

How to Make an Enemy: Transmisogyny and the 2024 Presidential Election

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Building the Wall

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall.” This is the first line of the 1914 poem “Mending Wall,” by the American poet Robert Frost, known for his philosophical meditations on ordinary rural New England scenes.¹ The poem is at first glance a simple reverie on the stone wall that separates the narrator's property from his neighbor's. The winter has passed, and the time has come to reset the stones, to “set the wall between us once again.”

The two neighbors walk, each on one side, until they come to a place where from the narrator's perspective, the wall doesn't need to be there. After all, his pine trees and the neighbor's apple orchard don't pose a threat to each other. However, the neighbor doesn't see it that way. “Good fences make good neighbors,” he says. The narrator ruminates on this statement, and eventually asks himself, but “*Why* do they make good neighbors?” It would make sense if there were cows who might wander away, but there aren't any cows. He observes his neighbor laboring with difficulty, utterly absorbed in his unnecessary task, and he comes to the conclusion, that “Before I build a wall I ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offense.” He begins to see his neighbor differently, as one who “moves in darkness,” like his father and grandfather before him. “Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down,” Frost writes. However, there is no swaying him. The neighbor simply repeats “good fences make good neighbors,” and the scene ends quietly.

On the one hand, the poem is about property and ownership, what is shared and what is not. It is also about identity: apple orchards and pine trees, and

1 Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 33–34.

what divides “me” from “you,” and then “us” from “them.” More broadly, it is about the human tendency to build walls rather than to dismantle them. It is not a question of *someone* but of *something* that wants the wall to come down, as though the definition of human depends upon wall building; to be human is to build a wall – a great wall – and to guard that wall with your life.

What is this indelible line between “us” and “them” other than a wielding of power? And what does “love thy neighbor” mean in a world of walls?

As Donald Trump was running for president in 2015, he made this promise:

I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me, and I'll build them very inexpensively, I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall.²

Beyond its grotesque material presence – a gash across the desert, a human and environmental tragedy – the Wall is a symbol of his worldview, of a country and a world divided into an “us” and a “them,” of the passion for separation, and for a world of winners and losers.³ The legacy of the first Trump presidency is the endless manufacture of an enemy.

To whom do I give offense? What am I walling in or walling out? Frost asks. Trump's Wall is an extreme variation on the neighbor's delusion that the apple orchards will “eat the cones under his pines.” It is also a symbol of an unfinished project, which Trump and his base are determined to complete.

However, there is no finishing such a project.

Making the Enemy

Trump and his Republican loyalists pose a grave threat to the United States and to the world. To know this, we first can recall the constant chaos and tragedy

2 Glenn Kessler, “A History of Trump's Promises That Mexico Would Pay for the Wall, Which It Refuses to Do,” *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/live-updates/trump-White-house/live-fact-checking-and-analysis-of-president-trumps-immigration-speech/a-history-of-trumps-promises-that-mexico-would-pay-for-the-wall-which-it-refuses-to-do/>.

3 From here on, I will capitalize “Wall” when referring to the symbolic Wall that Trumpism represents, in contrast to the material wall at the southern border of the United States.

brought by his first administration. At the southern border, the site of his infamous wall, children and adults were held in cages, some standing room only, and subjected to prolonged detention that violated federal guidelines.⁴ A report issued by the Department of Homeland Security cited these extremely overcrowded conditions, and yet Trump refused to acknowledge the existence of these camps.⁵ As is well known, at least 5,000 families were separated at the border during Trump's term, and some 2,000 have never been reunited.⁶ During the COVID-19 pandemic, he disregarded – or misplaced – detailed pandemic response plans left by the Obama administration, which led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths.⁷ He humiliated the government's own public health experts, whose lives were then threatened by his supporters. He refused to enact the Defense Production Act which would have ramped up manufacturing of desperately needed supplies, and he withdrew from the World Health Organization.⁸ Trump also claimed that bleach and ultraviolet rays killed the COVID-19 virus.⁹ White House briefings disappeared, leaving many of his actions to occur in the shadows. While for a time his open admiration of autocrats – Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong Un, Jair Bolsonaro, among others – provided comic relief for some, his actual autocratic attempt cast a shadow on this humor.¹⁰ He was serious when he compared himself to fascist dictators of the 1930s, and his incitement of a violent coup d'état on January 6, 2021, simply confirmed his contempt for democracy.

4 Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2020), 158–159.

5 Gessen, *Surviving*, 159.

6 Piper French, "Family Separation," *New York Magazine*, February 27, 2024, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/separated-families-border-trump-zero-tolerance-immigration.html>.

7 Brynn Tannehill, *American Fascism: How the GOP Is Subverting Democracy* (Transgress Press, 2021), 95.

8 Gessen, *Surviving*, 27; Tannehill, *American Fascism*, 100.

9 Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism – And What Comes Next* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023), 148.

10 Citing the Hungarian sociologist Bálint Magyar, Masha Gessen describes how autocratic transformation proceeds in three stages: autocratic attempt, autocratic breakthrough, and autocratic consolidation. Gessen believes that this terminology applied to the United States under Trump, and that these described our reality better than any existing words in the American political lexicon (*Surviving*, 6); Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes: A Conceptual Framework*, prepublication manuscript, Fall 2019.

The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) 2024 report notes that with this year's election, the United States is at a potential turning point.¹¹ It will be highly consequential if Trump wins, they say, both considering how he undermined American democracy in his previous administration, and the actions he threatens to take if elected, all of which are clearly outlined in the far-right policy, personnel, and training program, Project 2025, crafted by the Heritage Foundation, the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), and an array of other extremist organizations¹² His anti-democratic statements are “innumerable,” but include calling his opponents “vermin” during campaign speeches.¹³ He says that he wants to purge the Department of Justice of those he finds to be disloyal, dismantle the FBI, pardon himself of federal crimes, and have journalists arrested. Because the United States plays a key role in world affairs, they conclude, this election could have ramifications for democracy internationally.

Given all of this, and more, it is hard to believe that the American media and the public have legitimized his candidacy. Restrained neutrality in journalism continues to produce a kind of amnesia, and most of the public approaches this election as normal.¹⁴ As Susan Glasser wrote in *The New Yorker* in June 2024, Trump's actions while in office are in danger of being forgotten.¹⁵ He is now a convicted felon, but the outrage is simply not there. Why?

The question is complicated, but one reason I offer is an all-pervasive American exceptionalism, what legal scholar Sanford Levinson calls “The American civic religion,” based on the idea that the United States Constitution is a perfect blueprint for democracies all over the world, and that it will never,

11 Marina Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2024), https://www.v-dem.net/documents/43/v-dem_dr2024_lowres.pdf.

12 Paul Weyrich, one of the initiators of the modern conservative movement, started both the Heritage Foundation in 1973, a conservative think tank and counterpart to the Brookings Institute, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a state-level policy machine that is responsible for formulating bills and policies for proposal and ratification at the state-level. The ADF is an anti-abortion, anti-LGBT rights organization formed in 1993.

13 Nord et al., *Democracy Report 2024*, 42.

14 Gessen, *Surviving*, 145.

15 Susan Glasser, “Fighting Trump on the Beaches,” *The New Yorker*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-bidens-washington/fighting-trump-on-the-beaches>.

ever fail.¹⁶ American exceptionalism runs through the veins of U.S. society. Much of my research has been driven by a desire to divest of this exceptionalism, but I still fall prey to it, especially because I am White and middle-class. It is an attitude of entitlement that is part of the White American subconscious.¹⁷

However, it is imperative to get beyond this denial, and to realize that Trump and his loyalists promise a return to a Manichean worldview based on the building of Walls, both symbolic and material. In 2024, the enemy – specifically, the internal enemy – has once again become the perennial subject of Trump’s speeches, interviews, and social media rants. Forty-eight hours after a New York court found him guilty of thirty-four counts of falsifying records, in a scheme to illegally influence the 2016 election, Trump spoke to “Fox News and Friends”:

I talk about the enemy on the outside and the enemy from within. You have Russia, you have China, but if you have a smart president, you always handle them quite easily. Actually, we have a lot of advantages. But the enemy within. They are doing damage to our country.¹⁸

In this interview, with his use of words like “sick” and “deranged” to describe these enemies within, his politics can be described as Schmittian, that is, echoing the theories of Carl Schmitt, Weimar-era critic of liberal parliamentarian-

16 Gessen, *Surviving*, 9; Sanford Levinson, *Constitutional Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

17 In this chapter, I capitalize both “Black” and “White.” Some like Mike Laws of the *Columbia Journalism Review* contend that Black should be capitalized because it is an ethnic designation, but White should not because it describes “merely” skin color for those whose ethnic origins can be traced back to a handful of European countries. I agree with Daniel D. Miller, author of *Queer Democracy: Desire, Dysphoria, and the Body Politic* that such a description of white is naïve (New York: Routledge, 2022), 9–10. “White” is not merely descriptive, but rather has fluctuated historically, particularly in the United States. For example, Eastern Europeans in the early twentieth century were not considered White automatically but had to assimilate into Whiteness. In conversation with Miller, I capitalize White to “capture the ideological, social, and political significance of White identity constructions” (10). This commitment to Whiteness as ideology is central to understanding how White Christian nationalism creates ever-evolving boundaries around who can reap the benefits of Whiteness and who cannot.

18 Donald J. Trump, interview by Will Cain, Rachel Campos-Duffy, and Pete Hegseth, “The Will Cain Show, Fox News,” Fox News, June 3, 2024, <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6354224797112>.

ism. In fact, Schmitt might have applauded Trump and the Republican agenda intent on war, predation, and racial and civilizational divide.¹⁹ Schmitt, too, saw politics as a battle against an enemy who must be defeated at all costs. Once the sovereign leader decides that a state of exception exists outside of the legal order, all citizens become combatants.²⁰ Without the division between friend and enemy, and the possibility of war against the enemy, Schmitt believed the world would descend into rogue violence, creating the conditions for more, not less, conflict.²¹ If an enemy did not already exist, then one would have to be invented. For the U.S., the enemy of the state has always been both external and internal, as shown through the extermination of indigenous peoples during colonization, the brutal enslavement of Africans until the mid-twentieth century, legalized segregation under Jim Crow, and today's mass incarceration. Trump says in this interview and elsewhere that he is fighting for the Constitution, as many of his loyalists will do, but we also know that as an authoritarian, his inclination will be to invoke the state of exception, and to make that exception permanent.

While immigrants, and their so-called Democratic enablers, are a primary “enemy within” for Trump, trans people are often referenced in the same breath. During this “Fox News and Friends” interview, directly after stoking fears of immigrants sleeping in children's parks, Trump asks,

Who really thinks that men should be playing in women's sports? It is something I mention all the time [and it] gets one of the biggest applause ... when I first heard about it I actually thought they were kidding. I thought you know this was just a funny joke but they're actually serious about it. They're actually committed to it and who would want that? Who would want open borders?²²

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- 19 Nikhil Pal Singh, *Race and America's Long War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 171.
- 20 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 5.
- 21 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 35.
- 22 Donald J. Trump, interview by Will Cain, Rachel Campos-Duffy, and Pete Hegseth, “The Will Cain Show, Fox News.”

The fact that these derogations of trans people, what he refers to as “common sense,” earn him “the biggest applause” tells us the central role that trans people, connected here to the threat of “open borders,” play in this election.

These words likely garner praise from many of his admirers, but White Christian nationalists, specifically evangelical extremists, at the center of his campaign and of his previous administration, are one group that embraces this anti-trans rhetoric with fervor. While the reporting on this steadfast source of support has often been lacking or incomplete, the agenda evangelical extremists push was already at the heart of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the subsequent passage of draconian abortion law, the bans in Republican-led states on healthcare for trans youth, bathroom bills, bans on trans athletes, book banning, and more. I have come to believe that evangelical extremists pose the greatest threat to trans *existence* in the United States – not to *citizenship*, but to existence. They would like to ban trans people, particularly trans women, from existing in public and from accessing medical care, and under another Trump administration, they will be politically empowered to do so.

To gain a full understanding of the social and political context of transmisogyny in this election, we have to understand the evangelical extremists’ worldview, and how their teachings on the body, sexual sin, and the family all lead to their demonization of trans women and transfeminine persons. One of the primary drivers of transmisogyny among this highly mobilized segment of his base is the need to secure the definition of “woman” as biological and based in reproduction. Religious motivations supercharge the more generalizable wave of transmisogyny in contemporary U.S. society. Julia Serano defined transmisogyny as the specific way in which trans women are linked to sexual deviance and subjected to punitive violence.²³ It is a homophobic and sexualizing response as well, tied to fears of sodomy, which explains why transness in general has been linked to the “sexual predator” and “pedophile” tropes used to target gay men in the mid-twentieth century and beyond. For evangelical extremists, masculinity depends upon a rigid definition of “woman,” because it strengthens and validates their position as political powerbrokers, breadwinners, and warriors for God.

The dehumanization of trans people is not new but is rather recycled on a continuous loop – by Trump, far-right news media, and so-called online activists. Gessen recalls that in 2016, Trump vowed his base a return to

23 Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl* (New York: Seal Press, 2007).

an imaginary past in which their jobs and daughters were safe from brown-skinned immigrants, in which the threat of what Trump calls ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ was vanquished or had never existed, in which White people did not have to treat African Americans as equals, women didn’t meddle in politics, gay people didn’t advertise their sexual orientation, and transgender people didn’t exist.²⁴

He fulfilled this last promise through a list of laws, including in 2017 a ban – by tweet – on trans people joining the military. Trump declared that the United States would no longer “accept or allow” trans people to serve, citing “tremendous medical costs and disruption.”²⁵ The ban was not implemented until April 2019, and it did allow trans personnel already in the military to continue their duties, barring only new recruits. However, what is striking about this ban is its symbolic content, because it established an opposition between the military – *the* sign of American dominance in the world – and trans people.²⁶ Even while the Trump administration claimed at the time this was a financial and not a human rights decision, the ban suggested that trans people compromised American security, because of their so-called costly bodily and mental health needs, rendering the trans body a problem that can only be solved through erasure and non-existence. In 2024, Trump promises his followers that that they will live in a society free of so-called transgenderism, in which their *existence* will no longer trouble them. A constellation of legal and social developments should tell us their plans to turn trans people – particularly trans women – into personae non gratae.

White Christian nationalism, transmisogyny and the 2024 election can be understood through two figurations – the vigilante and the world crusader. The vigilante construct has its own dark history in the United States, conjuring the internal war against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Here, the vigilante is the person who is emboldened to take the law into their own hands. It is an outcome of what I am calling political trans(homo)phobia, in conversation with Meredith J. Bosia and Michael J. Weiss, which is manufactured to legit-

24 Gessen, *Surviving*, 171, emphasis added.

25 BBC, “Biden Overturns Trump transgender military ban,” January 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55799913>. Biden overturned this policy in January 2021.

26 Gessen, *Surviving*, 216.

imize corrupt governments and to concentrate power in the hands of elites.²⁷ Evangelical extremists, who feel they must battle – literally – for the soul of the nation, encourage online bullying and actual violence against trans people and the LGBTQ+ community more broadly. Their battle is not confined to the United States, however. They have for decades envisioned themselves as world crusaders, as shown by the evangelical influence on Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda, which passed in 2023 one of the cruelest anti-LGBTQ+ laws in existence.

One Nation under God

Much attention has been paid to Trump's autocratic ambitions, but what has not been taken as seriously are his deep ties to the Christian right, with White evangelical extremists at the forefront of the movement.²⁸ While evangelicals weren't the only White Christian group to support Trump, they have comprised the largest voting bloc in the GOP since 1988.²⁹ 81% of White evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016.³⁰ Political scientist Ryan Burge of Eastern Illinois University found that in 2018, 35.3% of voters registered with the Republican party identify as White and evangelical.³¹ This statistic becomes more significant when read alongside 2023 PRRI data which shows that only 13.6% of 40,000 survey

27 Meredith L. Bosia and Michael J. Weiss, "Political Homophobia in Comparative Perspective," in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, eds. Meredith L. Bosia and Michael J. Weiss (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

28 As Brynn Tannehill explains, conservative Catholics also influence politics, but they represent a minority in a divided Church where most members support same-sex marriage, reject religious rights to refuse service, support birth control, and other issues, in contrast to the clergy. Mormons have similar views to evangelicals, but only represent 2% of the population. Their power is concentrated in states like Utah and Idaho, where they are overrepresented in the GOP (*American Fascism*, 113).

29 *Ibid.*, 114.

30 *Evangelicals: From Faith to Power*, Episode 1, "The World Crusade," ARTEFRC, dir. Thomas Johnson, April 4, 2023, Apple TV, <https://tv.apple.com/us/episode/the-world-crusade/umc.cmc.1uvh7wonuswbzd2e4ebjoge6?showId=umc.cmc.6ij909rdmivsx42njxl3them>.

31 Tannehill, *American Fascism*, 113.

respondents identified as White evangelical Protestant.³² This means that despite that they are a minority in the country, for the first time, Trump gave evangelical extremist leaders a center of gravity in the White House, and in return, Trump validated their self-perception as a persecuted group lacking religious freedom. Together, they have set an agenda that will restore White supremacy and traditional family values to a country that in their minds is crumbling before their eyes. The eradication of transness is part of a spiritual war to regain control of the country, and they do not mean figurative war. They mean armed struggle – defeat of the enemy through any means necessary. And nowhere was this deadly struggle more visible than on January 6, 2021.

I've presented on the January 6th insurrection many times, and I include some discussion in my book *Masculinity in Transition*, but I am going to do something most academics won't. I'm going to admit that my analysis was incomplete – not only about January 6th but about the centrality of White Christian nationalism to gender constructs in the United States more broadly. Why did I, and so many investigators, scholars, and journalists, continue to overlook or downplay the homegrown, White Christian nationalist threat, culminating in, but not subsiding with, January 6th? Bradley Onishi, a professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Francisco, offers two possible explanations. First, for many more secular Americans in particular, conservative Christians are the “default demographic,” what he calls “the pesky but harmless moralists of a nation founded on religious principles.”³³ Some also fall into what I would call the “Ned Flanders effect.” Onishi points to the assumption that the irritatingly pious Ned Flanders from *The Simpsons*, with his banal “ok-leedokely” refrain, cannot also be Mr. Burns, the power-grabbing capitalist authoritarian, who is also besieged and victimized, caring little for other human beings. However, anti-pluralist, White supremacist, Christian nationalist beliefs have become mainstream, and their proponents have no use for dialogue and debate. Onishi sees January 6th as in essence a White supremacist religious ritual motivated by a crusade against the internal enemies of the United States.³⁴

32 PRRI, “2022 PRRI Census of American Religion: Religious Affiliation Updates and Trends,” February 24, 2023, <https://www.prii.org/spotlight/prri-2022-american-values-atlas-religious-affiliation-updates-and-trends/>.

33 Onishi, *Preparing for War*, 219–220.

34 *Ibid.*, 177.

The separation of Church and State, something vital for democracy, has eroded significantly in the United States since 2016, and it is hard to overestimate the effects. It was clear from the very beginning of his administration that White Christian nationalists had finally achieved the foothold in government they had been looking for since Richard Nixon became their first “sponsored” president in the 1970s. Trump’s spiritual advisor, Paula White, even delivered the invocation on inauguration day, January 20, 2017, becoming the first religious person in history to swear in a president. White is heavily influenced by the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a movement that was marginal until Trump came to power. The NAR has spread the belief that a spiritual battle is taking place on the “seven mountains” of family, government, the church or religion, education, business community, entertainment, and popular culture. Deeply embedded in the White House, she was appointed to establish a religious network at the core of the government via Trump’s newly established Faith and Opportunity Initiative at the Office of Public Liaison. She was charged with placing a faith director in every department and every agency, something unprecedented, and heretofore unimaginable.

She is also a prosperity gospel preacher and charismatic pastor, and one of the most popular and wealthiest evangelical extremists in the United States. The prosperity gospel spreads the idea that parishioners ensure their own wealth by giving money to the church, and that individual failing, not systemic racism, or gender and sex discrimination, are to blame for the so-called misfortunes of marginalized groups. This dangerous gospel of capitalist enterprise and White supremacy connects any belief in social justice to communism. As Onishi writes, in their minds, “real Christians don’t focus on feeding the hungry. They feed hungry souls.”³⁵

The history of conservative evangelicalism is also embedded in anti-Black racism. Particularly in the American South, White evangelical extremists fought bitterly to save both slavery and the practice of legal segregation, known as Jim Crow. In *White Too Long*, Robert P. Jones talks about the active role of White, Christian leaders, institutions, and lay people in the construction and maintenance of White supremacy in their local communities. White churches were the “connective tissue” that assembled leaders from other parts

35 Ibid., 10.

of society, and through what he calls a carefully crafted Christian theology, they established divine justification for their resistance to Black equality.³⁶

For these believers, Trump is the Old Testament king who will save the country for God. He is often compared to King Cyrus, a pagan Persian King who God used to allow the Israelites to go back to Jerusalem, an example where God used someone ungodly to accomplish his purposes.³⁷ This helps explain why for them, it still does not matter that he is a thrice divorced candidate, and now a convicted felon, facing an additional fifty-six charges in three remaining criminal proceedings. As Religious Studies scholar Anthea Butler explains, Trump's evangelical extremist supporters do not care about his moral stances or issues, or what he says: they care about Whiteness and *their* Whiteness.³⁸ For them, the United States is like Israel in the Hebrew Bible. "Christian nationalists hold the keys, in their own minds at least," Onishi writes, "to what God wants, what he commands, and who is to blame when the nation gets 'punished.'"³⁹ Reestablishing strict gender norms and eradicating transness is part of their racialized project.

We're Going to Need More Wall

For years now, political scientists have been sounding the alarm that the United States is close to civil war, in large part because the glue of racism and xenophobia has led to a partnership between the Alt-Right, who want a White ethno-state, and evangelical extremists, who want patriarchy and Christian hegemony in a Christian nation. As Onishi observes, both groups "mourn a mythological America they see as lost to the throes of pluralism, immigration, the expansion of civil rights for people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, and the changing racial demographics of the country."⁴⁰ White Christian nationalism has since become an umbrella for a wide coalition. The Alt-Right are offered a religious cover in return for their movement and ideology, which

36 Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 32–33.

37 Interview with Stephen Strang, *Evangelicals*, "World Crusade."

38 Interview with Anthea Butler, *Evangelicals*, "World Crusade."

39 Onishi, *Preparing*, 19.

40 *Ibid.*, 112.

means that the bibles and Christian symbols waved in the air on January 6th only served to legitimize their mission.

If a wall is not enough to keep your neighbor away, you can simply move, isolate yourself from the cities and college towns that are destroying America with their decadence, moral relativism, and dismissal of traditional family values. This exodus is what has been named the American Redoubt by James Wesley Rawles, a former U.S. military intelligence officer.⁴¹ For over a decade, a patchwork of the far-right, including numerous evangelical extremists, have been leaving states like California for Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Eastern Washington, and Eastern Oregon. “Redoubt” means stronghold or fortification, which is fitting for a movement that seeks geographical consolidation, de facto succession, and preparation for “the collapse of the United States and the chance to rebuild a theocratic state.”⁴² This development worries scholars like Barbara Walter, who sees this election not as a contest for electoral majorities or policy initiatives, but as a test of democracy’s endurance against an apocalyptic threat.⁴³

I join Onishi and a small choir of voices who believe that in such a crisis point, the time for measured discourse in academia or restrained neutrality in journalism has passed.⁴⁴ The question once again that concerns this chapter is not the threat this election poses to trans *citizenship*, but to trans *existence*. This is what I examine through the vigilante and the world crusader figurations.

The Vigilante

Trump actively promotes Schmitt’s idea that every citizen must become a combatant once the enemy has been flagged. As a result, ordinary people see themselves as vigilantes responsible for helping to identify, track and defeat the enemy figure. We could see them as accomplices in erecting and guarding the Wall that contains the intruders. When the trans woman became enemy #1 in

41 Ibid., 200, 205. In a blog post, he called for all freedom-loving conservative Americans to relocate in advance of impending economic and political doom (James Wesley Rawles, “The American Redoubt – Move to the Mountain States,” *Survival*, March 24, 2021, <https://survivalblog.com/redoubt/>).

42 Onishi, *Preparing*, 214.

43 Ibid., 215; Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start: And How to Stop Them* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022).

44 Onishi, *Preparing*, 215.

2016, vigilantes began an all-out assault on social media and in public spaces. This battle has assumed both legal and extra-legal dimensions. The racist history of the vigilante construct and the violence of current American policing also convey how the consequences of White Christian nationalist policies manifest exponentially for trans and queer people of color.

What is striking about this battle against transness is that it takes place in the most banal of locations: the seedy environs of public toilets and gym locker rooms. In March 2024, the discount gym chain, Planet Fitness, received bomb threats at forty franchises after the notorious far-right account “Libs of TikTok” compiled and shared numerous customer complaints about their trans-inclusive locker room policy.⁴⁵ Two videos came from a White, late middle-aged cis-gender woman in Alaska. In the first video, she announced that she caught a person whom she perceived to be a trans woman shaving in the women’s locker room. She also claimed that their presence was threatening to a young girl of about twelve “sitting in the corner with a towel wrapped around her.”⁴⁶ She told her viewers, “I realize he wants to be a woman, he gets to be a woman, I love him in Christ ... He doesn’t like his gender, so he wants to be a woman, but I’m not comfortable with him shaving in my bathroom.”⁴⁷ A picture she took of the individual was posted alongside the video, but because taking pictures of other clients without their permission violates Planet Fitness policy, her membership was revoked.

After discovering she had been “cancelled” by the gym, she made a second, more irate video, stating that Planet Fitness “is defending the man in the women’s locker room, the man with the penis, rather than the child sitting in the corner with the towel wrapped around her.”⁴⁸ She urges her (assumed) assigned female viewers to be aware of this imminent danger, and to use their au-

45 Lauren Aratani, “Planet Fitness outlets receive bomb threats after far right derides gym policy,” *The Guardian*, April 13, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/13/planet-fitness-bomb-threats-libs-of-tiktok>.

46 Libs of Tik Tok (@libsoftiktok), “UPDATE: The woman who exposed a man shaving in an Alaska Planet Fitness women’s locker room with a 12-year-old present just had her membership revoked. Why is @PlanetFitness prioritizing a man with a p*nis using a woman’s private space over women’s and girls’ safety?” X, March 11, 2024, <https://x.com/libsoftiktok/status/1768306476374716793>.

47 Ibid.

48 Libs of Tik Tok (@libsoftiktok), “Why is @PlanetFitness prioritizing a man with a p*nis using a woman’s private space over women’s and girls’ safety,” X, March 14, 2024, <https://x.com/HEisGathering/status/1770211271486415272>.

thority to stand up for themselves and to “stop these shenanigans.” The woman declared that this locker room at Planet Fitness was now an “unsafe space,” and that her next action would be to report “him” to the police. The video received 12.1 million views on X alone and was re-posted 21,000 times.⁴⁹

Here we see the ugly face of transmisogyny emerge within the context of religious beliefs. We see the structural and all-consuming nature of transfeminine hatred, even while it is not clear that this person identifies as a trans woman. The fear of transfemininity is present nonetheless as a very specific category of deviance. As trans historian Jules Gil-Peterson argues, the historical and present-day targeting and separating out of transfeminine individuals involves a spectacle of violence meant to restore moral and relational order, in alignment with state power.⁵⁰ A transfeminine person’s presence automatically is perceived as an aggression and a threat.

One should not accept as genuine the gym client’s love for “him” in Christ when she simultaneously misgenders, humiliates, and degrades them to an audience of millions. However, she enacts a common double move for White evangelical extremists. On the one hand, they are told to love the “sinner,” but if they persist in parading their sinful existence about in public spaces, they should be prosecuted, regardless of their *actual* actions. Online sermons help clarify the messaging. In one example, Paula White explains the “love the sinner” viewpoint when she tells her congregants that “[God] doesn’t hate the transvestite. God doesn’t hate the angry murderer,” and if we want to get right with God, we need to stop judging the sinners.⁵¹ This may seem like a somewhat positive message on the surface. However, the “transvestite” and “murderer,” are mentioned in the same breath, suggesting these two “sins” are on the same plane. Her use of the historical term “transvestite” also shows how one doesn’t have to identify as a trans woman to be targeted, as terms appear in these sermons interchangeably. A transfeminine individual is viewed

49 It must be noted here that X in particular has become an extremely hostile and unmonitored space catering to anti-trans activists since Elon Musk bought the company on April 14, 2022.

50 Kendall Seismier, “Why Do Trans Women Face So Much Violence,” June 6, 2024, in *At Liberty*, produced by the ACLU, podcast, MP# audio, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/at-liberty/id1396174920?i=1000658017326>, 38:00.

51 Pastor Paula White, “Galatians: The Most Controversial Subjects of the Christian Faith,” YouTube, September 10, 2023, <https://youtu.be/v6-UrF9wo0Y?si=YOQo1KYJXOXoXyTY>, 1:14.

as a sexual aggressor regardless of how they identify or how calm or non-threatening their presence.

Online religious figures reproduce and reframe Trump's transmisogynistic rhetoric. One such pastor is Dutch Sheets, also associated with the NAR. In one of Sheets' sermon, "hate the sin" takes on a diabolical, and political dimension in which Christian nationalism (the title of the sermon) will be forced to compete with "an irreligious nationalism, an unprecedented Satanist theocracy, a transgender dominionism."⁵² As in many of these online rants, Christians are portrayed as the victims of a global cabal, and as a result, Sheets, like the woman in Alaska, believes that Christians are being "cancelled." Ideas from the prosperity gospel filter in here, too, in other parts of the sermon. Intersectionality is seen as a threat to "our" God-given equality, because he surmises, it establishes a person's worth as based on how many minority groups they belong to with "trans being Superior to all others." The communist left wants to impose what he calls a "transgender nationalism."

Within this fear of a hostile transgender takeover, transfemininity takes on a specific set of meanings. First, protection of young people from sexual sin is of prime importance for evangelical extremists. The ideology on Godly marriage maintains that sexual purity before marriage, for both girls and boys, secures the entire family line and realizes the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. This ideology comes from the psychologist James Dobson, who founded a parachurch organization called Focus on the Family in 1977, which is still active today. Prior to this, Dobson trained with the eugenicist and original propagator of the Great Replacement theory, Paul Popenoe, whose ideas on the segregation and forced sterilization of "waste humanity" inspired leaders of the Third Reich.⁵³ Dobson's views on gender, however, came from another twentieth-century conservative, George Gilder, who believed that men are naturally sexually destructive beings and need a wife to tame their uncontrolled instincts. In what religion scholar Sara Moslener describes as a containment theory, without sexual satisfaction and stability, men cannot access produc-

52 Dutch Sheets, "What Is Christian Nationalism? | Give Him 15: Daily Prayer with Dutch," YouTube, May 29, 2024, <https://youtu.be/vB-Qj8wplfQ?si=oBBAAr2SOQDP9ZLT>, 1:45.

53 Audrey Clare Farley, "The Eugenics Roots of Evangelical Family Values," Religion & Politics, n.d., <https://religionandpolitics.org/2021/05/12/the-eugenics-roots-of-evangelical-family-values/>.

tively their inherent power and authority.⁵⁴ This uncontained male power leads to societal destruction – a doomsday scenario. The complementarian model of marriage relies upon this theory, ensuring that the God-given traits of women and men become the basis for the Godly family.

Dobson also spread the belief that the body does not belong to you, but to God, and any sexual sin is a misuse of God's property. Sexual sin not only angers God and stains the family line, but threatens to destroy our country.⁵⁵ Daniel Miller, author of *Queer Democracy*, explains that ideas like these have a very long history, and that the body has often been a metaphor for how nations see their collective character and virtue.⁵⁶ In White Christian nationalism, the president must reflect the American social body as straight, White, Christian, native born (English-speaking), and patriarchal. To exist in the United States, people not reflecting this ideal must *know their place*.

Taken together, these beliefs help explain the intense fear and anger that transfeminine bodies elicit. For evangelical extremists who believe these ideas about gender and marriage, the person whom they perceive to be a trans woman is an uncontained man. In my view, trans men or transmasculine subjects do not elicit the same fear, because as assigned female subjects, they are already perceived as weaker and incapable of this inherent power and authority. In the mind of someone like Dutch Sheets, White masculinity can be neither “biologically” nor sociologically approximated. The trans woman/uncontained man's wanton sexual urges make certain their capacity and even intent to rape in bathrooms and gym locker rooms, or anywhere else they may be alone with a vulnerable, mother-wife, daughter, or sister who is, by Godly design, submissive and obedient.

Tampering with the body – which is not yours but God's – via medical intervention is also a *sexual* sin of the highest order, and any attempt to change the terms of the gender contract, set forth in the Book of Genesis, puts the whole world in danger. For White evangelical extremists, these everyday spaces become the battle grounds on which the culture wars are waged. Cisgender women, already on high alert, take pictures or videos of transfeminine bodies, and in so doing violate their privacy, dehumanize them for audiences of mil-

54 Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 96; Onishi, *Preparing*, 110.

55 Onishi, *Preparing*, 103.

56 Miller, *Queer Democracy*.

lions, expose them to police violence and even create the conditions for mass casualties.

Conspiracy theories since the days of radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh in the 1980s have helped to fan these flames of transmisogyny. The Obama administration saw the biggest rise in such theories, and one gained so much appeal that it amounted to what we would call a new common sense. A story circulating on “mrconservative.com” claimed that then-First Lady Michelle Obama was actually a transgender woman named “Michael.”⁵⁷ According to an interview with an evangelical Trump voter, the claim was verifiable because there are no pictures online of Michelle giving birth to Malia and Sasha. “Anyone knows that,” she said, suggesting both the *de rigueur* nature of the fact and its well-seeded logic.⁵⁸ This particular conspiracy theory has had a long life, and it recently resurfaced in a February 2024 Super Bowl post by Donald Trump, Jr., who claimed he found an image of “Michael Obama” playing football for the Pittsburgh Steelers⁵⁹

This insidious lie that Michelle Obama is *really* a Black trans woman conjures two primary fears in the minds of evangelical extremists: the fear of Black men as allegedly by nature programmed to rape White women, and fears of the so-called horrors of the Civil Rights Era. Prior to the fight against abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, the conservative evangelical movement found its footing in their opposition to *Brown v. Board of Education*, which made school segregation illegal. There is still the desire to bring back legal segregation in schools through private school voucher programs designed to shield White families from Black and brown students. This fear of desegregation echoes back to a statement made by President Eisenhower, in support of those who opposed the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling on desegregation. Referring to Southerners specifically, he told Chief Justice Earl Warren, “These are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little [White] girls are

57 Stephanie McCrummen, “Finally. Someone Who Thinks Like Me,” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/finally-someone-who-thinks-like-me/2016/10/01/c9b6f334-7f68-11e6-9070-5c4905bf40dc_story.html.

58 McCrummen, “Finally.”

59 Alex Bollinger, “Donald Trump Jr. Accuses Michelle Obama of Being Transgender in Bizarre Super Bowl Post,” *LGBTQNation*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2024/02/donald-trump-jr-accuses-michelle-obama-of-being-transgender-in-bizarre-super-bowl-post/>.

not required to sit in school alongside some big Black bucks.”⁶⁰ Thanks to the speed of online misinformation, in an instant, Michelle Obama becomes that “big Black buck” in women’s clothing, which makes evangelical extremists feel on a very personal and intimate level that there is a “sickness” – an ungodliness – plaguing the national body.

The people who spread these conspiracy theories do not perceive their actions as malicious, or in any way conflicting with the Bible’s directive to “love thy neighbor.” They believe they are fighting the battle for God against Satan, and that no Wall could ever be fortified enough to contain the threat. They feel it is their obligation to convert trans and queer people and to lead them away from their harmful “lifestyle.” However, if they do not submit to persuasion, they must be eliminated from society to protect sexual purity and Godly families and to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth. They are willing to take up arms in this battle, as they have been persuaded by their pastors to eliminate at all costs the demons that inhabit the bodies of non-believers, especially LGBTQ+ people.

These religious views have also assumed a legal dimension, in addition to the extra-legal violence they produce. Some state-level bills passed on abortion and trans care rely on vigilante justice to accomplish their zero-tolerance goals. A law passed in Tennessee in April 2024 makes it a felony to *help* trans youth seek care, including providing information or maps, in person, by text, or by phone.⁶¹ One can imagine the kinds of vigilantism this will inspire, including eavesdropping on conversations, or tracking the physical movements and social media interactions of a so-called suspect. A companion abortion bill, dubbed the “abortion trafficking law,” has similar intent: to embolden like-minded followers to go to any lengths necessary to bring these enablers to justice.

Some of these vigilantes may even find their way into employment in the next Trump administration. Project 2025 is also a recruitment hub where visitors may “apply now” to become part of the database that will be used to fill

60 Micheal O’Donnell, “When Eisenhower and Warren Squared Off Over Civil Rights,” *The Atlantic*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/04/commader-v-chief/554045/>.

61 Erin Reed, “Tennessee Senate Passes Bill Making ‘Recruiting’ for Trans Youth Care a Felony,” *The Advocate*, April 14, 2024, <https://www.advocate.com/politics/tennessee-senate-bill-trans-youth-felony>.

positions in the federal government. The imprint of White Christian nationalism is obvious in the questions being asked of applicants. One section on the application form is comprised of eighteen, mandatory statements that are to be marked “agree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree.” These include: “The U.S. has the right to select immigrants based on country of origin”; “Life has a right to legal protection from conception to natural death”; “The permanent institutions of family and religion are foundational to American freedom and the common good”; and, finally, “The federal government should recognize only two unchanging sexes, male and female, as a matter of policy.”

The intent of this last statement is unveiled in the 920-page “playbook” called *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, in which the word “transgender” is mentioned thirteen times and appears first on page five:

Pornography, manifested today in the omnipresent propagation of transgender ideology and sexualization of children, for instance, is not a political Gordian knot inextricably binding up disparate claims about free speech, property rights, sexual liberation, and child welfare. It has no claim to First Amendment protection. Its purveyors are child predators and misogynistic exploiters of women. Their product is as addictive as any illicit drug and as psychologically destructive as any crime. Pornography should be outlawed. The people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned. Educators and public librarians who purvey it should be classed as registered sex offenders. And telecommunications and technology firms that facilitate its spread should be shuttered.⁶²

Throughout, this “playbook” makes threats and unsubstantiated claims like this one – preying on people’s most basic sense of security in the world. Short, clipped sentences, combined with more erudite, knowledgeable-sounding phrasing, appeal to people who have already been told what to believe. Such readers would be encouraged when they encounter the promise to imprison and register as sex offenders those teachers and librarians who want to inform their students about gender and sexuality – at a level appropriate to their age. They would be reassured to hear that so-called real women will be protected from these alleged predators and rapists. The vigilantism that such a document could inspire is simply terrifying.

62 The Heritage Foundation, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Washington: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), 5.

This leads to the baffling part of Trumpism: the lack of conscience, even when hatred of the enemy leads to imprisonment, violence and death. This dearth of humanity has been most evident in the Republican lawmakers who draft and pass this kind of draconian legislation. With few exceptions, these lawmakers vehemently dismiss the views of major medical associations, not to mention the tearful testimonies of parents, friends, and allies of trans youth.⁶³ Because they are fulfilling God's will, they do not feel they are doing anything wrong when 41% of LGBTQ youth surveyed have considered suicide in the last year, or when parents are forced to seek care in one of the fifteen states that have passed shield laws protecting patient healthcare from out-of-state investigations.⁶⁴ They do not feel remorse when families are forced to relocate, with all the shame and financial and emotional hardships that come with such a decision. They don't feel responsible when a trans woman politician in the United States with whom I'm acquainted receives disturbing emails, death threats, and messages explicitly advocating that she kill herself and find the nearest chair and rope, or be fed to a wood chipper, or that she is "a waste of biomass ripe for eradication."

Hannah Arendt once spoke about the banality of evil. Evil, she observed, was not monstrous but rather, the consequence of thoughtlessness and the concern for one's own advancement, the utter inability to see things from the perspective of another human being. Some of history's worst actors, she posited, are unable to comprehend their effect on the people they have judged to be their enemies. It is Arendt's most controversial insight, as it was derived from her reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi Lieutenant Colonel who fled to Argentina in 1950 but was kidnapped in 1960 in Buenos Aires by the Israeli Secret Service. She writes:

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that it can only ever be extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is "thought-defying" ...

63 This includes the American Academy of Pediatrics. See Alyson Sulaski Wyckoff, "AAP Reaffirms Gender-Affirming Care Policy, Authorizes Systematic Review of Evidence to Guide Update," AAP News, August 4, 2023, <https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/new/5/25340/AAP-reaffirms-gender-affirming-care-policy?autologincheck=redirected#>.

64 The Trevor Project, "2023 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People," n.d., <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>; Reed, "Tennessee Senate."

because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its “banality.”⁶⁵

Arendt believed that Eichmann was deeply individually and morally responsible for his crimes, but the “word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” that she observed was more significant for her than the crimes themselves or their adjudication.⁶⁶ She was adamant that this was the *lesson* from the trial of Adolf Eichmann, and not an explanation, phenomenon, or theory, which means it was to be learned from, beyond historical specificities.⁶⁷ She feared that if humanity did not learn this lesson, it was doomed to repeat the circumstances that presented it.

The violent rhetoric of the vigilante reminds me of Arendt’s lesson. When politically and religiously motivated transmisogyny spreads rapidly, online and off, like this fungus on the surface, it motivates people to take action in the world. To them, the threat posed by so-called transgender nationalism is real and imminent. The claims echoed by Trump and right-wing, evangelical extremist pastors compels everyday people to experience not just panic, but life-threatening dread, when they see a trans person. While some of us are stunned by this tidal wave of anti-trans hatred, there are those who are hungering for a so-called realignment of society, a return to America’s alleged greatness before the cultural movements of the 1960s and ’70s, which paved the way for a gender revolution and a Black president.

The World Crusader

For some evangelicals, it is not enough to force your beliefs upon an unwilling majority in your own country. They are determined to stand atop the seven mountains of family, government, church, education, business, entertainment, and popular culture – not just in the United States but all over the world. To restore moral order, the symbolic Wall needs to extend from one

65 Hannah Arendt, “A Daughter of Our People: A Response to Gershom Scholem,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 2003), 396.

66 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 252.

67 *Ibid.*, 379.

continent to the next, as enemies new and old could appear anywhere. This militarized zealotry has given rise to the world crusader.

These crusaders have been exceptionally proficient at attracting followers, in ways that even shock experts. In 2024, sociologists Matthew Taylor and Paul Zupe surveyed self-identified Christians to see how mainstream these once-fringe concepts had become.⁶⁸ Taylor and Zupe crafted the questions in very specific ways to match in word and tone the preachings of the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). There is a widespread belief, for example, that the world is experiencing a pandemic of demon possession, which is responsible for the rise in “transgenderism.” When respondents were asked if “there are demonic principalities and powers who control physical territory,” 69% said “yes.” When asked if “the church should organize campaigns of spiritual warfare and prayer to displace high-level demons,” 66% of self-identified evangelicals said “yes,” while a third of non-evangelical Christians also said “yes.” The results of the survey stunned these scholars, in part because even those not associated with evangelicals had been convinced. And if you really believe that there are “demons controlling your city, your city hall, your state capital, a whole province in another part of the world,” then you will feel it is your responsibility to liberate them.⁶⁹ At this point in the election cycle, when people on the so-called left speak, they hear only the “demons speaking through them.”⁷⁰

As Taylor posits, the right wing in the U.S. now has a kind of “lingua franca” of warfare that often hides behind a more placid, peace-loving veneer.⁷¹ The battles to displace these global enemies are not rhetorical, but literal. Spiritual warfare language is a step toward warfare in real life. In fact, this is the job description of the contemporary evangelical world crusader.

The first world crusader in America was Billy Graham, who led massive Christian revivals in tents and stadiums for fifty years. Graham sold evangelicism, family values, and the capitalistic American Dream. At home, Graham was the quintessential postwar husband-father, who is captured on film driving his convertible with his wife and five children, singing Christian hymns as

68 Brad Onishi, “NAR Watch Episode 1: The NAR Is Mainstream, Propheying a Global Caliphate, and the Apostles ‘Saving the Jews from Themselves,’” May 14, 2024, in *Straight White American Jesus*, produced by Axis Mundi Media, podcast, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/straight-white-american-jesus/id1441649707?i=1000655593573>, 32:00.

69 Onishi, “NAR Watch Episode 1.”

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

they sail along on the newly minted American highway system.⁷² Unlike the staid church preachers that people were used to in the 1940s and '50s, Graham was magnetic and in tune with modern problems. His vision was grandiose and set on planetary conversion, as shown in his postwar world tours, which were heavily sponsored by devout Christian oil men who shared his desire for so-called international uplift. They helped fund the first Christian media empire, including a radio show called “Hour of Decision” which attracted twenty million listeners.

At that early point, the separation of church and state began to blur. Under Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, Graham became the first White House chaplain, rapidly sealing the Christian alliance with power.⁷³ As Onishi phrases it, religion became the vehicle and politics the engine.⁷⁴ Thanks to Eisenhower, who was converted by Graham, we now have the words “In God We Trust” printed on dollar bills; the phrase “under God” was tacked on to the pledge of allegiance; and the first prayer breakfast was held between political and religious leaders, an annual event to this day.

Christian nationalism is ascendant around the world. At the United Nations, evangelical extremists work together through coalitions like the UN Family Rights Caucus, an NGO which uses human rights language and pseudo-science to protect *their* traditional family values, including the rights of the unborn.⁷⁵ However, the United States has the most influential – and richest – evangelical network in the world; there are around 2,000 megachurches internationally, and of those around 1,750 are in the United States (38 in Houston, Texas, alone).⁷⁶ A “megachurch” is the kind of venue most capable of spreading anti-trans views on a mass scale, complete with rock bands, movie theater seating, top-notch sound systems, and the financial ability to send missionaries anywhere in the world. These churches spread the so-called “good news” with mind-boggling efficiency.

Nowhere is this more visible than in Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria. Since the early 2000s, under George W. Bush, the first President truly sympathetic –

72 *Evangelicals*, “World Crusade.”

73 Interview with Philippe Gonzalez, *Evangelicals*, “World Crusade.”

74 Onishi, *Preparing*, 41.

75 Austin Dacey, “At the UN, Conservative Christian Agenda Cloaked in Human Rights Language,” *Religion Dispatches*, September 23, 2014, <https://religiondispatches.org/at-the-un-an-attempt-to-re-cast-childrens-rights-as-family-rights/>.

76 *Evangelicals*, “World Crusade.”

and effective – for evangelicals, Africa, imagined as monolithic and undifferentiated, became the desired unconquered territory. In evangelical extremists' view, here was a captive audience, a poor population ripe for the message of the prosperity gospel and an obscure and terrifying anti-LGBT agenda. Reverend Kapya Kaoma recalls how, in Uganda, preachers like Scott Lively of Abiding Truth Ministries sold this agenda in the most extreme terms. Kaoma, who now lives in the United States, observed Lively's appalling lectures in which he claimed that a "homosexual dysfunction" had taken over the United States, and that Uganda would be next if they did not act now. For Reverend Kaoma, some African countries became the "dumping place for his extreme ideas"; in the United States, "he was a nobody," but in some parts of Africa, "he became the spokesperson of American Evangelicalism."⁷⁷ Preachers and politicians built their careers and fortunes from this gospel of hate. Lively also influenced parliament, touching off a hysteria against the new "gay enemy," which led Uganda to eventually pass in 2023 one of the most extreme anti-LGBTIQ+ laws in the world.⁷⁸

In Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, and Ghana, where evangelical missionaries have been the most successful, governments have been able to weaponize what Meredith Weiss and Michael Bosia call "political homophobia," or the conscious use of homophobia as a "political strategy, often unrelated to substantial local demands for political rights."⁷⁹ Like the state-level bills in the United States, these laws are modular and easily imposed across the continent.⁸⁰ Ayodele Sogunro, writing on homophobic law in Nigeria, insists that if we do not understand the social and political context of these laws, we cannot

77 *God Loves Uganda*, dir. Roger Ross Williams, featuring Pastor Robert Kayanja, Pastor Martin Ssempe, Pastor Scott Lively, Lou Engle and Bishop Christopher Senyonjo (Brooklyn: Motto Pictures and Full Credit Productions, 2013).

78 In upholding the law from a legal challenge in 2024, the court used the *Dobbs* decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* in the United States as rationale to defend it. See Julianne McShane, "Uganda Cited *Dobbs* in an Anti-LGBTQ Crackdown. Americans Should Worry Too," *Mother Jones*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/04/uganda-dobbs-lgbtq-court-law-dobbs-usa-abortion-rights/>.

79 Ayodele Sogunro, "An Analysis of Political Homophobia, Elitism and Social Exclusion in the Colonial Origins of Anti-Gay Laws in Nigeria," *African Human Rights Law Journal* 22 (2022), 493–519; Meredith L. Bosia and Michael J. Weiss, "Political Homophobia in Comparative Perspective," in *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, eds. Meredith L. Bosia and Michael J. Weiss (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2n1.

80 Bosia and Weiss, "Political Homophobia," 6n1.

expect to fight them effectively.⁸¹ Inspired by Sogunro, I want to situate trans-misogyny within the context of White Christian nationalism, which results in what I would call political trans(homo)phobia. While trans people are not explicitly mentioned in African law, they are the ones targeted first and most viciously. Assumed to be uber-gay men rather than transgender, trans women and transfeminine individuals have the lowest life chances. “Gay” can be used as a catch-all phrase in the United States and Uganda, and many people do not know the difference between “trans” and “gay.” Trans people would have to pass seamlessly in society to be safe, assuming they would want to. Additionally, such passing requires access to expensive surgeries and medications. This brings me to a point that needs to be made as clearly as possible: *If we want to know what the United States looks like for trans people under another Trump administration, we should look at these African countries, especially Uganda.*

We could think of political trans(homo)phobia acting as the sharpest edge of a long knife, intended to suppress the claims of any minoritized group that challenges established authority. In Uganda and Nigeria, the combination of control of the media, social exclusion, and extreme political rhetoric leads people to either flee, often to South Africa, or to go into hiding. The end goal is the legitimization of the ruling class, who enact these laws in times of political crisis. In a country like Uganda, where 85% of the people are Christian, the church plays a central role.

When the so-called “Kill the Gays bill” was first passed in Uganda in 2014 (and then later dismissed on a technicality), vigilante-enforcers started to appear on every street corner. David Kato, an LGBTIQ+ activist in Uganda, saw the storm clouds gathering: “They [U.S. evangelicals] forget that they are preaching to people who will just take the law into their own hands.”⁸² This turned out to be a prophetic statement. Soon after this interview, he was bludgeoned to death by an unknown assailant.

The consequences of U.S. evangelical missionaries have been tragic in Uganda. In the new Trumpian autocracy, we can learn from people like David Kato, and unfortunately, from the fate that befell him. As the documentary *God Loves Uganda* conveys, before this, he was an admired member of the LGBTIQ+ community who made sure that the people in his care had the supplies and services they needed.⁸³ He knew his life was in danger, and yet he made the

81 Sogunro, “Nigeria,” 494.

82 David Kato, interviewed in *God Loves Uganda*.

83 *God Loves Uganda*.

decision to continue his work anyway. Alongside him was Bishop Christopher Senyonjo whose allyship may seem beyond the reach of most people. It must be granted that these are extraordinary individuals, who display what Arendt means by the radicality of good. However, these good actions do not have to be the exceptions. If evil is rootless and empty, Arendt concluded, like the fungus on the surface, then the good is rich, deep like soil, full of mycelium, roots, and nutrients, complex and alive – that is, within our reach.

Kato and Bishop Senyonjo were what I like to call unruly alliances, bonds across difference that occur between people who come to occupy the same pockets of resistance, often during times of political, economic, and environmental crisis.⁸⁴ Unruly alliances escape the imprint of fraternal constructs, transcending the limits of identitarian thinking beyond the realm of heteronormative domestic and familial arrangements. They help us to zero in on moments when conditions are ripe for unlikely coalitions to build and grow.

Bishop Senyonjo and his family suffered tremendously for the stand he took on behalf of the LGBTIQ+ community. He was ex-communicated from the Church of Uganda, but instead of turning his back on them, he developed a street ministry, helping out folks like Kato and lending his support wherever he could. After he vocally opposed the first anti-gay law in Uganda in 2013, a tabloid published pictures, names, and addresses of Uganda’s “top homos,” with Kato and Bishop Senyonjo featured side-by-side. The paper demanded that everyone on the list be hanged.⁸⁵

These threats against his life did not sway him, however, and when he attended Kato’s funeral, he intervened against the homophobic priest of his former church and the angry mob he had incited. As the coffin was carried to the burial ground, Bishop Senyonjo knew that if he did not step in, it would have been the end of the service. So, he said, “No.” He walked to the gravesite and said farewell properly to David Kato, much to the relief of the mourners who had just been persecuted by the priest and a chorus of voices shouting “kill the gays!” Bishop Senyonjo proceeded to console a crying young person who knelt at David’s grave. “Please don’t be discouraged,” he told them. “God created you, God is on your side.” Later in the car with the camera crew, he said, “I am sad but I have not lost hope. It may take years but there is hope for the future.”

84 K. Allison Hammer, *Masculinity in Transition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 3, 114, 208–9.

85 *God Loves Uganda*.

Conclusion: Theocratic Autocracy in the United States

If Trump is re-elected, in this brave new world, the manufacture of enemies will not have an end, and there would be little peace or rest. Walls, both material and symbolic, will be constructed in communities everywhere, in cities and towns both small and large. The vigilante/world crusaders would be waiting to catch transfeminine individuals in the act of being themselves. A U.S. Navy veteran, defense researcher, and one of the leading trans voices in American politics, Brynn Tannehill, along with Brad Onishi, Daniel Miller, and others, are making the case for a transformation into not just an autocracy, but a theocracy. This would be a situation in which elections are incapable of changing our reality.⁸⁶ Frank Schaeffer, the son of the most notorious anti-abortion preacher in the 1970s, and someone who is the most familiar with the origins and direction of this movement, offers this prognosis. “It may seem far-fetched to non-American audiences,” he says, but if they get their way, “Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States are going to be the big theocracies.”⁸⁷

Adding to this scenario is the question looming over our heads: is January 6th an isolated event, a one-time disruption of the peaceful transfer of power, or will it sprout again? In other words, if the Democratic candidate Kamala Harris is duly elected, are the White Christian nationalists, the various groups comprising the Alt-Right, and other Trump supporters preparing to subvert her presidency? No one knows the answer to this question. However, to prevent such a reoccurrence, we would have needed to pass laws that strengthen democracy (e.g., laws aimed at voter suppression and gerrymandering) and prosecute members of the Trump administration for crimes while in office.⁸⁸ The deep networks of right-wing extremists who participated in the insurrection at the Capitol would have to have been brought to justice. Virtually no one has been held individually, morally, or legally accountable for their actions – or at least not to scale. Beyond this, there would have to have been some kind of

86 Brynn Tannehill, “There Are Four Postelection Scenarios, and Not One Is Good,” *The New Republic*, March 22, 2024, <https://newrepublic.com/article/179966/four-2024-post-election-scenarios-trump>; Tannehill, *American Fascism*, 162.

87 Frank Schaeffer interviewed on *Evangelicals: From Faith to Power*, Episode 2, “Evangelicals in Power,” ARTEFRFC, dir. Thomas Johnson, April 4, 2023, Apple TV, <https://tv.apple.com/us/episode/evangelicals-in-power/umc.cmc.ayu8nysu6xml3t4r470jbmvm?showid=umc.cmc.6ij909rdmivsx4znjtl3them>.

88 Tannehill, *American Fascism*, 251.

national reckoning with January 6th and the entire legacy of the Trump administration, from the dehumanization of trans people, to the family separation policy at the southern border, to the irresponsible, deadly, and avoidable response to COVID-19 – a mourning, in other words, for the autocratic attempt that took place, or at the very least, a consensus on reality, *that it did take place*, and a unified determination for it never to happen again. None of this has come to pass.⁸⁹

And for the enemies of the new state, what does it look like if the door shuts, when the threat of state violence is actual, and when the transfeminine person in the locker room can, and must, be prosecuted for existing in public? If there is no ability to change the system, if the door has shut, then individuals must act according to their own conscience and the limitations of their positions within society. If the United States does become a theocratic autocracy in 2025, hope will be found in the people who can – and will – ultimately say “no.”

These people will be those who refuse the hereditary logic of the neighbor in Frost’s poem, who decline to rebuild the wall, and instead tear it down, knowing that the consequences may be grave, even lethal. As a gender scholar and trans person who refuses to be silent, I hope that there will be more transnational alliances and strategy sharing coalitions among trans and queer folks surviving in oppressive regimes, as have been forming between advocates in Uganda and in the United States for decades. I hope there will be more efforts like this book to understand what it is like to be an American – and a trans American – at this dark point in history. I like to think that if Trump is elected, and we descend this path toward a theocracy, there will be neighbors who refuse this so-called new common sense and become unruly alliances in the fight for trans existence. We must remember that we have choices. We can choose to erect a bigger, higher wall – more impenetrable than ever before – or we can leave the field unfenced and open – free to be as it is, a wild and unruly place where apple trees and pine trees comingle undisturbed.

89 These laws were HR 1, HR 4, HR 8363, HR 2660, which are voting laws primarily aimed at voter suppression and gerrymandering. These would have helped move the GOP closer to the center, allowing them to ignore their radical wing. HR 1, the “For the People Act,” is the only one that passed, with Kamala Harris as the tie breaker in the Senate. For a complete discussion on what could have been done to protect democracy during the Biden Presidency, see *American Fascism*, Chapter 11, “The (Nearly) Inevitable Plunge.”

