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‘White Power Milk’: Milk, Dietary Racism, and the ‘Alt-Right’

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Fig. 1: Richard Spencer, Twitter Profile, reproduced in Nagesh.

In February of 2017, the Museum of the Moving Image in New York City hosted an anti-Trump installation by Shia LaBeouf entitled: 'He Will Not Divide US'; it was disrupted by neo-Nazis and other members of the so-called 'alt-right' (Nagesh; Freeman; Pahr). However, what made their taking over of the art installation unique was that it was based on the idea of neo-Nazis drinking large amounts of milk (Pahr; Smith). Richard Spencer, the coiner of the term 'alt-right',¹ replaced Pepe the Frog with a milk emoji in his twitter handle. Spencer's twitter profile joked: 'I'm very tolerant... lactose tolerant!' (Reproduced in Nagesh). Alt-right members and other neo-Nazis have taken to typing 'Heil Milk' in online comment boxes (Nagesh), and referring to their belief in a world wide 'Jewish conspiracy' as the 'vegan agenda' (Nagesh; Smith) – all trends that led *Mic* magazine to claim: 'Milk is the new, creamy symbol of white racial purity in Donald Trump's America' (Smith).

While in a vacuum, these comments by the alt-right seem inexplicable – why focus on milk as a symbol of white pride? – when connected with the historical context of dietary racism in general, and with the consumption of animal-based products as a form of anti-immigrant sentiment in particular, such activity begins to make sense. In this paper, I analyze why milk specifically has been chosen as this 'new' symbol for racial purity. I believe that the alt-right's

current use of pseudo-scientific claims about milk, lactose tolerance, race, and masculinity can be connected to the similar arguments made during the 19th century against so-called ‘effeminate corn and rice eaters’ because of their supposed lack of consumption of meat and dairy. I argue that what we are witnessing is not an entirely new phenomenon; instead, it is an update of a preexisting belief about linkages between race, citizenship, class, gender, culture, and the consumption of animal-based food products.

Part I: Brain Exhaustion²

During the 19th century, the ‘effeminate rice eater’ represented a widespread and well-known colonial stereotype based on the argument that it was the eating of meat and consumption of dairy products that helped colonizers to become the more masculine, and therefore, the more dominant, power in the colonial age versus the supposedly ‘effeminate rice and corn eaters’ of the recently colonized countries. This trope pervaded the research of the 19th century and helped to justify colonialism under a scientific ideal based on the supposed failure of nonwestern nutrition and particularly on the argument that these other people did not consume enough of and/or the right type of meat or dairy as their Western counterparts. For example, J. Leonard Corning, a well-respected medical researcher and doctor, composed a monograph in 1884 entitled *Brain Exhaustion*, in which he argued that the colonial population lacked the ‘intellectual vigor’ of the English, not for racial reasons, but because they did not eat enough of the right types of Western meat and dairy products. As he wrote in a passage representative of his work as a whole:

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... But by far the most wonderful instance of the intellectual vigor of flesh eating men is the unbroken triumph of the Anglo-Saxon race. Reared on an island of comparatively slight extent, these carnivorous men have gone forth and extended their empire throughout the world. (Corning 196-197)

What is important to understand is that such ideas did not represent discredited or fringe ideas of the scientific establishment, and neither were such ideas understood by their practitioners as explicitly racist or colonialist. The motif of the ‘effeminate rice eaters’ was instead regarded as an intelligent argument in 19th century Europe – a concept that reiterated the biases of colonialism and racism under a supposedly non-racist and non-colonialist worldview based on, supposedly, the more scientific grounds of diet and nutrition. For example, Corning claims that Warren Hastings (the first British imposed Governor-General of India) was able to rule India not because of superior weapons’ technology, but because Hastings consumed a more meat-centered diet. As Corning phrases it, ‘[A]ll the forces of darkness [*i.e.* the people of India] were alike unavailing against the mental mechanism of this one man, whose lion-like qualities sufficed, with the assistance of a handful of flesh-feeding followers, to make himself master of millions of rice- eaters!’ (198). What made the idea of diet and nutrition as the basis of perceived racial differences was the supposed placidity of the change: All that needed to happen to ‘improve’ nonwhite races and people was a change in diet; once they started consuming enough meat, eggs, and dairy their supposed ‘brain exhaustion’ could be cured, a change which Corning suggested would solve both their supposed mental as well as supposed moral inferiority (198).

Equally important, these claims about meat eating, gender, and race operated not only in expansionist forms of colonialism, but also internally against immigrant groups. Meat and dairy consumption became articulated in the 19th century as an example of ‘white privilege’ intended to differentiate white male workers from the immigrant counterparts who were, again, cast as ‘effeminate rice eaters’. Racial and diet stereotypes, the colonial justification of European paternalism, and an internal hostility to immigrants became interwoven into a single worldview which portrayed immigrants as threatening to white, American manhood, because they did not eat enough of Western style meat and dairy products. As the researcher E. Melanie DuPuis phrases this development:

The working class responded by defending its right to eat meat, as a privilege of white citizenship... White working-class men deployed nativist anti-Chinese arguments in their demands for a living wage that would support their meat-eating. Rejecting nutritionists’ arguments that a meat-heavy diet was bad for them, the representatives of the newly established workers’ organizations struck back, on behalf of meat and of

native working-class jobs. ('Angels and Vegetables: A Brief History of Food Advice in America' 40)

DuPuis claims that it was not coincidental that colonialism, nativist union sentiment, and the decrease in the cost of meat occurred simultaneously. Instead, she argues that they forged a mutually beneficial relationship in which eating meat – a large amount of meat and the right type of meat – became a symbolic proxy for the issues of class, gender, and race privilege as they impacted the displaced white, male, worker. Therefore, market forces helped to allay working class fears, not by improving real wages or conditions for workers, but instead by providing them with ever-greater amounts of increasingly cheap meat. As DuPuis again writes, 'Workers did not exactly win the fight over wages, but they did win the fight to eat meat, if not in the way they had imagined' ('Angels and Vegetables' 43).

Particularly in the context of the United States, these arguments have long focused on the consumption of dairy and dairy products as the particular symbol of white supremacy. Part of the reason for this focus on milk was technological; unlike meat, which has been cooked for centuries, milk pasteurization represents a relatively late technological innovation, only arriving in the 19th century and only achieving full commercialization in the 1920s and 1930s. As Richie Nimmo phrases this argument:

Whereas meat has for countless centuries been cooked before being eaten, providing an effective means of both material and symbolic purification, and ensuring the transformation of its animal 'nature' into an object of 'culture' before its consumption by humans, the equivalent purification of milk is entirely a product of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (x)

In other words, one can chart a similar rise in the new science of nutrition and the resulting rise of worry about 'effeminate rice eaters' and the rise of the new science of pasteurization and milk commercialization and its connection to new beliefs about the nutritional value of milk consumption. Likewise, a focus on milk and dairy in the United States was also fuelled by a particular fear and focus on anti-Chinese immigration, which individuals – as an aggregate – possess relatively high rates of lactose intolerance. In the United States, particularly, in the 1920s and 1930s, milk came to represent a unique product which seemed to embody new 'technologies' of pasteurization, commercialization, and nutrition coupled with a

seemingly intrinsic connection to white citizenship: a commodity fetish seemingly unifying both ‘intelligence’ and ‘race’.

For example, a journal produced by the National Dairy Council in the 1920s proclaimed:

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. (Olsen, 32)³

Similarly, an agricultural history of New York from the 1930s asserted:

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 362-363)⁴

Part II: How Europe Got Rich

Articles arguing for a link between the consumption of dairy and success by white Northern Europeans did not end in the 19th or early 20th century. For example, the March 28, 2015 issue of *The Economist* included an article entitled: ‘No Use Crying: The Ability to Digest Milk may Explain how Europe got Rich’. It included the opening paragraph:

Humans can digest lactose, the main carbohydrate in milk, only with the help of an enzyme called lactase. But two-thirds of people stop producing it after they have been weaned. The lucky third—those with ‘lactase persistence’—continue to produce it into adulthood. A recent paper argues that this genetic quirk helps explain why some countries are rich and others poor. (‘No Use Crying’)

This article is based on the research of Justin Cook, an assistant professor of economics at the University of California-Merced. Cook describes his research as an attempt to prove ‘the role of genetic differences in explaining economic outcomes’. Cook makes this connection between lactose tolerance and European colonialism explicit throughout his work. For example, in an article for the *PBS NewsHour*, Cook begins by claiming:

Could milk consumption have contributed to Europe’s colonization of most of the world during the 16th century?

The answer ‘yes’ is more likely than you may think. (‘Got Milk?’)

Cook argues that the ability to digest lactose provided early civilization with the extra calories and nutrients for them to be able to achieve larger population density, technological innovation, and wealth, resulting, Cook claims, in European colonialism.⁵ Cook is explicit in his attempt to explain contemporary issues of wealth inequality between colonizing and colonized countries as deriving from their ability to digest dairy:

The great disparities in productivity that are seen throughout the world today are not new. As of 500 years ago great variations in technology, state development, and industry were obvious across states and continents; most notable is the distinction between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. Europe was in the middle of the Renaissance, had complex systems of state organization, numerous divisions of labor, and was making great strides in seafaring, while Africa was vastly under populated and relatively under developed. What are the causes of variations in historic development? It is known that Eurasia contained advantages in initiating and spreading agriculture, but are there other factors which led to larger precolonial populations? Why did Europe in particular have an advantage over other Eurasian states? This paper argues the variation in an important food source, milk, is significantly related to economic development in the precolonial era. (‘The Role of Lactase Persistence’)

What Cook makes explicit is that the importance of his research is not purely a historical understanding but, instead, a way to explain contemporary wealth inequality as arising from genetic difference (‘The Role of Lactase Persistence’; ‘No Use Crying’). However, such research is suspect. It cannot explain the rise of China (as Cook himself admits⁶), the population

of which displays both high levels of lactose intolerance and a high population level, wealth, and a thriving civilization that lasted for millennia. Nor can it explain the discrepancy between certain areas of Africa, the Middle East and South India, which possess high rates of lactose tolerance, but still experienced European colonialism. Nor, as earlier mentioned, does it fully account for the technological shifts of milk production (*i.e.* pasteurization and refrigeration) that helped to produce the globally high rates of milk consumption we currently witness. Finally, such research would seem to confuse correlation (Europe had comparatively higher rates of lactose tolerance) with causation (Europe engaged in colonialism). Indeed, it masks the ways in which it was not wealth that allowed for colonialism, but instead, colonialism that helped to foster and support European wealth (Acemoglu and Robinson).

However, my point is not only that Cook's research is wrong – although it certainly is – but also that his research is potentially dangerous. What I find most troubling is that I cannot find in his interviews, in his popular articles, or even in his peer-reviewed study on the topic of colonialism, the word 'racism'. Let us suppose that Cook's central argument was true – the consumption of dairy is what caused Europeans to become wealthy. Even if true, Cook still treats European colonialism as inherent and natural, as the only course that a wealthy country should engage in *vis-a-vis* other, less wealthy countries. In other words, he renders colonialism (and on-going wealth disparities between countries) as natural and tied to immutable genetics. As such, I see Cook's research as an updated version of the research from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, using diet – and, in particular, the consumption of animal products – as a means to naturalize what are purely human-made phenomena.

Cook's research has inspired other academics to forward even more extreme claims. For example, Andrey Shcherbak presented an academic paper in 2015, building explicitly on previous research from Cook, which suggested that the ability to digest lactose could be the cause of 'cultural' differences between ethnic groups.⁷ In particular, Shcherbak's paper theorized that ethnic groups that could digest lactose, which the paper identified as Northern European, possessed more 'Emancipation Values', defined as 'emphasis on freedom of choice and equality of opportunities', than those ethnic groups that could not digest lactose. The paper goes on to suggest – in part due to supposed shifts in infant mortality – societies that could digest lactose came to possess a 'higher value on human life' (Shcherbak, 'Does Milk Matter?'). Likewise, in 2016, Shcherbak produced a follow-up paper that argued that the spread of the

‘European diet’ (*i.e.* a diet rich in animal products) was, in part, the cause of the spread of democracy:

This paper argues that an improvement in diet – understood as an increase in the intake of protein-rich animal products – is a significant predictor of political change, namely democratization. Although intuitively it seems that causal arrow should go from democracy to higher nutritional status, I show that even after controlling for income growth and the liberalization of trade, diet affects political regime, but not vice versa. I argue that an improvement in diet is one of the structural prerequisites – along with income growth, education, urbanization – for a transition to democracy. (Shcherbak, ‘Diet for Democracy’)

Current researchers also argue that the genetic adaptation of lactose tolerance is either tied to, or proof of, other genetic adaptations also supposedly tied to race or ethnic group status, including ‘temperament’ and ‘impulse control’. For example, Brian Boutwell, professor of criminology at Saint Louis University, published an article in 2016 entitled: ‘On the Reality of Race and the Abhorrence of Racism Part II: Human Biodiversity and Its Implications’. Boutwell claimed:

Make no mistake, evolutionary changes like the capability for lifetime dairy consumption are important occurrences in their own right, but these changes beg an obvious question. Should we assume that natural selection has only affected genes related to drinking milk...? For this to be true, it would have to mean that natural selection somehow managed to ignore our central nervous system (CNS) and, by extension, genes that are connected (directly and indirectly) to human personality and temperament.

Such research led Boutwell to conclude that it is genetic differences between the races, and not environmental changes, which explain the differences in the crime rates and what he terms the ‘achievement gap’ between African-Americans and other ethnic groups (Boutwell).⁸

We should view Cook’s, Shcherbak’s, and Boutwell’s work in concert: Cook’s research determines the genetic causes for economic difference, colonialism, and the ongoing ‘rich poor gap’ between different countries; Shcherbak’s work explains why genetic reasons cause ethnic

groups to display, he believes, different cultural values; and Boutwell researches what he terms ‘bio-criminality’ or again, how biology can answer questions about criminality. Presumably, if Cook, Shcherbak, or Boutwell claimed that white people were – directly – richer, more democratic or less likely to commit crime solely because of skin color, established academic journals would not publish their work. However, by discussing a genetic adaptation which is read as occurring in Northern Europeans, and then interpreting this adaption as either responsible for or proof of genetic causes for colonialism, the wealth gap, democracy, temperament, impulse control, and crime – there exists a coded message which reaches similar conclusions now via an academic and socially acceptable means. Hence, it is my argument that their current research about diet and race should be thought of in terms of J. Leonard Corning and others’ similar research in the 19th century. In both cases, researchers created academic respect by simultaneously avoiding explicit racist statements while still concluding – as dietary and genetic – racial differences.

The effect of such research can be dangerous. For example, on October 5, 2015, Emma Maier,⁹ an undergraduate student at Brown University, published an opinion article in the school’s newspaper entitled ‘The white privilege of cows’. After summarizing the type of arguments about the benefits of access to animal-based foods covered in this article, the student came to the conclusion:

It is the strong who trample the weak, the rich who trample the poor. Societies that can produce the most food of the highest quality in the widest variety of situations can logically field a military, support a monarchy or sail around the world. Colonialism simply allows those who come from a history of being well-fed enough to let experimentation happen, conquering those who have not had that luck. Thus, whenever I see a white college student, reeking of privilege, I recall the coincidence (or causal relationship) between white physical features and animal agriculture.

Furthermore, I argue there is a connection between the ideas of dietary racism published in academic journals, taught in some college classrooms, and reproduced in publications such as *The Economist* and *PBS*, and a utilization of these ideas by those who seek to normalize racial differences as biological. At the same time, I want to be clear: I am not arguing that researchers such as Cook, Shcherbak, and Boutwell *caused* the alt-right. Nor is it my argument that Cook, or

other researchers, are directly associated with, or supporters of, the alt-right. Nor should any academic be directly held responsible for the ends for which his or her work might be misused by those with a present agenda. And, finally, I do not wish to ‘paint with a broad brush’; not all researchers on the question of evolutionary advantage of lactose tolerance reach the same type of totalizing statements as do Cook and Shcherbak in their research (Curry; Harmon).

Part III: ‘Soy Boy’

However, what I *am* arguing is that one can note a pattern between an earlier time in American history in which the white working class responded to anxiety of falling wages and increasing domestic immigration by focusing on issues of meat and dairy consumption, and the contemporary moment. In both cases, white male citizens felt threatened by a variety of factors (including falling wages, changes in racial demographics, and worries over immigration) and, in both cases, these fears were, in part, responded to by stringent calls for and demonstrations of the consumption of animal products as a way to reassert their whiteness, masculinity, and citizenship. As such, in both the early 20th century and the 21st century, we can witness a similar pattern of asserting the right to consume animal-based products as a ‘proxy’ for privileges related to race, gender, class, and citizenship. Moreover, this identity is asserted specifically against a perceived ‘other’ who is deemed to be not masculine, not white, and not adequately a citizen. While these anti-immigrant sentiments were focused on the fears of immigration from the Chinese in the 20th century, and fears of immigration from Mexico in the current climate, similar patterns around diet can still be seen. For example, during the last presidential election in the United States, supporters of Trump focused on the claim that a failure to vote for Trump would lead to ‘a taco truck on every corner’; this argument speaks to ongoing interweaving of fears about diet, race, and citizenship (Gutierrez). Likewise, when the alt-right insults someone they disagree with by calling them a ‘Soy Boy’ – the alt-right’s most common insults towards others – it is meant to imply that the male is overly feminine because he consumes soy products; the alt-right is explicating using a lack of meat and dairy consumption in order to question the other person’s masculinity (Sommer). In other words, the term ‘soy boy’ has come to represent an updated version of the term ‘effeminate rice eater’; it is intended to interweave fears about masculinity and diet into a single and intersecting term.

I am additionally highlighting – in both the historical and contemporary examples – research by trained academics, nutritionists, and medical professionals that is being directly referenced and cited by these groups as ‘proof’ of their views. The *New York Times* reported on this trend of white supremacists in the United States to cite research on lactose tolerance and race:

For white Americans half-inclined to blame nonwhite immigrants or African-Americans for perceived social problems, the veneer of a scientific rationale for white superiority, researchers say, can tip them toward racial resentment. It can be more effective than base appeals to tribalism, especially for the educated demographic the far-right has been targeting. (Harmon, ‘Why White Supremacists Are Chugging Milk’)

For example, a graphic from the an article entitled ‘Archaeology: The Milk Revolution’ (fig. 1), published in *Nature Magazine* forwarded similar, if less extreme,¹⁰ arguments as Cook about lactose tolerance as an evolutionary advantage (Curry):

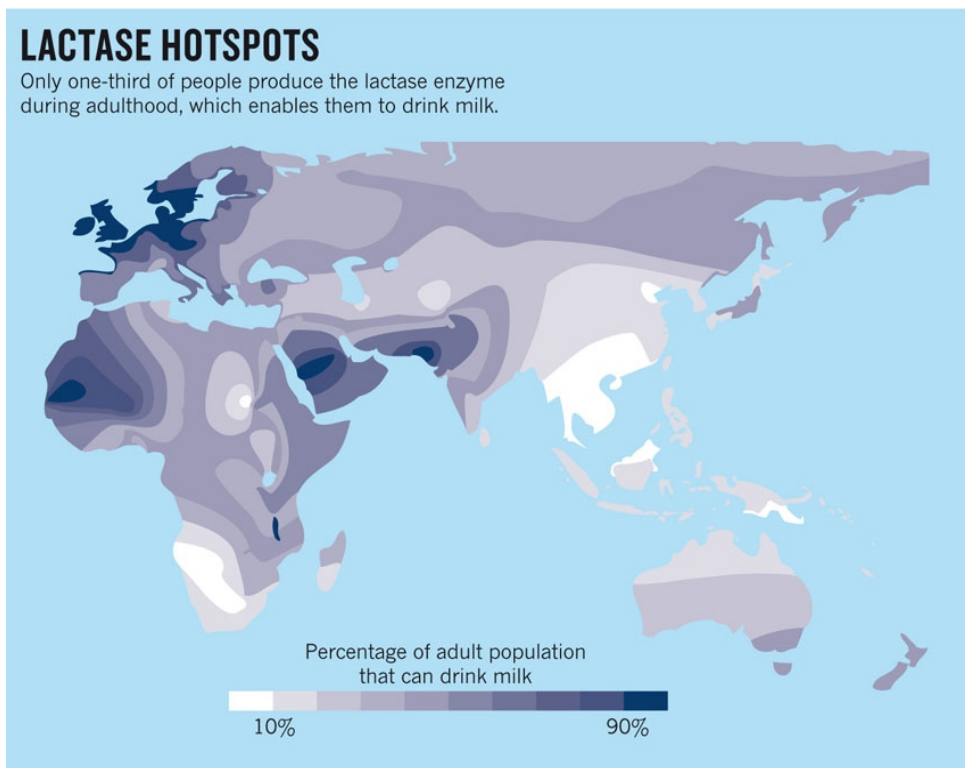


Fig. 1. *Lactase Hotspots*. Curry, ‘Archaeology: The Milk Revolution’.

Here (fig. 2) is a screen shot from a conversation on '4chan,' an online discussion board dominated by the 'alt-right:' (Please note: the following screen shot includes racist hate speech.)



Fig. 2: 4chan discussion board. (Reproduced in Swerdlhoff)

What is clear is that the exact graphic has been reproduced and seized upon by the alt-right to support its pre-existing ideology. I am not arguing that the article in *Nature* caused the alt-right or their ideology. I am arguing that the alt-right is actively reading, citing, and discussing research on lactose tolerance as a way to find intellectual and scientific support for their pre-existing worldview. For example, many articles on lactose tolerance and supposed evolutionary benefits and connection with ethnic group and races are reproduced directly – word for word – on racist and alt-right websites. *American Renaissance*, a publication that purports to believe in both ‘racial realism’ and ‘protecting white identity’ (‘About Us’), includes reprints of multiple articles on lactose tolerance, evolution, and race. Here we find reprints with titles such as, ‘Agriculture Linked to DNA Changes in Ancient Europe’ (Zimmer), ‘Got Milk? Thank Your European Kin’ (‘Got Milk?’), ‘How Europeans Evolved White Skin’ (which references lactose tolerance: Gibbons) as well the same article in *Nature Magazine* earlier mentioned (Curry), reproduced word for word, including the identical graphic. What seems clear is that the alt-right is taking this belief in the ability to digest lactose along with the cultural practice of animal

domestication and meat consumption as the new pseudo-scientific explanation for – or perhaps I should say the old pseudo-scientific explanation for – the supposed superiority of white people.¹¹

Conclusion: White Power Milk

Finally, it is helpful to understand the repeated use of white milk as a symbol of white purity. For example, in the opening scene of Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds*, the drinking of milk seems to symbolize the Nazi soldier's commitment to racial purity (*Inglourious Basterds* 2009). Likewise, in the penultimate scene of Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*, it is the drinking of a large glass of white milk that is intended to communicate to the audience that the girlfriend is, herself, a believer in white supremacy. Peele, who does not drink milk, explained in an interview, prompted by the alt-right use of dairy as a symbol for white supremacy:

'There's something kind of horrific about milk ... Think about it! Think about what we're doing. Milk is kind of gross... That scene [the scene of the white girlfriend drinking milk] is one of my favorites ... It's one of those moments, like a good "Key & Peele" sketch, when you know you've got it – this is going to work. There's no dialogue in it – just this beautiful, psychotic image that gives me glee when it happens in the film. (Yamato)

The expression of this self-aware connection between the image of whiteness, gender, purity, and milk is best exposed by the website 'White Power Milk'. Created by the mixed race performance artist Nate Hill, 'White Power Milk' purports to have young and wealthy white women gargle milk before spitting it up in order to sell to consumers (fig. 3). The website explains the appeal of this process:

Many are drawn to White Power Milk for the comforting certainty that our milk is the purest available. But it's something more elusive, and difficult to put into words, that keeps our customers coming back. We create a select beverage that is not only more healthy for your body, but is culturally superior. Sure, the milk available at your local grocery store meets USDA government standards for quality, but these standards are set to a mere minimum of purity. You deserve the best. (Hill)

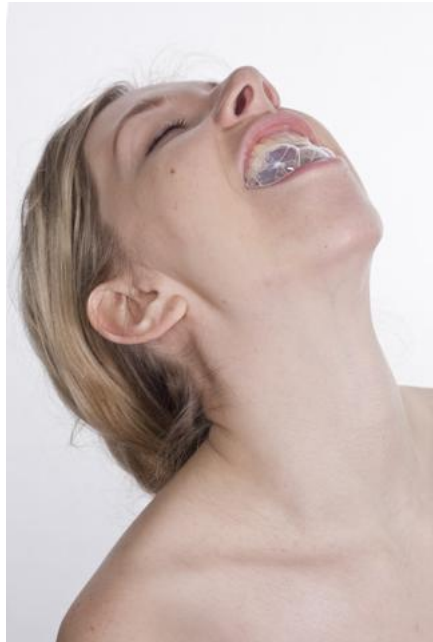


Fig. 1: Photo from 'White Power Milk' (Hill)

In addition, customers are encouraged to select which woman they would like to gargle their milk (fig. 4); the website provides a list of information for each possible woman including her heritage, relationship status, and education level. For example, for 'Nora' the website informs us that she is 'Descended from: The Newhouse family (media publishing)', has the relationship status of 'Single, Never married' and education status of attending 'Phillips Academy' for high school and 'Harvard University' for college (Hill).



Fig. 2: Selection of Women to gargle the milk (Hill)

As Hill explains the reason he created the website, which makes the connection to both race and gender explicit:

It is racial satire. It was inspired because some people feel that white women are superior to all other women and have special qualities that other races do not contain. If you go to twitter and search ‘I want a white girl’ you can see what I mean... People believe white women are more loyal, more sexual, and more obedient. Also in advertising white women are used to make just about any product seem more appealing, so I thought it would be good satire to ask, ‘What if they could even make milk taste better?’ (Read)

The most revealing aspect of Hill’s piece is that people seem not to be able to tell that it is a parody; whether it is people writing hate mail in opposition to the product, or the alt-right writing in support of it, milk and white supremacy have become so linked in the American imagination that people – across the political spectrum – believe in the existence of ‘White Power Milk’ as an actual product for purchase (Miller; Read; Leisure).

Similarly, Anne McClintock has previously charted the manner in which Ivory soap became seen as a symbol for racial purity, because of its supposed purity and whiteness. McClintock wrote (in terms of soap and colonialism):

Both the cult of domesticity and the new imperialism found in soap an exemplary mediating form. The emergent middle class values – monogamy (‘clean’ sex, which has value), industrial capital (‘clean’ money, which has value), Christianity (‘being washed in the blood of the lamb’), class control (‘cleansing the great unwashed’) and the imperial civilizing mission (‘washing and clothing the savage’) – could all be marvelously embodied in a single household commodity. Soap advertising, in particular the Pears’ soap campaign, took its place at the vanguard of Britain’s new commodity culture and its civilizing mission. (129)

So, too, I argue that milk has come to represent a commodity fetish symbolizing, like soap, the colonial dream of racial purity. Moreover, I argue that this move is not wholly new, as in the 19th and early 20th centuries because of similar fears of immigration and decline of the white working class, diet, meat, and above all, milk became a stand-in proxy for white privilege and white citizenship. These views were supported by a kind of pseudo-science in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that sought to use diet as a way to normalize and naturalize racist outcomes. So, too, I argue we can still continue to witness naturalizing claims about diet and race – particularly related to work on lactose intolerance that, much like in the 19th century, is being cited and reappropriated by white nationals as the scientific justification for their world views. Finally, I am suggesting that this converged focus in particular on the object of milk is not only because of its supposed correlation with race and lactose intolerance, but also because of the iconic imagery, as a visual element of the product itself, that artists have self-consciously deployed to invoke ideas of ‘whiteness’ and ‘purity’.

The most common response to the alt-right’s use of milk as a symbol of white racial purity has been to suggest that it functions only as a joke, that the alt-right is ‘trolling’ liberal America, that they are insincere in their beliefs, and that we should not investigate their actions for either deeper meaning or cultural significance. As a writer for *Wired Magazine* phrased this common critique:

‘Don’t Feed the Trolls’ remains indispensable guidance for the internet, if only because trolls exist solely to get a reaction out of you. Ignore them and they lose all power... Even as their memes morph into militaristic propaganda, this loosely organized troll

army inhabiting extremist corners of social media, 4chan, and Reddit has adopted a new tactic: claiming mundane objects like milk ... as symbols of white supremacy. (Ellis)

In one sense, this argument is true: as one of the white nationalists protestors at Charlottesville, Virginia claimed, he was only ‘pretending’ to be a racist at a white nationalist rally (Hunt). So, in one sense, the alt-right *both always really does believe* what it is saying and doing – someone pretending to be a white nationalist at a hate rally is, in fact, a white supremacist – and on the other hand, it is always claiming to not really believe in what they do, in fact, believe. While doing so is beyond the scope of this essay, one could argue the very appeal of the alt-right is this very ability to both believe in – while still being able to claim not to believe in – the racist ideologies they support. As Alice Marwick has phrased this same critique: ‘irony has a strategic function. It allows people to disclaim a real commitment to far-right ideas while still espousing them’ (Wilson; Marwick and Lewis). However, as the reprints of the articles on milk consumption and race on the *American Renaissance* website, 4chan, and other white nationalist websites make clear, the alt-right and other white supremacists organizations really do believe in the academic work on milk and animal products as scientific proof of white supremacy even if, at the same time, they may claim to see it as a bit of joke. Moreover, these comments in *Wired*, and by others, miss the historical and ongoing context in which these conversations have, and continue, to operate. Conversations about the consumption of animal products, race, gender, and colonialism are neither recent nor limited to the current memes of the alt-right. Instead, they represent a long-standing and repeated belief about diet, race, and issues of masculinity. To focus on this conversation is not, as some would have us believe, ‘feeding the trolls’; it is to start to explore, in a serious and academic manner, the still under-theorized connection between the consumption of animal products as a proxy ‘privilege of white citizenship’ (DuPuis). In other words, the alt-right’s decision to use milk as a symbol for white pride is not a random or recent meme; it is, instead, a re-deployment of an over a century old, and still ongoing, pseudo-scientific belief in the consumption of animal products as a basis of colonial strength, masculinity, and white supremacy.

Notes

¹ For a fuller discussion of the rise of the ‘alt-right,’ as well as the politics behind the use of the term, see Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis’s report: ‘Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online’.

² As it is making the same historical argument, this section draws from, and is similar to, an earlier published section in my article, ‘The Whopper Virgins: Hamburgers, Gender, and Xenophobia.’ *Meat Culture*, edited by Annie Potts, Brill, 2016, 90-108.

³ See also McCollum 151; DuPuis, ‘Angels and Vegetables’ 41; DuPuis *Nature's Perfect Food* 117; Freeman, ‘The Unbearable Whiteness of Milk’ 1268.

⁴ See also DuPuis *Nature's Perfect Food* 117; Freeman ‘The Unbearable Whiteness of Milk’ 1268.

⁵ As Cook phrases this supposed relationship among milk, population density, wealth, and European colonialism:

Did milk consumption lead to Europe’s colonization of most of the world? Lactase persistence’s robust relationship with precolonial population density suggests that milk consumption shaped economic development during a crucial time. And while it’s not likely milk consumption *directly* led to the colonization, the evidence suggests that it helped the overall economic development of Europe during the 1500s, which may have *indirectly* provided Europe with the wealth for colonization. (Got Milk?)

⁶ ‘China, with its great population, remains a major outlier in my research’ (Cook, ‘Got Milk?’).

⁷ Shcherbak states:

Lactase persistence as a product of genetic adaptation to the environment is a unique feature of European societies. Milk and dairy products became an essential part of the European diet, especially in North-Western Europe. This paper argues that LP affected not only diet per se but social and cultural change from a historical perspective. Our tests reveal a strong and positive relationship between LP and the Emancipative Values

Index as an indicator of modernization. Interestingly, developed countries are milk-drinkers and lactase tolerant. We argue that it is not a spurious correlation; historically, lactase tolerant societies had more opportunities for development. We assume that milk and dairy products were not only a nutritional advantage but also of social and economic benefit. A possible causal mechanism was suggested and tested. It puts emphasis on demographic change: lactose tolerance is associated with lower fertility rates and child mortality rates. Later this process resulted in individualization and higher education rates. ('Does Milk Matter?')

⁸ Boutwell's work is similar to but slightly different from the other two authors mentioned. He claims that 'races' [which he views as stable and biological categories] possess different tendencies toward crime and cites lactose tolerance as the main proof of a genetic difference between 'races'. In other words, he is not – directly – arguing lactose tolerance causes crime.

⁹ Emma Maier published the opinion piece under the pseudonym 'M. Dzhal Maie'; the student newspaper did not clarify the reason why the student chose to use a pseudonym. The student newspaper later apologized for publishing the article; they left it online as a historical document. While this article reflects the views of one student, it does not seem to represent the views of the larger student body at Brown University.

¹⁰ There are several key differences between Cook and Curry's article: The research Curry is discussing is not related to colonialism, is far older in time scale, and does not make any claims about contemporary issues (for example, a wealth gap between colonized and non-colonized countries.) I am not attempting to critique the research in Curry's article (which I have not independently reviewed). My only point in citing Curry's article is to highlight the degree to which the alt-right is reading and citing research on lactose tolerance and race. See Amy Harmon's articles in the *New York Times* for a fuller discussion on this point.

¹¹ It is a debate, depending on the specific research in question, to what degree the far right is using, or misusing, the research on lactose tolerance and race. (Harmon, 'Why White Supremacists Are Chugging Milk'). In any case, it seems clear that researchers have been slow to

respond against the use of their research by the far right. As Amy Harmon writes about her own decision to write a *New York Times* article on the topic:

N. is a black high school student in Winston-Salem, N.C., who does not appear in my article on Thursday's front page about how human geneticists have been slow to respond to the invocation of their research by white supremacists. (Note: N.'s full name has been removed to minimize online harassment.)

But the story of how he struggled last spring to find sources to refute the claims of white classmates that people of European descent had evolved to be intellectually superior to Africans is the reason I persevered in the assignment, even when I felt as if my head were going to explode. (Harmon, 'Could Somebody Please Debunk This')

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