

The Snake: Trump's White Genocide Parable

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From start to finish, Donald Trump's campaign speeches featured a xenophobic story about a snake. Sometimes he acknowledged the source, a 1968 soul song by Al Wilson, even as he claimed his version was 'an upgrade.'¹ Trump rarely if ever mentioned – and perhaps he didn't even know – that the song, 'The Snake,' was based on an Aesop fable, 'The Farmer and the Viper,' which was first reworked into a song by another Black singer and activist, Oscar Brown Jr, in 1963. Brown's daughter complained that Trump, a person with a long history of making racist statements, was repurposing the words of her father, a Black singer, 'to promote his hate message and intolerance.'²

As Brown's daughter's remarks suggest, 'The Snake' illustrates how Trump used racist dog whistles and fearmongering to appeal to a larger White nationalist audience that included far-right extremists obsessed with the threat of White genocide, a hypermasculine concept. In the remainder of these brief forum remarks, I unpack this argument, which I discuss in detail in *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US*.³

The link between the snake, far-right extremism, hypermasculinity, and race is evident from Trump's framing of the story, which centered on non-White immigrants, terrorists, and criminals threatening the body politic, symbolized by the 'tender-hearted woman.' 'Biden would make every city in America a sanctuary city,' Trump warned days before the 2020 presidential election. 'The Biden/Harris plan would also increase refugees 700%, opening floodgates to radical Islamic terrorism [...] I'm keeping terrorists, jihadists, and violent extremists out of our country.'⁴ After making such remarks, Trump would pull a sheet out of his inner jacket pocket and begin reading:

- 1 'Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Rally in Vienna, Ohio,' *C-Span*, 14 March 2016, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?406532-101/trump-rally-vienna-ohio-preliminaries>> [accessed 8 June 2021].
- 2 Leinz Valles, 'Trump Twisting Meaning of 'The Snake' Lyrics, say Oscar Brown Jr's Daughters,' *CNN*, 27 February 2018, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/27/politics/the-snake-africa-oscar-brown-jr-daughters-trump-don-lemon-cnntv/index.html>> [accessed 8 June 2021]. On Oscar Brown's life, see 'Oscar Brown Jr,' <www.oscاربrownjr.org> [accessed 8 June 2021].
- 3 Alexander Laban Hinton, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US* (New York University Press, 2021).
- 4 'Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Hickory, North Carolina November 1,' *Rev*, 1 November 2020, <<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech>> [accessed 10 June 2021].

Journal of Perpetrator Research 4.1(2021), 59–68
doi: 10.21039/jpr.4.1.102 © 2021 by the Author



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On her way to work one morning
 Down the path along the lake
 A tender-hearted woman saw a poor half-frozen snake.
 His pretty colored skin had been all frosted with the dew
 'Oh well' she cried, 'I'll take you in, and I'll take care of you'
 'Take me in oh tender woman
 Take me in, for heaven's sake
 Take me in oh tender woman,' sighed the broken snake.

She wrapped him up all cozy in a curvature of silk
 Then laid him by the fireside with honey and some milk
 Now she hurried home from work that night as soon as she arrived,
 She found that pretty snake she'd taken in had been revived, she was happy
 'Take me in, oh tender woman,
 Take me in, for heaven's sake,
 Take me in oh tender woman,' sighed the broken snake.

Now she clutched him to her bosom, 'You're so beautiful,' she cried.
 'But if I hadn't brought you in by now, heavens, you might have died.'
 Now she stroked his pretty skin and then she kissed him and held him tight
 But instead of saying thank you, that snake gave her a vicious bite!
 'Take me in, oh tender woman,
 Take me in, for heaven's sake,
 Take me in oh tender woman,' sighed that vicious snake.

'I saved you,' cried that woman,
 'And you've bit me heavens why?
 You know your bite is poisonous and now I'm going to die!'
 'Oh shut up, silly woman,' said the reptile with a grin,
 'You knew damn well I was a snake before you took me in.'

As he read, Trump emphasized certain words, like 'vicious,' and, especially, the last line of the story. Afterward, the crowds would cheer, wave 'Make America Great Again' signs, and sometimes chant 'U.S.A, U.S.A, U.S.A.'⁵

5 Eli Rosenberg, "The Snake": How Trump Appropriated a Radical Black Singer's Lyrics for Immigration Fearmongering,' *The Washington Post*, 24 February 2018, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/02/24/the-snake-how-trump-appropriated-a-radical-black-singers-lyrics-for-refugee-fearmongering/>> [accessed 9 June 2021].

At first glance, the message of Trump's rendition of 'The Snake' is clear: it is a story warning of the dangers of immigration and the need for a hypermasculine response. More abstractly, the story underscores the menace posed by others not of 'our kind' (the snake) who are allowed past a threshold (the boundary separating 'us' and 'them') and into a domestic space (the home of 'our kind') where they afflict, contaminate, and destroy 'our kind' (the 'tender-hearted woman'). The story suggests the need for vigilance and protection to avoid the fate of the innocent and naive woman, who is also associated with fertility and regeneration.

In addition, 'The Snake' taps directly into racial caricatures, suggesting that those not of 'our kind' have a dangerous and destructive nature. When asked about 'The Snake' in an interview, Trump's former campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, emphasized how it was used to speak to the issues of immigration and criminality. The snake, explained Lewandowski, effectively says to the woman,

Well, I'm a snake, right? And so you brought me into your home, and it's hard to believe that you didn't know what I was. I'm a professional killer, right? Just because you brought me in doesn't mean I wasn't going to ultimately revert back to my basic form.⁶

This language of reversion to a 'basic' form essentializes and racializes non-White (immigrant) difference.

Trump's campaign readings of 'The Snake' echoed his broader White nationalist political messaging. Indeed, Trump's earliest recitations of 'The Snake' occurred in January 2016 around the time when Stephen Miller – who had been working with Senator (and future Trump Attorney General) Jeff Sessions to fight recent GOP-moderate immigration reform effort – joined the Trump campaign. Miller worked with Steve Bannon, a former editor at the far-right media outlet *Breitbart*, to help formulate Trump's far-right, White nationalist policy, at the center of which stood the issue of immigration, one upon which a host of social ills could be blamed.

This important history could be elaborated upon in much more detail. For the purposes of this short forum essay, however, I discuss how Trump's anti-immigrant, White nationalist rhetoric – as illustrated by 'The Snake' – relates to the forum issue of far-right extremism and hypermasculinity.

6 'Corey Lewandowski,' *PBS Frontline*, 9 July 2019, <www.pbs.org> [accessed 9 June 2021].

The connection between Trump and far-right extremists was evident from the start of his campaign. Already, during the 2016 primaries, far-right extremists were attending his rallies, sometimes serving as unofficial security, a capacity also seen at the Capitol Insurrection.⁷ At one rally, Matthew Heimbach, a neo-Nazi and rising far-right extremist star dubbed ‘the little Führer,’ attacked a Black protester after Trump instructed the crowd, ‘Get ‘em out of here.’⁸ Such far-right actors recognized that Trump was speaking to them through this sort of incitement and related racist dog-whistles.⁹ This attunement was illustrated by two moments that bookended the Trump presidency.

The first was Alt-right leader Richard Spencer’s November 19, 2016 ‘Hail Trump!’ salute at the end of a speech in which he had stated, among other racially-charged remarks, ‘America was, until this past generation, a white country, designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation. It is our inheritance. And it belongs to us.’¹⁰ The second was President Trump’s presidential debate call to the Proud Boys to ‘stand back and stand by.’¹¹ The Proud Boys and other far-right extremist groups heard his message clearly, and it was a key moment that helped pave the way to the violent Capitol Insurrection on January 6, 2021.

While Trump used different levers of incitement, ‘The Snake’ illustrates one of the most important: White genocide with its hyper-masculine inflections. At the core of the story, as noted above, stands an evil non-White other (the snake) who ‘invades’ or ‘infests’ (to use metaphors that Trump also used to describe immigrants) a domestic space (the home) of purity and innocence (the tender-hearted woman, who in this context can be read as representing the U.S. – an association

- 7 Christiaan Triebert and others, ‘First They Guarded Roger Stone: Then They Joined the Capitol Attack,’ *New York Times*, 14 February 2021, <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/14/us/roger-stone-capitol-riot.html>> [accessed 9 June 2021].
- 8 Lois Beckett, ‘White Nationalist Leader Charged with Harassing Black Protester at Trump Rally,’ *The Guardian*, 1 May 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/may/01/white-nationalist-matthew-heimbach-charged-trump-rally>> [accessed 11 June 2021].
- 9 Alexander Laban Hinton, ‘What White Power Supporters Hear Trump Saying,’ *Sapiens*, 20 October 2020, <<https://www.sapiens.org/language/white-power-dog-whistles>> [accessed 11 June 2021].
- 10 Daniel Lombroso and Yoni Appelbaum, ‘“Hail Trump!”: White Nationalists Salute the President-Elect,’ *The Atlantic*, 21 November 2016, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/richard-spencer-speech-npi/508379>> [accessed 9 June 2021].
- 11 David Smith and others, ‘Donald Trump Refuses to condemn White Supremacists at Presidential Debate,’ *The Guardian*, 29 September 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/29/trump-proud-boys-debate-president-refuses-condemn-white-supremacists>> [accessed 9 June 2021].

illustrated by 'Lady Liberty' or 'Columbia' or even the Statue of Liberty, a symbolic entrance point for immigrants).

This language directly maps onto the idea of White genocide with its hypermasculine inflections. Indeed, all of the far-right extremists I have discussed here are men. And, while women have played a role, and sometimes an important one, in U.S. far-right extremism, the movement remains predominantly male.¹² The Proud Boys name their gender. Spencer gave his speech before an audience of largely men. The same was true of the predominantly male Unite the Right marchers, who chanted 'Blood and Soil!' and 'You [or Jews] will not Replace Us!' in the streets of Charlottesville.

This strong gender inflection of far-right extremism in the U.S. has a long history, one bound up with the country's patriarchal and White settler colonial beginnings.¹³ The White supremacist order that was established was maintained and enforced by men, including paramilitary slave patrols and, after the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan. There is also a strong patriarchal, White nationalist Christian current that further contributes to this gendering of far-right extremism.

Trump sought to position himself in this hypermasculine tradition in ways large and small, as underscored by his sex scandals, 'Grab 'em by the pussy' remark and 'locker-room talk' excuse, and many sexist comments. His framing of 'The Snake' was no exception, as it suggested vulnerable femininity and violation in need of male protection. This idea is deeply entrenched in far-right extremist patriarchy and directly echoes the idea of White genocide.

While the idea of White genocide dates back to the Nazis, eugenics, and beyond, the term was coined after the Civil Rights movement, which destabilized the long-standing U.S. White power patriarchal order. White power discourses began to be reframed in terms of victimization and grievance.

It was in this context that the professor turned neo-Nazi, William Pierce, wrote a book the FBI called 'the bible of the racist right,' *The Turner Diaries*. The 1970s text depicts how male-dominated White rebels topple a Jewish-controlled U.S. government seeking their demise. In response, the rebels annihilate non-Whites – and White race traitors – in the U.S. and beyond to create a White world.

12 Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Woman in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

13 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, 'Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of U.S. Race and Gender Formations,' *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 1.1 (2015), 54–74.

David Lane subsequently codified this idea in his 1988 'White Genocide Manifesto'.¹⁴ The short tract, composed of a preamble and 14 points, lays out the problem (a plot to destroy the White race), the source (Jews who control a government that systematically implements this White genocide plot), and the legitimate response to this 'crime against the collective White race'¹⁵ ('redress in whatever measures are necessary').¹⁶ Jews, notably, are sometimes depicted as snakes in anti-Semitic rhetoric and imagery, a connection swome of Trump's far-right extremist listeners likely made when hearing 'The Snake.' Lane's 14 points are echoed by his concluding 'FOURTEEN WORDS': 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children.'

The manifesto is highly gendered, valorizing women ('the life of a race is in the wombs of its women') who are under attack (in part through 'miscegenation between White women and colored men') and in need of protection (by White men who 'by Nature' have an 'instinct [...] to preserve the beauty of their women and a future for White children on this earth' and therefore to combat the 'Zionist conspiracy to mix, overrun and exterminate the White race').¹⁷

The importance of this hypermasculine idea of White genocide and the related 'Fourteen Words' mantra to White power extremists in the U.S. cannot be understated. Trump's rendition of 'The Snake' tapped directly into it, playing directly upon the sense of White (female and racial) imperilment at the hands of snake-like non-White other predators, a predicament demanding a hypermasculine response. It reflected a broader thread in Trump's White nationalism that played on White grievance and fear. And it wasn't all just words. As noted above, Trump's immigration policy directly addressed the White genocide 'replacement' concerns that were implemented by Steve Bannon and, especially, Stephen Miller, who the Southern Poverty Law Center eventually placed on its list of extremists when his history of White power and White genocide remarks and emails were revealed.¹⁸

Trump eventually agreed to leave office, but not before his populist White nationalism incited the Capitol Insurrection and brought U.S.

14 David Eden Lane, *Deceived, Damned, and Defiant: The Revolutionary Writings of David Lane* (St. Maries, ID: 14 Word Press, 1999). On European invocations of white genocide, see A. Dirk Moses, "White Genocide" and the Ethics of Public Analysis, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 21.2 (2019), 201-13.

15 Lane, p. 5.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

18 'Stephen Miller,' *Southern Poverty Law Center*, <www.splcenter.org> [accessed 10 June 2021].

democracy to the brink of collapse. In doing so, as I have noted, he mobilized far-right extremists including quasi-militia gangs like the Proud Boys and heavily armed militias such as the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers, who were directly involved in the violence.

A discussion of the pathways and mechanisms that lead people to join and fight in such groups is beyond the scope of this short forum piece. I have discussed this at length in my work on the Cambodian genocide.¹⁹ *It Can Happen Here* draws upon related literatures as it examines far-right extremist group mobilizations both through the lens of revitalization and social movement theory and through a metaphor of a flash, line, and hammer that I sometimes use in teaching.

The Flash refers to the ideology or discursive structures – like the White genocide conceptual frame – that ‘illuminate’ the world for (would-be) extremist perpetrators, providing meaning, explanation, and emotional resonance (for example, in relation to fear and grievance) in an often difficult and unfair world in which existential anxieties abound. Events like Covid-19, the accompanying economic collapse, and governance challenges only heighten such anxieties and make ‘the Flash’ seem more illuminating and appealing. QAnon gained popularity in precisely this sort of context.

The Line refers to the pathways that follow from ‘the Flash,’ ranging from the line dividing ‘us’ and ‘them’ to the organizational structures, including methods of indoctrination, which bind group members and enable action. Some extremists may initially join movements because of ‘the Flash;’ others may do so for community or instrumental reasons (for example, financial incentives and status) and are only later indoctrinated to greater or lesser extents. These organizational structures enable ‘the Hammer’ of action, which ‘strikes’ to different degrees (for example, postering and heckling versus physical violence or mass murder attacks).

There are many different groups, which vary in terms of ideology, organization, and action. When such groups strike, they usually do so within the terms of their particular alignment of the flash, line, and hammer. If some may launch violent attacks – like the Turner Diaries-inspired group, ‘the Order,’ that undertook a crime spree in the early 1980s – such forms of action have historically remained isolated.

19 Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Alexander Laban Hinton, *Man or Monster? Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

Trump demonstrated how a wide range of such groups could be mobilized around a White nationalist message that emphasized White genocide fears and deep state conspiracy. It is important to recognize that a leader like Trump can't just press a button and mobilize militias and other far-right extremist groups. It takes work – and Trump had been priming the pump of extremist incitement for months ahead of the 2020 election and indeed since he first began campaigning in 2015.

By January 2021 he had these extremist groups ready to act through consistent messaging that invoked White genocide and ultranationalist themes. What was perhaps most concerning was not just the heavily armed militias and other far-right extremist groups he mobilized, but the broader array of White nationalist groups and sympathizers – QAnon conspiracists, Christian nationalists, and a host of other 'ordinary zealots' – who joined with them in the Capitol Insurrection. Things could have been much worse with violence in the streets had Trump not been stripped of his social media incitement technologies, especially Twitter.

And, despite the change in political leadership, the US remained volatile even after Trump departed office. Trump continued to loom in the background, a threat to return – or, even if he didn't, offering a 'Big Lie' model for future U.S. political demagogues and extremist inciters. Trump also left the U.S. highly polarized. In the months after Biden's inauguration, Trump's White nationalist and White genocide rhetorics continued to be echoed by his followers, members of the GOP, and right-wing media – including a FOX News personality who regularly invoked White nationalist themes and argued in prime time that demographic replacement was a legitimate concern.²⁰ Meanwhile, far-right extremist groups in the U.S. continued to organize and were designated by law enforcement as the number one domestic terrorist threat. All of this led to a situation in which, even after Trump, the U.S. remained a fragile state – one in which the door has been opened wider to future populist demagogues who now have an example of how to advance their authoritarian aims by mobilizing hypermasculine far-right extremists to act.

20 Chris Callizza, 'How the Ugly, Racist White 'Replacement Theory' Came to Congress,' *CNN*, 15 April 2021, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/04/15/politics/scott-perry-white-replacement-theory-tucker-carlson-fox-news/index.html>> [accessed 11 June 2021].

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