as a powerful tool for colonialism (Cohen; Gaard).<sup>9</sup>

In many European countries and the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, dairy milk was promoted by powerful propaganda associations driven by dairy producers and given a veneer of legitimacy through engagement with politicians and experts in medicine and nutrition (Martini; DuPuis 'Angels and Vegetables', *Nature's Perfect Food*). Dairy milk was celebrated as a drink that improved public health; it was claimed to be a perfect food from a nutritional perspective, and was served free of charge to school children in many countries from the 1920s onwards (Wiley, *Cultures of Milk*).

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, dairy milk also symbolized modern progress in

the western world. It was portrayed as a ‘natural’ food that could be improved through modern technological development in the forms of pasteurization, homogenization, and standardization (DuPuis, *Nature’s Perfect Food*). The idea of dairy milk as a healthful, modern food was tied to the politics of a healthy and modern nation state (Jönsson). As described in detail by DuPuis (*Nature’s Perfect Food*), Wiley (*Cultures of Milk*), and Nimmo, dairy milk in many western countries was portrayed as white and clean, a modern beverage for modern people. The strong relationship between dairy milk – and cow’s milk in particular – and western culture even played a role in anti-colonial efforts in India, where Gandhi linked the ‘Mother cow’ image and cow protection to the ideal of ‘Mother India’: Gandhi transformed the cow into a nationalist icon; cow’s milk symbolized ‘purity and strength of the nation’ (Wiley, ‘Growing a Nation’ 47-48). But even Gandhi infused his anti-colonial efforts with rhetoric implying Western superiority over ‘traditional’ Indian culture, favoring western cows like Holsteins to those from either ‘scrawny’ South Asian zebu cows or water buffalos, who, despite producing the majority of India’s milk, have long been considered ‘unclean, unlucky and a bad omen’ whose milk is thought to make people dumb and lazy (Wiley, ‘Growing a Nation’ 50, 55, 57). Cow’s milk from western cows, on the other hand, was seen as the perfect food, symbolizing the story of the march to progress, a flawless world of industrial production and managerial bureaucracy.

Dairy milk was also considered by experts to be directly linked to the success and superiority of white northern Europeans as a race. The respected University of Wisconsin nutrition scientist E.V. McCollum – who, not insignificantly, had a close relationship with the dairy industry (DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 41) – wrote in his widely-read 1918 book *The Newer Nutrition* that:

[t]he peoples who have made liberal use of milk as a food, have, in contrast [to non-milk drinking peoples], attained greater size, greater longevity, and have been much more successful in the rearing of their young. They have been more aggressive than the non-milk using peoples, and have achieved much greater advancement in literature, science and art. They have developed in a higher degree educational and political systems which offer the greatest opportunity for the individual to develop his powers. Such

development has a physiological basis, and there seems every reason to believe that it is fundamentally related to nutrition.(151)

USDA publicist T. Swann Harding was one of many experts who linked perceived ‘dietary deficiency to a deficiency in national character’ among people from China and other Asian countries where dairy was not a central component in most people’s diets (DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 41), writing in 1928 that ‘[t]oday, the Chinese is peaceful, sequacious, unprogressive, unenterprising, nonperservering; his stature is poor, his physique bad, his mortality high’ (cited in DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 41).

The US National Dairy Council joined the chorus of associating white milk with the perceived superiority of white bodies, publishing a pamphlet in the 1920s stating:

The people who have achieved, who have become large, strong, vigorous people, who have reduced their infant mortality, who have the best trades in the world, who have an appreciation for art, literature and music, who are progressive in science and every activity of the human intellect are the people who have used liberal amounts of milk and its products. (DuPuis, *Nature’s Perfect Food* 3)

A 1930s publication about the agricultural history of New York echoed these sentiments:

A casual look at the races of people seems to show that those using much milk are the strongest physically and mentally, and the most enduring of the people of the world. Of all races, the Aryans seem to have been the heaviest drinkers of milk and the greatest users of butter and cheese, a fact that may in part account for the quick and high development of this division of human beings. (Hedrick, 117-18)

Dairy milk has long been associated not only with whiteness but also with a particular form of idealized white masculinity: a US advertisement for milk from the 1930s depicts a smiling blond-haired, blue-eyed boy holding a bottle of milk with the words ‘Milk Makes Men’ splashed across the page (fig. 1). In Sweden, an advertisement from the 1940s shows a muscular light-skinned, blond-haired boy holding a massive glass of milk under the words ‘the milk boy is healthy and strong’ next to an image of a scrawny, slumped-over dark-haired boy drinking from a small coffee cup under the words ‘the coffee boy is feeble and weak’ (fig. 2).



Fig 1. 'Milk Makes Men'. USA, 1930s; Josh Harkinson, 'The Scary New Science That Shows Milk Is Bad For You', *MotherJones.com*, Nov./Dec. 2015 issue, <https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2015/11/dairy-industry-milk-federal-dietary-guidelines/>



Fig 2. 'Pristävlingsbroschyren', Mjölpropagandan. Sweden, 1926. <http://blog.sociologie.de/2014/12/die-moderne-als-bildprogramm/>

Dairy milk consumption has seen a slow and long-term decline in many western countries since the end of the second world war, with the Asia-Pacific region overtaking western Europe as the largest dairy consuming region in the world in 2016 (Levitt; Cohen 268). The rise of plant milk gained increased speed with the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the US, where soy milk appeared as a spiritual and morally healthy food (Du Bois 220; Fu). In the 1980s and 1990s, following soy and other plant milks' increased mainstream popularity, the marketing of plant milk has often been linked to perceived Asian and female-coded traits, such as yoga or promotion of a healthy, less caloric lifestyle (Shurtleff and Aoyagi 1392, 2600). At the same time, as the marketing of dairy milk has expanded to new regions and to new groups of (non-white) people, dairy campaigns, like the Got Milk campaign, have portrayed 'a wide diversity of people in terms of race and social background' drinking milk, forwarding the narrative that dairy-milk-drinking is a universal and everyday practice for everyone (DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food* 218). For the dairy industry this can be read as an economic must, a strategy to enter into new markets and consumer segments on a global scale, especially given the decrease in dairy milk consumption and the increased interest in plant milk in the US and Europe (Du Bois; Levitt).

The association between dairy milk, whiteness, and a particular form of idealized white masculinity persists today, with a 2012 US ad for a product called 'Maxi-Milk' featuring a white, bare-chested man with rippling muscles suspended in air, gripping a rocky cliff with one hand and drinking a bottle of Maxi-Milk with the other (fig. 3). 'Milk for Real Men', the ad proclaims, a modern-day iteration of rhetoric linking white milk to idealized white masculinity that dates back well over a century. The rhetorical link between dairy milk and whiteness that has been used to justify and perpetuate notions of white superiority is also alive and well today, from racist rhetoric in current-day US federal dietary guidelines to members of the alt-right using milk as a symbol of white purity and supremacy (Gambert and Linné; Freeman, 'The Unbearable Whiteness of Milk'; Freeman, 'Milk, a Symbol of Neo-Nazi Hate'; Stănescu, this volume).

As the next section discusses, the alt-right also uses milk to construct tropes of ‘milk masculinities’, with dairy being used to exemplify whiteness and virility and plant milk – in particular soy milk – being used as a symbol of weakness and emasculation.



Fig. 3: ‘Milk for Real Men’. Maxi-Milk, USA, 2012; SeanLerwill.com, 30 Aug. 2012, <http://www.seanlerwill.com/maximusclemaxi-milk/>.



**'Males who completely and utterly lack all necessary masculine qualities':  
Soy milk's role in 21st century tropes of 'plant food masculinity'**

Embedded within the rhetoric of dairy milk's superiority is an inherent rhetoric of exclusion: despite the fact that humans are the only animals that regularly drink the milk of other species as adults, roughly 65% of the world's population lack the genetic mutation that allows them to digest it (Curry). The mutation, known as 'lactase persistence', developed about 7,500 years ago and was more prevalent in certain regions: northern Europe was the largest such 'lactase hotspot', followed by small pockets in the middle east, western Africa, and part of the Indian subcontinent (Curry). Lactase persistence allowed those with the mutation to exploit it on a grand scale: as anthropologist and molecular biologist Joachim Burger said, '[w]ithout milk [ ] everything would have been different. Thirty to 40 per cent of the middle to northern European gene pool would have been different, different people would have taken over the continent, and so on' (cited in Owen).

Fast-forward a few thousand years and dairy milk remains today a central fixture of Western culture despite a majority of people of color not being able to digest it (Cohen). If dairy milk is symbolically connected to Europe and the west, plant milk – and soy milk in particular – has long been associated with a number of Asian cultures<sup>10</sup> (Fu; Linné and McCrow-Young; DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food*; Atkins; Nimmo; Du Bois, Tan, and Mintz). Soy milk traces its roots to the Han Dynasty in China (206 BC to AD 220) (Huang 51), though it was likely not until the sixteenth or seventeenth century that soy milk consumption became more widespread in China (Shurtleff and Aoyagi 5), and it did not become a central part of the Chinese diet until the eighteenth or nineteenth century (Huang 51; Fu).

Much like the 'meat vs. rice' dichotomy of the colonial era (DuPuis, 'Angels and Vegetables', 40; Gompers and Gustadt), the dairy vs. soy milk divide is also used to reinforce racist and sexist stereotypes and assumptions. DuPuis discusses how the perfect whiteness of dairy milk became linked with the white body genetically capable of digesting it: 'By declaring milk perfect, white northern Europeans announced their own perfection' (*Nature's Perfect Food* 11). At the same time, soy milk – associated as it was with Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian,

and Chinese cultural traditions – was linked to inferiority, weakness, and emasculation (Linné and McCrow-Young 200).

Given the longstanding historical nexus between milk and racist and sexist rhetoric, it is unsurprising that the months immediately before and after the Trump inauguration saw milk – both dairy and soy – emerge as the latest symbols to perpetuate alt-right values (Freeman, ‘Milk, a Symbol of Neo-Nazi Hate’; Gambert and Linné; Stănescu this volume). Dairy milk became a symbol of alt-right hyper-masculinity at an event in February 2017 that’s become known as the ‘milk party’: a large gathering of white men – many shirtless and toting cartons of milk – who gathered only weeks after Donald J. Trump’s inauguration to the US presidency. Documented on a live-streaming video, the group was captured screaming racist, sexist, anti-Semitic and homophobic rants.<sup>11</sup>

‘Down with the vegan agenda!’ yelled one bare-chested man at the ‘milk party’, prompting another to go on a long, partially inaudible rant in which he seems to be denouncing the concept of vegans and veganism. ‘This’ he says approvingly into the camera, holding up his carton of milk, ‘meat, protein ...’ he pauses. ‘Plant shit? What do you think we are, pussies?’ He turns to the men behind him. ‘Are we pussies?’ he shrieks. ‘No!!!’ they cheer. ‘Exactly!’<sup>12</sup>

After the ‘milk party’, milk went viral: the #MilkTwitter hashtag appeared in hundreds of tweets with explicitly racist, sexist, and white nationalist content (Freeman, ‘Milk, a Symbol of Neo-Nazi Hate’; Gambert and Linné; Stănescu this volume). ‘Soy boy’, referencing soy milk, became a popular alt-right slur not long after, with the #SoyBoy hashtag going viral in the spring of 2017 and remaining a popular alt-right hashtag today, used against (often white) men whom members of the alt-right perceive to be physically and/or intellectually weak, effeminate, and politically correct (Sommer).<sup>13</sup>

Urban Dictionary – a crowdsourced online dictionary for slang words and phrases – defines the term ‘soy boy’ as follows:

Slang used to describe males who completely and utterly lack all necessary masculine qualities. This pathetic state is usually achieved by an over-indulgence of emasculating products and/or ideologies.

The origin of the term derives from the negative effects soy consumption has been proven to have on the male physique and libido.

The average soy boy is a feminist, nonathletic, has never been in a fight, will probably marry the first girl that has sex with him, and likely reduces all his arguments to labeling the opposition as ‘Nazis.’ See also: cuck, beta/omega male, orbiter, kissless virgin, male feminist.<sup>14</sup>

## Contextualizing #SoyBoy

In order to make sense of the #SoyBoy phenomenon, it must be understood in a variety of contexts: as a contemporary extension of colonial era tropes of plant-food masculinity like the ‘effeminized rice eater’ of the late 19th-century; as a reflection of the way power dynamics manifest in social media spaces; and as an example of the way the alt-right uses irony and humor to advance its often dead-serious views. Activities disseminated on social media form an important aspect of contemporary mediatized culture (Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement; The Political Web*); a number of critical media scholars have analyzed the power relations that play out in these digital spaces and the ways in which they prevent or perpetuate domination and oppression conducted by humans over both other humans and other animals (Almiron et al. 3; Ott and Mack 14; Babe).

Exploring the tweets connected to the #SoyBoy hashtag through this critical lens reveals three broad and interconnecting themes. The first theme, *Soy and the fear of effeminization*, illustrates how soy is portrayed as a contaminating and emasculating substance both literally and metaphorically, a narrative bolstered by references to dubious and cherry-picked ‘science.’ The second theme, *The threat of vegan masculinities and the Soy World Order*, relates to the ways in which vegan men, through their female-coded ideologies of care and compassion that veganism is commonly associated with, pose a threat to both idealized forms of white western masculinity and the entire ‘white nation state’, a conspiracy theory originating in the 1970s US and since

then seen many times in fascist and neo-nazi rhetoric in different contexts (A. Wilson). Finally, the third theme, *Reclaiming #SoyBoy*, illustrates ways in which some men – and women – celebrate and embrace their identity as vegans, feminists, and #SoyBoys, turning the alt-right slur on its head and reclaiming it as a tool of empowerment.

Before exploring these three themes, however, it is necessary to unpack the use of ironic humor as a strategic tool of some members of the alt-right to promote their views.

### Taking alt-right irony seriously

The term ‘alt-right’ was coined in 2008 by perhaps its most famous celebrity, Richard Spencer, who created the term to describe right-wing political views that are at odds with the conservative mainstream establishment (Lyons). A 2017 report about the origins and ideology of the alt-right defined it as ‘a loosely organized far-right movement that emphasizes internet activism, is hostile to both multicultural liberalism and mainstream conservatism, and has had a symbiotic relationship with Donald Trump’s presidential campaign’ (Lyons). *The New York Times* described the alt-right as ‘that shadowy coalition that includes white nationalists, anti-feminists, far-right reactionaries and meme-sharing trolls’ (Roose).

Many dismiss the racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and other offensive rants by members of the alt-right in online spaces as being nothing more than ironic trolling antics targeting politically correct ‘normies’ who can’t take a joke. But irony and ambiguity are worth taking seriously: they are established strategies of alt-right trolls who seek to exploit Poe’s Law: the notion that it’s virtually impossible to distinguish between satire and sincerity online, allowing extremist views to hide in plain sight.<sup>15</sup> As Ryan Milner, author of *The Ambivalent Internet*, explained: ‘Unless you have an obvious marker of another person’s intent, you can’t really gauge their intent. They could be messing around. They could be deadly serious. They could be a mix of both’ (cited in J. Wilson).

For the alt-right, ‘irony has a strategic function. It allows people to disclaim a real commitment to far-right ideas while still espousing them’ (Marwick, cited in J. Wilson 2017). But irony is more than merely a strategy of the alt-right; it is also a characteristic of it. In *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, a report examining far-right online subcultures and their use of social media to spread misinformation, Marwick and Lewis argue that the alt-right is ‘characterized by a deeply ironic, self-referential culture in which anti-Semitism, occult ties, and Nazi imagery can be explained either as entirely sincere or completely tongue-in-cheek’ (12).

All of this is to say that troll culture – along with the ironic tweets, memes, and hashtags that perpetuate it – is ‘a way for fascism to hide in plain sight’ (J. Wilson). And therein lies the real danger of Poe’s Law: not that someone may mistake satire for sincerity but that ‘every ‘ironic’ repetition of far-right ideals contributes to a climate in which racism, misogyny, or Islamophobia is normalised’ (J. Wilson). And because of that, says Angela Nagle, author of *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, ‘[t]he best response is to stubbornly take the ‘alt-right’ at their word.’ In short, ‘the best step may be to meet irony with sincerity’ (J. Wilson).

## **Soy and the fear of effeminization**

‘This is gonna fill you full of estrogen, this is gonna block all your testosterone’, asserts alt-right commentator James Allsup,<sup>16</sup> holding up a carton of soy milk in his ironic-yet-serious YouTube video ‘How to Join Antifa’, in which he suggests that what epitomizes the anti-fascist, feminist, politically correct people he lambasts is that they drink soy instead of dairy milk.<sup>17</sup> Allsup doesn’t simply link soy milk to veganism, feminism, political correctness, and other ideas or values he deems weak or emasculating: he believes soy negatively impacts men’s bodies as well as their minds. ‘We’re gonna be drinking only soy milk’, he continues ironically, ‘and it’s gonna flush all that testosterone – which is a word that means white supremacy – out of your body.’

Allsup is joined by countless others on YouTube, Twitter, and other social media spaces linking soy milk to fears of emasculation and effeminization, often using questionable and cherry-picked ‘science’ to create a narrative that soy consumption is scientifically proven to

emasculate, weaken, and effeminize men. In an 8-minute-long video titled ‘The Truth About Soy Boys’,<sup>18</sup> English YouTube personality Paul Joseph Watson, often described as ‘alt-right’ in his views,<sup>19</sup> asks, ‘Is soy food turning men into massive pussies, and making them more likely to adopt left-wing beliefs?’ Watson goes on to discuss his belief that consuming soy foods, which contain phytoestrogens, leads to a reduction in testosterone and lower sperm count and therefore weaker, more effeminate men. Watson’s video, like Allsup’s, is lighthearted and humorous in tone, but both men reference news stories and scientific articles from the likes of Men’s Health and the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), suggesting that they take the threat of soy seriously.<sup>20</sup>

This practice of relying on cherry-picked ‘science’ to validate alt-right fears and construct tropes of effeminized masculinity mirrors the practices taken by those who perpetrated the trope of the effeminized rice-eater in the 19th century. Esteemed medical and scientific ‘experts’ like Corning, Caffyn, and western nutritionists (DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 40-41) perpetuated the problematic tropes and gave them significant legitimacy by linking sexist and racist beliefs to the aforementioned ‘supposedly non-racist and non-colonialist worldview based on the mutable characteristic of diet instead of an immutable genetics’ (Corning, cited in Stănescu, ‘The Whopper Virgins’ 95). Similarly, members of the alt-right rely on questionable ‘science’ to help justify their own sexist and racist views, ignoring evidence that their sources may be dubious. In reality, an authoritative large-scale meta-analysis study published in 2010 found ‘no effects of soy protein or isoflavones on reproductive hormones in men.’<sup>21</sup>

Not all #SoyBoy tweets link the term ‘soy boy’ to the dubious science of soy’s negative impact on testosterone levels or sperm count: some #SoyBoy tweets focus instead on soy as a metaphor for weakness or effeminization, replacing the natural science narratives about the toxic properties and contamination of soy on male bodies as with narratives about how also moral and social/cultural properties can be transmitted through the consumption of soy (milk). The notion of soy milk having the ‘power of transmission’ (Maillet 17) to confer the (negative) qualities it is perceived to contain to those who consume it builds on a centuries-long narrative of milk having that same transmissive quality (Maillet; Jackson and Leslie 72). Breast milk from wet-nurses in

the 1800s – virtually all poor or working class women – was deemed by medical experts to be ‘contaminated by [their] moral failings’ (Smith 123), and milk from water buffalo in colonial-era India was thought to make people dumb and lazy because the buffalo herself was considered to be ‘unclean, unlucky and a bad omen’ (Wiley, ‘Growing a Nation’ 50-57).

A tweet from October 2017 illustrates how soy is seen as a transmitter of weakness whether it is consumed or not, claiming that ‘Soy is a metaphor for weakness. One can be a soyboy even if soy milk never passes his lips.’<sup>22</sup> Similarly, a tweet from March 4, 2018 illustrates the idea of a ‘soy boy’ being used as a metaphor for emasculation (fig. 4). Depicting a man at what appears to be a women’s rights march smiling proudly holding a ‘U don’t need to be a woman to be feminist’ sign, the caption states, ‘This must be one of those ‘men’ that has a Uterus, I suspect he traded his testicles for it!’ #LayOffThe #SoyBoY #BringBackHisTesticles #March4Women.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 4: ‘U don’t need to be a woman to be a feminist’. Twitter.com, 4 March 2018, <https://twitter.com/BluR4y/status/970314826890260485>.

As with the ‘effeminate rice eater’ trope from colonial times, the trope of the emasculated ‘soy boy’ is associated not only with cherry-picked science but also of racist stereotypes linking broadly ‘Asian’-coded foods – rice and soy – to weakness and emasculation. That can be seen played out in a pair of #SoyBoy tweets (figs. 5 and 6). One, from November 17, 2017, depicts a pale, slender, dark-haired, man who some may consider vaguely ‘Asian’ in appearance wearing lipstick and eye makeup; the tweet says ‘I hereby propose a Constitutional Amendment banning soy products for American males.’ The other, dated October 5, 2017, depicts a pink-and-purple ‘feminine’ coded Japanese anime character with sparkling purple eyes; the character is holding a bottle of Soylent soy milk and the caption reads ‘Started buying @soylent for my son, he’s a bonafide #SoyBoy now!’



Fig. 5 ‘Constitutional Amendment’.  
Twitter.com, 17 November 2017.  
User account suspended.



Fig. 6: ‘Soylent SoyBoy’,  
Twitter.com, October 2017.  
[https://twitter.com/RakkettRahu/  
status/916101095646261248](https://twitter.com/RakkettRahu/status/916101095646261248)

Twitter is not the only space in popular culture perpetuating these colonial-era narratives linking Asian people – and their diets perceived to be laden with foods like rice and soy – to stereotypes of weakness and femininity: a 2016 book called *Pussification: The Effeminization of the American*



*Male* features an image of an Asian-looking man on the cover, grinning broadly and taking a selfie (Giles, fig. 7).<sup>24</sup> The unspoken implication is clear: Asian men, as a broad category, exemplify effeminate masculinities that many in the alt-right loathe and fear.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 7. Doug Giles, *Pussification*. White Feather Press 2016. Amazon.com, <https://www.amazon.com/Pussification-Effeminization-American-Doug-Giles/dp/1618081454>

At the heart of the alt-right fear of soy's literal or symbolic effeminizing properties and its perceived links to racist stereotypes about Asian cultures appears to be an anxiety closely related to the one that fueled the colonial trope of the 'effeminate [Asian] rice eater.' Stănescu identified the trope at play in his analysis of Burger King's *Whopper Virgin* advertising campaign, which he argued was a success 'because of the linkages they made between the consuming of meat from Western style fast food restaurants and the stereotype of 'the effeminate rice eater' which has a long history of being deployed as a rhetorical means to naturalize colonialism and

xenophobia’ (‘The Whopper Virgins’ 91). Stănescu argued that ‘[t]he widespread appeal of *Whopper Virgins* to an American audience lies in the continuation of an argument, formerly made during colonization, that non-western countries lack appropriate levels of ‘masculinity’, virile ‘willpower’, and technological innovation, because they do not eat enough Western style meat’ (‘The Whopper Virgins’ 110). ‘The sort of implicit argument’, explains Stănescu, ‘seems to be that even white men (like the white working class men before them) run the risk of becoming “effeminate [Asian] rice eaters” if they do not learn to consume enough Western style meat’ (Stănescu, ‘The Whopper Virgins’ 99, citing DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’).

Today, colonial era stereotypes linking Asian cultures – and by extension foods like soy that are staples in many Asian diets – to notions of weakness and emasculation persist in the viral retweeting of the #SoyBoy hashtag, dressed up as ironic memes and packaged for a 21st-century digital audience. But Asian men aren’t the only targets of alt-right rhetoric: vegan men are their enemy too, with narratives prejudicing and belittling vegan men proliferating perhaps because there are more female than male vegans or perhaps because of the symbolic connection between veganism and caring for others, which will be explored more closely in the next section.

## **The threat of vegan masculinities and the ‘Soy World Order’**

It may be unsurprising that vegans are often the target of #SoyBoy taunts. After all, vegans drink soy (or other plant milk) instead of dairy. But there are other components involved in the formulation of a ‘vegan masculinity’ that cause it to be the antithesis of the idealized white male archetypal ‘dairy masculinity’ that has been prevalent since the late 19th century.<sup>26</sup> A primary characteristic of ‘vegan masculinity’ as it is portrayed in #SoyBoy rhetoric is care and compassion, both for other humans and other animals alike. Scholars like Donovan and Dunayer have noted how in western culture caring about and for other animals, including working at rescues and participating in the work of animal rights or animal welfare organizations, has historically been women’s work (Kemmerer 1). Today, on Twitter and other digital media

platforms, this stereotype is reinforced. A vegan masculinity of care and compassion is the antithesis to ‘the man as hunter’ stereotype that supports alt-right tropes of idealized meat-eating masculinity (Kheel; Kalof and Fitzgerald).<sup>27</sup> A blend of racism, sexism, and speciesism combine to shape alt-right discourses about ‘the vegan agenda’ and the effeminate and politically correct vegan men who supposedly perpetuate it (Wyckoff). These discourses ridicule and target vegans – and in particular vegan men – as effeminate, childish, and naive for not focusing on the more important human-centered problems of the world. These same discourses can even be seen inside academia and in discussions of what constitutes ‘real science’ in the rhetoric of opponents to animal advocates and their work (Birke; Glasser and Roy).<sup>28</sup>

Another component in the construction of vegan masculinities on Twitter and other digital media spaces is the depiction of plant-based food as something lesser than ‘real’ animal-based food. As posted in a link connected to a #SoyBoy tweet on February 19th, 2018:

‘Soy’ really is the perfect metaphor for a kind of falseness that faux-male ‘Soyboys’ represent. A soy-burger is a fake substitute for a burger. Soy milk is fake milk. Soy milk and soy burgers justify their existence by claiming to be healthier and more virtuous than the originals, but deep down inside we feel that those claims are false [...] There is nothing great about soy. Soy is moral posturing made edible, and it tastes like garbage. (Shepherd)<sup>29</sup>

That plant-based food is framed as something lesser-than and inauthentic compared to ‘real’ and ‘natural’ animal-based food can, borrowing ideas from Miller’s 2012 study exploring the ramifications of ‘vegetarian meat’ (45), be seen as a variation on how ideas of ‘the natural’ functions as a ‘reassertion of patriarchal or hetero-normative (for example) orthodoxies’ connecting to popular cultural tropes of plant-based foods as ‘reversing the order of nature’.

This discourse also works as a metaphor for vegan men being not only inauthentic, but also embracing of traits traditionally coded as feminine, resulting in them being lesser men than ‘real’ (white) men. Ultimately, the alt-right’s construction of a vegan masculinity is also the construction of a masculinity of abnormality and anomaly, one that threatens to contaminate the body of those who consume soy products. This narrative can be seen in #SoyBoy tweets linking

to dubious scientific articles published in places like the far-right American conspiracy theorist and fake news media platform Infowars.com, alleging the emasculating properties of soy as detailed earlier in this article.<sup>30</sup>

The fear of soy articulated in #SoyBoy tweets is used as a proxy and a metaphor to target what is seen as an attempt of politically correct, liberal, feminist vegans that pose a threat to everything from meat-eating to gun ownership and, in the end, to whiteness and Western culture at large.<sup>31</sup> The ‘Fall of the Western Man’ tweet (fig. 8) from April 2, 2018 exemplifies these fears, juxtaposing a traditional view of masculinity – an image as taken from the 1940s milk propaganda described by DuPuis (*Nature’s Perfect Food*) – with the degenerate soy-consuming ‘betaman’, a result of a feminization of men on a societal level.<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 8: ‘The Fall of Western Man’. Twitter.com, 2 April 2018, <https://twitter.com/GZCon98/status/980604732870819840>

These discourses build on a prevalent narrative among far-right fascist and neo-nazi groups, one about traditional western culture, gender, and family values – and by extension the entire Western nation state – being threatened by politically correct, non-white, and feminist vegans.

<sup>33</sup> The Soy World Order, the Vegan Agenda, and ‘deep soy state’ are alt-right codewords for these deadpan-humor takes on conspiracy theories that are prevalent on Twitter hashtags such as #SoyBoy.<sup>34</sup>

## Reclaiming #SoyBoy

In 2006, Japanese commentator and sociologist Maki Fukasawa coined the term *soshokukei danshi* – literally translated as ‘herbivorous boy’ or ‘grass-eating boy’ – to describe ‘the proliferation of men who, in appearance and attitude, bear little resemblance to the two dominant Japanese male groups of the past century: soldiers and their peacetime offspring, corporate warriors’ (McCurry). Sometimes referred to as *ojo-men* – ‘ladylike men’ – it appears at first glance as though men who are called *soshokukei danshi* are being branded with another offensive version of the old ‘effeminate rice eater’ rhetoric from the colonial era. Interestingly, it is not so. In fact, between 60-75% of Japanese men in their 20s and 30s self-identify as *soshokukei danshi* (Harney), a strong indication that being a ‘herbivorous boy’ is a proud identity, one ‘of a new tribe of Japanese men who have eschewed traditional notions of masculinity and adopted a gentler, more “feminine” persona’ (McCurry).

A similar phenomenon has taken place with the #SoyBoy hashtag as well. While a majority of #SoyBoy tweets contain rhetoric that perpetuates sexist and racist stereotypes designed to ridicule men who fail to embody an idealized version of white, meat-eating, conservative masculinity, a number of people – mostly men but some women and gender nonbinary people too – have used the hashtag to celebrate and embrace their identity as vegans, feminists, and #SoyBoys, turning the alt-right slur on its head and reclaiming it as a tool of

empowerment. The reappropriation of the ‘soy boy’ trope manifests in a number of different ways, some of which reinforce the idea of there being an idealized form of masculinity connected to strength, power, and muscularity, and others rejecting mainstream norms of masculinity altogether.

A number of male vegan athletes and bodybuilders use the #SoyBoy hashtag to accompany images of themselves boasting of their strength and power on a plant-based diet (fig. 9), explicitly embracing the ‘soy boy’ identity and sometimes using accompanying hashtags like #plantbuilt or #plantstrong.<sup>35</sup> Sometimes the tweets explicitly link physical strength to the ethics of care within veganism: one tweet depicts former NFL player David Carter, the self-described ‘300 pound vegan’,<sup>36</sup> lifting weights behind the quote ‘you don’t have to take a life to gain muscle’ (fig. 10).



Fig. 9: Vegan Athlete. *Twitter.com*, 13 Dec. 2017, <https://twitter.com/meatymcsorley/status/941044253240672256>.



Fig. 10: '300 lb vegan #soyboy'. *Twitter.com*, 3 July 2018, [https://twitter.com/narcissist\\_ghst/status/1014233764552232960](https://twitter.com/narcissist_ghst/status/1014233764552232960).

The #SoyBoy hashtag is sometimes used in more generic posts by the vegan community, accompanying images of vegan food.<sup>37</sup> Like the athlete, bodybuilding, and other #SoyBoy tweets depicting stereotypically masculine men, the point of these tweets appears to be to create a narrative where a vegan 'soyboy' lifestyle can be not only sufficient but even *superior* to a dairy-and-meat-based diet, *even* for strong masculine western men (or women).<sup>38</sup>

Other tweets seek to reframe the 'soy boy' term to establish a new norm of soy-based masculinity while still explicitly embracing aspects relating to traditional expressions of masculinity. For example, in a tweet from July 30, 2018 (fig. 11), a user named @scottbravo tweeted a photo, presumably of himself, depicting a man's torso, legs, and muscular tattooed arms, with the following caption:

I've been getting called a #soyboy lately. I'm assuming that's a well muscled, well hung, funny, gorgeous, impeccably dressed guitar playing boy(?) that likes....soy? I like the sauce I guess.....#BlueWave #BuddhistWave #ChangeTheWorld #BlueTsunami #ComeSeeMe<sup>39</sup>



Fig. 11: 'Well muscled #soyboy'. Twitter.com, 30 July 2018,  
<https://twitter.com/scottbravo/status/1024059196826943489>

Another tactic used by some #SoyBoy tweeters is to leverage scientific findings and other authoritative research to subvert the alt-right pseudo-scientific rhetoric so prevalent on #Soyboy. A number of tweets referenced the irony of #SoyBoy being primarily used to cast vegan men as effeminate given that it is hard to imagine a more feminine-coded substance than estrogen-filled animal milk, a substance created within the breasts of female mammals.<sup>40</sup> Others share scientific articles themselves, one of them referencing research indicating that '[v]egan men have significantly higher testosterone than vegetarian or meat eating men'.<sup>41</sup>

Some tweets seek to explicitly 'reclaim' #SoyBoy, reappropriating the trope as a tool of empowerment for people interested in rejecting not only mainstreams norms of masculinity but also age-old distinctions between people coded as 'men' or as 'women.' Reappropriation is a powerful tool in the cultivation of identity and power: research indicates that the practice of



reappropriating and reclaiming derogatory words (such as *queer* and *bitch*) leads to an increase in the perception of power felt by the person labeling herself with the derogatory term (Galinsky et al. 2028). The practice also increases other people’s perceptions about the degree of power held by both the person reclaiming the derogatory term and the stigmatized group she belongs to (Galinsky et al. 2028).<sup>42</sup>

In a tweet from April 30, 2018, the user @yungBokonon said:

it would be nice to see leftist men start reclaiming ‘soyboy.’ like ‘yeah I’m a soyboy, I’m modeling a socially non-toxic masculinity that’s all about being comradely to humans & nonhumans of all genders, plant-based diets are ecologically sound & unthreatening to my manhood’.<sup>43</sup>

And on October 28, 2017, a woman named Jillian Foster identified herself as a #SoyBoy, reappropriating a term typically used to emasculate men and describing it as an act of personal empowerment.<sup>44</sup>

Call me a ‘soy boy’ anytime you want. I’m reclaiming this ridiculousness #soyboy  
#MakeAmericaSoyBoyAgain

By including an image taken from another #SoyBoy tweet – originally posted by a member of the alt-right intended to ridicule members of the mainstream ‘liberal’ media – showing a lineup of mainstream male media celebrities doctored to depict them wearing the pink ‘pussy hats’ popularized by feminists of all genders in the wake of the revelation of Donald Trump’s ‘grab ‘em by the pussy’ comment and in connection with the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington (fig. 12), Foster’s tweet reminds the viewer of other recent examples of the power of reappropriation.<sup>45</sup>



Fig. 12: 'Reclaiming this ridiculousness'. *Twitter.com*, 28 Oct. 2017, <https://twitter.com/jillianfoster/status/924339887670812672>.

## Conclusion

Given that we live in a world steeped in 'coloniality' (Grosfoguel)<sup>46</sup> it is no wonder that sexist and racist colonial-era tropes are alive and well today, packaged in a 21st-century digital culture form. Examples of the manifestation of 'coloniality' in today's society abound: ever since the introduction of industrially-produced soy products in the west in the early 20th century, soy has been discursively framed as a non-western food challenging traditional western norms, identities, and bodies (Du Bois 220; Fu; Gurel). This article shows that there is a long history of what Gurel, writing about yoghurt, calls a 'fetishization' of dairy milk masculinities and whiteness (74), as well as a long history of denigrating things coded as Asian, feminine, and plant-based. In today's digital media landscape and the digital politics of the alt-right, dairy milk has become a symbol for racial purity, connecting pseudo-scientific claims about milk, lactose

tolerance, race, and masculinity. For members of the alt-right, dairy milk symbolizes strength of body and society; drinking it reinforces notions of white superiority and idealized visions of masculinity. The politicization of soy in racist and sexist discourses and the term ‘soy boy’ provides a discursive counterpoint, relying heavily on late 19th and early 20th-century stereotypes of so-called ‘effeminate’ plant eating, often linked to Asian and other non-white cultures. Soy milk represents weakness, emasculation, and all things politically correct, but also a real threat of a possible shift in power away from white males and towards women, people of color, and those embodying nontraditional masculinities. Indeed, with vegans of all genders reclaiming the #SoyBoy hashtag to disrupt alt-right masculine ideals and up to 75% of young men in Japan eschewing old-fashioned gender norms and embracing the ‘herbivorous boy’ label, it seems that a new, empowered, and norm-shifting version of ‘plant food masculinity’ is disrupting outdated and rigid notions of gender roles and identities.

Despite the recent rise in the popularity of plant milk and other plant-based foods in the West,<sup>47</sup> alt-right rhetoric ridiculing vegans is not the only cultural force at play when it comes to shifting norms around meat and dairy consumption. In traditional non-dairy Asian countries like China, dairy consumption is strongly on the rise, partly due to increased urbanization and a shift toward western-style diets with the growing wealth of the middle class.<sup>48</sup> And in Europe, a recent study from the University of Southampton found that young men ‘are afraid to choose the vegetarian option in a restaurant for fear of being socially shunned’, even if they dislike meat or are unable to eat it for health reasons.<sup>49</sup>

Herein lies the potential of a vegan movement that centralizes the dynamics of race, culture, and gender (Harper; Deckha 530) to disrupt normative white-masculine dairy culture. Black feminist geographer and critical race theorist A. Breeze Harper has reflected that she ‘[has] observed that mainstream vegan outreach models and top selling vegan-oriented books rarely, if ever, acknowledge such differing socio-historically racialized epistemologies amongst the white middle class status quo and the collectivity of other racial groups, such as African Americans, Chinese-Americans, or Native Americans’ (6). She reminds us that:

[the] underlying assumption amongst mainstream vegan media is that racialization and the production of vegan spaces are disconnected. However, space, vegan or not, is

raced and simultaneously sexualized and gendered directly affecting individuals and place identities. (Harper 6, following Dwyer and Jones; McKittrick; McKittrick and Woods; Price; Massey; Moss)

The affordances of digital media have changed the conditions for all forms of political activism (Dahlgren, *The Political Web*; Castells). And just like other social movements, or indeed the alt-right, the animal rights and vegan movement's use of digital media has been important as a coordinating tool, for recruitment of activists, to disseminate information, and for opinion building (Almiron et al.). For those working to reframe centuries-old norms and tropes related to race, sex, and humankind's relationship to other animals, part of that work may also take place online. Feminist viral hashtags like #ShePersisted and #NastyWoman illustrate the viral power of social media to reframe narratives, turn derogatory language on its head, and breathe new life and power into formerly insulting and belittling words.<sup>50</sup> That's the power of social media, after all, and the power of language: to constantly shift and change over time, to assert and reclaim power, to change norms, to reframe tropes in pursuit of a more inclusive and enlightened world. But ultimately the power of social media to change norms and minds depends on the power of the social movements driving those changes; success is likely to only come through a robust anti-racist, color-conscious, and gender-conscious vegan movement (Harper).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The alt-right is somewhat murky and hard-to-define; the term itself has been described as 'accommodatingly imprecise', explaining that it both 'describes an aggressive trolling culture . . . that loathes establishment liberalism and conservatism, embraces irony and in-jokes, and uses extreme speech to provoke anger in others' while also denoting 'a loosely affiliated aggregation of blogs, forums, podcasts, and Twitter personalities united by a hatred of liberalism, feminism, and multiculturalism (Marwick and Lewis 2017: 11).

<sup>2</sup> An analysis of the alt-right's strategic use of ironic humor is discussed later in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The art installation was called He Will Not Divide Us:

<http://www.movingimage.us/exhibitions/2017/01/20/detail/hewillnotdivide-us/>.

The 'milk party' can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nuSuVf5km4>. See also [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTy6f\\_HyuQU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTy6f_HyuQU).

<sup>4</sup> Another example that makes for a fascinating counterpoint to #MilkTwitter and #SoyBoy is a recent viral hashtag cropping up in the UK: #Gammon (or #WallOfGammon). 'Gammon' is a type of traditional British pork-based food, and here the term is being used by people on the left to insult the very same right-wing white men who are likely to be using #MilkTwitter and #SoyBoy against the left (Chakelian 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Each tweet was saved as a printout, re-read, sorted, and systematized.

<sup>6</sup> Gurel (2016) describes for example how yogurt in the US has been marketed as 'a sweet, girly snack – a food that marked its consumers as not just feminine but also white and elite.'

<sup>7</sup> The perceived association between meat and masculinity is even older than colonialism: Marta Zaraska, author of *Meathooked: The History and Science of Our 2.5-Million-Year Obsession With Meat*, posits that '[t]he connection between meat and masculinity has been with us for 2.5-million years, basically since we've started scavenging for rotten zebras on the savanna. . . . For centuries men limited women's access to meat – in many cultures there are taboos on women eating certain types of meats, sometimes even punished by death.' Zaraska cautions, however, that despite longstanding associations between meat and masculinity, 'there is no biological reason for men to require meat. There is no single compound that men just must obtain from meat and that nothing else can provide. The connection between meat and masculinity is purely cultural' (Weill).

<sup>8</sup> While rhetoric characterizing women as 'the weaker sex' was widespread and mainstream, it was not uncontested: examples abound of women of the era pushing back against these sexist assumptions. Perhaps most notable was African-American abolitionist and women's rights

activist Sojourner Truth's famous *Ain't I a Woman* speech from the Women's Rights Convention in 1851, in which she proclaimed:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.

Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place!

And ain't I a woman?

Look at me!

Look at my arm!

I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me!

And ain't I a woman?

I could work as much and eat as much as a man – when I could get it – and bear the lash as well!

And ain't I a woman?

See <https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen coined the phrase 'milk colonialism', explaining that '[m]ilk, which can be described as a 'conquering colonial commodity', has been caught up in some of the central tensions of nationalist projects both in the metropolises and their colonies' (Cohen 269).

<sup>10</sup> While soy has long associations with Asia – especially east and southeast Asia – not all countries in Asia have a historical relationship to soy, and a number, including India, actually have significant and longstanding relationships with dairy.

<sup>11</sup> The exhibit was called *He Will Not Divide Us*:

<http://www.movingimage.us/exhibitions/2017/01/20/detail/hewillnotdivide-us/>.

The 'milk party' can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nuSuVf5km4>.

<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTy6f\\_HyuQU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTy6f_HyuQU), with the pertinent part starting at 1:50.

<sup>13</sup> The timing of these hashtags going viral in the months after Trump took office does not seem to be a coincidence: both #MilkTwitter and #SoyBoy are rife with tweets referencing the poster's support of Trump and his 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) rhetoric. For example, see

<https://twitter.com/Boo3zero5/status/1014561386188431360> (July 4, 2018) and

<https://twitter.com/DBHnBuckhead2/status/976260180915707910> (March 20, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> SoyBoy, Urban Dictionary:

<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Soy%20Boy>.

<sup>15</sup> Poe's Law, Know Your Meme: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pires-law>.

<sup>16</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Allsup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Allsup).

<sup>17</sup> See *How to Join Antifa*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-cPEAohPhw>.

<sup>18</sup> The Truth About Soy Boys: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTSvLKY7HEk>.

<sup>19</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_Joseph\\_Watson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Joseph_Watson).

<sup>20</sup> The Men's Health article frequently referenced on social media is:

<https://www.menshealth.com/nutrition/a19539170/soys-negative-effects/>. The NCBI article is: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20171261>.

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19524224>. Many tweets using the #SoyBoy hashtag perpetuate the 'soy effeminizes men' narrative even without referencing scientific studies or authorities. For example, a tweet from July 30, 2018 reads:

DON'T BE #SOYBOY! Real men, very strong men avoid eating soy products, so should be you. Don't grow fat tits, don't code in #php #JavaScript #ruby! Eat damn steaks, program in C, Haskell and Lisp! <https://twitter.com/zhirkow/status/1024429659201712128>.

<sup>22</sup> See

[https://twitter.com/HonorAndDaring/status/922532568469262336?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E922532568469262336&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.shortlist.com%2Fnews%2Fsoy-boy-alt-right-insult%2F331922](https://twitter.com/HonorAndDaring/status/922532568469262336?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E922532568469262336&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.shortlist.com%2Fnews%2Fsoy-boy-alt-right-insult%2F331922) (Oct. 23, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/BluR4y/status/970314826890260485> (March 4, 2018); see also: <https://twitter.com/HiCaliberLilGal/status/954748402352320512> (January 20, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> The Amazon author page for the book's author, Doug Giles, includes this description: 'Doug's interests include guns, big game hunting, big game fishing, fine art, cigars, helping wounded warriors, and being a big pain in the butt to people who dislike God and the USA.' See <https://www.amazon.com/Doug-Giles/e/B001JS6DTE>.

<sup>25</sup> This paper's use of broad terms like 'Asian people,' 'Asian culture,' and 'Asian men' is not intended to imply that these are homogeneous categories devoid of a multitude of cultural, political, historical, and other distinctions. Rather, these generic terms are used because they reflect the reality that the alt-right paints with a broad brush and does not make nuanced distinctions between people and cultures within Asia.

<sup>26</sup> Despite significant anti-vegan rhetoric among the alt-right, there is in fact a vocal minority of far-right vegans, a phenomenon discussed in an October 2017 article in Vice (de Coning 2017).

<sup>27</sup> <https://twitter.com/JolieCallison/status/1030563373694570496> (August 17, 2018)

<sup>28</sup> See <https://twitter.com/EssexJarv/status/1031572034764132355> (August 20, 2017)

<sup>29</sup> The text goes on to say 'The modern Soyboy is bland, distasteful, unhealthy and inauthentic, just like Soy. He ascribes to a smug postmodern Soy-ethics that could even be called a Soy-religion. He has a Soy-body and Soy-opinions. The Soyboy claims to be better than the original, but everyone knows that's not true.'

<sup>30</sup> For example, see Daniels 2018: <https://www.infowars.com/study-reveals-science-behind-soy-boys/>

See also <https://twitter.com/GZCon98/status/980604732870819840> (April 2nd 2018)



<sup>31</sup> Linking to hashtags such as #itsokaytobewhite (See <https://twitter.com/GZCon98/status/980604732870819840> (April 2nd 2018))

<sup>32</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/GZCon98/status/980604732870819840> (April 2, 2018)

<sup>33</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/NotTheSthEaston/status/972630929402310656> (March 10, 2018)

See: <https://twitter.com/DVATW/status/932742889020502016> (November 20, 2017)

<sup>34</sup> See: <https://twitter.com/CantuKris/status/915072258481168385> (November 20, 2017)

See: <https://twitter.com/CantuKris/status/892710914734030848> (August 2, 2017)

<sup>35</sup> <https://twitter.com/athlegan/status/983245474659471360>

<https://twitter.com/palegoon/status/971122823866605568>

<https://twitter.com/cabbagebrains/status/947227741627150336>

<https://twitter.com/meatymcsorley/status/941044253240672256>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.300poundvegan.com/about/>

<sup>37</sup> [https://twitter.com/herbivore\\_club/status/960997125663444992](https://twitter.com/herbivore_club/status/960997125663444992) (February 6, 2018)

<sup>38</sup> [https://twitter.com/herbivore\\_club/status/960997125663444992](https://twitter.com/herbivore_club/status/960997125663444992) (December 3, 2017)

<sup>39</sup> <https://twitter.com/scottdbravo/status/1024059196826943489>

<sup>40</sup> As in one tweet from May 27, 2018:

<https://twitter.com/misternegative/status/1000883849071681536> :

Soyboy. I've been called that one a lot all week. Ironically, milk promotes excess estrogen in the body due to it containing estrogen from female cows. And not to humblebrag, but I'm confident I'm stronger, faster, smarter, and more capable than almost any of them :) see also

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/04/milk-hormones-cancer-pregnant-cows-estrogen/>

<https://twitter.com/TheVeganPunk/status/989438783341973506>

<sup>41</sup> <https://twitter.com/sentientist/status/931530547955929088> (November 7, 2017) (linking to a 2000 article from the *British Journal of Cancer*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2374537/pdf/83-6691152a.pdf>).

<sup>42</sup> See also Gregoire, 2017: ‘Tony Thorne, a linguist and slang specialist at King’s College London, said this type of reversal can be a very effective means of shifting meanings and perceptions associated with certain language. ‘To take words used as slurs by Trump or Trumpists, like “nasty woman” or “bad hombre”, and use them as your own identity label — especially in the context of memes or tweets where savage sarcasm and irony are rife — is effective, amusing and gets a message across’, Thorne told The Huffington Post. Thorne added that the term ‘pussy’ has in recent years been reclaimed at least twice, ‘in the feminist activist “pussy power” in the U.S., and Vladimir Putin’s nemesis girl group Pussy Riot’.

<sup>43</sup> <https://twitter.com/yungBokonon/status/991090742721503232>

<sup>44</sup> <https://twitter.com/jillianjfooster/status/924339887670812672> (October 28, 2017)

<sup>45</sup> See Pussyhat Project, <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/faq/>.

<sup>46</sup> Scholar Ramón Grosfoguel describes the term ‘coloniality’ to ‘address “colonial situations” in the present period in which colonial administrations have almost been eradicated from the capitalist world-system’. He writes:

By ‘colonial situations’ I mean the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialized/ethnic groups by dominant racialized/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations. Five hundred years of European colonial expansion and domination formed an international division of labor between Europeans and non-Europeans that is reproduced in the present so-called ‘postcolonial’ phase of the capitalist world-system (Wallerstein 1979, 1995). Today the core zones of the capitalist world-economy overlap with predominantly white/ European/ Euro-American societies such as Western Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States, while peripheral zones overlap with previously colonized non-European people. Japan is the only exception that confirms the rule.

Japan was never colonized nor dominated by Europeans and, similar to the West, played an active role in building its own colonial empire... The mythology about the 'decolonization of the world' obscures the continuities between the colonial past and current global colonial/racial hierarchies and contributes to the invisibility of 'coloniality' today. (Grosfoguel)

<sup>47</sup> Dairy milk consumption has fallen in both in traditionally high milk-consuming countries in Europe and in the US, where sales of dairy milk decreased by 7% in 2015 and are projected to drop another 11% through 2020. See *US Sales of Dairy Milk Turn Sour as Non-Dairy Milk Sales Grow 9% in 2015*. Mintel Press Office, April 20, 2016, <http://www.mintel.com/press-centre/food-and-drink/us-sales-of-dairy-milk-turn-sour-as-non-dairy-milk-sales-grow-9-in-2015>.

At the same time, plant milk sales are on the rise, with an expected increase in market value of dairy milk alternatives worldwide from 2013 to 2024 of over 500%. See *Market Value of Dairy Milk Alternatives Worldwide from 2013 to 2024, by Category (in Million U.S. dollars)*. Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/693015/dairy-alternatives-global-sales-value-by-category/>.

<sup>48</sup> See Nicola M. Shadbolt and Dhananjay Apparaob, *Factors Influencing the Dairy Trade from New Zealand*. IFAMA 2016, [https://www.ifama.org/resources/Documents/v19ib/14\\_Shadbolt.pdf](https://www.ifama.org/resources/Documents/v19ib/14_Shadbolt.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> 'Men Fear Social Shame of Ordering Vegetarian Dishes, Study Finds', *The Telegraph*, August 26, 2018, [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/26/men-fear-social-shame-ordering-vegetarian-dishes-study-finds/?WT.mc\\_id=tmg\\_share\\_fb](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/08/26/men-fear-social-shame-ordering-vegetarian-dishes-study-finds/?WT.mc_id=tmg_share_fb). The yearlong research study found that men 'experienced 'social isolation' among friends after admitting to reducing their consumption of meat.'

<sup>50</sup> See Leah Fessler, *#ShePersisted is more powerful as a rallying cry for women than #NastyWoman could ever be*. *Quartz*, 10 Feb 2017, at

<https://qz.com/905765/shepersisted-is-more-powerful-as-a-rallying-cry-for-women-than-nastywoman-could-ever-be/>

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