

**NERD/GEEK MASCULINITY: TECHNOCRACY, RATIONALITY,  
AND GENDER IN NERD CULTURE'S COUNTERMASCULINE HEGEMONY**

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

Nerd and geek culture have become subjects of increasing public concern in recent years, with growing visibility and power for technical professions and increasing relevance of video games, science fiction, and fantasy in popular culture. As a subculture, nerd/geek culture tends to be described in terms of the experiences of men and boys who are unpopular because of their niche interests or lack of social skills. This dissertation proposes the concept of nerd/geek masculinity to understand discourses of hegemonic masculinity in nerd/geek culture.

Examining three case studies, the novel *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, the neoreactionary political ideology, and the #GamerGate controversy, the dissertation suggests that nerd/geek masculinity responds to a perceived emasculation of men who identify as nerds or geeks by constructing the interests, skills, and behaviors of nerd/geek culture as inherently male traits. In this way, nerd/geek masculinity turns the very traits nerds and geeks are often mocked for into evidence of manhood – as the cost of excluding women and queer people from nerd and geek culture.

## **DEDICATION**

To my friends and family who have supported me through this process of scholarship and survival, especially Aeva Palecek and Emily O’Leary... you are my dearest friends.

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As someone whose life experience has taken many unforeseen paths, who began her PhD studies under a different name than she would finish them with, I have received amazing strength from sources that all too often go unremarked and unrewarded, or are

dismissed as distractions. With so many close friends leaving the area or finding different paths, the Internet has provided an important way for me to stay in touch with those who have traveled far away, and to find support from those who I may never meet in person. Twitter, in particular, has provided extensive emotional support and active assistance in my research. In particular, I need to acknowledge Arthur Chu as a Twitter contact who has been enormously helpful in researching both #GamerGate and neoreaction. In general, I want to praise social media not merely as a way to escape from academic work, but also to supplement and enhance it.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In June 2012, feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian launched a crowd-funding campaign on the popular website Kickstarter, asking for donations to fund Tropes vs. Women, a series of online videos that she envisioned to critique video and computer game narratives of gender. Within days, Sarkeesian was beset with an assault of disparaging online communications, including death and rape threats, pornography and edited images depicting her in sexually compromising situations,<sup>1</sup> and a homebrew video game in which the player physically assaults her.<sup>2</sup> Current controversies in the geek and nerd subcultures around gender, race, and other identity categories in particular demand rhetorical investigation, since as the author of “Beat up Anita Sarkeesian,” the online game depicting the titular activity stated:

Anita Sarkeesian has not only scammed thousands of people out of over \$160,000 [the amount of funds raised by Sarkeesian’s crowd-funding project as of the author’s posting of his game] but also uses the excuse that she is a woman to get away with whatever she damn well pleases. Any form of constructive criticism, even from fellow women, is either ignored or labeled [sic] to be sexist against her. She claims to want gender equality in video games, but in reality, she just wants to use the fact that she was born with a vagina to get free money and sympathy from everyone who crosses her path.<sup>3</sup>

This paragraph mirrors thousands more attacks that would be launched against Ms. Sarkeesian, who uses rhetorical methods (Sarkeesian has a degree in communication studies and a Master’s Degree in Social and Political Thought)<sup>4</sup> to investigate gender



themes in video games, over the next several years.

The controversy that first bubbled to the surface because of Sarkeesian's Kickstarter has blown up into the online fracas referred to as #GamerGate, and similar controversies around the place of women, minorities, and feminism have arisen in cultures related or adjacent to gaming, such as science fiction fandom.<sup>5</sup> Arguments about the role of female fans and gamers have circulated for some time, with, famously, allegations leveled that geek culture has been infiltrated by "fake geek girls."<sup>6</sup>

I contend that these attitudes form a dangerous rhetorical pattern that constitute an ideology of epistemological and technocratic domination. Anti-diversity and misogynistic attitudes, combined with a belief in the intellectual superiority of technical experts as well as of media fans, potentially make nerd culture a dangerous reactionary community. The link intellectual elitism and exclusion has a history as long as that of rhetoric itself. Plato's *Republic* and his dialogue *Gorgias* paint a picture of scholars of antiquity who believed firmly that their proper position in society was as its rulers. Along with the birth of Enlightenment came the concept of an intellectually-driven, society-wide movement of progress. Eventually industrialization cemented the notion of societal growth and flourishing as driven by specialized, technical knowledge. In contemporary society, no single group can be identified as an undisputed intellectual elite – academics experience declining prestige globally<sup>7</sup> and a lower level of personal power and professional freedom in the context of neoliberal managerialism.<sup>8</sup> Yet the "managerial" class has not supplanted any previous intellectual elite, as managers themselves are subject to substantial "organizational control" and do not exist at the top

of a social power hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the link between knowledge/skill and political power remains contentious as always in contemporary discourse.

One set of social roles associated with intellectual talent, yet rarely with explicit political power or civic worth, is that of the “nerd.” Nerds are, commonly, killed with, and perhaps even obsessed with, technology and/or genre recreation and media (that is, science fiction, fantasy, or horror).<sup>10</sup> Society at large tends to associate geeks with technical skill and talent (consider Best Buy’s Geek Squad),<sup>11</sup> while dominant discourses also define nerds as existing in a “liminal” masculine space, partly excluded from and partly included in hegemonically (white) masculine discourses.<sup>12</sup> Nerds and geeks constitute a (youth) subculture apart from the mainstream.<sup>13</sup> Mendick and Francis have described geeks as “abject” in the Kristevian sense,<sup>14</sup> while most scholars observing nerds and geeks acknowledge that regardless of their perceived “coolness,” to be a nerd is, discursively, to be white and male (and it’s likely that Mendick and Francis agree, while recognizing the discursive connotations of such nerd identification).<sup>15</sup> This stereotype-reliant discourse is in fact replicated and reiterated within circles associated with technical expertise and nerd media consumption. Contemporary discursive spaces centered on technical expertise such as Silicon Valley businesspeople and online hacker spaces and software development teams - reflect a pervasive sense that intelligence and technology skills are a path to social power and success. Yet simultaneously, these subcultures demonstrate a pronounced narrative of personal marginalization in the personal and sexual realms (despite the fact that no conclusive evidence supports the assertion that nerds are

substantively marginalized in adult life, and some scholars argue that the nerd has achieved a positive connotation in popular culture.)<sup>16</sup>

Nerds and “geeks,”<sup>17</sup> who journalist and subcultural scholar Benjamin Nugent define as those who express a “machine-like” intellectualism,<sup>18</sup> demonstrate a strong public narrative of persecution and social marginalization. Existing communication and media research has corroborated and extended Nugent’s identification of this specific “nerd” stereotype.<sup>19</sup> Nerd cultures – in which I include both the “technical nerd” cultures endemic to Silicon Valley and other high-tech industrial and research industries, as well as the “media consumption” nerd cultures engaged in science fiction, fantasy, games, and animation fan activity – form unique and rhetorically significant conversations about social power and the rightful place of intellectual “nerds” in social hierarchies. These conversations often invite questions about racism, sexism, homophobia, and transgender exclusivity and transphobia, and exist against a backdrop of white, straight hegemonic masculinity.

In this dissertation I investigate two discourses that are repeatedly reiterated in contemporary Anglophone technology, science, and geek/nerd subcultures: that of (often subtly authoritarian) political ambition through technical expertise, and that of social marginalization (which is often responded to through discursively appropriating the social marginalization rhetorics of subaltern groups). This discourse of the nerd – presenting nerds as an example of a marginalized group of men who are to some extent excluded from masculinity and whiteness, yet also empowered with technical abilities and understanding beyond the average person’s comprehension – merits examination

from a rhetorical standpoint, particularly as this discourse has found substantial cachet culturally.<sup>20</sup> These discourses relate to, connect with, and inform dialogues around class, race, gender, and sexual orientation in rhetorical studies, particularly in relationship to feminism and queer theory. The guiding questions for this project are:

- How do discourses of oppression circulate within geek/nerd communities?
- How do nerds/geeks substantiate (or fail to substantiate) these claims of oppression with evidence or constitutive rhetoric?
- Who is constructed as “oppressing,” and in what ways do nerds and geeks suffer this oppression?
- Why do these particular oppressor-oppressed narratives arise, and what political and argumentative implications arise from them?
- What possibilities for inclusion and exclusion are foregrounded or foreclosed by the constitutive rhetoric of geek culture?

In the following segments, I will substantiate the importance of the aforementioned questions through a closer look at the connections between hegemony and nerd/geek culture, and how this hegemony may manifest in the specific form that I am terming “technocracy.” First, I will review the theory of hegemonic masculinity, which is crucial to understanding the specific case of geek culture. Next, I will discuss the cultural relevance of geek subcultures and establish three key figures of the geek, as the oppressed, as the excluder, and the technocrat, as well as the theory of geek/nerd masculinity I propose to unify these figures. Finally, I will discuss the three case studies around which the dissertation is based.

## HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Hegemonic masculinity was “first proposed” as a theoretical frame in studies of high school cultures in Australia.<sup>21</sup> The concept gained traction at least in part as a result of its differentiation between masculinity and maleness as an identity and masculine-coded behaviors that specifically reinforced male dominance over women, as well as its recognition that hegemonically masculine behaviors also subjugate subordinated masculinities.<sup>22</sup> Exact definitions of hegemonic masculinity have varied over time; Nick Trujillo emphasized its function as a sort of masculinity that demands “physical force and control... occupational achievement... familial patriarchy... frontiersmanship, and... heterosexuality,”<sup>23</sup> and other scholars have emphasized how can be and are performed actively by not just heterosexual men, but women, gay men, and others. Notably, studies of conservative female politicians such as Sarah Palin and Angela Merkel show strong adherence to traits of hegemonic masculinity, engaging in celebration of hegemonic masculine performances by male candidates and in the valorization of hegemonic male authority (in Palin’s case) and casting off “the less powerful aspects of the [feminine] identity” (in Merkel’s).<sup>24</sup>

Men who “fail” at one or more conventional definitions of hegemonic masculinity physical strength and vigor, athleticism, patriarchal family, and professional success -do not always repudiate the system of hegemonic masculinity, but rather find ways to adapt it to their interests. Lal Zimman studies transgender men, who “were assigned a female gender role at birth” but transition to a male identity, and the speech patterns used by such men. Trans men, trained as many of them have been in feminine speech patterns,

may be read as gay based on their speech, despite the effect on the voice that testosterone therapy often offers, and trans men who do not identify as gay may find such stereotyping “a source of misrecognition.”<sup>25</sup> Zimman points out that the stereotyping of men as homosexual as a result of the perception that their speech patterns are feminine contributes to hegemonic masculinity – the ranking of a certain group of men, in this case, transgender men, as less manly or masculine – and that such stereotyping often occurs from an early age. He also notes that even being read as a “nerd” can lead to an accusation of gayness among men. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that straight trans men would resist identification with gay men; as Zimman puts it, “hegemonic masculinity [is] a form of masculinity that stands at the top of the ideological gender hierarchy,” and even men who are otherwise marginalized by account of birth sex assignment would certainly gain some benefits by more fully performing it.<sup>26</sup> Gay men, however, are also far from immune to hegemonic masculinity. Nicholas Lanzieri and Tom Hildebrandt found that gay men’s exaltation of conventionally masculine traits such as muscularity and athleticism could be explained with the framework of hegemonic masculinity.<sup>27</sup>

Even men who do not fall into specifically marginalized demographic categories experience marginalization as a result of failure to conform to hegemonic masculinity. Men who suffer bullying as boys may internalize narratives about masculine strength and survival, viewing skill in strength, fighting, and aggression as paths out of marginalization.<sup>28</sup> However, not all masculinities that can be termed as hegemonically masculine valorize the physical forms of domination that fit the original definition at all.

In particular, the nerd cultures I study in this dissertation tend to reject physical prowess and skill in favor of a masculinized idea of intellectual superiority.

The definition of hegemonic masculinity I use in this dissertation is most directly influenced by Lori Kendall's work on the topic in the context of nerd culture. Kendall cites R.W. Connell's definition of the concept as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."<sup>29</sup> Kendall notes that hegemonic masculinity is a near-unobtainable identity and that most men fail to embody it; nerd men, in particular, struggle with a feeling of inadequacy as they fail to meet the more traditional definition alluded to by Trujillo.<sup>30</sup> Nerd hegemonic masculinity is an increasing area of concern, particularly in light of the issues discussed in this dissertation's case studies, which have attracted substantial feminist attention. In the wake of the #GamerGate controversy, feminist scholarship about the term was linked to sinister conspiracy theories about "cultural Marxism" by participants in the "masculine gaming culture" being critiqued.<sup>31</sup> Like gay and transgender men, nerd men often choose to perform masculinity in ways that reinforces a system of hegemony that has marked them as inferior, perhaps out of a hope that the system can be changed to grant nerd men the privileges of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, as the case studies evidence, there is a strong trend toward a redefinition of masculinity that remains centered on masculinity and cisgender<sup>1</sup> men, but

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the dissertation I will use the term "cisgender" to denote people who continue to identify with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth; that is, cisgender refers to individuals who are not on the transgender spectrum.

deemphasizes physicality and strength in favor of idealism, intellectualism, and skill with technology.

The emphasis on gender, rather than general politics, race, or class, in this dissertation stems from two equally important observations: first, ongoing controversies in nerd culture, including but not limited to those discussed in the case studies, center around gender more than any other aspect of cultural/social identity. #GamerGate, the most high profile of these controversies, is a highly gendered harassment movement; even before #GamerGate, nerd social spaces experienced ongoing debates around whether/if women should be included in such spaces at all. Throughout the dissertation, I show that this gendered division in nerd/geek culture goes back more or less to the inception of the nerd/geek identity. The second reason is that, as a feminist scholar, I believe the study of gender provides a special and privileged frame to talk about power and influence, particularly in environments where science and technology are frequent topics of discussion. I acknowledge the importance of race and class in geek/nerd masculinity as a dynamic, and discuss them throughout the dissertation, but have chosen to foreground gender due to the circumstances of the project at hand.

## **GEEK IDENTITY & CULTURE**

### ***Geek as an Identity Constituted by Oppression***

“Geek” and “nerd” culture develop from “rule-loving, unathletic men and women” who are most comfortable with technical topics.<sup>32</sup> Although it may seem tempting to dismiss both nerd culture and its persecution narrative as inconsequential relics of angry high schoolers’ fantasies, produced as much by mass media as by real human experience,



Patrick Brady writes that social peer groups, like “jocks” and “nerds,” are in fact hierarchical factors in forming secondary school organizational culture.<sup>33</sup> Andrew P. Smiler’s social role analysis of male behavior found that “jock” and “nerd” are particular masculine categories with which adult men may identify even after secondary school has ended. Smiler found that the “nerd” and “jock” stereotypes hold up: when individuals self-identify as a member of one group or the other, they tend to engage in behaviors stereotypical of that group, such as being in good physical shape (for self-identified jocks) and being academically skilled and avoiding consumption of drugs (for nerds).<sup>34</sup>

Important in understanding the existence of the nerd/geek stereotype is the knowledge that for at least some geeks/nerds, the stereotype becomes foundational to a sense of identity. Claire A. Hill finds a conflict in existing academic definitions of identity, noting that for legal scholars like herself (and, I would contend, rhetorical and communication scholars as well), identity tends to function as “immutable”<sup>35</sup> identities that have concrete consequences for one’s social relationships with other human beings.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, “economic” identity takes to heart the economic theory understanding of humans as rationally choosing agents in which humans purposively assume identities.<sup>37</sup> Hill distinguishes between coherent identities – in which she includes both racial/gender identity and identification as a jock/nerd – and less coherent ones (such as being someone who enjoys a particular kind of food) by making the legal point that both racial/gender categories and social categories such as “jock” or “nerd” “can profitably inform” legal judgments, due to the extent to which membership in such categories shapes a person’s social existence.<sup>38</sup>

As a foundational category for many members of the “nerd” and “geek” subcultures, many nerds and geeks firmly believe that membership in this social category has consequences for them. I propose that this categorization, as imposed by nerds themselves as well as by those outside of the nerd group, such as bullies, but also in adult culture including cultural scholars and critics who identify certain behaviors or texts as “nerd” or “geek,” can best be understood as constitutive rhetoric; that is, as a kind of discourse that develops material consequences for those it incorporates. As a category imposed by others, the discourse of nerdiness carries possible harmful consequences which, to those affected, justify attempting to organize nerds as nerds. Benjamin Nugent’s journalistic examination of the roots of nerd culture find parallels to modern day nerds and geeks in Jane Austen’s Mary Bennett, a nineteenth-century nerd incapable of comprehending social subtleties (but excellent at reasoning on the literal level).<sup>39</sup> Nugent argues that even in this initial portrayal of nerds, before the existence of the categorization itself, readers can see a “dehumanization” that contributes to the later marginalization of nerds as outcasts, or people who, due to their intellectual skills, are “not entitled to a normal emotional life.”<sup>40</sup> Numerous examples of communication and media scholarship demonstrate examples of stereotypes of nerds and geeks as unemotional, socially incompetent, or creepy – a stereotype which can have obvious consequences for members of this group.<sup>41</sup> One key example might be the portrayal of the entire cast of *The Big Bang Theory*, which was problematically denounced on nerd websites as “nerd blackface” for its portrayal of emotionally stunted, socially incompetent nerds.<sup>42</sup>

Nugent points out that geek/nerd culture historically stands opposed to “jock” culture, the culture of young people defined by athletic skill. He claims that it is in fact the stereotype of the oppressing jock that makes the “nerd” coherent.<sup>43</sup> If Nugent’s claim here is correct, this creates a troubling parallel between (white, masculine) nerds and subaltern groups whose identity is chiefly or entirely constituted by societal oppression. Kendall has traced this persecution narrative to the 1984 film *Revenge of the Nerds*,<sup>44</sup> but I argue that discourses of nerd/geek oppression arise from multiple factors.

There are substantive civic implications to such narratives of persecution, particular when they are found in association with strong signifiers of whiteness and masculinity. When such discourses also affirm claims about epistemic authority, there is substantial cause for concern. Existing literature about the marginalization rhetorics of “conservative counterpublics” including the economic elite<sup>45</sup> and antifeminist “Men’s Rights Activists” (MRAs) demonstrates the potential reactionary impact of such movements.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, analysis of nerd persecution narratives can illuminate possible avenues of rhetorical praxis or activism to address feelings of intense marginality and simultaneous participation in social oppression. This investigation could provide substantive guidance to those trying to promote inclusivity in geek culture.

### ***Nerds as Excluders***

This narrative of persecution masks the problem that nerd and geek culture is still predominately white, male, and heterosexual in Anglophone countries. It is an exclusive culture, despite its narrative of being itself constituted by its own exclusion from the perceived norm. Geek culture is rooted in a history of social reinforced misogyny and

racism. In addition to its roots in technology, geek culture also is understood to refer to fandom of fantastical and imaginative media – science fiction, fantasy, and horror, referred to collectively as speculative fiction or sf. (SF, capitalized, refers to the specific speculative fiction subgenre of science fiction, which emphasizes technological and scientific premises over those grounded in magic, religion, or folklore.)<sup>47</sup>

From the beginning, science fiction and other forms of sf were male-dominated and white-centric literary forms, like much literature of their times. Development of a unique fan culture centered around this literature created not only the beginnings of nerds and geeks, but also a fan culture that, along with so-called “fan-zines” (independently published magazines containing articles and letters about media, as well as fan-authored “fan fiction”),<sup>48</sup> came to center around fan conventions. Although fan-zines have largely been supplanted today by online forums and blogs, convention culture remains a significant influence over geek culture, drawing content creators and marketers themselves to highly attended events like San Diego Comic Con.<sup>49</sup> These conventions are known to be both currently and historically hostile toward women.<sup>50</sup> Well-known “founders” and elders of the sf community have been implicated in sexual misconduct, often perpetrated with the knowledge of others within the fan and author community: For example, Marion Zimmer Bradley, author of *The Mists of Avalon*, *Darkover*, and other influential mid-century science fiction and fantasy novels, was accused of having “actively aided and abetted her husband... in the sexual abuse and molestation of children.”<sup>51</sup> This molestation and the subsequent “scandals” involved conventions and the fan community.<sup>52</sup> Fan community folklore suggests, as well, that famed *I, Robot* and

*Foundation* author Isaac Asimov’s “groping hands” made conventions unwelcoming for female fans during his lifetime.<sup>53</sup> Ongoing discussions within fan communities aim to address the pervasive problem of misogyny in fandom, but these discussions, as I have noted above, are subject to significant “backlash” and “pushback. One example of such backlash is the “sad puppy” movement led by conservative science fiction writers, such as Vox Day and John C. Wright, to allegedly reclaim science fiction publishing from a takeover of leftist “social justice warriors” and minorities.<sup>54</sup> The nerd/geek identity is rooted in exclusion, and controversies over who belongs show no signs of fading.

### ***Nerds as Technocrats***

Technocracy, simply defined, is the historical ideology that experts in specific fields, rather than democratically or popularly selected leaders, ought to rule. Technocracy is an ideology that is largely thought to be discredited in contemporary culture – the movement for government by specialized, technical elites ended publicly by the Second World War. However, *technocratic attitudes* lead to texts that claim particular political territory for the technical (as opposed to the civic, democratic, spiritual, or other realms of discourse). I intend to show here that such a claim is made within geek subcultures, whether overtly or implicitly, through an underlying technocratic genre of discourse – a claim that requires some substantial explanation and elaboration. My use of the term “technocratic” is intentionally idiosyncratic in the context of the contemporary use of the term. Rather than reading “technocracy” as it is generally understood in the limited sense of a scientifically driven kind of government (such as a professional organization that requires particular educational credentials for voting membership), I use the term more

broadly to refer to the political belief or position that historically, the technocrat movement constituted an explicitly political attempt to increase the power of the “managerial class” relative to both traditional working classes and the bourgeoisie.<sup>55</sup> I contend that the “politics” of geek culture, such as they are, are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) technocratic, and that this politics can be found to circulate within geek discourses.

It is easy to see parallels to the contemporary managerial class – which today would certainly include the majority of information technology professionals as well as a significant portion of white collar labor in general – in the aspirational rhetoric of the oppressed, white male nerd. Anecdotally, an experience that helped me make this realization is remembering the coping strategies passed from parent to child in my own personal history: when I, a white, avidly middle-class boy (as far as anyone knew at the time), was subject to intense bullying in high school, ostensibly (in the words of my bullies) because I was a nerd who liked Star Wars, my father promised me that “those guys will be washing [my] car someday.” This allusion to my presumed career success in the managerial class is mirrored in the rhetoric of nerd culture as a whole, both in the previously noted examples of taking pride in avoiding behaviors like drug use, and in the cultural association between nerds and middle-class white professionalism.

Technocracy in this sense is a force that exists in tension with democracy and involves a reverence for technical experts that can approach a religious level of zeal.<sup>56</sup> I contend that technocracy can be understood as a concept which citizens may embrace

and support, or reject and oppose, rather than as a singular political movement to which citizens declare allegiance. While literature in rhetorical studies does not generally discuss the concept of “technocracy” outside of the context of the historical movement with that name, many rhetorical theorists have sought to undermine technocratic argument styles. For instance, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s famous essay “Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron” argued for the dominant rhetorical paradigm of its era to be rejected, at least in part, because of how it privileged knowledge that was viewed as elite or intellectual over intuitive and experiential forms of knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Arguments and cultures that utilize technocracy can be understood as engaging in a form of discourse which fundamentally privileges a raced, classed, and gendered managerial authority over open deliberation. One effect of this, noted by Beverly H. Burris in a theoretical essay on the contradictions of technocracy, is “polarization into expert and non-expert sectors.”<sup>58</sup> Such division mirrors the self-segregation of nerd culture, despite its increasing connections to large media industries and technology companies that have extensive mainstream relevance.

This technocratic ideology is relevant, I contend, because contemporary political discourse across the globe is undergoing a crisis of authority, particularly with regard to epistemological claims. Topics such as climate change<sup>59</sup> have invited a questioning of truth claims made with overwhelming amounts of conventionally persuasive evidence and with the conventional trappings of scientific authority.<sup>60</sup> Simultaneously, widespread public discomfort, expressed by groups as diverse as the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and Jon Stewart’s Rally to Restore Sanity<sup>61</sup> has led to discourses advocating radical

populist speech without respect for conventional authority. Regardless of “left-right” political affiliation, a student of contemporary discourse is likely to uncover a pervasive sense that a number of groups believe both that conventional authorities about truth and falsehood are misleading the public, and that those groups themselves deserve a great (if not exclusive) voice in the administration of public concerns. Thus, the presence of subcultures whose personal narratives and identifications center on both conflict with other groups and on a certain claimed epistemic authority over rival groups and common people is a subject for rhetorical concern. Furthermore, Jeffrey Nealon and others have called for attention to narratives of exclusion and persecution among “angry white men.” Examining the complaints made by members of conventionally privileged groups can provide insight into the wider discourse around science, technology, and authority, as well as identity and privilege.<sup>62</sup> To a significant degree, extreme discourses in nerd culture form a constitutive rhetoric of white middle-class (hetero-)masculinity, with associated implications about the superiority of technical intellectualism – the hallmark of being a “geek.”

The “nerd” and “geek” stereotypes gain increasing significance to political rhetoric in a technology-driven economy. Despite the power of high-visibility technology companies like Google, Microsoft, and Apple, geeks who have found employment in technology have found themselves the target of the language of protest: in California’s Silicon Valley area, home to many of these companies, protesters have targeted the “Google buses” that take technology workers to their workplace to give voice to issues of inequality.<sup>63</sup> Coverage of the issue has often drawn upon “geek” and “nerd”



language, with one article in the technology-focused CNet news service referring to a “growing culture clash between geeks and [San Francisco locals],” while a comment on TIME’s article on the subject drew a direct parallel between economic oppression and Google’s nerdy employees:

This is more right wing rich BS! Displacing people from their homes so people who have had opportunity and advantage can now move in is criminal. Why don't these high tech companies offer housing where they are located to their employees so none of this would happen? Better yet, offer jobs to those that are being displaced or build affordable housing to those that are loosing [sic] their homes so some rich geeks can go to "work." Thank goodness for the protesters!<sup>64</sup>

Most famously, businessman Tom Perkins suggested that “outrage over the rising real-estate prices which these ‘tech geeks’ can pay” could be compared to the persecution of Jews prior to Kristallnacht in a letter to the Wall Street Journal.<sup>65</sup> In summation, it appears that contemporary “nerds” and “geeks” are no longer seen as just the social outcasts of televisual stereotyping, but – at least when it comes to nerds working in technology fields – they are being increasingly identified with economic oppression and exploitation, as well as the “one percent.”

## **THEORIZING NERD/GEEK MASCULINITY**

As shown in the preceding sections, geek/nerd identification is a salient characteristic of individual identity in numerous social contexts, not limited to secondary school cliques and childhood stereotyping. In this dissertation I conceptualize a cultural thread, script, or rhetorical positioning in discourses surrounding those who identify themselves as

geeks and nerds, which I term *nerd/geek masculinity*. While not all people identifying as nerds or geeks perform masculine roles, the discourse of nerd/geek masculinity centers geeks and nerds as men or people existing in male-centric space, and positions an archetypically male experience as foundational to the nerd/geek experience. Nerd/geek masculinity weaves the preceding three narratives -geek as oppressed, geek as oppressor, and geek as technocrat -together into a singular narrative identity which I contend appears in numerous separate discourses connected with nerd/geek culture. It also provides a profound challenge to certain parts of hegemonic masculinity as defined by Trujillo, namely those associated with physical success, while continuing to valorize career success, heterosexuality, and the superiority of men over women.

I define nerd/geek masculinity as a rhetorical *identity performance*<sup>66</sup> in which the experience of being a nerd or geek is framed as some combination of the following, in greater or lesser degrees:

- A consequence of a person's skill at using technology, computers, scientific, or niche knowledge to master the natural or social world;
- An inherent quality of personality characterized by:
- Awkwardness, inability, and/or unwillingness to navigate social conventions and situations;
- Intelligence and intellectual ability, particularly when applied to science, engineering, and/or the rules of debate and arguing;
- Knowledge about and interest in niche or obscure subjects, particularly science fiction, fantasy, and horror, or games and gaming;

- Romantic and/or sexual isolation or unpopularity;
- Isolation from, lack of understanding toward, or hatred of sports and physical recreation, both as a participant and an observer;
- An opposition to, unfamiliarity with, and/or dislike of care, grooming, fashion, and appearance; an attitude of mind over matter; -A fundamental experience of bullying, marginalization, or exclusion from the social mainstream that may combine all of the above.
- A belief that this marginalization is unjust and that nerds or geeks are inherently meritorious, despite cultural disapproval.

These last two points are crucial to nerd masculinity's political importance because they link these personality traits and activity preferences – perceived by the person in question as essential to the self – to oppression, often by creating a causal link between a nerdy skill or preference, such as interest in computer programming or in science fiction fandom, with the negative parts of the nerd/geek identity, such as romantic isolation. In many (but certainly not all) discursive iterations of nerd/geek masculinity, sports, physical fitness, and physical recreation are constituted as frivolous activities performed by men whose expression and experience of masculinity is not "nerdy," but conforms to a more traditionally masculine – and more socially lauded – mold. In simpler terms, the "jocks" of nerd-centric narratives like *Revenge of the Nerds* are privileged, in the story told by nerd/geek masculinity, by their ability and desire to express masculinity through physical aggression and activity, while the more meritorious preferences and skills of nerds and geeks are viewed as less valuable, and by extension in a patriarchal society,

less manly.

Why not "nerd intellectualism" or simply "nerd identity performance"? Not all of the examples in this dissertation that I use to substantiate and exemplify nerd masculinity are performed by men or contain specific references to explicitly gendered behaviors. My reasoning for using "nerd masculinity" is twofold: first, the historical grounding of nerd masculinity is in a specifically male experience of alienation, experienced by an overwhelmingly male subculture, which is even more overwhelmingly *seen* as male, even when it is not. Ongoing controversies surrounding nerd/geek fan communities consistently illustrate a prevailing conception that women in nerd communities are "privileged" with romantic and sexual attention that is rarely, if ever, available to nerd/geek men. Second, the manner in which nerd masculinity performs a resistance to perceived dominant norms is ideologically consistent with the wider concept of hegemonic masculinity – nerd/geek traits are exalted, for instance, because they offer dominance and control over the natural or social worlds, or because they make the acquisition of sexual capital and leverage possible. In the first case study, neoreactionary politics, masculinity as expressed through technological skill is understood to be an explicit path to restoring patriarchal power structures. In the first case study, the novel *Ender's Game*, the protagonist's nerdy traits specifically grant him skill as a warrior, conqueror, and fighter.

Nerd/geek masculinity is politically significant because it is a counterculture rhetoric of resistance to dominant forms of masculinity and social organization that alienate those who practice and perform it. Even nerd/geek women perform nerd/geek

masculinity when they position themselves within a nerd/geek hierarchy. During #GamerGate, the hashtag #NotYourShield was used by female and minority supporters of #GamerGate to support the wider movement to accuse social justice-aligned speakers of using minorities as a shield against accusations of corruption.<sup>67</sup> As a discourse that grows from a perception of sexual and even economic alienation, but also affirms the positive (and often framed as superior) qualities of those who practice it, nerd/geek masculinity is capable of contributing to and shaping movements and activism. In each of my case studies, I will examine a movement or specific case of significant discourse that exemplifies nerd masculinity. The case studies both build an argument for a nerd/geek masculine identity performance and help illustrate its implications in enabling reactionary and sometimes violent political action and communication.

### ***A Note on Identity and Positionality***

As a scholar who identifies as a nerd/geek as one of her primary identities, my study of these issues approaches the deeply personal. As I will discuss throughout this dissertation, each one of my central case studies has directly affected my life – *Ender's Game* through the novel's influence on my juvenile development, and neoreaction and #GamerGate because as a female, queer nerd gamer, I have been directly and indirectly singled out for attack and marginalization by these movements' proponents. As a result, I cannot and do not claim a position of pure objectivity with respect to the issues I examine. I believe that my dissertation continues in the tradition of many others scholars' work that is embedded within my cultural background and lived experience.

I do want to note that in the case of both #GamerGate and neoreaction, with

whom I have directly interacted (and I have referenced some of these encounters throughout), the core of my arguments were developed and written before the interaction. I had no substantial personal experience with neoreaction at all when I began writing the chapter on the subject; upon outlining the chapter of the dissertation dealing with the movement, Michael Anissimov and a blogger known as trvdante began sexually harassing me online – an experience which I recount in the Conclusion section. Because both neoreaction and #GamerGate relate to academics in a largely antagonistic manner, studying these movements without interacting with them may become quite difficult.

As a rhetorical scholar, I recognize the powerful influence that personal experience has upon a scholar's ability to reflect on a particular set of rhetorical artifacts. Nevertheless, I believe that we cannot do anything other than reflect as best we can – particularly when our chosen artifacts are ongoing, developing movements and belief systems.

## **DISSERTATION STRUCTURE**

This dissertation consists of three case studies, each examining a text or body of textual discourses that involve nerd/geek masculinity. These case studies form the three central chapters of the work.

### ***The Nerd's War: Ender's Game and the Politics of Smart Children***

This case study examines the novel *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card, an influential and celebrated *bildungsroman* about a genetically engineered child soldier named Andrew "Ender" Wiggin. Published originally as adult science fiction, the novel caught on among teenagers, and has been reprinted since 1992 with a forward in which Card

writes about the influence the novel has had on “gifted” students, a group with which he strongly identifies. *Ender’s Game* is the story of a child raised to be defined by his intelligence and technical skill. Ender is marginalized by his peers as a result of his intelligence and supreme tactical skill.

Card writes passionately in the novel’s forward about how young gifted students see themselves in Ender, and how the suffering of such students has been ignored by society as a whole. I argue that *Ender’s Game* functions as a constitutive text for nerd/geek masculinity. Ender is a fundamental archetype of what it is to be a nerd boy, and his experience is subtly gendered to place his experiences in line with a specifically masculine form of marginalization. Using Kristeva’s notion of abjection,<sup>68</sup> I argue Ender is *ultimately* abject; his oppression as a supremely intelligent, socially awkward nerd (the term is not used, but his membership in the label is clear) is *the fundamental oppression within the novel’s text*, despite the fact that Ender is subject to much worse violence. I suggest that the novel’s substantial cultural impact on nerd/geek culture makes it a powerful vector to establish a twisted way of understanding oppression in which nerd/geek boys are the basic, archetypal oppressed group. Additionally, I suggest that the novel implicitly appropriates queer dynamics of oppression by making the unstated argument that to be a “gifted” child is to be fundamentally unlike those around you.

### ***The Marginalized Kings of Silicon Valley: Platonic Themes in Neoreaction***

The association between those culturally enmeshed in the technology industry and within media fandom with conservative and reactionary ideologies has garnered substantial attention in the popular press. Neoreaction, a term for a particular subset of

perspectives associated with anarchism and antimodernity, has gained some high profile allies, such as PayPal CEO Peter Thiele, although it remains a fringe, Internet-based movement.<sup>69</sup> I examine three neoreactionaries in particular: technology worker advocate and former Occupy Wall Street activist Justine Tunney, transhumanist Michael Anissimov, and information technology developer and pseudonymous blogger Mencius Moldbug, as well as the corpus of conversation around their posts on blogs and social media.

I argue that neoreaction, while it shares many similarities with the early 20th century technocracy movement (which ended with World War II and the New Deal), actually more clearly resembles a revival of Platonism. Examining several Platonic dialogues, especially the *Phaedrus*, the *Sophist*, the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, I make the argument that neoreaction presents a model of objective reality that, while grounded in a language of “scientific objectivity,” is actually non-empirical and derived from principles. Like the escapee from Plato’s cave, neoreactionaries frame themselves as uniquely awakened to see through the lies of society. And like Socrates, they are persecuted for their beliefs -or so they frame themselves.

The ultimate message of neoreaction, like Plato’s *Republic*, is that the men who are most fit to govern are in fact the men who are least likely to have power. These men, as in Plato, are intellectuals - technical professionals, in this case, rather than philosophers, but occupying a similar position. This makes neoreaction a key example of nerd/geek masculinity: linking marginalized, neo-Socratic technology buffs with the rightful rulership of society (made very explicit by Tunney, Moldbug, and Anissimov, all of



whom believe the ideal leaders of culture lie in Silicon Valley). Like Ender, this archetypical nerd “marginalized king” is hated for his superiority -an empowering narrative for a group that has been taught to view itself as marginal.

### ***<Women> and <Games>: Hegemonic Regulation of Ideographs in Online***

#### ***Culture***

The most visible and publicly discussed controversy around nerd/geek issues is the ongoing #GamerGate crisis. Drawing on the theory of the ideograph as developed by Michael Calvin McGee, Kevin Deluca, and others, I argue that the ideographs of <games> and <not-games> operate in #GamerGate discourse alongside <women> and <not-women> to regulate the ideal image of a community centered around video gaming. Because SJWs and women promote games which are <not-games>, allowing them into the games community will undermine its integrity. Furthermore, #GamerGate’s discourse overwhelmingly challenges the womanhood of women who do participate in gaming -specifically by using alleged or open transgender identities of #GamerGate targets and opponents to discredit their status as <women>. I sample extensive #GamerGate discourse which uses transphobia and images of transgender women deceptively hiding in the gaming.

I suggest that #GamerGate is the ultimate, concrete manifestation of geek/nerd masculinity. A space perceived as predominately male, under threat of female infiltration, is defended by geek/nerd activists who cite each of the key elements of geek/nerd masculinity: the marginalization and bullying of nerds, their intellectual superiority, and the inherently masculine quality of this identity. I also suggest that the

fixation #GamerGate has on outing transgender women, real or imagined, relates to the destabilizing effect of femininity in traditionally male spaces, especially when it is expressed by those who were once understood to be male.

### **NERD/GEEK MASCULINITY'S DANGER**

In the conclusion of the dissertation, I review the path geek/nerd masculinity has taken, from the birth of the geek/nerd label, science fiction fandom, and IT culture, to #GamerGate and neoreaction. I suggest ways in which *Ender's Game* is part of a pattern of discourses which center nerd/geek masculinity as a mindset for understanding the world. I argue that neoreaction and #GamerGate have significant implications for the study of heteronormativity in culture, as they represent efforts by a particular male-dominated faction of culture to reinforce particular kinds of gender binarism. They also have important implications for advocates for the rights of transgender women, as the figure of transgender woman, allowed to be neither male nor female, is an important abject figure in this construction of geek/nerd masculinity.

As a rhetorical scholar, I think geek/nerd masculinity is important because it is a nexus of numerous powerful forces in culture: technology, sexuality/gender, and political power, filtered through a narrative of persecution. Jeffrey Nealon's theory of white male anger warns us about the dangers of dominant groups who understand themselves as marginalized; but what of dominant groups who understand themselves as marginalized not because of their membership in that dominant group (men), but because of their membership in a group which is subtly coded as male and hegemonic?

The three case studies at the heart of this dissertation tell a story about an ideology's reification through subsequently more radical and more violent discourses. Like any rhetorical criticism, I pay attention to specific selections of an incomprehensibly large amount of text -starting with a novel, moving to a fairly small set of blogs and forums, and ending with an out-of-control social media melee which is still ongoing. I cannot possibly provide a comprehensive account of geek/nerd masculinity, but I hope to provide a helpful roadmap for further scholarship on this ongoing crisis.

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<sup>2</sup> Erik Kain, "On Anita Sarkeesian, Sexism in Video Games, and Why We Need to Have the Conversation," Forbes, July 13 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Bendlin Spurr, "Eulogy for 'Beat up Anita Sarkeesian'", Newgrounds <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/598591> (accessed February 1 2014).

<sup>4</sup> "About." Feminist Frequency. <http://feministfrequency.com/about/> (accessed April 27, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Isabella Biedenharn. "Correction: Hugo Awards Voting Campaign Sparks Controversy." *Entertainment Weekly*, April 6, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Tara Tiger Brown, "Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away." *Forbes*, March 26, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> R. N. Abramov, "Managerialism and the Academic Profession: Conflict and Interaction," *Russian Education and Society* 54, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Nick Fredman and James Doughney, "Academic Dissatisfaction, Managerial Change and Neo-Liberalism," *Higher Education* 64, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Kent D. Peterson, "Mechanisms of Administrative Control over Managers in Educational Organizations," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1984).

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin Woo, "Alpha Nerds: Cultural Intermediaries in a Subcultural Scene," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2012).

<sup>11</sup> "Geek Squad," Best Buy, <https://www.geeksquad.com/> (accessed April 27, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Lori Kendall, "'Oh No! I'm a Nerd!': Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum," *Gender and Society* 14, no. 2 (2000); Lori Kendall, "'White and Nerdy': Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype," *Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3 (2011); Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in U. S. Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (1999).

<sup>13</sup> J. A. McArthur, "Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Heather Mendick and Becky Francis, "Boffin and Geek Identities: Abject or Privileged?," *Gender and Education* 24, no. 1 (2012): 17-18.

<sup>15</sup> Kendall, "'White and Nerdy': Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype."

<sup>16</sup> Gary Hoppenstand, "Editorial: The Revenge of the Nerds," 2009.

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- <sup>17</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use these terms essentially interchangeably, while acknowledging substantial debate within the subcultures themselves about the appropriateness of “nerd” versus “geek.”
- <sup>18</sup> Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2009).
- <sup>19</sup> Monika Bednarek, "Constructing 'Nerdiness': Characterisation in the Big Bang Theory," *Multilingua* 31, no. 2 (2012): 203.
- <sup>20</sup> Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in U. S. Popular Culture."
- <sup>21</sup> R.W. Cornell and James Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (December 2005): 830, accessed April 23, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.
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- <sup>31</sup> Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (March 2015): 208-20, *Communication Source*, EBSCOhost.
- <sup>32</sup> Nugent, 17.
- <sup>33</sup> Patrick Brady, "Jocks, Teckers, and Nerds: The Role of the Adolescent Peer Group in the Formation and Maintenance of Secondary School Institutional Culture," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 25, no. 3 (2004).
- <sup>34</sup> Andrew P. Smiler, "Living the Image: A Quantitative Approach to Delineating Masculinities," *Sex Roles* 55, no. 9/10 (2006): 624-25.
- <sup>35</sup> I acknowledge the deep tradition of social constructionist scholarship which suggests that traditional identity categories such as race, gender identity, and sexuality are not fundamentally immutable; however, Hill points out in her own footnote that for the purposes of the contrast she draws with economic identity scholarship, such identity categories do indeed function immutably.
- <sup>36</sup> Claire A. Hill, "The Law and Economics of Identity," *Queen's Law Journal* 32, no. 2 (2007): 391-92.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> Nugent, 17-18.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.
- <sup>41</sup> Bednarek, "Constructing 'Nerdiness': Characterisation in the Big Bang Theory."; Mackenzie Cato, "Stereotypes, Gender Roles, and Transformation on Reality Tv: Is Beauty and the Geek's Social Experiment a Success?," Conference Papers --International Communication Association, (2008); Qin

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<sup>44</sup> Kendall, "'White and Nerdy': Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype."; Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in U. S. Popular Culture."

<sup>45</sup> Robert Asen, "Ideology, Materiality, and Counterpublicity: William E. Simon and the Rise of a Conservative Counterintelligentsia," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>46</sup> Emily J. Sack, "Battered Women and the State: The Struggle for the Future of Domestic Violence Policy," *Wisconsin Law Review* 2004, no. 6 (2004); A. L. Girard, "Backlash or Equality? The Influence of Men's and Women's Rights Discourses on Domestic Violence Legislation in Ontario," *Violence Against Women* 15, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>47</sup> Although works that arguably qualify as sf can be found throughout literary history, and works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or, the Modern Prometheus*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *From the Earth to the Moon*, and H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* are today considered to belong to that genre, speculative fiction is generally recognized as beginning with Hugo Gernsback's creation of the *Amazing Stories* pulp magazine in 1926. James Gunn writes that Gernsback's magazine, and the succeeding pulp science fiction publications it influenced, gave writers a clear genre to work with when writing sf. See James Gunn, "Science Fiction around the World," *World Literature Today* (May-June 2007), <http://archives.worldliteraturetoday.com/2010may/gunn.html> (accessed April 29, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Mackey and Jill Kedersha McClay, "Pirates and Poachers: Fan Fiction and the Conventions of Reading and Writing," *English in Education* 42, no. 2 (2008).

<sup>49</sup> Sam Thielman, "When Nerds Gather, the Industry Takes Notice," *Adweek* 54, no. 27 (2013).

<sup>50</sup> Nicole Stark, "The Characteristics of Sexual Harassment Policies at Fan Conventions," Department of Sociology (Online document: University of Central Florida); additionally, extensive documentation exists of harassment; some examples include the Geek Feminism Wiki's catalog of such incidents; author John Scalzi statement on his policies for attending conventions; publisher Melville House's blog post on the topic; and blog *The Daily Dot*'s coverage of harassment at WisCon. See "SFF Harassment Revelations 2013." Geek Feminism Wikia. Accessed April 9, 2015. ; Scalzi, John. "My New Convention Harassment Policy." *Whatever: All Cake and Hand Grenades*. July 2, 2013. Accessed April 9, 2015. ; Kurtz, Dustin. "We Live in the Future: Stop Being a Creep at Science Fiction Conventions." *Melville House*. July 1, 2013. Accessed April 9, 2015.; [www.dailydot.com/geek/wiscon-jim-frankel-sexual-harassment/](http://www.dailydot.com/geek/wiscon-jim-frankel-sexual-harassment/); Aja Romano, "Wiscon's Flaky Response to Harassment Incident Sparks Internet Uproar," *The Daily Dot*, July 21, 2014, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.dailydot.com/geek/wiscon-jim-frankel-sexual-harassment/>.

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Goldin, "Timeline of Events", SFF.net <http://www.sff.net/people/stephen.goldin/mzb/timeline.html> (accessed February 2 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Justine Larbalestier, "Why Women Are Silent (Updated)" <http://justinelarbalestier.com/blog/2012/08/06/why-women-are-silent/> (accessed February 2 2014).

<sup>54</sup> George R. R. Martin, "Where's the Beef," Not a Blog, April 9, 2015, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://grm.livejournal.com/418285.html>.

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## II. THE NERD'S WAR: ENDER'S GAME AND THE POLITICS OF SMART CHILDREN

When I first entered high school, I had no idea that I would one day experience life as an out transgender woman, and had never in any way thought of myself as a gender or sexual minority. As far as I knew, I was an ordinary fourteen year old boy who loved video games and, of course, *Star Wars*. It was to my sudden and traumatic surprise that my high school career began not with acceptance by my peers, but with brutal homophobic bullying, and countless derogatory slurs about my sexual orientation and gender identity. It wasn't that my tormentors had any particular knowledge of my future, as amused as I sometimes am to think back on those days. No, their reason for claiming that I was a gay boy (they, of course, used a much less polite term) was that I liked *Star Wars*. As a scholar of gender, my experience might seem bizarre, and yet I was certainly not alone among young (apparent) men in facing harassment based on my "nerdy" interests. In all these moments of torment at the hands of my peers, I wanted someone to identify with, and when I was fifteen, I found him, in the pages of Orson Scott Card's award-winning novel *Ender's Game*. *Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card's Hugo-and Nebula-award winning 1985 space opera epic. Identified by the author himself as a novel for and about intellectually gifted youth, *Ender's Game* has become a beloved part of geek and nerd popular culture, telling a "mythic" story<sup>1</sup> about bullying, marginalization, and the ways in which intellectual prowess sets children apart from their peers at school. For me, Ender's story was my story, and many young people have

felt the same way about him.

In this chapter, I analyze the appeal and function of *Ender's Game's* story of nerd victimization and oppression. The release of the novel's film adaptation sparked an aggressive boycott campaign by LGBT and queer rights campaigners who pointed out Card's virulently anti-gay views (which included at one point advocating punishing highly visible queer people to make an example of them and to keep others closeted).<sup>2</sup> Conversely, many of the novel's readers interpret it as an ode to understanding those who are different and a metaphor for social oppression and violence in the real world. Critical analyses, notably John Kessel's, have faulted the novel for featuring a protagonist who commits and then is morally excused for genocide, and have read it as an apologia for war criminals and an ode to genetically superior individuals with intelligence beyond their peers.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I propose that *Ender's Game* is a constitutive text which uses the device of abjection and a figure of identification to invite readers who see themselves as intellectually gifted or talented youth to universalize their own experiences of oppression and bullying – a gesture that is at once empathic and hegemonic. *Ender's Game* utilizes entwined themes and imagery of intelligence, marginalization/violence, and empathy, and a queer dynamic runs through the text. I will first summarize the novel's plot, and then explain the theoretical basis of my analysis in Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and in constitutive rhetoric. I will examine the novel's creation of an imagined, constitutive community, and tie this community to nerd/geek masculinity.



## THE LEGACY OF ENDER'S GAME

*Ender's Game*, published in 1985 and based on an earlier short story by Card, is a boy-at-school adventure story or bildungsroman of protagonist Andrew "Ender" Wiggin. Ender is a Third child in a society where eugenics and aggressive secularism have made large families unacceptable. Permitted to live because of his parents' predicted ability to produce hyper-intelligent offspring, Ender's siblings Peter and Valentine were rejected from the military training academy known as Battle School – Peter, because he was too cruel and violent, and Valentine, because she was too empathetic. Humanity's leaders believe that Ender has the raw intellect to become an admiral for all of humanity's fleets, which are *en route* to a distant star to retaliate against the home planet of the Buggers, a race of ant-like aliens that nearly exterminated the species in two previous skirmishes. The story focuses on Ender's experiences in the orbiting Battle School, which is an academy where children are pitted against one another in mock battles in zero gravity. At Battle School, Ender is subjected to vicious and persistent bullying, encouraged by authority figures in order to toughen him. As a result of this bullying, Ender kills two of his classmates without fully realizing what he has done. He also experiences a series of life-changing visions inside a strange video game provided to him by the school to play, where he confronts his fear of his brother, his feelings of isolation, and above all his violent desire to hurt those who have wronged him. At the end of the novel, Ender is asked to take a final "test" where he is required to direct a mock attack against the Buggers' home planet, and he is assured is merely a simulation. Ender repeats the tactic which he had learned in dealing with bullies: a

complete and total attack which leaves the enemy no chance to strike back or to surrender. In this attack, Ender destroys the Bugger home planet entirely. Informed that he was in fact commanding the actual attack and that he has committed genocide, Ender dedicates the rest of his life to atonement, founding a religion of "Speaking for the Dead" based around understanding the lives of those who were different from the speaker, and eventually finds a surviving colony of Buggers, who he hopes to repopulate.<sup>4</sup>

*Ender's Game* was received enthusiastically by science fiction publications upon its publication, earning its author the distinction of being the only author to win both the Hugo and Nebula awards in two consecutive years, for *Ender's Game* and for its sequel, *Speaker for the Dead*. Although it was initially published for adult readers of science fiction, its most lasting impact has been on young adult literature, today the novel is published under the Tor Teen imprint. George E. Slusser writes that Card's novel consists of a kind of "child space" in which its juvenile protagonists -Ender and his companions at Battle School, as well as Ender's siblings at home on Earth -are the sole protagonists, and adult authority the enemy.<sup>5</sup> However, perhaps the strongest theme of the novel is the theme of marginalization, and specifically the marginalization of the type of child that Ender Wiggin is: children who excel in school, and who are set apart from their peers because of their intellectualism. Salon critic Laura Miller describes the theme succinctly: the emotional core, she writes, "is about wanting to be a hero and a victim at the same time." Ender is exceptional enough to be allowed to lead a battle fleet and save the world (while destroying someone else's) before he is even a teen, but Ender's exceptionalism brings him nothing but suffering. "Ender," Miller writes, can be

distinguished from that other boy hero, Harry Potter, who was also "chosen" and manipulated by his mentors to save the world, in that he is "wrapped up in his exceptionalism, convinced he's both better than everyone else and utterly abject and forsaken."<sup>6</sup>

The novel's defenders highlight the novel's twin themes of empathy for the oppressed and the oppressed nature of its protagonist himself: blogger Andrew Liptack points out that a gay student facing marginalization for his or her identity could easily find identification with Ender.<sup>7</sup> Michael and Eric Cummings suggest that Ender's empathy is nearly equal to his tactical skill in terms of his importance to the story.<sup>8</sup> But Card himself highlights Ender's appeal not only in terms of Ender's marginalization, but also the specific reason why he is marginalized: the fact that he is, in Card's terms, gifted, or in contemporary subcultural terms, a nerd. To be an intellectually gifted youth – an Ender or a Valentine – is to be different from your peers; to have talents that adult authorities may or may not appreciate, and an identity that peers view with disdain and jealousy. Ender's experience at Battle School – unpleasant and violent at best – happens because of the twin curses of hostility from authorities like General Graff, and a sort of inherent dislike or disdain from more "normal" students. By offering identification with a character like Ender, Card targets the novel in particular toward young readers who view intellectual talents as their most essential, salient characteristic, and offers the potential for them to consider themselves to be a uniquely marginalized group. In the subsequent section, I examine the specific mechanism through which Ender's (and the gifted student's) marginalization is represented: abjection.

## **ABJECTION AND RHETORIC: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

In order to understand the intense and often contradictory narratives implicated by a text such as *Ender's Game*, it is imperative to understand the theory of abjection as developed by Julia Kristeva, and to understand its implications for the rhetoric of identity. Kristeva defines abjection as something that exists at the boundary of the unthinkable, and is allowed to attain neither subjectivity nor objectivity.<sup>9</sup> Abjection is a fundamental relationship of the human self to a condition of impossibility. All individuals relate to abjection, but for those whose condition of living is abjection, their lives are motivated by an exclusionary urge in the place of desire.<sup>10</sup> The abject is simultaneously utterly abhorred and rejected by society, while it is also necessary for the maintenance of the social order; Kristeva compares the abject to "an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung" which has been eaten or made part of a person and thus must be acknowledged, but which is inevitably seen as intrusive, dangerous, and abhorred: "the improper/unclean."<sup>11</sup> The term can refer to queers, illegal immigrants, criminals, or any other group that must be acknowledged by society, but which is viewed with a combination of repulsion and terror.

Although broader social theory has begun to cope with abjection, rhetoric has surprisingly little engagement with the subject. Abjection as a rhetorical concept is rightfully central in the analysis of rhetorics concerning physical borders and nationalism, and this is the primary area where rhetoricians have worked on the topic. According to D. Robert DeChaine, the United States border with Mexico forms a symbolic border of citizenship; those who cross it without permission become marked as

abject, without agency – neither citizens nor non-citizens, “illegals.”<sup>12</sup> Jose David Cisneros argues that the constitution of abject illegals is essential to the formation of the identity “American.”<sup>13</sup> Those who exist in a subject position of abjection are themselves unable to participate in the culture’s discourse, but signifiers representing them create discourses that threaten to exclude those within the culture itself. For instance, Deborah McPhail explains that in post-World War II Canada, the concept of “fat” came to represent a threat to white masculinity, in which it stood for insidious feminine weakness.<sup>14</sup>

Some scholars in rhetoric have engaged with the concept in other contexts; notably, Andy Crockett reads a kind of abjection into the oppression of women in Classical Greece, and he argues that Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* can be read as a sort of rejection of this dichotomy between "wife and whore," allowing Helen to occupy "an ill-defined middle ground" or abjection rather than either of the acceptable, yet oppressive, subjectivities available to the women of her time. Crockett, however, uses Kristeva's abjection as only a brief reference in his analysis of the *Encomium*; despite the idea's clear applicability to his overall argument, he only addresses the concept of abjection as articulated by Kristeva once.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Anjali Vats and LeiLani Nishime explain that "yellowface" representations of Asian culture "reiterates the interplay of abjection and denial that structures the creation of a racialized subjectivity, causing "actually" white performers presenting as Asian to simultaneously occupy a space as Other and as the hegemonic, dominant subjectivity.<sup>16</sup> This representation allows white audiences, through the "yellowface gaze," to reconstruct their own subjectivities as members of the

dominant group.<sup>16</sup> Marita Gronnvoll and Kristen McCauliff discuss how veiled Islamic women occupy a position in the popular discourse as abject, as oppressed women unable to gain subjectivity. This veiling, however, also is read by the dominant culture as a "containment" of a dangerous womanhood; the image of a female suicide bomber is an ultimate expression of a kind of terrifying abjection, a threat of escape from behind the veil.<sup>17</sup> All of these examples of abjection highlight the ways in which dominant discourses depend upon the subordinated to maintain their clarity and their cohesiveness.

Understanding abjection as important for rhetorical studies of identity can extend existing concepts such as constitutive rhetoric and identification/disidentification, which are important in forming subcultures, social movement groups, and even mainstream society. Constitutive rhetoric, a concept first formalized by Maurice Charland in his analysis of Quebecois separatist rhetoric, refers to rhetoric that creates its audience as a social subject in order to legitimate itself and create unity with said audience.<sup>18</sup> An example of constitutive rhetoric in youth culture is Christian contemporary music (CCM) and its appeal to audiences as good Christians and individuals marginalized as "Jesus freaks" by society – listeners are encouraged to view themselves as Christians, but the music also only addresses those who are already members of this Christian community, despite the music itself being part of that community's self-definition.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that the discourse of strongly identified subcultural groups, whether Christians in youth culture or some other group that defines themselves through being different from mainstream society, includes references to abject "Others," as well as perhaps to the way in which mainstream society holds itself in a relationship of abjection to these

subgroups.

One notable engagement with abjection from outside of the rhetoric field is Sean Brayton's analysis of the MTV reality television show *Jackass*, which he relates to the "somasochist" relationship of abjection to white male identity in contemporary culture. Brayton notes that while traditionally, abject groups have been members of recognized subaltern identities such as immigrants. However, the "white male victim narrative," which he locates in films like *Fight Club* as well as in *Jackass*, somasochistically split men between a desire to dominate and a perception that they are themselves being marginalized by the various subaltern groups who, in the past, they had uncontested dominance over.<sup>20</sup> I contend that this dynamic represents an appropriation of rhetorical strategies that subaltern groups use to deal with abjection in order to reinforce existing hegemonic structures, and this dynamic will be integral to my subsequent analysis in this chapter. White male abjection in these cases represents a dynamic of subjugation as a result of increased recognition of alterity and of alternate forms of subjectivity, and in my analysis section, I will demonstrate a specific case of this appropriation-of-abjection in Orson Scott Card's novel.

## **ENDER'S GAME AS RHETORICAL TEXT: CREATING A SYMBOL FOR THE ABJECT NERD**

*Ender's Game* has been an extraordinarily impactful novel because of its allegorical power and its ability to get readers to identify with its pre-teen protagonists. What amounts to a dark Harry Potter saga in outer space gains power because of the way in which the novel draws connections between teen alienation, school violence, and

violence in war and against oppressed groups. Card uses fantastical space opera imagery to convey a world that, at least to many of the novel's readers, parallels real world social structures.

Card's novel reflects the theme of abjection throughout through constructing mirroring relationships between Ender and various other characters in the world who face discrimination, prejudice, and violence. One of the most powerful aspects to the novel's central premise is by using a character who shares traits with expected readers to maximize their identification with the emotional impact of scenes of violence and oppression, and then framing this character as, metaphorically, the representative for all oppressed groups. This literalized simile – Ender as the ultimate sufferer or ultimate marginalized figure – occurs implicitly through Ender's use of empathy for essentially all characters, including bullies, fellow victims, and those who against whom he himself is committing violence and oppression. In other words, Ender comes to be both the ultimately abject and the observer of others' states of abjection (and sometimes, the inflicter of these states). In “Creating the Innocent Killer,” his germinal analysis of *Ender's Game* (most likely the most extensive and recognized critical essay on the novel), John Kessel points out that, while Ender *thinks* frequently about the moral issues related to his actions, the novel itself clearly maintains the stance that we should be *sympathizing* with Ender as a victim of the acts committed against him and the other students of Battle School, and even, ultimately, of the extermination of the buggers. The structure of the novel is built to put the reader inside Ender Wiggin's head, and from there, to build parallels with other characters with whom we also have (lesser) sympathy.



Ender, who in Kessel's terms is a "victim hero," thus stands for every other figure in the novel who is victimized.

*Ender's Game's* ability to connect with readers hinges on two parallel narrative devices: the consubstantiality of Ender and other oppressed groups, and the moral framing of the violence and oppression suffered by characters in the novel – specifically, the novel's emphasis on deception, bullying, and Ender's sister Valentine as a contrast to this. First, I seek to examine how Ender comes to stand for all victims of oppression in the novel's text. Next, I'll examine the moral framing; finally, I'll provide a caveat demonstrating exactly how and why the novel is particularly powerful for a limited subset of readers, and less powerful for others.

### ***Consubstantiality with Ender***

In order make Ender the representative of all the other victims in the novel, Card first has to establish victimhood. Ender is abject to others in several key ways. First, he is a child, and children occupy a position of subjection to adults in society – one which Card seems to find a legitimate form of oppression. The novel's depiction of the burdens of childhood subjectivity is explicitly identified by Card, in the novel's 1992 forward, as one of the reasons for its enduring appeal among students who are similar to its child protagonists. Card's identification of "gifted children" emphasizes the exceptionalism at the heart of the subject position the novel offers: gifted youth, in the world of *Ender's Game*, are denied subjectivity in the same way that "normal" children are, but they, and only they, can transcend this limited subjectivity to attain something more. He notes that the novel was extensively criticized by some adult readers, including a school guidance

counselor who wrote to a science fiction trade publication about it, for portraying child characters unrealistically; he responds:

Yet I knew – I knew – that this was one of the truest things about Ender’s Game. In fact, I realized this may be indeed be part of the reason why it was so important to me... to write a story in which gifted children are trained to fight in adult wars. Because never in my entire childhood did I feel like a child. I felt like a person all along – the same person that I am today. I never felt that I spoke childishly. I never felt that my emotions and desires were somehow less real than adult emotions and desires. And in writing Ender’s Game, I forced the audience to experience the lives of these children from that perspective – the perspective in which their feelings and decisions are just as important as every adult.<sup>21</sup>

As a gifted young man, or, a nerd, in terms Card does not use but clearly alludes to, Ender is victimized. Card establishes giftedness as a category of victimization, thus offering a victimized status to readers who see themselves in Ender and his compatriots, but also opening up the possibility of parallels that will increase these readers’ empathy for others. Ender’s victimhood is illustrated through his positioning as Battle School’s primary bullying target. Ender’s everyday life is positively defined by being a victim of consistent violence. The violent acts Ender commits – killing two others students – are justified, within the narrative, as actions taken in response to persistent and pervasive threat. Ender’s perceptions of his bullies, while empathetic in that he understands and acknowledges the social realities in which they live and the reasons why they participate in violence against him, nevertheless bias the *reader* to view the bullies as menaces and

monsters. When Ender is cornered by Bonzo, his ultimate nemesis at Battle School, in the showers, Bonzo and his gang are described in vividly threatening terms:

There were seven of them, leaning back against the metal sinks or standing closer to the showers, watching him. Bonzo stood in front of them. Many were smiling, the condescending leer of the hunter for his cornered victim.... All it would take for the picture to be complete was for Stilson and Peter to be there, too. They needed Peter's smile; they needed Stilson's obvious stupidity.<sup>22</sup>

Ender understands why these boys do what they do, but he still has to take action against them, lethal if necessary. This narrative of justified violence energizes the reader with a sense of power and justification. Even if the reader isn't going to fight bullies physically, the novel suggests readers can understand themselves as victims who have the right to resist.

Finally, Ender's victimization is accentuated by his own self-loathing, a product of his prodigious intellect. This self-loathing is partly a result of the terrible things he is forced to do, but also as a result of the intellectualism that sets him apart from even the other, highly exceptional, students selected to attend Battle School. Ender's experience, which becomes an archetypical one that many readers similar to Ender will identify with, is one where he feels completely alienated from others. At one point during his tenure at Battle School, he has advanced to command his own "army," and acknowledges that from his fellow students "he had so much damn respect he wanted to scream,"<sup>23</sup> yet he feels completely apart from them. Ender escapes into "the fantasy game," a virtual reality simulation used by the school to analyze his mental states,

rather than socializing with peers. Isolation is emphasized in every aspect of Ender Wiggins' life – but always empathy, as well.

### ***Moral Framing of Ender***

Ender's abjection is only the beginning of the novel's rhetorical move, as Card establishes Ender as the metaphoric representation of all oppressed groups. It's important to note that the novel rarely strays from a close-perspective third person narration from Ender's point of view; that is, we are rarely in anyone's head but Ender's. This emphasizes the almost myopic focus on his experience. The novel has some segments told from Valentine's point of view, and dialogue between Colonel Graff and other members of the Battle School administration is interspersed within chapters. Within the segments of the novel that offer Valentine's point of view, and in the conversations the Colonel has, Ender remains the central and crucial figure around which nearly all thought and discussion centers. Ender himself, therefore, is the character who is left to think about the plight of other Others besides himself: everyone else spends their time thinking about Ender.

Ender's internal monologue is heavily centered on trying to understand the thought processes of those from whom he is alienated. Repeatedly throughout the novel Ender will, seemingly dispassionately, recount his understanding of what someone else is thinking, often when their thinking has clearly led them to take an action that is detrimental to his wellbeing. For instance, in the scene where he is cornered in the shower, Ender is able to deduce that Bonzo, his chief assailant, wants him dead, but that Bernard, who appears equally menacing, is less committed to harming him. He

understands the motivations of his assailants to be humiliation, thus explaining their choice to assault him in the shower when he is naked.<sup>24</sup> Ender understands, in general and with some errors, the motivations of Graff and the directors of Battle School; for instance, when he first rides the shuttle to Battle School, Ender figures out that Graff chose to publicly praise him in order to provoke bullies to attack him.<sup>25</sup> He understands the motivations of Bernard, his first major bully, in targeting him.<sup>26</sup> Throughout these and numerous other instances, Ender puts himself in another person's shoes. This empathy gives him the tactical genius that makes him the destined hero of the bugger war, but, more importantly to the novel's themes, it allows him to understand the oppression of others.

Ender's empathy is demonstrated most keenly at the very beginning of the book: when he is forced to play the role of the hunted alien bugger in a game of "buggers and astronauts." "The bugger" in the game "was in it until the astronaut decided it was over," Ender notes. But even as he prepares himself for violence against him committed by his brother – violence which he fears he will not survive – Ender contemplates the similarities and differences between his experience and those of an *actual* bugger:

If I survive the games, thought Ender. He put on the mask. It closed him in like a hand pressed tight against his face. But this isn't how it feels to be a bugger, thought Ender. They don't wear this face like a mask, it *is* their face. On their home worlds, do the buggers put on human masks, and play? And what do they call us? Slimies, because we're so soft and oily compared to them?<sup>27</sup>

Ender is victimized from the very start of the novel by the same system that

will eventually lead him to commit the ultimate act of genocide against the Buggers. The novel portrays the buggers as antagonists until the twist ending, and thus we not learn that the buggers are in fact victims until near the end of the novel, but it is quite clear from the start that Ender's real enemy is the system that is training him to fight the buggers.

The ending of Ender's story highlights the intended reading of Ender as a cipher for oppression in general: he becomes the Speaker for the Dead, an anonymous, guilt-ridden wanderer who shares the life experiences of those who have died, starting with those who he himself killed. Ender's relationship to the buggers is unique: he is the only human they understand well enough to communicate with, because of their infiltration of the fantasy game and the mind game that Battle School provided. Everything the buggers ever were, and everything they ever can be in the future, is eventually placed in the hands and mind of Ender himself, and he realizes that his empathy has made the buggers a companion through his days of bullying, as much as he is now their only possible savior.

In the agony of my tortured dreams they came to know me, even as I spent my days destroying them; they found my fear of them, and they found also that I had no knowledge I was killing them... I am the only one they know, and so they can only talk to me, and through me. We are like you; the thought pressed into his mind. We did not mean to murder, and when we understood, we never came again.<sup>28</sup>

Realizing that the buggers did not understand human consciousness and that this

misunderstanding motivated their invasions, Ender becomes a voice for those he slaughtered. The obvious parallels between the earlier invasions and Ender's own actions under duress and under misconceptions reinforce the mirroring of Ender's condition in the lives and deaths of the buggers.

Colonel Graff describes Ender as emotionally in between his excessively violent brother, Peter, and his excessively empathic sister, Valentine, who is framed in nearly angelic, idealized terms throughout the book. In Ender's conversations with Valentine, he consistently emphasizes his empathy and his hatred for the more violent components of his self; Valentine's love for Ender represents the empathy Ender will extend even to those who he destroys.

"It's the Buggers themselves. I don't know anything about them, and yet someday I'm supposed to fight them. I've been through a lot of fights in my life, sometimes games, sometimes---not games. Every time, I've won because I could understand the way my enemy thought. From what they *did*. I could tell what they thought I was doing, how they wanted the battle to take shape. And I played off of that. I'm very good at that. Understanding how other people think... I've been thinking about myself too. Trying to understand why I hate myself so badly."

"No, Ender."

"Don't tell me 'No, Ender.' It took me a long time to realize that I did, but believe me, I did. Do. And it came down to this: In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that

very moment I also love him. I think it's impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves. And then, in that very moment when I *love* them--"

"You beat them." For a moment she was not afraid of his understanding.

"No, you don't understand. I *destroy* them. I make it impossible for them to ever hurt me again. I grind them and grind them until they don't *exist*."<sup>29</sup>

Ender never allows himself to fully "other" his opponents, even those that are insectoid aliens whose planet he is in the process of destroying. In his murders of Bonzo and Stinson, the boys who corner him, and his use of the "Little Doctor" superweapon on the Bugger homeworld, Ender experiences a connection with his opponents, granting him both a superior strategic ability to master these opponents and a feeling of "love" toward them. Valentine functions as a kind of symbol of this love: through all of the violence to which Ender is subjected, the thought of Valentine, the first person who showed empathy for *him*, sustains him.

The placing of Valentine Wiggin on a symbolic pedestal has implications for the gender politics of *Ender's Game*. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, "nerd" and "geek" culture does not, by default, have a space for women and girls are participants, rather than sexual objects. Valentine, like Petra, is desexualized; but despite her intellectual prowess (and her active participation in political activities leading to significant changes in world affairs), she is not a figure of true identification like Ender, but is instead primarily a motivating figure for Ender. Valentine represents the empathetic part of Ender's personality, while Peter represents his violent aspect, but she



is also a figure of desire for him. A fellow victim of Peter, her life still depends entirely upon Ender's, and her ultimate fate is to travel the galaxy at his side. Like the buggers, Valentine's narrative arc mirrors and ultimately depends upon Ender's. Ender's characteristics are that he is known for his intelligence and for being an outcast; he is intelligent far beyond his years; he has little direct interest in explicit sexual desire or sexuality. Those who rule over his world are practical; they have little respect for the agency of children and are like the guidance counselor who Card denounces in his foreword. Such readers are not likely to – and demonstrably, from Card's example, have not – embrace the narrative the text offers, or to join its constituted community. Ender's enemies/victims are much more complex to define: at the least, we can see that they share with Ender an exclusion from the dominant cultural values; to draw on Spivak, they are subaltern because they do not have access to the resources of the state and of imperialism.<sup>30</sup> But while Ender is destined to become a leader in the empire that has disenfranchised him, his bullies, even if they have momentary power over him, have no such destiny. They will die in agony – agony inflicted by Ender. Furthermore, while ultimately this exclusion is blood on Ender's/the reader's hands, it is rational and understandable if not excusable – and while Ender understands them, he *is not them*. That last step, of consubstantiality, is reserved only for the relationship between Ender and the intended reader.

## IMPLICATIONS

*Ender's Game* masterfully invites readers to enter a horror show of a school in which students are taught to kill. Ender Wiggin himself is an archetypal audience

stand-in, and the novel's emphasis on his archetypically "nerdy" traits and experience of bullying have made it a favorite of marginalized and bullied gifted students. Like many stories driven by male alienation, however, *Ender's Game*'s relevance as a stand-in for all potential audiences is troubled by its links with unquestioned hegemonic masculinity. *Ender's Game* reflects nerd/geek masculinity in that it presents a character whose marginalization stems from his status as a nerd/geek (or "gifted" youth), and portrays his triumph over victimization. What is perhaps both more interesting and perhaps more troubling, however, is that Card's novel doesn't simply aim to provide a shared story or saga for nerd/geek men or nerds/geeks in general: by making Ender the metaphoric representative of the abject and the oppressed, Card positions nerd/geek masculine identity as an *archetypically* oppressed or marginalized identity. Specifically, I contend that this is a specifically *queer* move, in which metaphoric imagery much more commonly associated with homosexuality and the transgression of binary gender is used here to tell a quintessentially male (if not necessarily "straight") story. In this implications section, I will provide an exploration of the novel's ambiguously queer dynamics, both involving literal sexuality and the metaphoric status of the buggers, and suggest that *Ender's Game* appropriates the rhetorics of the oppressed developed in response to abjection through the lens of Ender's empathy.

*Ender's Game* contains no depictions of explicit sexuality; the heart-flutters and coy glances of children experiencing their first crushes, endemically depicted in other young adult literature, are almost entirely absent. Ender shows no sign of sexual attraction to girls. He worships Valentine, but as his protector and motivating force,

rather than in any manner that is remotely sexual. References to gender itself are muted and reduced to evolutionary psychology: Petra, the only girl in Ender's squad, has in Graff's words overcome "centuries of evolution" conditioning her to be kind and nurturing like Valentine.<sup>31</sup> Petra is treated in every way like another boy, and is comfortable being nude around boys.<sup>32</sup> Boys refer to Petra as having "balls."<sup>33</sup> The only kiss in the novel is described in an ambiguous manner, which leaves the question of whether it connotes anything beyond brotherly affection open:

Alai nodded soberly. "Always my friend, always the best of my friends," he said. Then he grinned. "Go slice up the buggers." "Yeah." Ender smiled back. Alai suddenly kissed Ender on the cheek and whispered in his ear, "Salaam." Then, red-faced, he turned away and walked to his own bed at the back of the barracks. Ender guessed that the kiss and the word were somehow forbidden. A suppressed religion, perhaps. Or maybe the word had some private and powerful meaning for Alai alone. Whatever it meant to Alai, Ender knew that it was sacred; that he had uncovered himself for Ender. . . That was what Alai had given him; a gift so sacred that not even Ender could be allowed to understand what it meant. After such a thing nothing could be said. Alai reached his bed and turned around to see Ender. Their eyes held for only a moment, locked in understanding. Then Ender left.<sup>34</sup>

The possibility of homosexuality here is less interesting than the allusion to the secret and the forbidden. Ender is forbidden and abject as a Third, and Alai is forbidden and abject as a Muslim, and the two boys seem to find kinship in this shared alienation and

difference. While *Ender's Game* contains no literal sexuality, it is infused with a sense of the queer, which joins with the abject in order to give Ender and his enemies the special statuses that they occupy. Kristeva writes that the Christian supercession of the Leviticus purity taboos allowed Christianity to appropriate the “sinful” and impure in the Pagan world so as to incorporate things which are forbidden or cut off by taboo as necessary debts within the Christian body, legitimizing Christ’s sacrifice and ultimately leaving the very concept of a saved body free of sin dependent upon the body of the perverse sinner who is not saved.<sup>35</sup> Ender’s transcendence of bullying, his formation of productive friendships with his classmates, and his love for Valentine, depend upon that self-same bullying, and upon the existence of abject others who are not fully condemned but not allowed to fully realize themselves as agents.

Alai’s kiss cannot be read as entirely without sexual connotations. By combining its depiction with his enactment of a forbidden (Muslim) religious custom, the text creates greater ambiguity than would otherwise have been present. At the same time, Alai’s blushing embarrassment indicates there is more to this than a friendly farewell. In a place where the feminine has been erased, this moment of love and intimacy constitutes a glimpse for Ender into something that is altogether absent from Battle School: love, in a boy’s world of violence and aggression. Notably, given the already-established themes of the conjoining of love and violence, this intersection of the queer with the violent and forbidden does not suggest that Ender and Alai will remain friends, or that there are happy endings in store for them; indeed, it merely links Alai, along with Valentine, Stilson, and Bonzo, into a relationship of love and pain with the ultimate

queer menace: the buggers.

The buggers, who the humans believe wait in deep space to unleash destruction upon humanity, are unknown and secret; and like Alai's secret, Ender eventually learns more than any other human knows about them. Ender is a pioneer, who learns to understand the Other, but in the end, he is the only *Other* who will survive. As a constitutive text, by establishing Ender as someone who understands alterity and is himself Other, but never truly joins in solidarity or union with these others (at least until he has inflicted tremendous violence upon them), *Ender's Game* establishes a limit to the rhetorical community that it constitutes. As the reader is invited to identify with Ender, they also take on Ender's relationship of alterity toward those who are *not* Ender. These "other others" take on the function of sin and impurity in Kristeva's analysis of Christianity, while Ender, like the body of Christ, is eventually purified through violence. Excluded by this move is nearly all sexual desire; the feminine and the female (with Petra being the lone girl at Battle School); the unperceptive and unintellectual; and, ultimately, the expression of nonrational alterity (signified by the buggers.) The violence directed against these others is tragic, it is unjustified,<sup>36</sup> and it is nevertheless inevitable because they will never be part of this community of gifted loners who *are* permitted to overcome their marginality.

## CONCLUSION

By naming *Ender's Game* as a constitutive text for gifted children – for nerds – Card sets a specific scope for the text's rhetorical impact: namely, that it forms community and gives a narrative to students who read it. But what sort of community is

formed through the invitation Card makes? Who is most able to become consubstantial with or to identify with Ender? It is not strictly accurate to argue that, because Ender is a Caucasian male, that his experience will not resonate with (for example) Latinas who share characteristics with him. But such an identification is unlikely to happen so long as the reader is within the scope of either social normativity and the “adult” world that is responsible for so much of Ender’s suffering, or some of the discarded, trashed objects who are swept aside in Ender’s path. In other words, if the reader is more a General Graff, a Petra, or a Bonzo than they are an Ender, they will not become part of the community the novel constitutes.

Above I cited Sean Brayton’s argument that films and novels such as *Fight Club* constitute an appropriation of abjection by white male culture. I contend that a similar dynamic is at work with *Ender’s Game*, but Card’s is far more insidious. While quintessentially *Fight Club* (for example) may imply that Caucasian, heterosexual men now occupy an oppressed position in society relative to those who they formerly oppressed, or that white masculinity has become unclean or impure, *Ender’s Game* utilizes a predominately white masculine subculture as a lens for oppression in general. By highlighting vivid experiences that are likely shared with many of the novel’s readers, and likening these experiences to the very worst of wartime violence, Card suggests that a uniquely heterosexual and male experience can be used to understand uniquely “queer” experiences – literally, in the text of the novel, the buggers, and figuratively, the objects who exist outside the novel’s text.

*Ender’s Game* is explicitly a constitutive text for gifted and intellectual

youngsters, but the scope of the narrative *is not limited to* Ender's oppression, or the oppression of those similar to Ender. Rather, Card seems to be asking readers to be like Ender, and to be like Ender implies taking on a role as a representative for the abject. However, by framing Ender first and foremost as a victim himself, his position and his experience are centered, and we know from the narrative of the novel that Ender will put himself first in a position of survival. Ender is fundamentally *different* from his peers (including the buggers, who are his ultimate peers), and part of that difference is that even if he understands them, he may be forced to destroy them.

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<sup>1</sup> Card's term.

<sup>2</sup> Orson Scott Card "The Hypocrites of Homosexuality," Nauvoo: A Gathering Place for Latter Day Saints, February, 1990, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://www.nauvoo.com/library/card-hypocrites.html>.

<sup>3</sup> John Kessel, "Creating the Innocent Killer: Ender's Game, Intention, and Morality," John Kessel, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://johnjosephkessel.wix.com/kessel-website#!creating-the-innocent-52-killer/ce5s>. This essay was originally published in *Foundation, the International Review of Science Fiction* in 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*, Ender Series (New York: Tor, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> George Slusser, "The Forever Child: Ender's Game and the Mythic Universe of Science Fiction," in *Nursery Realms: Children in the Worlds of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror*, ed. Gary Westfahl and George Slusser (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Miller, "The Twisted Mind of Ender's Game," *Salon* (blog), October 30, 2013, accessed April 28, 2015, [http://www.salon.com/2013/10/30/the\\_twisted\\_mind\\_of\\_enders\\_game/](http://www.salon.com/2013/10/30/the_twisted_mind_of_enders_game/).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Liptack, "Ender's Game and Bullying," *Andrew Liptack: A Nightmare of Wires* (blog), December 5, 2011, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://andrewliptak.com/2011/12/05/enders-game-and-bullying/>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Cummings and Eric Cummings, "Love Thy Enemy: Ender's Game and Empathy," *On Violence* (blog), January 2010, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://onviolence.com/?e=155>.

<sup>9</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay On Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> D. Robert Dechaine, "Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Alienization, Fence Logic, and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 1 (February 2009): 43-65.

<sup>13</sup> Jose David Cisneros, "(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Rhetoric, Hybridity, and Citizenship in La Gran Marcha," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 1 (February 2011): 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Deborah McPhail, "What to do with the 'Tubby Hubby'? 'Obesity,' the Crisis of Masculinity, and the Nuclear Family in Early Cold War Canada," *Antipode* 41, no. 5 (November 2009): 1021-22.

<sup>15</sup> Andy Crockett, Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*: Violent Rhetoric or Radical Feminism?, *Rhetoric Review* 13, no 1 (Autumn 1994), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Anjali Vats & LeiLani Nashime, "Containment as Neocolonial Visual Rhetoric: Fashion, Yellowface, and Karl Lagerfeld's 'Idea of China,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 4 (October 2013).

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<sup>17</sup> Marita Gronnvoll and Kristen McCauliff, "Bodies that Shatter: A Rhetoric of Exteriors, the Abject, and Female Suicide Bombers in the "War on Terrorism," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (September 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (May 1987): 133.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Radwan, "Music and Mediated Religious Identity: 'Jesus Freak,'" *Journal of Media & Religion* 5, no. 1 (January 2006): 1-23.

<sup>20</sup> Sean Brayton. "MTV's Jackass: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity." *Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no.1 (April 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, Introduction.

<sup>22</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 146.

<sup>23</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 146.

<sup>25</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 24-26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 223-24.

<sup>29</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 167-68.

<sup>30</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Postcolonialism in France," *Romanic Review* 104, no. 3/4 (May 2013): 223-242.

<sup>31</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Card, *Ender's Game*, 50-51.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 123-24.

<sup>36</sup> It is crucial to keep in mind that the novel's text does not support a "justification for genocide" reading – both the alien homeworld and the boys Ender kills are in positions where inaction or lesser force on Ender's part would have resolved the problem as well or better from Ender's point of view; the explicit and intentional presence of this nuance in the text indicates that we, the reader, are meant to condemn Ender even as we empathize with him.



### **III. THE MARGINALIZED KINGS OF SILICON VALLEY: PLATONIC THEMES IN NEOREACTION**

If technology is a historical aspect of male power, can women participate it at all without becoming “honorary men”?<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, watchers of the Occupy Wall Street movement which had so tantalizingly promised radical change and then seemingly petered out were surprised when the movement’s social media presence, particularly its official Twitter, started posting after a long period of dormancy. Occupy’s apparent reactivation stemmed from the actions of a single former Occupy volunteer, Justine Tunney, who had once been a homeless activist but was now a software engineer with Google. Tunney’s posts, where which she proclaimed affiliation to a movement known as “neoreaction” with which few were familiar, raised serious objections about the trajectory of the Occupy movement as a whole. Through posts on the reactivated Twitter account, Tunney blasted those she had once shared a movement platform with, accusing them of bigotry and, more strangely, denouncing the movement’s initial goals and proclaiming her disillusionment with Occupy’s anticapitalism. Tunney now professed neoreaction, a perspective that could not be more profoundly at odds with Occupy rhetoric. The “1%” that Tunney had marched against with Occupy were now Tunney’s people, an elite that is unfairly blamed, and exploited, by the masses.<sup>2</sup> So what is this movement that drew one of Occupy’s founders to abandon her original ideals?

Neoreaction is a marginal ideology that has gained some traction in geek/nerd

communities. Generally neoreactionaries oppose democracy and modernity, but strongly support both technological progress and acumen. Neoreaction has gained particular traction in Silicon Valley and among technology professionals. Drawing on diverse sets of philosophical sources, including Thomas Hobbes, Catholic theology, and Plato, neoreaction's advocates suggest that democracy and egalitarianism are steps down the wrong path -but science and empiricism, at least in the peculiar ways they understand them, are not. As such, it may seem odd that Tunney, a transgender woman and former radical leftist, would align herself with a movement that with clear anti-democratic propensities. However, for Tunney it seems that the peculiar class status of geeks necessitated her allegiance: "When geeks eventually take power, there won't be any mercy for the society that once bullied us from cradle to grave. Be afraid."<sup>3</sup> As a technology geek, Tunney frames her interests as aligned with other technology geeks, and her experiences of marginalization to be driven more by this geek categorization than by her positionality as a woman or a queer person.

I contend that geek/nerd masculinity is *fundamentally masculine* and that this masculinity is inextricable from neoreaction's narrative of nerd/geek marginality. Importantly, because Justine Tunney is transgender, she did not receive a warm welcome from other neoreactionaries, and despite the fact that she is one of the movement's most visible supporters, many neoreactionaries believe that Tunney's presence undermines the movement's core principles. For instance, neoreactionary blog writer and activist Michael Anissimov wrote (in response to the previously cited Tunney tweet) that

The integrity of this intellectual project is at stake when people publicly

associated with neoreaction by the media are making comments like this. That's why I've asked for people within neoreaction not to associate with him. When someone is publicly espousing ideas superficially associated with neoreaction, but makes comments along these lines, completely shunning him is the only way to disabuse any public notions of an ideological association.<sup>4</sup>

Tunney's critics, and Anissimov, are correct in the sense that neoreaction, as an expression of nerd/geek masculinity, is deeply grounded in an understanding of truth as something accessible to men and masculinity, an understanding that ultimately bears more in common with the writings of Plato than with the early modern luminaries like Locke and Hobbes that neoreactionary writers frequently cite. Neoreactionary thought presents a view of reality as understandable through a particular, idiosyncratic kind of rationality and empiricism that bears little relationship to the methods of mainstream scientific rationality, despite its frequent reference to these methods. While neoreactionary thinkers frequently proudly cite modern and even postmodern intellectuals popular with conservatives, I contend that the central dynamic of neoreaction is a narrative about marginalized latter-day philosopher-kings who, like Plato's Socrates, experience marginalization for their greater understanding of the true nature of reality.

Where Socrates was an outsider, ultimately forced to drink hemlock for using philosophy to see through the confining cave of physical circumstance, neoreaction presents technology geeks as modern parallels of Socrates being fed the poison cocktail of modernity, diversity, and postmodern skepticism. Neoreaction offers a tantalizing

promise to those who understand their identities in terms of being marginalized by hegemonic narratives of manhood, yet still cling to conceptions of manhood and mastery over the material world as necessary possessions for a properly functioning society. Importantly, this nerd/geek marginalization cannot be separated from the Platonic, gendered context in which it is framed. The seductiveness of this combination explains neoreaction's appeal to Silicon Valley as well as the reason why Tunney herself has been, as a result of her identity, a lightning rod for members of the neoreactionary school of thought.

In order to explore neoreaction's sublimated Platonic dynamics, I will provide a history of neoreaction as a movement and in particular its relationship with earlier authoritarian movements grounded in technological rationalism like technocracy, explain the relationship between Plato and the neoreactionary marginalized king, and finally connect this marginality dynamic with geek/nerd masculinity and the transformation of the feminine into embodied material for ideas. While neoreaction remains largely confined to fringe, online discourses, it has significant implications for the impact of technology culture on political views and participation, and in particular Tunney's defection from the radical left may function as a canary in an ideological coalmine, predicting a growing appeal of the reactionary right for young intellectuals with technological gifts.

## **CLASSIFYING NEOREACTION**

Neoreaction is a movement that has sprung up organically on the Internet, and as a consequence I examine it exclusively with reference to online sources. The movement

has its roots in a number of discussion forums across the Internet, particularly LessWrong, a project of the Machine Intelligence Research Institute dedicated to the transhumanist ideal of creating an overwhelmingly powerful machine intelligence to replace democracy as a governing system for human affairs.<sup>5</sup> Key players in the neoreaction discussion who I examine include Justine Tunney, Michael Anissimov, and Mencius Moldbug. Tunney, as I've previously mentioned, is a former left-wing activist who turned to neoreaction after an acrimonious split from Occupy Wall Street and her hire at Google. Anissimov is a blogger and author on neoreactionary topics who espouses a belief in the Singularity, the rise of artificial intelligence overlords and the next stage of humanity's evolution. He edits MoreRight, a blog for neoreactionaries that invites other contributors. Moldbug is a pseudonym for one of the most influential neoreactionary/"formalist" thinkers, whose blog *Unqualified Reservations* is frequently referenced in neoreactionary discourse. Moldbug's background is in computer engineering and operating systems, and he frequently mixes technical metaphors with his political theorizing.<sup>6</sup>

Neoreaction has its most obvious modern roots in technocracy, which is perhaps not a commonly heard term in political deliberation. In the early 20th century, technocracy was a movement that reached some levels of public acceptance. Today, the term is used mostly to refer to actions taken by bureaucrats in contemporary democratic societies and to the empowerment of bureaucrats to legislate on specific political and civic questions.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, empowering unelected officials to act on behalf of democratically elected governments poses problems for certain democratic models of the state. However,

“technocracy” as a term has its roots in a much more comprehensive challenge to democracy. Technocracy as originally conceived is the comprehensive rule of society by technical experts, and was understood by its advocates as *superior* to democratic rule, not merely a subcategory of public administration where certain questions are delegated to such experts.<sup>8</sup> The technocrat movement of the early 20th century was perhaps best summed up by Walter Lippmann’s argument that no one person could possibly be informed enough about every issue to be a knowledgeable voter, because democracy puts too high a burden on the individual citizen.<sup>9</sup>

By World War II, Technocracy as an ideology was dead in the water. “Technocratic” European democracies still administer their affairs based on the will of the general public, even if some decisions are made by bureaucrats.<sup>10</sup> The technocratic perspective is now anathema to political and social theory, as nearly every academically recognized point of view rejects technocracy, and often a substantial amount of effort is put into refuting it.<sup>11</sup> However, the rise of information technology workers as a class has given rise to new ideologies of professional expertise and laid the groundwork for a new discourse of technocracy, perhaps one that is even more anti-democratic than the original. Much like the original technocrats, neoreaction rejects the legitimacy of the contemporary academy (although its proponents tend to claim great respect for perceived past eras of scholastic inquiry.) Unlike typical conservatives and libertarians, neoreactionaries make the case that democracy, egalitarianism, and cosmopolitanism are cultural dead ends, and that while technology has continued to advance productively, most perceived social development have been a long detour that

has led nowhere beneficial. Most neoreactionaries advocate forms of monarchism, with some suggesting reinstating European dynasties but most seeking elsewhere for their hegemons, believing that centuries without real political power have left Europe's remaining royalty unfit to govern.

Neoreactionaries make their case to the technology industry by grounding their arguments against democracy in the premise that democratic states inevitably undermine those with the skills and talents to create and innovate. In other words, democracy inexorably descends into communism. PayPal founder Peter Thiele, another highly visible proponent of neoreaction, brought the movement to the attention of many in 2009 when he wrote an editorial for the Cato Institute suggesting that the liberatory economic potential of the Internet depends on an escape *from democracy*, and from the tendency of popular rule to expropriate wealth from its creators and ideas from their thinkers. His proposed future society, a loose collection of city-states ruled by individual barons or monarchs constructed in space or on the seas, might seem absurdly reminiscence of the ravings of a comic book villain -or of Andrew Ryan, the antagonist of the 2007 video game *Bioshock*, which depicted such an autocratic colony established by the followers of Ayn Rand's Objectivism under the sea. But Thiele's warnings resonated with the antigovernment libertarians common in Silicon Valley. To the technology industry, neoreactionary is a proposal for a new form of elite rule, built on managerial efficiency and unquestioned masculine power, rooted in an empiricism that melds the most medieval monarchism with the innovation of modern technology entrepreneurs. Anissimov writes in his book that "in reality... irrational voter biases... reinforce and

magnify one another, leading to poorer outcomes than if a handful of competent individuals were making the decisions.”<sup>12</sup> Fundamentally, neoreaction raises the ruling logics of information-technology businessmen to the fundamental principles of a society with the same rigid domination and hierarchy that neoreactionaries envision absolute monarchs once possessed, and all of this logic is rooted in a sort of rigid biological essentialism. The legacy of Walter Lippmann and *Public Relations* here is apparent; although Lippmann’s technocratic outlook was certainly more benign and less blatantly racist than Anissimov’s, the core argument of both *Public Relations* and these latter day technocrats amounts to making the case that it is not in the interest of the average person to govern him/herself, and that specialists of different varieties make for superior rulers.<sup>13</sup>

Anissimov argues using evolutionary history that humans are inherently hierarchical beings, and this hierarchy is inherent, and biologically, gendered. He writes:

Primates evolved cooperating in hierarchical groups with a pecking order, the “dominance hierarchy”. A living example of an ancestral *homo sapiens* dominance hierarchy would be the “Big Man” system in Melanesia and Polynesia, where dominant men take key roles and occasionally challenge one another for position.<sup>14</sup>

Note Anissimov’s emphasis on *dominant* males. Dominance is only possible for men, but not all men will achieve it, and this is an inherent quality of these men. Anissimov uses references to the African savannah as well as animals in captivity to argue that presence of an alpha male who maintains his authority using violence is essential to



the proper functioning of a society.<sup>15</sup> He seems to consider the cultural developments present in humans, and not in apes, to be more or less irrelevant.

Perhaps the way to understand this biological essentialism is through the writings of Plato. The gendered assumptions that Anissimov and other neoreactionaries make, excluding people like Tunney who would otherwise be allies, is inextricably woven into neoreactionary ideology. Neoreaction expresses geek/nerd masculinity as a universal principle of knowledge and truth. The ideology initially seems like a sociopolitical conundrum because its proponents claim to draw on numerous philosophical influences from modernity, such as Locke, Hobbes, and Rosseau, but ultimately reject modernity as a paradigm, but in reality, by presenting a view of reality as understandable only through a particular (and idiosyncratic) kind of (pseudo-)scientific rationality, neoreaction offers an ontology that is far closer to Platonism than it is to any modern, scientific, or empirical understanding of how the world works. While neoreaction appeals to tropes of knowledge and of metaphysical certainty justified through science and the theories coping with it developed by early modern philosophy, it ultimately presents a view of knowledge that is fundamentally mystical in nature. The reaction of some neoreactionaries to a transgender woman's support of the movement is illustrative here: someone who they view to be pretending to be or emulating a woman while being a man is not just comical, pathetic, or uncomfortable, but an actively dangerous form of insanity because of how they believe threatens to destabilize traditional nuclear families. Attributing an almost mystical status to Tunney's anatomy at birth, or to her chromosomes, and framing this as an inescapable scientific fact, summarizes the overall

approach of neoreaction, which is to use the rhetoric of science and rationality to stabilize definitions in terms of a universal ideal. By constructing a system of knowledge which *explicitly* genders power and knowledge in this way, neoreactionaries' neo-Platonism manages to accomplish a higher level of gendered chauvanism than even thinkers such as Rousseau.

## **NEOREACTION & PLATONISM**

Platonism predates modern empiricism by a substantial distance. For neoreactionaries to rely upon it, then, is appropriate for a discourse that is grounded in a rejection of modern social theory (even though neoreactionaries reference some of the foundational discourses of that theory, such as Hobbes.) While neoreactionaries disagree on subjects like the ontology of gender with respect to transgender persons, neoreaction as an ideology relies upon a traditionally hegemonic masculine paradigm of knowledge that assumes male supremacy. Platonism is an ideal perspective with which to compare neoreaction, because it holds a commitment to a kind of objective, material reality which is not "materialist" in the modern, ontological sense, which I term the ideal as a shared concept between both ideologies. This form of idealism carries implications about gender and sexuality with respect to accessing ideal truth. Neoreaction and Platonism both advance patriarchal ideals of authority and expertise which implicitly and explicitly position women's bodies as necessary "materials" for male transcendence and the proper functioning of society. Finally, neoreactionaries and Platonists are concerned with a marginalized king, a figure who should be given a position of dominance and power based upon his mastery of the Ideal and of expertise, but who is shut out of social power

structures. Each of these parallels strengthen neoreaction's positioning as a form of geek/nerd supremacist discourse, due to the ways in which both neoreaction and Platonism link masculinity with technical skill, expertise, and general merit.

### ***The Ideal***

First, a complex notion of “reality that is not identical with scientific-empiricist understandings of the concept is shared in common by the two ideologies. Plato famously originates, for Western thought, the image of the lone thinker freed from conventional delusions, the man who today we might say has “taken the red pill,”<sup>16</sup> as Moldbug and others do. Plato's lone prisoner finally freed from his cave and forced to see the truth will find himself painfully blinded by the light of Earth's surface world he's never before seen, and although he can “contemplate [reality] as it is” and not according to the illusions he grew up with, upon returning to the former world his compatriots will not see his attempts to liberate them as help but as justification to persecute him.<sup>17</sup> He is as much the cavern's prisoner after his escape as before, because he can see the truth but cannot clearly act upon it. This suffering is conspicuously gendered and dramatized:

Here at *UR* [*Unqualified Reservations*, Moldbug's blog], we sacrifice ourselves, we hang nine long nights on that cold, cold gallows, for the real thing alone, for reason unmixed, for reality itself. And when we find it we fall down, we crumple, we are thrown to our knees, we abase ourselves utterly, we cry like little girls.<sup>18</sup>

Since the world itself is a delusion, knowledge gained from it can be deceiving, and in this way Platonism clearly diverges from ordinary modern “realist” and empirical

ways of looking at the world. Platonism constructs a taxonomy of knowledge based not in later scientific concepts of a material world discovered through observation, but of a world of ideas that requires a spiritual or mystic awakening to discover, and one that is accessed through the raw power of the intellect. “Ultimate reality,” for Plato, “is found in the forms.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***Gendering the Ideal***

This ideal is explicitly gendered and sexualized. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates (speaking as Plato’s mouthpiece) tries to seduce his friend Phaedrus through philosophical discussions about the nature of rhetoric. These conversations engage in the characteristic Platonic anti-rhetoric moves also demonstrated in Plato’s engagement with the Sophists in *The Sophist* and *Gorgias*, framing rhetoric as an emotional corruption of objective reality/truth. However, the sexuality of *Phaedrus*, and the explicit connections drawn between romantic seduction, sexual attraction, and rhetorical persuasion, demonstrates how sexuality itself is rhetorical and embodied for Plato. In *Phaedrus* the dynamic involves the relationship of pederasty between men and boys common in Socrates’s Athens, but the framing of the young boy in the dialogue who is being loved, and inspiring sexual feelings of desire in his older lover. Throughout the *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus describe an objectified young lover who is sexualized in ways that strongly resemble contemporary dynamics of heterosexual objectification of women.

The bulk of the *Phaedrus* consists of three speeches, the first by Lysias (repeated by Phaedrus), and the second two by Socrates. Lysias argues that “the non-lover” offers

superior friendship to a lover, and ironically makes the case for what would now be called Platonic friendship; in Socrates' first speech he essentially suggests that he is about to be overcome with overwhelming lust for Phaedrus, but then in his second address suggests that the relationship between lovers can be a path, via extreme passion, to understanding the deeper truths of the soul. The two then move, oddly, to a conversation about speechmaking itself, recognizing that they have been deeply affected by the speeches that they have recited to one another. The problem with speechmaking, Socrates argues in a case that is familiar to rhetoricians engaging with the sciences and with philosophy, is that one can make quite persuasive speeches without knowing whether the argument being made is really true. However, Socrates also begins to elaborate what could be seen as a precursor to Aristotelian virtue ethics, in which he suggests that well-trained rhetors will be superior in efficacy as well as in moral character to those who are less expert, because such a "harvest" will fail to reap a useful crop. A rhetor who makes arguments without an understanding of what is objectively right will have poorly defined terms and ultimately make a poor case. Conversely, Socrates argues that a man who is "able to discern the nature of the soul" has achieved the ability to persuade and reveal truth, and to lead his family and community to a better way of being.<sup>20</sup>

For Plato, the world functions according to a complex ideology of underlying "forms" which are mirrored in lesser imitations - "things" - throughout the world. These forms do not achieve true transcendent reality.<sup>21</sup> In the *Phaedrus* and the *Sophist*, rhetoric is associated with things and philosophy with forms and higher knowledge, and

the ability to discover these truths is also linked clearly with assuming a masculine or dominant role in family and sexual life.

Both neoreaction and Platonism aim to uncover a reality that has been hidden or marginalized. Plato's philosopher-kings differ from neoreaction in one key, core technical sense, however: while for Plato, technical skill is inferior to a narrower category of ideal philosophical knowledge, while for neoreaction technical skill is ultimately exalted above all other kinds of knowledge. Neoreaction on its surface appears to rely upon old-school technocracy for its legitimacy. It is advocated by technology industry workers, surely this generation's Taylorist factory managers, and its – technocracy's proponents push for increased power for a particular professional class while arguing that the good of this class is in fact the good of all. But neoreactionaries root their arguments in far more glorious – some would say hyperbolic – terms than 20th century technocrats used.

Neoreaction is grounded in a belief that modern, liberal understandings of the world, particularly in terms of political theory, economics, and sociology, fail to properly access objective truths about the world. Unlike other "objective" philosophies, like Ayn Rand's Objectivism, neoreaction is not grounded in a denial of the legitimacy of religious or supernatural things, nor does it particularly rely upon specific scientific or even economic modes of analysis as Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, and other materialist philosophers have done historically (although Moldbug and many other neoreactionaries support Austrian economic theories). Karl Popper categorizes Marx and Hegel with Plato, suggesting a totalitarian element in Plato's philosophy, but he does so because of

the “holistic,” historicist nature of their philosophy, not because of their epistemology.<sup>22</sup> The strongest link between Platonic idealism and neoreaction is the emphasis that the latter brings to “waking up.”

In order to access objective truth, for Moldbug, one must have taken some kind of “red pill,” a metaphor borrowed from the *Matrix* films and common throughout the movement, referring to a (usually metaphoric) drug that awakens a patient to the true nature of reality. Merely knowing the truth is not sufficient, for Moldbug’s reaction, because people can come to know truths because they are being persuaded to that truth as part of a wider scheme of manipulation. He considers most right-wing politics to be of this kind of untruth – “designed to persuade as many bipeds as possible to pull the right lever.”<sup>23</sup> Only someone who has taken a red pill, that is, undergone an experience of awakening similar to the cave’s prisoner being led out into the light for the first time, will be able to consistently see truth and avoid dominant orthodoxies when they are deceptive. Here we see the clear legacy of Platonism: truth is not so much a set of facts that correspond to objective reality, as the beliefs of a person who is capable of knowing truth – a philosopher, or, for Moldbug and his followers, someone who has been “redpilled.” Citing Walter Lippmann, Moldbug describes a system in which subject area experts manipulate the public to create what they believe to be desired outcomes, but unlike the redpilled neoreactionary ruler, their actions create only ideology, only a senseless form of domination with no link to the truth.<sup>24</sup>

To take the “red pill” is, for Moldbug, not easy. Moldbug contrasts it with other red pills available in culture, “blue pills soaked in Red #3.” The neoreactionary red pill is

"the size of a golf ball, though nowhere near so smooth, and halfway down it splits and reveals a sodium-metal coal, which sear your throat like a live coal." "Scarring," he says, will result. Unlike the reality revealed by recreational drugs, Moldbug says, this reality "is uglier" than the one you knew before. And like the mindless population of the Matrix in the film of the same name (and the red pill metaphor's origin), the majority of the world is not ready to wake up to neoreaction. Like the security guards and police in that film, they will resist, even at the cost of their own lives, because they are not ready to be awakened.<sup>25</sup> Moldbug is, then, as much this nameless cavern's prisoner as anyone else, even though he is a latter day seeker of the world of the forms armed with rhetoric, information technology, and the numerous psychoactive substances he references lovingly throughout his posts (and promises that the coming neoreactionary overlords would make legally available).

Take Moldbug's discussion of climate science, in which he argues that the "consensus" of climate scientists that humans are causing global climate change is a result of "corruption":

[Prominent climate researchers] Mann and Jones were and are sovereign over billions of minds. Literally: what a billion people know of "global warming" is the beautiful smoothed curves of Mann and Jones. (And others, of course, in their little Party-climate science, as we've seen, being a one-party state.) [...] If Science is sovereign, it is corrupted by power. We can see this because we can see that Science is sovereign, and we can see that it has become corrupt. But if Science be not sovereign, it must be subordinate to some other sovereign power.



Moldbug blames “government by university” for this corruption in science; for Moldbug, the academic elite of universities are the primary force in perpetuating false beliefs and bad science<sup>26</sup> Moldbug’s climate change rant is a latter day *Gorgias*, exposing that the Emperor not only has no clothes, but is actively distorting and deceiving the public. Academic elitists, for Moldbug, are the latter day Sophists.

Moldbug’s discourse tends to avoid explicit endorsement of sexism, but Nyan Sandwich, a blogger on Anissimov’s MoreRight collective, links feminist activism with the failure of Western civilization to develop “social tech,” that is, “social constructs, norms, and ideas that affect what individuals do as a collective.” Nyan Sandwich blames “widespread deconstructionism that views any remaining Western social-tech (such as Patriarchy) as evil” for continued lack of development and organization, and suggests that PUAs (Pick Up Artists, “relatively normal men” who develop social technologies to seduce women) and “meatspace communities” formed by members of the LessWrong transhumanist community, may be examples of social technology that overcome this trend.<sup>27</sup> Social tech, in Nyan Sandwich’s construction, is akin to the formation of the kind of “teaching” relationship that Socrates and Phaedrus suggest is the ideal relationship between lovers -and of course, Nyan Sandwich’s developers here are implicitly gendered male (and explicitly, in the case of PUAs). Anissimov himself links the creation and revelation of social technologies and truth to the control of female sexuality directly, quoting a post by James A. Donald on another site:

Everywhere in the world, capitalism is deemed evil, the scientific method is low status, and easy divorce and high female status inhibits reproduction. If women

get to choose, they will choose to have sex with a tiny minority of top males and postpone marriage to the last minute – and frequently to after the last minute.

(“Top” males in this context meaning not the guy in the corner office, but tattooed low IQ thugs) We need a society that is pro science, pro technology, pro capitalism, which restricts female sexual choice to males that contribute positively to this society, and which makes it safe for males to marry and father children.<sup>28</sup>

This direct link between female sexual agency and the collapse of science hints at a dark flipside to *Phaedrus*’s linking of love/sexuality and truth. For Plato, a lover’s love potentially can make a man a better ruler. For Donald, lack of a woman’s love – to which “top” men are entitled – can corrupt the entire state. Additionally, Donald’s post illustrates the fear of sexual alienation inherent in geek/nerd masculinity. This concern about female agency leads to the next common theme between Platonism and neoreaction: a sexualized concept of expertise and hierarchy which builds on the already sexualized concept of truth.

Given these unsettling writings, it’s clear that characterization of truth in the *Phaedrus* has direct implications for political theory and the role of men and women in society. Truth is defined by Plato as the knowledge accessible to philosophers, the men who are the natural rulers of society. In the *Republic*, Plato states “inasmuch as philosophers only are able to grasp the eternal and unchangeable, and those who argue in the region of the many and variable are not philosophers,” those with access to truth should rule.<sup>29</sup> (Note here the emphasis on unchangeability in reality -a perfect match

with neoreaction's rhetoric of unchangeable gender and an unchangeable ruling class for society.) In one debate, Socrates warns that "until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of the world have the spirit and power of philosophy... cities will never have rest from their evils." Socrates makes the case that proper philosophical understanding will preserve the proper ordering of societal institutions, including marriage, family, and gender relations.<sup>30</sup>

Plato does not explicitly disavow the value of women as political participants in society; formal equality is part of the Republic, as it presumably is in Tunney's technological dictatorship, if perhaps not in Moldbug's or Anissimov's. Indeed, C. Jan Swearingen has argued that the misogyny of Plato's use of maternal and feminine imagery has been overstated, and that Plato can be read as putting forth sincere praise in his depictions of women like Diotima and Aspasia. She acknowledges, however, that the Platonic tradition has been deeply steeped in and responsible for misogyny.<sup>31</sup> Wendy Brown points out that in the Republic, truth itself is codified as female, as are "the souls that finally glimpse" it.<sup>32</sup>

It is not my intention to dispute this feminist reclamation of Plato; however, masculinity is explicitly tied to the acquisition of moral values and thus truth in the Platonic tradition. The *Timaeus* provides a model for an ontology of being that inherently places women as receptive and acted-upon, and men as creators and transformers. This cosmology is reiterated throughout Plato's work and is fundamental to Platonism.<sup>33</sup> Plato understands femininity on the cosmic level as something created to function as a physical, maternal entity, after "the works of

intelligence” have already been created. The maternal receptacle-substance exists on a metaphysical level, but is described directly with reference to the biological function understood to belong to female bodies in nature.<sup>34</sup> This reproductive function is an unfortunate consequence of humanity’s position as physically embodied, rather than existing in abstraction as a sort of idea:

In order then that disease might not quickly destroy us, and lest our mortal race should perish without fulfilling its end -intending to provide against this, the gods made what is called the lower belly, to be a receptacle for the superfluous meat and drink, and formed the convolution of the bowels, so that the food might be prevented from passing quickly through and compelling the body to require more food, thus producing insatiable gluttony, and making the whole race an enemy to philosophy and music, and rebellious against the divinest element within us.<sup>35</sup>

“The divine element within us” supersedes the physical, and femininity/womanhood is inherently physical or embodied throughout Plato. Thus, while Plato may in fact have described souls as ultimately female, it is at the very least true that he can and has been read as promoting a kind of male supremacy with respect to access to truth and thus to proper fitness to rule. The link between technocracy and a mutated form of Platonism has already been made – Kenneth Henwood writes:

The arguments in the Republic are predicated upon a prior argument which can be expressed as follows:

There is moral knowledge.

Possession of it qualifies one to rule.

Those who do possess it therefore are entitled to rule.

The reasoning does not differ markedly from the acceptable argument that

There is technical knowledge.

Possession of it qualifies one to practice it.

Those who do possess it therefore are qualified to practice it.<sup>36</sup>

It seems fairly simple to conclude that while Plato himself would almost certainly not view the sort of technical skills possessed by Silicon Valley workers as meriting control over society, they can easily make use of the structure of his arguments to advance their fitness to rule.

The hegemonically masculine component of neoreaction also parallels Plato in key ways. For neoreactionaries knowledge (and technology, crucial to their understanding of knowledge) is masculine, and the feminine seems largely restricted (outside of edge cases) to a reproductive function, which, in cases like Anissimov's engagement with Tunney, establish fertility as the essential characteristic of womanhood, and this essential womanhood's performance as crucial to the survival of a (racially-coded as white/Aryan) civilization. Not only is the reproductive function of women's role in fact blamed for the need to censure homosexuality and transsexuality, in Anissimov's threatened white society, but it also hampers the pursuit of higher knowledge and truth, which is obtained through knowledge and technology. Anissimov identifies the "blank slate" theory of mind as "politically expedient," despite the fact that "real scientists refute it," and holds up as a key example of a distortion this theory applies, the idea of gender being socially constructed:

Boys grow into men merely because that is what we are culturally programmed to be, not because we have distinctly masculine brains shaped during gestation in the womb and millions of years of natural selection.<sup>37</sup>

This theory, Anissimov argues, contributes directly to the growth of “big government” and bureaucracy, impeding the successful functioning of the state. For Anissimov, biology encodes the proper destiny and fate of an individual, based on race, as well as gender, and this biological reality is primarily concerned with ordering power and proper relations between individuals.

Furthermore, the “transhumanist” strain of neoreaction, which is concerned with superseding human limitations through technologies of body modification and advanced manufacturing, carries this implication even further. Plato describes the body – and particularly the body’s meaner functions, such as eating, drinking, and defecation – as composed ultimately of the feminine receptacle-substance. Overcoming this limitation, as the transhuman strain of neoreaction promises, is the promised result of the surrender of political power to a new, technocratic sovereign.

Neoreactionaries invariably contend that expertise with technology and with abstract thought is crucial to leadership and ruling. Transhumanism follows this through to a conclusion that is uniquely Platonic, beyond even the already-considerable Platonism of other neoreactionaries (such as Moldbug.) Neoreactionary supporter HBDfan, commenting on the transhumanist blog LessWrong (originally a haven for neoreactionary discussion, which spawned the competing and specifically neoreactionary transhumanist site MoreRight), argues:

Libertarianism is insufficient as most people will be led easily. They will not take freedom. Freedom is hard work, freedom is frightening. Neoreaction follows from libertarianism with a more secure possible future. Technology provides wealth and being with your group provides security in society.<sup>38</sup>

In the same thread, Annissimov suggests that the arrival of the Singularity – the rise of the artificial intelligence overlord that can supersede monarchical governments – may be delayed by “the real risk that Western civilization will fall apart before we get there.” Anissimov blames the growing acceptance of transgender identities like Tunney’s for delaying the Singularity by undermining traditional family structures.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, all of these discourses frame the female body as fundamentally receptive and reproductive in purpose; the fact that women’s bodies are not available to the right sort of man to reproduce his offspring is framed as a major factor in preventing access to truth. The sexual alienation of the geek/nerd man is elevated to an existential threat to civilization itself -which brings us to the final theme present in both neoreactionary and Platonic discourse, the marginalized king.

### **THE MARGINALIZED KING**

Socrates was ultimately put to death for speaking his understanding of absolute truth. The Platonic mindset assumes that those who *should* rule society do not, and the dominance of a feminized, deceptive rhetorical power over the ideal, ungended or masculine, philosopher-kings. Despite the natural correctness of philosophy, philosophers have a very poor track record of successfully rising to rule, and this (perceived) experience of exclusion is ultimately what unites neoreaction and

Platonism. Had he lived in contemporary America, Plato himself (or his character Socrates) might have identified as a “nerd.” After all, he shares many of the grievances that are particular to the “nerd”/“geek” community and those who perform geek/nerd masculinity, a culture that fails to respect his technical skills, a culture that does not recognize intellectual skill as worthwhile, and ultimately, a culture that sees him as an outsider because of his manner of expressing his knowledge and skills. Where Socrates was ignored and eventually killed, a contemporary performer of geek/nerd masculinity is made to work in programming jobs that have poor stability, poor benefits, and little possibility for advancement. Where Plato is denied his Republic of philosopher-kings, the geek/nerd neoreactionary sees a potential for a future where the electronic currency Bitcoin is the mint of the realm, where a successful technology millionaire can become a king, and where true meritocracy governs success and respect in society.

Platonic works, such as the Republic, make similar suggestions for the rule or dominance of elite “knowledge” classes over their inferiors. While, notably, Plato suggests a significantly more egalitarian organization of society in terms of gender in the *Republic* than would have been normal for Athens of his time, he also suggests a near-totalitarian regimentation as part of the ideal Republic: citizens should be taught to view themselves as made of fundamentally different substances, and these substances as naturally inclining them to one position in society or another. This viewpoint, which would place philosophers as the highest of substances and thus society’s rulers, would deceive those in power as much as those subjugated.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps neoreaction could be



interpreted as an example of such an ideology of fundamental difference, and its advocacy on blogs such as MoreRight and Unqualified Reservations as the retelling of this myth, albeit to somewhat unreceptive ears. In any case, neoreactionaries provide a portrait of truth that is grounded in the moral and civic character of leaders – truth is defined by, as in Plato, philosophers, men who should be *philosopher-kings*.

Feminist historian Cynthia Cockburn argues that when automation developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, men had contradictory attitudes toward it, because it forced many out of work by making their jobs redundant. However, because technology was marked as fundamentally a male domain, it also increased the privilege men had over women. Furthermore, women, when they were involved with technology in the workplace, were usually unskilled “operators” who were afforded permission to participate in the process of manufacturing and technology but only in a “reproductive” capacity.<sup>41</sup> In a very real sense, the early history of women in technology is being identified with the Platonic understanding of the female as raw material.

Anissimov contends that the rise of advanced artificial intelligence on Earth “is inevitable.” Specifically citing the importance of artificial wombs for future social development, Anissimov also links the adoption of transhuman technology to the continued dominance of nations, which, given his concern with racialized dynamics of reproduction, clearly suggests the continuation of this racially charged dynamic into a posthuman era.

My point is that Transhumanism is not a choice. It’s inevitable. Molecular assemblers will be built, and human enhancement will flow directly from them.

For any philosophy to survive in the long run, Reaction included, it must take into account these realities.<sup>42</sup>

For Anissimov, transhumanism is the inevitable outcome of neoreactionary thought as well as technological development. Even a philosophy that advocates a kind of regression to more seemingly-primitive forms of social organization must account for this, as it is part of the progression humanity is following toward higher forms of existence. Anissimov suggests that the rise of transhuman technologies will allow the rise of literal philosopher kings who are “educated for their responsibilities in advance,” groomed from birth for leadership.<sup>43</sup> Without the principles of reaction leading to the promotion of such a limited circle of leadership, Anissimov fears that transhumanism would instead bring a false liberation in which the masses rose with technology they didn’t understand.

Over the long run, cultures with superior military technology, reproduction, and economic growth tend to replace other cultures. (Neanderthals, anyone?)

Transhumanist technologies such as soldier enhancement technologies, artificial wombs, and molecular manufacturing have the potential to supercharge all these metrics by orders of magnitude. Very large power gaps could potentially be produced on historically minute timescales.

Anissimov fears “unrestrained technological power in the hands of the masses,” and warns that a “Friendly AI” will not come about in time to regulate the development of this technology, the people will have access to greater technology than they know how to responsibly use, without neoreaction and its marginalized Philosopher Kings.<sup>44</sup>

The ultimate marginalized king, for Anissimov, is the singularity-AI; but the more immediate examples for neoreactionaries are the men who are truly competent -the “red pill” men who have awakened to the truth about culture and society, who have the expertise and political know-how to rule but who are shut out of the halls of power by their inferiors. Tunney herself has engaged in this rhetoric on a number of occasions, famously stating that technology workers were worse off than chattel slaves.<sup>45</sup> Tunney’s petition to declare Google CEO Eric Schmidt “CEO of America” argued that the technology industry should be given “administrative authority” over the country, and Tunney’s online activism has continually maintained that Silicon Valley has the knowledge and expertise to improve culture where existing bureaucracy and academia cannot.<sup>46</sup> Describing the case of a boy who attacked two girls who teased him for his geeky appearance, Tunney sympathized, and stated that since “society is incredibly hostile toward geeks from birth,” then suggested that special nerdy schools for geeky kids should be implemented. The “all-consuming narrative of equality,” she argues, prevents nerdy children from recognizing their own potential.<sup>47</sup> Tunney’s narrative continues the narrative of *Ender’s Game* established in the previous chapter: nerds are people with enormous potential, whose potential is cruelly crushed by social marginalization.

Since neoreaction begins as the argument that while monarchs are inferior to hypothetical machine intelligences as potential rulers for humanity, they are nevertheless superior to the common whims and whimsies of the general public, the promise of neoreaction is an eventual defeat or transcendence of the feminine, of the need for sexual

reproduction and thus for the female sex. Andrea Dworkin famously feared this outcome of technological mastery of mind and reproduction, writing in *Woman Hating* that the creation of cyborg sexual partners for men risked allowing the literal extermination of living female humans.<sup>48</sup> Among transhumanists, the fantasy of the robotic sexual partner is a common one; evolutionary psychology is frequently cited to support the idea that equal, respectful sexual relationships between humans of different sexes is not possible.<sup>49</sup> Even though Justine Tunney advocates for matriarchal societal structures and transgender rights, the bulk of the neoreactionary movement she has at times supported is driven by a deeply-rooted narrative in which the marginalization of male geeks and nerds, including their sexual marginalization, is a deep injustice. Even Tunney's example of a boy who, in her own framing, defended himself by "brutally attacking" his bullies, is an example of a boy being teased about his appearance by girls. The rage of other neoreactionaries against women choosing "tattooed low-IQ thugs" over "the guy in the corner office," and their call for societal regulation to prevent this, expresses the ultimate fear of those who view themselves as marginalized kings.<sup>50</sup> Anissimov takes this even farther, suggesting that until "an influential cadre of Berkeley students" (promoters of the Frankfurt school) perverted dominant political ideologies, "high-level political thought was still based heavily on Traditional principles of sacred responsibility among a few men of power."<sup>51</sup> It is his duty, then, to restore such men to power and respect, for the good of all.

Given these beliefs and contentions, it's clear that neoreaction relies both implicitly and explicitly on a number of important Platonic ideas. Namely, it assumes an

underlying “real” ontology which is nonetheless not accessed by mainstream science; it maintains that only a certain, implicitly male, sort of people can really access this truth; and it presents these people -specifically, technically skilled people and IT laborers -as marginalized when they should be rulers. There are significant, gendered implications to this framing, as I have previously alluded to.

Reading neoreaction alongside Plato offers deeper insight into what the neoreactionaries propose. In particular, it allows us to understand the deepest impact of the implicit gender roles in their worldview, and to note how the very contemporary nature of a movement built around the valorization of Silicon Valley intersects with an ancient view of gender. Lori Kendall has written extensively about the ways in which technology workers in particular employ a form of masculinity which is grounded in their skill with computers in particular;<sup>52</sup> Cynthia Cockburn contends in addition that technical competence and female identity are largely constructed as incompatible.<sup>53</sup> Neoreaction takes this further, however, by making this incompatibility explicit and by linking male success and empowerment to engaging in these exclusive-of-femininity activities (which is perhaps why Tunney’s presence in the movement is so threatening: someone who is not only female and technically competent, but whose femaleness is perceived as *chosen*, seems to make neoreaction incoherent.) Anissimov certainly thinks so:

Another trend is the rapidly falling testosterone among American men, which has gone so far as to cause some men to dress up and pretend they are women. They might even get surgery to mutilate their genital organs. This behavior is

destructive, a form of self-indulgence and escape which contributes to the breakdown of societal fabric. If communities are going to reap the benefits of strong families, they will have to reject and condemn these behaviors. Otherwise, the demographic suffers from below replacement births and has no future. A shrinking demographic is a dying demographic.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, trans women are not the only target of Anissimov's ire here. He places the responsibility for the sexual decay of society explicitly on "male" transsexuals who transition to live as women, but note that he explains transsexuality with reference to the hormone testosterone, and that along with the assumption that all "genetic" men have an obligation to contribute to a strong family unit that they participate in as men comes the concurrent responsibility for all "genetic" women to participate in sexual service for these men (and fulfill a primarily parental role within the "strong families" he proposes.) Tunney, then, is not a woman, because of her genetics and anatomy, but just as importantly, if she were a woman, she wouldn't be qualified to partake in conversations about neoreaction at all. Demographics demand that a properly functioning society enforces a strict segmentation of gender, and women's role in that society is primarily reproductive, not intellectual.

If the ideology of the free market maintains that women are inferior, as de Beauvoir states, because of her physical capabilities leaving her less valuable as a laborer, then the ideology of neoreaction holds woman as inferior because she is a tool of reproduction, not an agent of political or moral knowledge.<sup>55</sup> Policing the bounds of who counts as a woman, as Anissimov does, also allows him to regulate what those he views as actual

women do -and it makes the preferences and desires of women subservient to the needs of families and the greater good of humanity. In essence, Anissimov's targeting of transgender women is a direct appeal to the importance of promoting patriarchy, and makes explicit the patriarchal conclusions of neoreaction. Anissimov's desire to make sure that Tunney is always understood as a man (through his consistent use of the "he" pronoun to refer to her) can be understood as a simultaneous affirmation of the proper role of women as reproductive and subservient, and a hegemonic policing that keeps women out of neoreactionary conversation.

While cloaked in the language of capitalism, scientific rationality, and empiricism, the antimodernism of neoreaction truly finds its roots in Plato. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore the ways in which neoreaction's Platonism resonates dangerously with nerd/geek masculinity to create a seductive promise for those to whom it speaks.

## **NEOREACTION AND NERD/GEEK MASCULINITY**

As discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, nerd/geek culture understands membership to be tightly linked to skill with technology; technology also has a deep link with being a nerd or a geek. Both technology culture and people who identify as nerds and geeks identify these statuses as strongly masculine, thus necessitating the identification of "geek girls" where "geek boys" are simply assumed. Geek/nerd masculinity is a form of masculinity which is grounded in being marginalized; the constitutive narrative of bullying, which I explore as foundational in my first case study, frames nerds and geeks as having a shared experience of oppression. Given the extant link between nerd/geek identity and participation in information technology

development and culture, this provides a strong recipe for a group that can be drawn to radical ideas such as neoreaction.

On a psychological level neoreaction's construction of women as outside the sphere of rationality resonates with established attitudes in nerd/geek culture and information technology about the inherent masculinity of technical skill. Coupled with the promised link between technical skill and the moral understanding necessary for rule, neoreaction forms a seductive promise for the marginalized males of nerd/geek culture. In this section, I will describe how the planks of the neoreactionary platform and its crypto-Platonism resonate and synergize with nerd/geek masculinity.

First, by being rooted in technology, neoreaction gains strength from existing assumptions about women's participation in technology culture. "There are no women on the Internet." "Women don't program computers." These claims, however statistically and historically ungrounded they are, are common ones in the forum cultures which drive both geek/nerd culture and neoreaction, and their acceptance, which has been extensively documented by academics like Lori Kendall, helps explain both neoreaction's relative acceptance, and why neoreaction is dangerous. The success of neoreaction in gaining nerd/geek adherence, however limited it may have been, poses important implications for scholarship. Libertarianism, hyper-capitalist, and other ideologies popular in information technology may be implicitly harmful to women because they posit the irrelevance of social systems of support, or the lack thereof, in individual success, and thus risk perpetuating deeply rooted systemic inequalities which have historically held women back.



But Platonist essentialism is something else entirely: a mindset in which the passivity and submissiveness of the female population is not merely seen as normal, but is also constructed as crucial. For Plato, the feminine is not merely a matter of anatomy or social role, but is a fundamental sort of substance.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Moldbug, Tunney, and Anissimov all align with nerd/geek masculinity in portraying the traits of nerdiness or geekhood as innate, laudable, and nevertheless oppressed. This creates a much deeper potential alliance between nerd/geek culture and extremist right-wing conservatism of a more traditional type, while simultaneously reaffirming that nerds/geeks are always male. Even though Tunney is a woman, furthermore, she seems to (to those neoreactionaries who support her) have become as Cockburn framed it in the quotation with which I open this chapter an “honorary man,” placing her above the feminine masses (something which, ironically, her critics who see her as a man seem less willing to do than those who acknowledge her gender.)

Second, neoreaction’s views go beyond mere sexism in their emphasis on women’s reproductive function -and again, this move links gender-essentialist ideology directly to nerd/geek masculinity. The explicit *sexualization* of nerd/geek marginalization – the assumption, discussed by Kendall and others, that nerd/geek men will generally be unsuccessful in finding heterosexual companionship – makes the female-exclusiveness of neoreactionary theories of power more exciting and seductive. Women may deny geek/nerd men their bodies, but neoreaction promises that social power and thus, eventually, social dominion capable of securing sexual companionship will be in the hands of men with the right priorities, and that women will be ultimately unsuccessful in

the same sphere.

Neoreaction's reading of gender, again, varies. Anissimov takes the hard line that links heterosexual intercourse to culture in an essential, compulsory manner which is necessary for social survival, and Moldbug, again, suggests that one problem with "Communism" and the crypto-communism of our current society is that it fails to appreciate "women for what they are." He holds up the example of programs aimed to help women deal with specific professional challenges related to their status as women as such a misapprehension of women's nature, a move with which perhaps feminists might find common purpose.<sup>57</sup> But Plato's take on what women "are" is clear: women are the physical part of the human experience, while men are the mental and spiritual. A properly ordered society places women into their natural roles as participants in the process of reproduction (of things and people alike), and men as leaders and dominators.

Finally, neoreaction uses implicit cultural assumptions about women's role in technology or lack thereof, combined with its valorization *of* technical skill, to fundamentally position women as inferiors. Whether neoreaction literally advocates for women to function primarily as wives and mothers, as Anissimov suggests, or whether it simply suggests that women tend to be less inclined toward certain careers for reasons ultimately rooted in biology rather than culture (as both Moldbug and Tunney seem to believe), in all cases, neoreactionaries frame the right to rule as based in something that they consider to be explicitly male. I contend that through this literalization, women are transformed into the raw materials of the neoreactionary subculture's transhuman transcendence. Fundamentally, neoreaction *makes women into the vessels of men's*

*transcendence of their physical bodies.*

For most neoreactionaries (except, of course, Tunney), gender is innate and absolute, determined, depending on when one asks, on prenatal brain development and genetics, or on the presence of a particular hormone that creates masculine behaviors. This fundamental truth of gender can only even appear to be distorted in a situation of perverse liberalism, which neoreactionaries contend we are living in. On MoreRight, Anissimov's blog, Charles Tuttle makes the seemingly contradictory case that humans have stopped engaging in *community* -surely, at least as fundamental a human behavior as gender -as a result of government regulations such as fair housing, increased rights for criminal defendants, and so forth. He argues:

In a modern American town, there are no children wandering in the woods or playing on sidewalks; as in the UK, they have lost the right to roam. Strip malls and big-box retail dominate the built landscape. Both the car itself and the distance it must travel provide protective barriers where the community has failed to do so. In sufficiently diverse neighborhoods, healthy, dense social networks do not form; people trust each other less, even others who look like them. The doors are all locked, and the people are inside. Each space is open to everyone, according to his willingness to pay – but not particularly well-suited to anyone.<sup>58</sup>

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the bullying narrative among nerds/geeks as a sort of “foundational” myth. Neoreaction seems to have formed its own foundational myth about intellectual men in contemporary society: that they are Platonic philosopher-kings,

denied unjustly, like Plato, their kingdom. This concept becomes sexualized and linked to a figurative economy of male and female bodies, inherently distinct, and the male's linked to intellectual fulfillment and rule. Through affirming biological gender and a commitment to unproblematic gender roles, and linking as Anissimov does this commitment to a possibility for humans to achieve transcendence over the physical, neoreaction offers a way for men with technology skills to be the new Socrates, and to affirm the value of these technology skills in affirming masculinity.

The “threat” to nerd/geek culture as a male-centered subculture is that dominant cultural values do not always affirm that geeks and nerds are “real men.” As discussed in the Introduction, historical movements to increase “vigor” and physical power in normative masculinity have marginalized men who identify with mental and intellectual skill. While many neoreactionaries will never reach the extreme sorts of mindsets depicted by those who advocate for access to robot sexual partners, and while many, such as Tunney, claim to support legal equality for women, the deep integration of the equation with technical skill with mastery over, domination of, and eventual superseding of the physical, and the implicit association between the feminine and the physical, this particular instantiation of nerd/geek masculinity makes women an implement for male transcendence.

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Domination: Women, Men, and Technical Know-How*, Northeastern University Press, 1985: 8.

<sup>2</sup> Chu, Arthur. “Occupying the Throne: Justine Tunney, Neoreactionaries, and the New 1%.” *The Daily Beast*. Accessed March 6, 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/01/occupying-thethrone-justine-tunney-neoreactionaries-and-the-new-1-percent.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Tunney, Justine, “When Geeks Eventually Take Power, There Won’t Be Any Mercy for the Society That Once Bullied Us from Cradle to Grave. Be Afraid.” @JustineTunney (blog), Twitter, June 1, 2014, accessed April 19, 2015, <https://twitter.com/JustineTunney/status/473118471593934848>.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Anissimov, “The Kind of People Who Should Be Nowhere Near Neoreaction,” MoreRight (blog), June 2, 2014, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/the-kind-of-people-whoshould-be-nowhere-near-neoreaction/>. Anissimov always uses the male pronoun to refer to Tunney, as he does not recognize transgender women as female.

<sup>5</sup> “Neoreactionary Movement.” *RationalWiki*, [http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Neoreactionary\\_movement](http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Neoreactionary_movement), accessed April 29, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to Anissimov’s and Moldbug’s blogs, Justine Tunney and Michael Anissimov have all produced blogs or corpuses of Twitter posts promoting neoreaction, and these have received comments, deliberation and discussion. I’ve included the items linked from key sites that discuss neoreaction, such as RationalWiki, as well as forums and comments linked from those blogs and comments, in the overall world of discourse I’ve chosen to analyze. I’ve documented some of Tunney tweets from articles about her, as she intermittently removes her Twitter profile from public visibility. Where people post pseudonymously, I utilize the handles or aliases that they’ve chosen. I also cite Anissimov’s recent ebook, *A Critique of Democracy: A Guide for Neoreactionaries*.

<sup>7</sup> McAvoy, Gregory E. *Controlling Technocracy : Citizen Rationality and the Nimby Syndrome*. Washington, D.C.: Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Akin, William E. *Technocracy and the American Dream : the Technocrat Movement, 1900-1941*. Berkeley: Berkeley : University of California Press, 1977; Fischer, Frank. *Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Newbury Park, Calif. : Sage Publications, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Kurki, Milja. “Democracy Through Technocracy? Reflections on Technocratic Assumptions in EU Democracy Promotion Discourse.” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 5, no. 2 (2011): 211– 234.

<sup>11</sup> Skidmore-Hess, Daniel. “Philosopher-Kings and ‘Critical Critics’: Technocracy and Its Alternatives in Contemporary Political Thought.” PhD. Diss., University of Wisconsin: 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Anissimov, *A Critique of Democracy: A Guide for Neoreactionaries*, 2015. Ebook.

<sup>13</sup> Lippmann.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> In the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, the protagonist Neo, who unbeknownst to him shares with the rest of humanity a computer-simulated dream world keeping him deluded to the true nature of reality, is offered the choice to take a blue pill, and forget what he has discovered, or to take a red pill and wake up to the real world. The metaphor of the “red pill” has been extensively adopted by online culture to refer to being awakened to a hidden truth and overcoming false consciousness and illusion.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (n.p.: The Internet Classics Archive, 2000), 7:1, Web.

<sup>18</sup> Mencius Moldbug, “The True Election: A Practical Option for Real Political Change,” *Unqualified Reservations*, March 19, 2010, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2010/03/true-election-practical-option-for-real.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Blomgren Bingham, “When We Hold No Truths to Be Self-Evident: Truth, Belief, Trust, and the Decline in Trials,” *Journal of Dispute Resolution* 131 (2006): 132.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. n.d.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Plato, *Republic*; Plato articulates his theory of the forms in numerous other places as well; see Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy on Plato’s metaphysics.

<sup>22</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Boston: Boston : Beacon Press, 1957).

<sup>23</sup> Mencius Moldbug, “A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations (Part 4),” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), January 29, 2009, accessed April 20, 2015, [http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified\\_29.html](http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified_29.html).

<sup>24</sup> Mencius Moldbug, “Ol7: The Ugly Truth About Government,” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), May 29, 2008, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2008/05/ol7-ugly-truth-about-government.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Mencius Moldbug, “A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations (Part 1),” *Unqualified Reservations* (blog), January 8, 2009, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified.html>.

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- <sup>26</sup> Mencius Moldbug, "Climategate and Other Correspondance," Unqualified Reservations (blog) November 26, 2009, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/11/climategate-and-other-correspondence.html>.
- <sup>27</sup> Nyan Sandwich, "Areas for Social Tech Development," *MoreRight* (blog), n.d., accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/areas-for-social-tech-development/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Anissimov and James A. Donald, "Jim On Civilization," *MoreRight* (blog), March 20, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/jim-on-civilization/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Plato. *Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Book VI. N.p.: The Internet Classics Archive, 2000. Web.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> C. Jan Swearingen, "Plato's Feminine: Appropriation, Impersonation, and Metaphorical Polemic," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1992): 109-12.
- <sup>32</sup> Wendy Brown, "'Supposing Truth Were a Woman...': Plato's Subversion of Masculine Discourse," *Political Theory* 16, no. 4 (1988).
- <sup>33</sup> Emanuela Bianchi: "Receptacle/Chōra: Figuring the Errant Feminine in Plato's Timaeus," *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 124-25.
- <sup>34</sup> Plato. *Timaeus*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. N.p.: The Internet Classics Archive, 2000. Web.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> Kenneth Henwood, "Of Philosophers, Kings and Technocrats," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1979): 299.
- <sup>37</sup> Anissimov, *A Critique of Democracy: A Guide for Neoreactionaries*, 2015.
- <sup>38</sup> HBDfan, 20 November 2014, LessWrong. Comment. <http://lesswrong.com/lw/la5/neoreactionarieswhyareyouneoreactionary/> (accessed January 14, 2015).
- <sup>39</sup> Michael Anissimov, 20 November 2014, LessWrong. Comment. [http://lesswrong.com/lw/la5/neoreactionaries\\_why\\_are\\_you\\_neoreactionary/](http://lesswrong.com/lw/la5/neoreactionaries_why_are_you_neoreactionary/) (accessed January 14, 2015).
- <sup>40</sup> Plato. *Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Vol. 3. N.p.: The Internet Classics Archive, 2000. Web.
- <sup>41</sup> Cockburn, 32-35.
- <sup>42</sup> Michael Anissimov, "Reconciling Transhumanism and Neoreaction," *MoreRight*, May 23, 2013, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/reconciling-transhumanism-and-neoreaction/>.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Chu.
- <sup>46</sup> Justine Tunney, "We Petition the Obama Administration To: Transfer All Federal Administrative Authority to the Tech Industry," *WeThePeople*, March 19, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/transfer-all-federal-administrative-authority-tech-industry>.
- <sup>47</sup> Justine Tunney, "Why Nerds Should Be Segregated," *The Alright News* (blog), October 17, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <https://justinetunney.com/segregation.html>.
- <sup>48</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: New York, Dutton, 1974).
- <sup>49</sup> For instance, the My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic fan fiction series *Friendship is Optimal* advances a serious argument for directing human activity toward "destructive uploading" – that is, converting biological brains to artificial ones – to maximize human pleasure on the utilitarian level. The series cites arguments commonly found on the LessWrong forums about the inherent incompatibility between male and female desires as encoded by evolution and social conditioning and roles as taught by society. Although the fan fiction itself presents the absurd scenario in which a computer game based on My Little Pony leads to the forcible machine assimilation of humanity, the arguments are earnest and their premises held by many neoreactionary supporters, including Anissimov and likely Tunney. See Iceman, "Friendship Is Optimal," *FIM Fiction* (blog), November 26, 2012, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.fimfiction.net/story/62074/friendship-is-optimal>.
- <sup>50</sup> Michael Anissimov and James A. Donald.
- <sup>51</sup> Michael Anissimov, "Frankfurt School Caused Progressivism," *MoreRight* (blog), January 19, 2015, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/frankfurt-school-caused-progressivism/>.
- <sup>52</sup> Lori Kendall, "'Oh No! I'm a Nerd!': Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum," *Gender & Society* 14, no. 2 (2000): 261-62.
- <sup>53</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, *Machinery of Dominance : Women, Men and Technical Knowhow* (London, NH: Pluto, 1986).

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<sup>54</sup> Michael Anissimov, "The Purpose of Reactionaries," MoreRight (blog), May 27, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/the-purpose-of-reactionaries/>.

<sup>55</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 64.

<sup>56</sup> Bianchi.

<sup>57</sup> Mencius Moldbug, "Technology, Communism, and the Brown Scare," Unqualified Reservations (blog), September 13, 2013, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2013/09/technology-communism-and-brown-scare.html>.

<sup>58</sup> Charles Tuttle, "When Did Healthy Communities Become Illegal?," MoreRight (blog), February 27, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/when-did-healthy-communities-become-illegal/>.

#### IV.<WOMEN> AND <GAMES>: HEGEMONIC REGULATION OF IDEOGRAPHS IN ONLINE CULTURE

In late summer, 2014, a nigh-unprecedented furor arose around the issue of gender in video games and technology culture. Although technology feminists like Adria Richards had been speaking out about discrimination against women in technology for years,<sup>1</sup> and Ellen Pao's ultimately unsuccessful sexual discrimination lawsuit against Silicon Valley venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caulfield & Byers was already in progress,<sup>2</sup> 2014's biggest dialogue about gender and technology came out of the niche fields of video games journalism and "indie" game development. The movement, called #GamerGate after a Twitter hashtag created by actor Adam Baldwin when he shared a video criticizing the sexual history of an independent game developer, Zoe Quinn, drew a particularly violent strain of rage to the surface of games and gaming culture. While the movement started with an open letter by Eren Gjoni, Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend, about Quinn's alleged infidelity and emotional abuse of Gjoni, the article's assertion that Quinn had slept with games journalists in order to get positive coverage for her no-budget, freely-available text game *Depression Quest* inspired numerous other allegations of corruption and collusion between independent game developers and journalists who cover games.<sup>3</sup>

The oft-stated refrain of #GamerGate agitators –“it's about ethics in game journalism” –resonated quite differently to those who were targeted with this reputedly-righteous fury: it was, according to Quinn, about harassing those who are



“disproportionately powerless in the industry, disproportionately female or feminist” and silencing their voices in gaming.<sup>4</sup> The rhetoric of #GamerGate aligns with that of the political right and with reactionary politics -#GamerGate got significant boosts in visibility when self-identified conservative (or “factual”) feminist Christina Hoff-Summers and *Breitbart* blogger Milo Yiannopoulos declared themselves aligned with the “movement.”<sup>5</sup> The initial attack on Zoe Quinn centered on sexual favors she allegedly traded to journalists for positive reviews of her video game *Depression Quest* and was based almost entirely on accusations from a disgruntled ex-boyfriend. Indeed, while #GamerGate maintains that journalistic ethics is their primary concern, in practice #GamerGate criticism has targeted women across the queer and transgender spectrum. In short, #GamerGate’s arguments about the game industry have strayed far beyond concern with journalistic ethics, as many members of the movement seek to regulate or police the definition of video games, and subsequently, gamers themselves.

It is not my intention in this chapter to provide a comprehensive catalog of all #GamerGate discourses, or to provide a comprehensive evaluation of a movement that is ongoing and whose consequences are yet to be comprehended or even imagined. Rather, my goal is to examine a particular synergy between one of the types of people most frequently targeted by #GamerGate – queer and transgender women, or those they perceive to be queer or transgender<sup>6</sup> – and the types of *games* that #GamerGate opposes. Zoe Quinn, who identifies as queer,<sup>7</sup> produced *Depression Quest* to communicate her own experiences with depression and to reduce stigma around the illness. The underlying “game engine” Quinn used, a framework for game development known as

Twine, allows text-based games similar to a “choose your own adventure” novel to be created with minimal programming experience, and since Twine’s release, such text-based games have become a common form of expression in an indie games community that is welcoming and inclusive to queer and transgender people. #GamerGate consistently frames games like *Depression Quest* as not real games at all, and thus positive coverage (or any coverage at all) for them in games media as evidence of collusion.<sup>8</sup>

#GamerGate makes use of a complex ideological concept of gaming that merits rhetorical analysis. Specifically, #GamerGate, as a geek/nerd movement, is engaged in a campaign to protect the countermasculine, hegemonic identity of “gamer.” As established in the Introduction, those labeled with “geek,” “nerd,” and other terms are positioned by dominant cultural discourses – or at least have been in the past – as of lesser status within a hegemonically masculine hierarchy. #GamerGate discourse demonstrates all of the characteristics that typify geek/nerd masculinity, in that much #GamerGate discourses relies upon an essentialist characterization of gamer identity and interests. #GamerGaters associate this identity in various cases with romantic and social isolation, social awkwardness, and even neuroatypical conditions that affect social cognition (“the [autism] spectrum.”)<sup>9</sup> Like much of geek/nerd identity in general, “gamers” are understood to be young men with marginal social status as a result of social isolation and unusual interests, and gamer culture has centered on taking pride in this marginal identity. Men labeled “geek” or “nerd” or “gamer” maintain their hegemonic privilege as men, but often experience discourses of subordination or

devaluation compared to men who more closely perform traditional forms of masculinity.

#GamerGate, as a movement centered on the identity of “gamer,” thus is a clear location to look for discourses of geek/nerd masculinity. In this chapter, I will suggest that #GamerGate has structured their attempt to police the boundaries of gamer subculture around ideologically loaded terms, or what Michael Calvin McGee terms “ideographs.” Ideographs are words that perform the function of ideological myth-making and construct public consensus by succinctly communicating a complex array of arguments.<sup>10</sup> Although the meanings of <women> and <games> have widened on a cultural level, those affiliated with #GamerGate seek to regulate these terms. Although it is impossible to say whether gamers became concerned first about <women> or <games>, the instability in the definition of each of these ideographs has created a perception of instability in the culture surrounding games; #GamerGate is a reactionary attempt to restabilize them. Specifically, #GamerGate’s rhetoric frames <games> as being played and developed by <men>, not <women>, and thus simultaneously must maintain the coherence of this framing by recontextualizing games developed by <women> as not <games>, and women who develop games as not <women>.

First, I ideograph theory and explain the tensions in the ideographs. For indie gamers, <games> are an expanding category that is welcoming a wide variety of new participants, including <women>, and <women> is a category that includes people based on self-identification rather than birth sex assignment. For #GamerGate, conversely, increased non-male and queer participation in the gaming hobby, threatens the integrity

of “being a gamer” as a countermasculine, hegemonically masculine identity, and it is precisely this threat that motivates the movement. After discussing how indie games and #GamerGate battle over these ideographs, I will discuss the inherent contradictions in #GamerGate’s attempts to stabilize the ideographs and contextualize their efforts as part of a wider nerd/geek masculinity that constructs itself by using marginalized <women>’s lives to build its own credibility through exclusion. #GamerGate’s tropes of journalist ethics, fighting collusion, opposing bias, and defending “gamers” all service to reinforce a narrative of hegemonic masculinity which, like neoreaction, ultimately builds its power upon the domination and invalidation of women and particular queer women.

## **IDEOGRAPH THEORY**

McGee famously suggested that an ideograph is a kind of political shorthand that compiles numerous ideologically loaded meanings and significations into a single word or concept – “the building blocks of ideology.”<sup>11</sup> Drawing upon Marxian theory and the culture industry thesis of the Frankfurt school, McGee’s contention was that ideographs serve an important regulatory function in capitalist society by manufacturing illusory consensus.<sup>12</sup> Implicit in the concept of ideographs is the recognition that they are not consubstantial with the actual word used – that is, <freedom> in the context of politics may not encompass all possible linguistic interpretations of “freedom,”<sup>12</sup> having little if anything to do with a lack of physical encumbrance. Instead, for Americans, <freedom> signifies an expansive ideal of personal liberty within the bounds of a property-based system of laws. Similarly, as McGee puts it:

In the United States, we claim a common belief in “equality,” as do citizens of

the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; but “equality” is not the same word in its meaning or its usage. One can therefore precisely define the difference in communities, in part, by comparing the usage of definitive ideographs.<sup>13</sup>

Although ideographs are terms that have formal definitions, their interpretation relies upon and understanding of the ideological machinations of the contexts in which they emerge. Just as using <equality> signifies economic equality in the Soviet Union, and the assumptions inherent in a socialist system, <equality> in the United States connotes a more legalistic sense of <equality> linked more deeply with notions of liberty.

Extensive rhetorical case studies have demonstrated how contesting an ideograph can be a powerful site for political struggle.<sup>14</sup> Ideographs are widely understood to function as a locus of control, allowing rhetors to both access powerful societal beliefs, and requiring them to work within existing societal constraints and understandings of meaning.<sup>15</sup> John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Condit, examining Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., found <equality> to be both an aspirational goal for civil rights rhetors, and a tool for their domination and control. X and King had very different visions of an “equal” future, and neither had sufficient power over societal discourses to bring about his vision. The ideograph of <equality> was for each of these rhetors a powerful tool for describing a political goal, but Lucaites and Condit maintain that through their reliance upon this ideograph, X and King invited its ideological influence into the movements they spawned.<sup>16</sup>

Importantly, ideographs are not simply “god” or “devil” terms which afford speakers social power; rather, the way in which rhetors use them both affords them

social power and influence *and* participates in contesting and redefining the wider meaning of the ideograph for those participating in the discourse. For example, Heather Stassen and Benjamin Bates' survey of attitudes about marriage in marriage-aged youth found that supporters of same-sex marriage described marriage as a contract or a lifelong commitment between two people who loved one another. Opponents characterized marriage specifically in terms of a bond between a man and a woman, but both groups referenced generally agreed upon definitions and characteristics such as love and commitment.<sup>17</sup> The ideograph <marriage>, then, contains some meanings, such as "love" and "support," which are recognized by all, and other meanings, like heterosexuality, which are more specific and ideological. An ideographic perspective, then, is ideal for analyzing terms whose definitions and meanings are both contested and sites of social power – a situation which I contend is the case for <games> as well as for <women>.

McGee's essay suggests that ideographs can be analyzed either synchronically, or within a particular period of time, or diachronically, or across time. An iconic example of integrating both synchronic and diachronic analysis is Catherine H. Palczewski's analysis of images of feminized men and masculinized women in anti-suffrage postcards. In this study, Palczewski examined how notions of womanhood were reestablished and strengthened through depictions of <women> who had forsaken proper roles of femininity and motherhood. These postcards used existing concepts of the proper way to be female or male to reinforce these concepts in broader culture. Although the images Palczewski analyzes are visual in nature, she notes that they reference existing assumptions about women created and brought up during previous verbal and

written arguments around woman suffrage. Thus, the ideograph <woman> is in this case analyzed across both synchronic and diachronic contexts. However, Kevin Michael DeLuca suggests that McGee's ideographic theory alone has a "lacuna in... theorizing of ideographs" with respect to the synchronic, and suggests incorporating Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's articulation theory.<sup>18</sup>

As my interest in #GamerGate's rhetoric is about how they engage with <women> and <games> in this rhetorical moment, I want to incorporate DeLuca's extension of ideograph theory with my analysis. In Laclau and Mouffe's theory of articulation, antagonisms create struggle and oppression and offer both the exigency and the possibility for change. For example, DeLuca uses the example of biological foundationalism failing as a unifying principle for feminism, because it reifies relationships of domination that it is used to justify. Focusing on the discursive or rhetorical antagonisms between men and women, or between women and patriarchy, offers a more productive space for resistance. DeLuca suggests that Laclau and Mouffe's concept of "elements" structuring discourse can be more richly conceptualized as ideographs; these ideographs contain power in the moment, but also shift and "fill" up over time with meaning.<sup>19</sup> David Grindstaff draws upon this idea to suggest the existence of performative ideographs, in which identities are produced discursively through the compiling of "discursive laws" into bodies and actions that "contingently" define those who perform such ideographs. For instance, Grindstaff argues heteronormativity constructs queer bodies, including lesbians and transgender people, in relationship to images of gay male homosexuality. This association can, however, be challenged and

revealed to be contingent as part of resistance.<sup>20</sup> Just as Grindstaff and DeLuca allude to the changing significance of “same sex relations” and queer identities, or to patriarchy and feminism’s meaning, I want to show how the ideograph of <woman> is again called into question – in this case, along with and in relation to the ideograph of <games> -in this particular antagonistic moment in the indie games and #GamerGate communities.

## **INDIE GAMES & WOMEN’S PLACE IN GAMING**

Video games are a multibillion dollar industry whose revenue exceeds that of Hollywood. As video games become more culturally important, the types of games that exist are rapidly increasing. While the biggest-budget games that receive the most attention still require high-powered gaming consoles or advanced personal computers, games playable on mobile devices or on any internet-connected device have also proliferated as massive chunks of the industry’s revenue now originate with mobile or social-media-based games like *Farmville*.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the culture of those who consume, create, and play games has been increasingly subject to critical scrutiny from academics, journalists, and the public, creating the environment necessary for the explosion of discourse that has occurred as a result of #GamerGate.

The question of “what is a game?” is inevitable in such an environment, and games scholars have extensively sought to answer this question through academic inquiry in journals such as *Games & Culture* and through the development of new methods of inquiry about games such as ludology. However, #GamerGate is itself at least in part a reaction *against* elite, academically defined concepts of games, gamers, and gaming, and so the stage is set for a battle around the ideograph



<games>, particularly in light of the meanings invested in the ideograph by commercial game development and advertising. Specifically, “indie” game, and their developers, have overwhelmingly been the targets of #GamerGate’s attacks, and many indie developers are women and queer people, making them attractive targets for #GamerGate. Like #GamerGate, members of indie game development culture and the journalism and criticism communities that surround it have a stake in defining what <games> are, and in many cases understand this definition to be linked to challenging hegemonic definitions of identity categories. In this section, I will discuss the historical context for <games> and <women> to be political symbols for indie gaming.

As the commercial, corporate media industry gains diversity, a vibrant community of independent game developers has also sprung up, pursuing much different goals from the bulk of game developers. Freely and open source software (FOSS) tools for game creation have reached high levels of maturity; multiple games available from Steam, the largest online store for video games, were produced with game creation engines such as Ren’py and Twine. Such tools expedite the process of game development by providing easy frameworks for writing games that minimize the programming skill that a game designer needs. Twine, in particular, has received significant attention for its simple coding requirements that allow users to make games with no more technical investment than they would need for a simple web site.<sup>22</sup> Twine games are unlike the sorts of games that can be found on the shelves of game shops and on today’s powerful game consoles, however, as their format is much more textual and

gamers explore the in-game narrative through hypertext and (usually) minimal or no sound or imagery, beyond text and fonts. It is this simplicity, combined with the tool's ease of use, which has led to Twine's extensive recognition as a participatory and liberating tool.

The availability and popularity of tools like Twine has led to a diversification of games not only in terms of style but also in terms of content and purpose. Blogger and game designer Porpentine made the case in a widely-circulated blog post that Twine, through offering an avenue for creative expression without formal training in programming or writing, is a radical political tool for breaking free of dominant cultural hegemonies surrounding the creation of media content. Porpentine maintains that Twine is the first tool since the early days of computing which clearly offers the oppressed a voice in interactive, computer media. Twine games, they state, are "personal," insights into the creator's lived experiences.<sup>23</sup>

How the fuck is life worth living if the brains we have right now aren't good enough? The audience/performer dynamic as it exists is built on capitalism, on academia, on a proper way of doing things defined by people who do not have our best interests at heart [...] They don't want your stories because the idea that someone can tell a story without going to college or someone can make a game for free is a betrayal of capitalism, it's a betrayal of an industry that says creativity can only be imparted for money. People are taught to believe they aren't someone. Taught to believe they aren't a Creator. The idea that creation is a mystical white process. That you need to go to their schools and read their

books and worship their idols.<sup>24</sup>

For Porpentine and some other indie game creators, the availability of free and cheap, user-friendly game creation tools is a victory for personal expression, but also potentially for radical politics. Where games have often been perceived as juvenile and unworthy of criticism (film critic Roger Ebert said in 2010 that “no gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form”),<sup>25</sup> many indies cast off entertainment as their primary goal and aimed to send messages or explore aspects of the human experience. “Serious games,” as Bryan Ochalla put it in a 2007 article for development blog *Gamasutra*, had been largely scorned by the industry as a whole, in part due to a lack of craft.<sup>26</sup> Academics presenting at groups like DiGRA have aimed to develop strategies for activist games,<sup>27</sup> and games like *Depression Quest* explore serious issues rather than seeking primarily to entertain. (Some indie games are still primarily entertainment-oriented, of course; Brianna Wu’s *Revolution 60*, which became a subject of #GamerGate-related controversy and will be discussed subsequently, is a science fiction spy action adventure.)

The definition of an “indie” game is somewhat unclear, and is not simply linked to the financial status or business affiliation (or lack thereof) of its developers. Quinn’s *Depression Quest*, like many of Porpentine’s games, is distributed without charge; many creators accept donations in support of their work using crowdfunding sites. Such low-budget, comparatively simple games may vary substantially from traditional conceptions of what a “game” is – many are linear and lack challenges or failure states for players. However, many marginalized creators have produced larger, more

elaborate games which uncontroversially qualify as “games” by most technical definitions, but, as we will see in the subsequent section, such games still receive substantive critique from #GamerGate. For example, Christine Love has produced a series of science fiction “love stories” set in postfeminist dystopias, which explore the possibilities of women’s liberation and queerness in the face of oppression. *Analogue: A Hate Story* and *Hate Plus* have received substantial critical acclaim and are sold commercially. Brianna Wu used crowdfunding to launch a relatively high-budget action-strategy game called *Revolution 60* for Apple mobile devices and has emphasized the game’s use of an all-female set of protagonists and explicitly feminist message. Both Love and Wu have spoken of their desire to bring political messages to gaming and their dissatisfaction with existing narratives in games, particularly their treatment of women. While *Revolution 60* and the *Hate* games are commercial, they are still indie games, and their creators have actively involved themselves in conversation with creators of less commercial projects, such as Quinn. Furthermore, both *Revolution 60* and the *Hate* games have been labeled “not games” by substantial numbers of #GamerGaters,<sup>28</sup> who, as I will show subsequently, tend to align themselves with the mainstream, commercial games industry (whether or not said industry wants their support) and to view indie games as an encroachment on their territory.

Despite the substantial pushback indie games developers have and continue to engage in, the culture surrounding video and computer games is overwhelmingly hegemonically masculine and rooted in corporate marketing of particular forms of

media. Scholars have recognized the devastating effect of this hegemonic masculinity in generating sexual harassment and exclusion toward women, even before #GamerGate, and some even linked violent content and reinforcement of masculinity in video games to violent incidents such as the Columbine High School shootings.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, the video game industry has invested a great deal of rhetorical capital in building a concept of “gamers” as people who are “hardcore” and consume “hardcore” games.

Counterintuitively, this identification has only become stronger as more of the industry’s revenue originates with “casual” and mobile games. Adrienne Shaw points out that this binary between “hardcore” and “casual” has little to do with the seriousness with which a player takes their playing of games, and much more to do with the ideological content of the games that are played. “Casual” games are less likely to involve violence, for instance, and the archetypical casual game, *Farmville*, requires a great deal of repeated time investment to be played successfully, which is not the case for some “hardcore” games like the military shooter *Halo*.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, choice of preferred game genres among those who play games is overwhelmingly gendered, with especially men and boys choosing to play only typical “male” genres.<sup>31</sup> Hardcore gaming is linked to the “military entertainment complex” and produces specific forms of masculinity.<sup>32</sup>

The political nature of many indie games seems to have been the proximate cause for #GamerGate’s initial fury. For many indie developers, <games> are a culture which offers a potential for liberation from oppressive material realities, but historically have been a space that is not inclusive toward developers who are members of marginalized groups, particularly <women>. For Wu, Quinn, and others, creating games that are

targeted at women and involve female protagonists can help change the space gaming takes place in, and make <games> a place for <women>. Wu, for instance, states in her official biography that the experience of making games transformed her from politically unconcerned with feminism to being a feminist activist. Wu's personal narrative describes her as always having involved identification with technology and games, but also facing marginalization and even threats on her life as a result of her identity.<sup>33</sup> Christine Love describes *Analogue* as a "feminist" game on her website.<sup>34</sup> Anna Anthropy's 2012 *Dys4ia* narrates an explicit experience of gender transition.<sup>35</sup> These engagements between <games> and <women> predate #GamerGate, and are just a few examples of an already-existing tension between games culture's understandings of both terms, and inclusion as the indie games community advocates.

This tension is amplified in #GamerGate. Quinn's game, *Depression Quest*, is famous largely because of the attacks inflicted by #GamerGate upon its author. The game itself is entirely text-based and is designed to represent the experience of living with depression. Written from Quinn's own experiences, the title received both praise and criticism from games journalists. When Quinn's ex-boyfriend Eren Gjoni published several pages of private information about their relationship, including the allegation that Quinn had been unfaithful to him and that she had had affairs with specific journalists in order to gain favorable coverage of *Depression Quest*, #GamerGate was launched. It is not immaterial that this wave of harassment targeted a game about mental illness that was written by a woman. It's also not coincidental that much of the discourse about corruption in gaming journalism since Gjoni's posts depends upon a definition of

<games> that excludes Zoe Quinn from being a *developer* of <games>. #GamerGate's choice not *just* to attack Quinn for allegedly using sex to promote her game, but for distorting the meaning of <games>, reflects the strategic function of #GamerGate of regulating membership in the gaming community based on gender.

The politicization of indie games, as well as their perceived differences (many would say innovations) relative to more mainstream titles such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*, set the stage for #GamerGate's policing. "Hardcore" and "indie" games are not *inherently* opposed, nor does including *Depression Quest* in a gaming canon in any way diminish *Grand Theft Auto*, or *vice versa*. #GamerGate constructs an antagonism nonetheless. In the subsequent section, I will examine how the forces behind this antagonism include a defense of masculinity from perceived feminine subversion and corruption.

## **POLICING <GAMES>**

Implicit in the definition of <game>, for hardcore gamers, is the explicit exclusion of women and girls from the production and consumption of <games>. Real <games> are the kinds of games that *men* play – *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, and other combat-centric, often competitive games. If a woman *does* play games, she is a woman on man's territory. Games like *Gone Home*, *Analogue: A Hate Story*, *Revolution 60*, and *Depression Quest* must be excluded from <games> because they do not fill the ideological function that <games> serve. That is, these games fail to galvanize a specific kind of masculine, or perhaps better put, *countermasculine* subculture.

One of #GamerGate's tropes, especially in response to criticism of sexism and

violence in mainstream video games, has been to suggest that critics, rather than engaging in allegedly corrupt journalism practices, should instead “make their own games.” This strategy is quite peculiar when one notes that of the three main targets of #GamerGate harassment – Zoe Quinn, Anita Sarkeesian, and Brianna Wu – only Sarkeesian does not identify herself as a game developer. Quinn has produced (and continues to produce) an extensive library of Twine games, and Wu has developed *Revolution 60*, an action/role-playing game for the iPhone and PC. Both Quinn’s and Wu’s statuses as game developers have been directly challenged, as we see in an exchange on Twitter where a critic of Wu claims that “developing a multi gb [gigabyte?] phone game is not game dev.”<sup>36</sup>

Additionally many marginalized creators, such as the previously cited Porpentine, the historical exclusion of <women> from <games> is a result primarily of marketing and subject area emphasis; women don’t play games as often because they are not marketed to, or because games do not deal with issues that women are interested in. Indie games provide a way to involve more people in both the process of production and creation. #GamerGate provides a counternarrative for this particular moment: <Women> don’t play or make <games>, and women who do play or make <games> are really men! Consider, for example, that the games industry has, for at least the past two decades, maintained the centrality of graphical, combat-or competition-based games, and marketed these games toward men. Video game marketing emphasizes violence and sexualized depictions of women and non-white people.<sup>37</sup> As Porpentine noted, mainstream video games are created according to very particular ideological standards



and expectations about audience, and as *Polygon* blogger TracyLien documents game marketing since the 1990s has created the expectation that games will be consumed by heterosexual, straight men.<sup>38</sup> #GamerGate discourse, somewhat ahistorically (because the shift toward marketing to men and boys began during the 1990s), constitutes gaming has always have been part of a male discursive space. As a result, it is not surprising that a #GamerGate supporter would take on the voice of a woman in order to parody perceived female attitudes toward games:

1988 – “lol look at loser anon and his vidya!”<sup>39</sup>

1989 – “lol look at loser anon and his vidya!”

[...]2005 – “lol look at loser anon and his vidya!”

2006 – “why won’t anyone give me attention?”

2007 – “The cake is a lie XDXXD”<sup>40</sup>

2008 – “Girls can play games too ya know!”

2009 – “I’m a grrrrl gamer!”

2010 – “Girls are just as good as guys pretty much”

2011 – “Videogames are sexist”

2012 – “Videogames must cater to our needs”<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, <games>, in the dominant hegemonic conception, are something made for and belonging to straight white boys, and #GamerGate supporters are deeply invested in defending and strengthening this association. The indie games community with which #GamerGate grew to take issue is made up of large numbers of people who, in various ways, challenge one of more of those identity markers by producing <games> that are

*not* for straight white boys.

To be a “gamer,” especially a “hardcore” one, is to be read as male, and this is an assumption #GamerGate maintains and reinforces through the construction of antagonism inherent in their view of the meaning of <games>. The case of *Gone Home*, from studio Fullbright Games, is illustrative: *Gone Home* is a “story exploration video game” about investigating the Greenbriar family home, which is mysteriously empty and filled with mementos of characters’ pasts, lives, and relationships with one another.<sup>42</sup> The player discovers a love story between two women at the core of the game’s story. Critics praised *Gone Home* as a “poignant” exploration of a family’s life together,<sup>43</sup> and its positive representation of a lesbian relationship garnered attention from queer critics.<sup>44</sup> But the game itself received aggressive criticism from those in the gaming community, becoming almost a shibboleth for games that are *not* <games>.

*Encyclopedia Dramatica*, a wiki site used by #GamerGate to host information and attacks on #GamerGate’s opponents (including “doxes,” revealed personal information about public figures and Internet users),<sup>45</sup> has a page on *Gone Home* with “this is not a game” in flashing, multicolored, capital letters at the top. They describe *Gone Home* thusly:

"Gone Home" is a full-on architectural simulator, made by two chicks, a fag and a white guy with dreadlocks, wherein you control Kaitlin Greenbriar who will unravel the uninteresting history of her lesbian sister who decided to bail on her military duty in order to scissor with her dyke friend. You can also learn about how her parents don't love each other anymore, her uncle is a child molester who

is now a ghost and you will get to experience a lot of 90's references and text... lots and lots of text.

The "game" got stellar reviews from videogame websites and videogame critics who were, incidentally, all friends with the creator and told people that this was literally the best game of the year and that they should run out and buy it. When they did buy it they realized this "game" wasn't a game at all.

The page goes on to suggest that “real players” didn’t buy the game at all, or if they did, it was “because the reviewers and the developers were secretly butt-buddies.” The game’s supporters mostly just want to play it because of its “gay, left-wing ideology,” and are opposed to the “actual customers who [were] duped into spending 20\$ on 20 minutes of pro-gay propaganda with no gameplay” and left “overwhelmingly bad” reviews.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, on the online game marketplace Steam, *Gone Home*’s product page is tagged with “walking simulator” by the community’s curators. This derogatory term became ubiquitous after the game’s release and critical reception for those who rallied around the banner that “*Gone Home* is not a game.”<sup>47</sup> The use of homophobic and misogynist slurs to describe its creators places them outside of the imagined community of gamers, whose defining trait is masculinity or at the very least a lack of clearly embraced femininity.

Indeed, in order to define indie games as not <games>, #GamerGate requires similar rhetorical moves as those used by opponents of same-sex marriage to define marriage as, transhistorically, between a man and a woman. Like marriage, the historical definition of games in this context is more complex than advocates for “traditional”

definitions acknowledge; some of the earliest games played on university mainframes were text adventure games, such as *Adventure*. Adventure games became increasingly unpopular in the 1990s as 3D graphics technology improved and games could better represent violent action scenes, but the presence of non-violent, non-competitive, and non-graphical games remains throughout the history of gaming.<sup>48</sup> Similar to advocates for “traditional marriage,” #GamerGate’s game traditionalists aim to fix <games> as reflecting the present, commercially determined, and hegemonically masculine understanding of <games>, despite the fact that when <games> were first defined, they were defined *in reference to* titles that bore at least as much resemblance to *Depression Quest* or *Gone Home* as they do to *Call of Duty*.

The role of gender is already evident in the discourse that references <games>. *Gone Home* is homosexual propaganda, and <games> are not that, because <games> are for a population that is historically male. As Anita Sarkeesian was told in a tweet (which, she maintains, is typical of online communications she receives on a regular basis,), “gaming belongs to men and it will stay that way.”<sup>49</sup> But #GamerGate also polices <women>, mounting a two-pronged attack and making the assertion that not only do women not play <games>, but that women who defy this categorization are likely not <women> at all.

## **POLICING <WOMEN>**

A much more hotly contested ideograph outside of the specific context of gaming, <women> is a powerful signifier whose significance cannot be understated. Defining <women> both reinforces and promotes certain behaviors as appropriate or

inappropriate for women, and includes and excludes individuals from the identity of <women> itself. Feminist scholars have long recognized that there is no simple definition for <women> as a group; Sojourner Truth's famous (and famously misreported) oration "Ain't I a Woman" was an indictment of first-wave feminism's implicit associations between womanhood and *white* experience.<sup>50</sup> Tasha N. Dubriwny argues that First Lady Laura Bush used the ideograph <women and children> in reference to the War on Terror and women's rights in Afghanistan functioned to promote imperialist discourses and conservative politics, not to mention by defining women and children as helpless and needing (military) rescue.<sup>51</sup> As previously noted, Catherine H. Palczewski found that during woman suffrage discourse, <woman> and <man> functioned disciplinarily in the Foucauldian sense, helping to reestablish discourses of feminine weakness that made women unfit to vote, while using the perceived absurdity of transgression of the male-female gender binary to reinforce the anatomic determination of gender/sex.<sup>52</sup> Throughout reactionary discourse, the fear of a breakdown of gender barriers is often used to create fear of change in audiences.

Transgender women are at the forefront of the broader cultural battle around <women>. Simply by defining themselves as women when cultural norms and medical and legal authorities consider them otherwise, transgender women generate the appearance of being involved in a sort of radical feminist project. These discourses of authenticity have been extensively recognized by feminist discourse even before any public visibility for transgender women; the "cult of true womanhood" was excluding women for centuries before any open transgender advocacy in the presently

understood sense.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the most notable and poignant example of transgender women's visibility is the recent modification to encyclopedia Wikipedia's entry for "woman," where a collage of women are displayed: the first woman in the collage is transgender actress Laverne Cox.<sup>54</sup> Cultural conservatives, as well as some feminists, view the categorization of transgender women as women to distort the term "women" beyond recognition.

Any such assertion requires the deployment of a specific concept of "real" femininity which excludes transgender women – a project which is notoriously complex, given the actual complexity of systems of chromosomal sex, anatomic sex, and endocrinology. Those opposed to transgender women's categorization as women often cite rules such as "women do not have penises," "women are capable of giving birth," or "women do not have a Y chromosome," all of which are both ideological and would lead either to the exclusion of some women who are not typically thought of as "transgender" from the category of <women>, or the inclusion of some transgender women. But the presence of a definition argument surrounding <women> leads to the definitional function of an ideographic word having deep and material impacts on people's lives. This parallels among other examples, Hayden's analysis of the definitional function of <life> in abortion debates.<sup>55</sup> Just as defining <life> determines the available medical procedures available to pregnant women, defining <women> affects the lives of women in terms of access to medicine, legal representation, and public accommodations.

In the specific context of the use of <women> in the #GamerGate controversy, transgender women have also been forced into a central role. #GamerGate has

weaponized social prejudice against transgender women both to threaten opponents and to dodge accusations of misogyny by establishing those they harm as not-real-<women>. One of the key tactics used by #GamerGate against so-called “social justice warriors” has been outing, whether accurately or not – as transgender, or false, women. While engaging with Vox Day, a neoreactionary, in a Twitter thread about #GamerGate, Day posted an exchange involving me, in which Day offered to rape me “for just \$499,” on his blog entitled *Alpha Game Plan* in a post entitled “All They Want is Attention.” Day writes, “a woman notices Roosh [Roosh V, operator of the #GamerGate website *Reaxxion*] and me criticizing Chris Kluwe [former Minnesota Vikings linebacker and active opponent of #GamerGate] on Twitter and desperately wants to get some of that precious, precious male attention.” Another poster links to my website, in which my biography is present and reveals that I am transgender, and states “you’ve been had. No women participated in this exchange.” Other posters begin discussing the question of “why [there are] so many SJW trannies,” and one suggests that since having sex reassignment surgery allegedly makes trans women essentially eunuchs, we have behaviors in common with a sinister group of eunuchs who once seized power and influence in Imperial China.<sup>56</sup> While an extreme example of transmisogyny, this incident is not at all unique. I faced this attack (and a doxing threat that was made in the same post) merely as a trans women who deigned to participate in a conversation *involving* prominent #GamerGater members and their opponents. Higher-profile #GamerGate targets have faced extensive threats and harassment based on outing them as transgender.

In March of 2013, openly transgender Twitter user @icequeenerika tweeted to

Obsidian Studios, the developers of the just-released roleplaying game *Pillars of Eternity* that she was upset by a joke present in the game at the expense of transgender women. The joke, inserted as part of the crowdfunded title's backer rewards to early backers who paid premium prices to put their content into the game, read:

Here lies Firedorn, a hero in bed.

He was alive, but now he's dead.

The last woman he bedded, turned out a man

And crying in shame, off a cliff he ran.<sup>57</sup>

Erika's tweet was shared 870 times, by both her supporters and opponents. It was retweeted by high profile opponents of #GamerGate, including Brianna Wu. But perhaps the most attention to the tweet came from #GamerGate; on their subreddit KotakuInAction, an extremely popular post receiving 217 comments and 1,812 upvotes was entitled "The guy who suggested to Obsidian that they should have denied a backer's money on the grounds that he was 'transphobic' for a joke, posted multiple times about 'killing all men' and sending all men to concentration camps. These are the people who believe they have a higher moral ground on sexism."<sup>58</sup> (The poster was referencing sarcastic posts made by Erika in the past.) Erika also received death threats<sup>59</sup> and was mentioned in a podcast by #GamerGate ally TotalBiscuit. TotalBiscuit, who has millions of followers on YouTube,<sup>60</sup> likely substantially increased the harassment Erika received. In his podcast episode, "Pillars of Transphobia," he argues that a mere "tasteless... lewd" joke that is consistent with the dark setting of the game shouldn't be censored. "I would like this joke to stay," he says, "not because I agree with it, but



because it is part of the [game's] lore.” On the subject of the joke, he suggests that the joke is actually at Firedorn's expense. “If he was misled,” however, with respect to the gender identity of the “man” he slept with, “you could make the case that he is in fact a rape victim.” On Erika, he suggests she is an anonymous person who is engaging in “bullying” rather than having “a thick skin” as trans people should have, and that “this is not a campaign for justice.”<sup>61</sup>

Game critic Katherine Cross, who is also transgender, pointed out that TotalBiscuit's reference to the fictional sexual encounter in *Pillars of Eternity* reinforces the “trans panic defense” used to justify the murder of trans women. Noting that Obsidian seemed to be working to address the joke (they later did remove it from the game), Cross pointed out that TotalBiscuit himself seemed more offended than those who @icequeenerika asked to make changes. The harassment Erika suffered, and the attempts by #GamerGate to emphasize that, in their view, she is a man, exemplify a pattern also cited by trans woman and #GamerGate doxing target Sarah Nyberg in conversation with Cross.<sup>62</sup> #GamerGate simultaneously constructs a narrative of games as male or masculine, and of female gamers who criticize them as falling outside the legitimate bounds of womanhood. By establishing and defending apparently transhistorical, exclusive definitions of <women> and <games>, and threatening dire consequences if either becomes “diluted” by women or games defined more “broadly,” #GamerGate appropriates powerful preexisting social discourses of exclusion to preserve existing social dynamics.

#GamerGate is an effort to police and secure the boundaries of an ideological

community of gamers, one that the movement's advocates perceived as existing quite comfortably before SJW and feminist tampering. Such tampering threatens both the positions of power occupied by many existing members of the discursive community, as well as their stable conception of the hobby activity that unites them. By wielding both <games> and <women> as authoritatively definable, possesable, and regulateable terms, #GamerGate sets an exclusive boundary around gaming – one which continues to define it in terms of hegemonic masculinity. Without this, #GamerGaters fear that the very meaning of “gamer” could become unhinged.

### **INTERSECTING THE POLICING OF <GAMES> AND <WOMEN>**

In a similar move of critiquing alleged inauthenticity, the figure of the transgender woman has assumed nearly as ominous a shape for “traditional” gamers and members of #GamerGate as it has for the religious right and for certain feminists. Janice Raymond famously alleged that lesbian spaces were being colonized by transgender women, a “transsexual empire”; today, Vox Day and other members of the “red pill” movement suggest that young men in gaming and nerdy spaces are being targeted for sexual exploitation – or supplantation – by transgender infiltrators as well.<sup>63</sup> Many of the figures targeted by #GamerGate and belonging to the indie game development community are transgender women. Notably, Anna Anthropy, author of *Dys4ia*, openly identifies as transgender, as does Chloe Sagal, a game developer whose attempts to “crowd-fund” projects via sites like IndieGoGo have been repeatedly targeted for removal by groups of harassers who allege her gender identity constitutes deceit.<sup>64</sup> Christine Love does not frequently identify with the label of “transgender,” but has done

so in the past to speak out against prejudice.<sup>65</sup> Discourses within #GamerGate frequently set upon the inauthenticity of these transgender identities, even as they pursue the inauthenticity of the <games> produced by women and queers.

#GamerGate's targeting of women who speak against them for "outing" as trans is not limited to targeting women who are in fact transgender. Brianna Wu's identity as a game developer has been (somewhat nonsensically) challenged based on her company primarily developing games for mobile devices; however, her identity as a *woman* game developer was also called into question by #GamerGate attacks. #GamerGate began circulating rumors that Wu, founder of the studio Giant Spacekat, is a transgender woman. Vox Day, on his blog *Vox Popoli*, alleged knowledge of a previous male (and Caucasian) identity under which Wu had lived. Day goes on to list the "genuine women" who deserve recognition as game developers, unlike Wu, and states that "women no more make up half of gamers than Brianna Wu has two X chromosomes." He further goes on to suggest that the label of "gamer" should be reserved for people who play "serious games," and that the term "gamer" is etymologically derived from "wargamer."<sup>66</sup> Day's misgendering of Wu (he uses the pronoun "he" throughout the article) is directly correlated with his assertion of the ideological dichotomy between <games> and games which are not games. Day positions himself as directly responding to a deceptive attempt to erode the true meaning of two ideographs: <women> and <games>. (It is important to note that Ms. Wu does not publicly identify as transgender, has not acknowledged any former male identity, and that Day's claims about her are unsubstantiated.)

Day's remarks highlight the connection between the policing of <women> and the policing of <games>. While he insists that some "genuine" women are game developers, his assertion in the face of statistical evidence<sup>67</sup> that women do not comprise a significant portion of the gamer population indicates the link between the twin claims that transgender <women> are <men> (because of their chromosomes, in this case) and that <women> don't play or make <games>. These claims intrinsically depend on one another; the antagonism between <man> and <woman> is used to support an inherent antagonism between <women> and <games> and permits Day to regulate the boundaries of the gaming community.

The #GamerGate use of <games> emphasizes the conventionally masculine function traits of gaming, particularly those associations created in the past two decades of marketing toward "hardcore" gamers. Prior to the 1990s, women like Roberta Williams were key figures in establishing gaming, and text-based games were common.<sup>68</sup> Vox Day's statement that genuine games involve 3D graphics and combat and that "genuine," non-transgender <women> do not like these games in substantial numbers sums up the way in which #GamerGate uses narrow definitions of <women> to reinforce their understanding of games, and *vice versa*. Interestingly, this also places an untenable rhetorical burden onto female game developers and players: if the games you like are too "womanly," whatever that may mean, then they aren't really <games>; and if you like real <games>, you probably can't be a woman.

The central observation that I make based on #GamerGate's construction of <games> as masculine, violent, and corporate and <women> as "not transgender" (with

all of the varying meanings that this may have at any given point – lacking a penis presently, having a vagina since birth, having two X chromosomes, lacking a Y chromosome, or simply being clearly female in the judgment of the current speaker) is that the ideographs both depend upon one another for coherence and also undermine one another's coherence. #GamerGate contends that <women> tend not to be interested in <games> and that games produced by women are not <games>, and then even if they were, the women who produce <games> are not really <women>. All of this allows the gamer community to shield themselves from external critique because only a very limited subset of people are qualified to comment on <games>. Furthermore, those outside this subset who seek to comment on games, or to make or even play them openly, risk having their own identities subjected to critique.

The contradictions in this reading are quite clear, of course: if transgender women are not <women>, then transgender women may enjoy <games> and may be qualified to critique them. If gaming is a male space, and transgender women are in fact male, then <games> are a space transgender women can occupy. Interestingly, and tellingly, #GamerGate rarely follows this through to its implication. While #GamerGate supporters sometimes accept transgender women as women, the movement's discourse overall holds very little back in degendering transgender women by referring to them as male. Once degendered, however, this maleness affords little or no male privilege – transgender women who are not permitted membership in the ideograph <women> do not gain the preferred status that men occupy in #GamerGate rhetoric. Transgender women are not <women> to #GamerGate, but they certainly don't gain the status of

<men>. This implication is rarely if ever spelled out in #GamerGate's harassment and allows the deeper function of focusing on transgender women's identities to become evident. Namely: #GamerGate constructs nerd/geek masculinity through negating their own and others' womanhood.

## CONCLUSION

Video games as a “nerd/geek” activity hide a dangerous contradiction, for nerd/geek men. The male protagonists of <games> tend to be physically fit, aggressive, and talented in combat. Their lives are adventurous and they have numerous sexual opportunities with women. Nerd culture, as previous chapters have discussed extensively, doesn't have these traits. Furthermore, this nerd culture is permeated with a deep anxiety around masculinity – an anxiety which transgender women trouble by suggesting that birth assignment is not sufficient to qualify one as a man.

Hegemonic masculinity maintains that men run society, but not all men are equally positioned within this hegemony. Kendall, Nugent, and others point out that the very category of “nerd” reflects a certain “failure” of masculinity – a failure, as a man, to conform to the strict criteria of physical vigor and sexual success, among other traits, understood to be traits of a successful male member of society. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I proposed the theory of nerd/geek masculinity as a countersexuality, and a challenge to existing structures of hegemonic masculinity. Why, nerd/geek men ask, should we judge ourselves as less manly because our skills are in computers rather than strength, when Bill Gates is the richest man alive and businessmen still look up to Steve Jobs' leadership? Nerd/geek masculinity upholds hegemonic masculinity by proposing a

different standard of judgment for successful manhood, rather than by challenging the privileging of manhood itself as feminists were.

Transgender identity – particularly, transgender female identity – is a dangerous challenge to the coherence of nerd/geek masculinity, as long as it does remain committed to the superiority of manhood to womanhood and to hegemonic masculinity as a system. Transgender women by definition exist and live within male spaces and while occupying male social positions before transitioning. The prevalence of transgender women in IT and gaming culture undermines the central conceit of nerd/geek masculinity: that to be proficient with technology, interested in fantasy and science fiction, and so forth is not evidence of failure at manhood, but in fact support of successful manhood. Accepting that many of the pioneering figures in the history of computing have been transgender women,<sup>69</sup> and that they rightfully occupy the discursive position of <woman>, in fact puts nerd and geek men in a *more* precarious position than they occupy under unmodified hegemonic masculinity. If being born with male anatomy and biology and raised as a man and even succeeding in business and industry as a man is not sufficient to qualify someone as a man, then nerd/geek men might not even be failed men: they might be women!

In order to avoid such a dangerous conclusion, #GamerGate upholds nerd/geek masculinity by focusing on the exclusion of transgender women *in particular*. Not only does identifying an opponent as transgender expose her to social shame and ridicule from the mainstream, but by “exposing” “false” <women>, #GamerGate maintains both the dominance of “proper” nerd and geek men, and the creation of a gaming space free

from women, imposters or otherwise. The same occurs when #GamerGate polices <games>, a genre of games predominately created by those who identify themselves as women is kept out of the male gaming space. The policing of <women> and <games> has a powerful dual function: it creates a male space of gaming, participation in which is an affirmation of manhood, and it establishes clear definitions of womanhood that counter existing cultural narratives that nerd/geek men are failures at masculinity. By establishing that one *is* born, and does not become, a woman, #GamerGate solidifies the association between male gamers and male privilege.

The #GamerGate constitutions of <games> and <women> are, again, unstable. As a movement grounded largely in anonymous and semi-anonymous communication and terroristic threats, coherence is not a requisite for successfully accomplishing its goals (such as they are.) The arising of this particular strategy from a movement devoted to upholding nerd/geek masculinity is, however, telling: in attempting to affirm a marginal practice of masculinity, nerd/geek men involved with #GamerGate both deny participation in games to women, and deny womanhood to those they perceive as failed men, in exactly the manner that successful manhood is denied nerd/geek men within hegemonic masculinity. The impact of #GamerGate remains to be seen; however, the specific and intentional reification of not just *conventional* norms of gender, but new ones specifically designed to help this form of countermasculinity cohere and express power, provide ample evidence of the civic relevance and importance of studying this form of countermasculine hegemony.

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Industry's Boy's Club," in *The New Republic* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Gage and Pui-Wing Tam, "Kleiner Perkins Partner Sues for Discrimination," *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition* 259, no. 120 (2012); David Streitfeld, "Venture Capital Firm Prevails in Bias Case Riveting Silicon Valley. (Cover Story)," *New York Times* 164, no. 56819 (2015).

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<sup>4</sup> Zoe Quinn, "An Open Letter to People Calling for 'Neutrality'," in *Quinnspiracy*, ed. Zoe Quinn (tumblr, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Christina Hoff-Summers, "What Critiques of GamerGate Get Wrong," *American Enterprise Institute* [YouTube channel], October 27, 2014 (accessed April 29, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RVICvBd2lw>); Zaid Jilani, "GamerGate's Fickle Hero: The Dark Opportunism of Breitbart's Milo Yiannapolous," *Salon* (blog), October 28, 2014 (accessed April 29, 2015, [http://www.salon.com/2014/10/28/gamergates\\_fickle\\_hero\\_the\\_dark\\_opportunism\\_of\\_breitbarths\\_milo\\_yiannapolous/](http://www.salon.com/2014/10/28/gamergates_fickle_hero_the_dark_opportunism_of_breitbarths_milo_yiannapolous/)).

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<sup>8</sup> Steve McMahon, "A Review of the Anti-Game *Depression Quest*," in *Reaxxion* (2014); Steam et al., "User Reviews (Depression Quest)", Steam <http://store.steampowered.com/app/270170/> (accessed April 12, 2015).

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, "'We Are Not Free': The Meaning of <Freedom> in American Indian Resistance to President Johnson's War on Poverty," *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2014). Jolanta A. Drzewiecka, "Reinventing and Contesting Identities in Constitutive Discourses: Between Diaspora and Its Others," *Communication Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2002); Fernando Pedro Delgado, "Chicano Movement Rhetoric: An Ideographic Interpretation," *Communication Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1995).

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## V. CONCLUSIONS

In 1938, reader Donald C. Turnbull wrote to science fiction magazine *Astounding Science Fiction*, complaining of a recent trend in the fiction the publication printed: women. “In the last six or seven publications,” Turnbull complained, “females have been dragged into the narratives and as a result the stories have become those of love which have no place in science fiction.” Declaring that “a woman’s place is not in anything scientific,” Turnbull asked *Astounding* to discard “sentimentality and sex” and provide “more science and less females.”<sup>1</sup> It is surprising how little the gender conversation within nerd/geek culture has changed since then. The second wave of feminism and the fame of numerous female science fiction authors exploring feminist and queer themes through their writing has not prevented the rise of numerous reactionary movements within geek culture that aim to exclude women and queer people from the community.

In the three case studies of this dissertation, I have traced a common theme in geek/nerd conversation: the simultaneous valorization of geekiness as a masculine activity, and the framing of women as non-geeky and women interested in geek/nerd culture as suspect and even potentially dangerous. Terming the masculine geek ideal “nerd/geek masculinity,” I’ve contended that the discourse relies upon numerous assumptions about men, women, nerds/geeks, and even political philosophy. These assumptions both allow for and reinforce nerd/geek masculinity’s role in nerd/geek culture and in public perceptions of nerds and geeks.

In this conclusion, I will tie together the three case studies and suggest their implications for nerd/geek culture, for society’s relationships with nerds, geeks, and

technology, and for scholarship on rhetoric, gender and feminism. Each case study constitutes a different manifestation of a concept that bridges them all. *Ender's Game* constructs nerd masculinity in a positive sense, suggesting a common experience of bullying and victimization, and presenting intelligence in young “gifted” students, especially men, as fundamental building blocks of identity. Neoreactionaries take as a given the basic premise of nerd masculinity that nerds and geeks are intelligent men and spin this into a political philosophy based on the importance of overcoming nerd marginalization. #GamerGate polices the boundaries of cultural products associated with geeks and nerds, using an essentialist notion of the gamers as men to regulate not just nerd/geek culture, but also the proper roles of women in society. All of these cases are part of a wider trend that promotes a narrative of female exclusivity in nerd/geek culture and devalues and marginalizes women and the feminine in general. I will discuss the intersections between the three case studies, then draw implications about the concept of nerd/geek masculinity, and finally propose some future directions in rhetorical studies of gender and nerd/geek culture.

### **INTERSECTIONS OF NERD MASCULINITY CASE STUDIES**

To review, nerd/geek masculinity is a term I propose for a method of performing masculine identities that appears and is repeatedly iterated across each of my case studies. Its characteristics include a formative experience of bullying, which is perceived to be a result of one’s “geeky” or “nerdy” interests or skills, an understanding that the person performing this masculinity is intelligent and rational to an above-average level, and an association between nerdiness/geekiness and maleness/masculinity. Nerd/geek

masculinity essentializes both nerds/geeks and women, suggesting that geeks and nerds are particular sorts of people who experience particular kinds of marginalization, and that such a marginalization is a male experience.

*Ender's Game* is a historically important novel to nerd/geek culture because of the significant number of people who identify with Ender, and particularly with his experience of brutal bullying. This identification, which the author explicitly notes and condones in the novel's introduction, frames geeks and nerds as marginalized by virtue of their intelligence. Since Card doesn't use the terms "geek" or "nerd," but rather "gifted," to refer to his protagonist and the students who identify with him, this quality of superior intellectual ability is portrayed as fundamentally linked to being oppressed and subject to violence. The novel's message of empathy, furthermore, suggests that nerds/geeks owe solidarity to other oppressed groups, yet also that fundamentally the *original*, primary oppression is nerd/geek oppression itself.

I do not make any claim of causality concerning *Ender's Game* directly causing or contributing to the growth or importance of nerd/geek masculinity. The claims that nerd/geek masculinity implies, however, are absolutely correlated with and reinforced by *Ender's Game*, its fans, and its author. I suggest that *Ender's Game* represents a key point of evidence in the idea that nerd/geek culture is hegemonically structured by nerd/geek masculinity. In a community that largely celebrates a narrative that is, ultimately, about the geek power fantasy of overcoming brutal bullying, views like those implied by nerd/geek masculinity should be expected to arise and find prominence. Many of the assumptions of nerd/geek masculinity are clearly articulated in the text of

*Ender's Game* itself: Ender's suffering and bullying is a result of his above-average intelligence, and intelligence of this kind is biologically essentialized, with the only girl in the novel who participates in Battle School, Petra, masculinized and degendered.

While causal links cannot be generally established, it seems likely that readers of *Ender's Game* with whom Ender's story resonates would be likely to embrace narratives of nerd/geek oppression as well as nerd/geek superiority. Neoreaction offers a way to be like Ender in real life, recognizing one's marginalization as a nerd/geek, and seeking to gain political power using nerd/geek skills and talents (similar to the strategy used by Ender's brother Peter in the novel itself.) #GamerGate is organized resistance to perceived nerd/geek oppression, and its violence bears eerie similarities in terms of its justification to Ender's justification for his violent attacks on his fellow students. The "SJW" infiltration of gaming, a user wrote on 4chan's /pol/ (Politically Incorrect) message forum, is "girls trying to assert their traditional dominance over nerds," and framing men as "complete psychos" when they receive deserved "backlash" for bullying.<sup>2</sup> "When we are bullied by jocks, radfems, SJWs, or San Fran trust-fund babies, WE STAND TOGETHER, ARM IN ARM" says a poster using the #GamerGate hashtag on Twitter, above a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his fellow civil rights protesters.<sup>3</sup> Bullying justifies aggressive and disproportionate reactions.

Neoreaction, the ideology, focuses less on nerd persecution (although it certainly claims that nerds are politically marginalized) and more on nerd/geek superiority. This takes its most stark form in the writings of Michael Anissimov, who holds the sincere belief that "global nanowar" is the inevitable outcome of any political system that does

not involve rule by Caucasian, cisgender male nerds.<sup>4</sup> In service of this belief, Anissimov has engaged in sustained campaigns of harassment against, among others, transgender women, including myself as well as his fellow neoreactionary Justine Tunney. Neoreaction as a whole carries the implications of the subplot in *Ender's Game* in which Ender's siblings, Peter and Valentine, achieve real-world political power through what amounts to blogging (the novel predicted a global information network on which political discussions would take place by posters operating under pseudonyms, even though it was written before the establishment of the Internet and long before the neologism "blog" was coined.) Intelligent, rational discussion in public forums that are sympathetic to nerds and geeks can bring about very real political change and, like Peter Wiggin, the neoreactionaries believe that ultimately a strong, autocratic leader will be the ideal outcome of such political discussion.

In a very real way, neoreaction is the logical consequence of the valorization of a particular, narrow form of logical correctness and use of evidence. Competitive policy debate -a quintessentially "geek" activity if there ever was one -produces significantly higher rates of verbal aggression, measured quantitatively, among those who participate, and particularly among males.<sup>5</sup> Competitive debate rounds are often decided based on logical correctness and manipulation of evidence within debate rounds, rather than on empirical evaluation of the evidence.<sup>6</sup> This kind of thinking is certainly not limited to those who have engaged in competitive debate, but debate is exemplary of this mindset, and Anissimov's "nanowar" will certainly call to mind the much-vaunted nuclear war/ecological catastrophe that the archetypical debater will declare the inevitable



consequence of their opponent's plan. Neoreaction could be conceptualized as Silicon Valley's answer to policy debate. Its Platonic tendency to refer to absolute truth rather than empirical evidence, perhaps best exemplified Anissimov's facially absurd claim that transgender women will doom families,<sup>7</sup> and that by extension, the white race will be unable to prevent their lessers from employing destructive nanotechnology,<sup>8</sup> is a twisted, racist technology mogul's version of the more mundane sorts of catastrophic logical fallacies and chains of evidence that are used to dominate discussion in classrooms across the country, in classes and in competitive debate rounds.

Neoreaction's logical positivism makes it an excellent component of the nerd/geek masculinity structure because it refutes the possibility that perhaps nerds/geeks are unpopular and put upon because they deserve it, or because their skills are not valuable to society at large. On the contrary, neoreaction tells nerds/geeks that their intelligence rightfully makes them rulers. This system of constructed resentment directly parallels the resentment that seems to underlie Plato's theorization of the ideal rulership of society in the *Republic*, and for neoreactionaries, it allows their masculine/male identity to be tightly linked to their nerd/geek identities and histories of marginalization. In other words, where *Ender's Game* constitutes nerds/geeks as morally righteous victims, neoreaction tells nerds/geeks that they are not just morally right, but objectively and factually so.

#GamerGate, as the final component of this dissertation's analysis, demonstrates the most material and applied manifestation of nerd/geek masculinity. Prior to #GamerGate, game criticism and the study of games had been becoming increasingly accepted in

academia, with “the establishment of a network of scholars interested in the study of games as a form of culture, art, and entertainment,”<sup>9</sup> and the late Roger Ebert’s assertion that video games would never be a true artistic medium was becoming less and less part of common wisdom.<sup>10</sup> #GamerGate has upended the culture that surrounds the discussion of games as subjects of criticism and discussion. According to Rebecca HG, who describes herself as a professional gaming archivist who did her Master’s Degree in restoring and saving old video games, getting funding to do archival work and other academic study of games has become increasingly more challenging.<sup>11</sup> As I documented in my chapter on the movement, #GamerGate has been linked to extensive harassment and arguably terrorism against women and queer people who are involved in creating, studying, or discussing games. While discussing the contents of this dissertation, I myself received harassment from members of #GamerGate. In short, #GamerGate has had a direct, detrimental effect upon the sober and mature study of games and upon the lives of numerous women and queer people.

The #GamerGate movement combines nerd persecution and nerd supremacy to offer perhaps the purest example of a nerd/geek masculine discourse. Not just morally righteous victims or genius rulers of the world in waiting, nerds/geeks are according to #GamerGate subjects positioned in a world that threatens them, empowered to defend themselves as well as to retaliate against those who threaten their interests. Using the language of a radical rights movement to serve reactionary interests, #GamerGate makes nerd/geek masculinity into a badge of honor and a set of political interests.

## NERD/GEEK MASCULINITY: IMPLICATIONS

Until the advent of #GamerGate, I expected to have a much more difficult time making the case for the import of the issues at stake here. Nerd/geek culture is, after all, a subculture, and until recently, not one which was frequently thought to intersect with key issues of civic import. Relegated to sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, and *The Guild*, nerds and geeks might have seemed at most an interesting side note to the wider study of gender norms among Anglo-American men. But #GamerGate changed all of that. For better or for worse, nerds and geeks are currently in the spotlight, and their intersection with issues of gender and gender identification are key to their visibility.

Codifying nerd/geek masculinity and demonstrating its applicability through three case studies adds to a rich body of literature that already exists on how nerds and geeks perform gender. Lori Kendall's research, to which this entire project is indebted, has demonstrated that hegemonic masculinity exists in nerd culture, albeit in a substantially different form from the hegemonic masculinity that researchers have traditionally discussed under that name. Nerd hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic masculinity with an inferiority complex, nerd masculinity which recognizes that nerds do not live up to most socially constructed standards of manhood, due to their typical lack of physical vigor and strength.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Nugent corroborated this with his journalistic research into the 20th century roots of nerd identity in the marginalization of less athletic boys.<sup>13</sup> Despite the extensive research Kendall has done over a number of years to demonstrate the presence of hegemonic masculinity in nerd/geek culture, she hasn't undertaken the project of systematically codifying exactly how nerd culture's form of hegemonic

masculine performance differs from other cultures and subcultures manifestations of hegemonic masculinity. Nerd/geek masculinity is my effort to do just that, and the ongoing #GamerGate crisis demonstrates the clear importance of making this contribution. Each of my case studies has shown each of the theoretical elements of nerd/geek

masculinity, in differing levels of emphasis depending on context. The experience of being a nerd or a geek is:

A consequence of a person's skill at using technology, computers, scientific, or niche knowledge to master the natural or social world. Ender Wiggin and his siblings use skill with computer/video games and skill with machines to overcome challenges. Ender's tactical skill is a niche form of intelligence. Neoreactionaries view technological skill as one of the most important characteristics of a leader. #GamerGate is a movement centered around the nerd/geek's unique position as a user of video games and computers.

- An inherent quality of personality, characterized by awkwardness in or inability or unwillingness to navigate social conventions and situations and by intelligence and intellectual ability. Ender's intellectual talents set him apart from his peers and make him socially awkward; he is best able to relate to those, like his siblings, who share those talents. Justine Tunney characterizes nerds/geeks as likely on the autism spectrum, and thus (in her view) socially inept or awkward, but doesn't consider this a disqualification for being part of her imagined ruling elite. #GamerGate heavily emphasizes the unpopularity of nerds and geeks.
- Knowledge about or interest in niche or obscure subjects, particularly science

fiction, fantasy, and horror, or games and gaming. *Ender's Game* is of course itself a work of science fiction. Perhaps more importantly, Ender is a video gamer, and his skill with games is explicitly a major component of his success. Neoreactionaries participate in discussion about futurism and speculate about the rise of artificial intelligence and robot sex partners. #GamerGate is based specifically around games and gaming.

- Romantic or sexual isolation and unpopularity. Ender has no romantic partnerships, apart from the awkwardly understated dynamic with Alai. Unlike many in the other two case studies, this doesn't seem to bother Ender. This element is much more strongly present in neoreaction, which is concerned with ensuring women choose the "right" sexual partners, who are described in "nerdy" terms like "the guy in the corner office" as opposed to "tattooed low IQ thugs."<sup>14</sup> Finally, women's exclusion and marginalization of geeky men lies at the core of much of #GamerGate's frustration, as I've discussed throughout my analysis of that movement.
- Isolation from, lack of understanding toward, or hatred of sports and physical recreation, both as a participant and an observer. Once again, Ender is somewhat of an oddball as the games in the Battle Room have an athletic character to them, but the battles are ultimately about strategy, not reflexes or prowess. As in the previously cited examples, neoreactionaries value intellectual traits above physical ones. Gamer culture, likewise, exists generally apart from sports and physical activity, with few exceptions.

- An opposition to, unfamiliarity with, and/or dislike of care, grooming, fashion, and appearance; an attitude of mind over matter. Ender's physicality is rarely emphasized, other than when his physical survival is in danger. Neoreaction valorizes the abstract and the idealistic, and emphasizes the physicality of the repudiated feminine. Women in neoreaction are left to be physical while men live the life of the mind. Finally, #GamerGate similarly devalues the feminine and the physical.
- A fundamental experience of bullying, marginalization, or exclusion from the social mainstream which may combine all of the above. Ender's experience *is* the fundamental, archetypical bullied nerd myth. Neoreactionaries and #GamerGate emphasize the exclusion of nerdy men from social acceptance and popularity.
- A belief that this marginalization is unjust and that nerds or geeks are inherently meritorious, despite cultural disapproval. All of these narratives ultimately invite us to sympathize with the nerd who is performing nerd/geek masculinity, whether in his quest to survive Battle School, become a latter-day philosopher-king, or defend "ethics in gaming journalism."

The presence of each of these elements in the case studies means that the shared elements of abstraction from the physical and marginalization of predominately male intelligent or gifted people is woven through each of them. All of the case studies frame nerds/geeks/"gifted" youth as inherently smart, inherently marginal, and an oppressed class. The implications for gender, however, vary depending on the specific case study.

The narratives I studied varied in the extent to which misogyny is explicitly woven

into their premises. Card, with *Ender's Game*, is at most guilty of passively excluding women from active participation in the story and engaging in gender essentialism.

Neoreaction and #GamerGate have been explicitly misogynistic from the start. However, nerd/geek masculinity leads to sexist conclusions, whether or not those conclusions are expected or intended. As Kendall's research indicated, nerds/geeks who are male tend to view their nerdiness as linked to gender, and thus nerd/geek culture develops in directions that aim to address and correct issues of *countermasculinity*, rather than fully involving women or the feminine. At its more extreme ends, the outcome is #GamerGate and vicious sexist and transphobic harassment.

While writing about these case studies, the reactions I've received from public discussion of these cases are notable and they constitute additional evidence of the impact of nerd/geek masculinity on public dialogue. During the development of my chapter on neoreaction, I wrote a post for my personal blog detailing the issues surrounding Justine Tunney's interactions with neoreaction, which was subsequently brought to the attention of neoreactionaries, including Tunney and Michael Anissimov.<sup>15</sup> As a result of these posts, I received substantial online harassment, including Anissimov posting on my wall for several days to remind me that I am a man and that I do not have a vagina.<sup>16</sup> Notably, another neoreactionary blogger, unaware at first of my transgender identity, wrote an essay in which he disparaged my weight and physical appearance and speculated on my sexual attractiveness:

So evidently this blogger called "Bootleg Girl" exists. The name is quite fitting, at least the "bootleg" part. When you feel the need to remind everyone in pretty

much every single post how much of a woman you are, you basically degrade into being a rough facsimile of a woman. She even has a spider and cobwebs in her avatar, probably representative of her dry, lonely, cavernous vagina that no respectable man would enter and even the thirstiest of white knights would think twice before plunging into.

Upon learning by engaging with me on Twitter that I was transgender, he updated the post, noting “last night, Bootleg Girl told me that she had a penis. This explains why Mike ‘No Homo’ Anissimov is still obsessing over her” (Anissimov’s homophobia and transphobia is apparently notable even among members of the neoreactionary movement.)<sup>17</sup> My experience is by no means a unique one for women who speak out and engage on these topics; Tunney’s experiences, as well as the experiences of posters like @icequeenerika who I discussed in the #GamerGate chapter, illustrate that a woman or queer person who engages with these outposts of geek/nerd culture is at risk of being targeted not merely as a political opponent, but as a subject of brutal personal attacks. Such attacks overwhelmingly focus on sexuality and gender.

Perhaps the richest implication that I believe can be drawn from these case studies is the relationship of the queer to nerd/geek masculinity. Certainly, hegemonic masculinity in general is heterosexist; this is part of the original definition cited by Trujillo and others.<sup>18</sup> But #GamerGate and neoreaction are *overwhelmingly* focused on repudiating the queer, and *especially* transgender women, who represent a nexus of both queerness and perceived femininity. Take the following post on 8chan by a #GamerGate member upset with the movement’s direction:



We need to drop the pretense that this movement is some kind of inclusive hugbox that needs to bend over backwards for trannies, “minorities,” etc. If they don’t agree with the core values of gamergate, then fuck them.<sup>119</sup>

Singling out “trannies” as unwelcome and specifically contrary to the principles of the movement suggests a much deeper antipathy to transgender identity than the cultural baseline. Even *Ender’s Game* has a certain undercurrent of erased queerness, in Ender’s interactions with Alai as well as the text’s emphasis on how Petra, the lone girl in Ender’s social group, fails to meet normative (and biological) expectations of womanhood.

I suggest that nerd/geek masculinity, as a countersexuality practiced by a predominately male group, is placed in a rhetorical conundrum in countering the dominant perception that nerdy performances of masculinity are somehow deficient. One way to avoid the implication that nerd/geek men are unmanly is of course to object to the categorization of certain skills or behaviors as masculine or feminine. Alternately, nerd/geek men could choose not to pursue recognition as manly or masculine. However, nerd/geek masculinity by definition aims to reinforce masculinity and to claim traits associated with being nerdy or geeky as manly. As a result, it becomes necessary to disassociate from the feminine wherever possible.

In particular, transgender women present a dangerous challenge to nerd/geek masculinity. With an extremely high level of visibility in nerd/geek culture, transgender women are difficult to ignore or render invisible. Although most transgender women will not describe our experiences in terms of having been men who became women, this is

the popular understanding of transgender female identity, and when framed as such, transgender women seem to be a masculine nerd/geek's worst nightmare. Since nerds and geeks are disparaged for their talents and behaviors being unmanly, if it is actually possible for nerd/geek men to become nerd/geek women, then the taunting possibility seems to loom that nerd/geek men *might truly not be men*. In order to prevent this implication, many who perform nerd/geek masculinity attack both the concept of gender transition, and the possibility that there are female nerds/geeks in significant numbers.

As a rhetorical and feminist project, this dissertation offers two key insights into the wider study of gender. First, it corroborates Julia Serano's assertion of a link between transmisogyny -the specific hatred of transgender women -and misogyny in general. Discourses like neoreaction and #GamerGate are aimed at upholding male supremacy in society at large, but their overwhelming targeting of transgender women with abuse focused both on their femaleness and their transness demonstrates that, contrary to arguments made by feminists like Janice Raymond that transgender female identity is a patriarchal cooptation of womanhood, transgender women are instead suspended in a perpetual state of being subject to misogyny *and* misgendering (identification with maleness). Furthermore, as my own encounter with trvdante and Anissimov illustrates, being misgendered as male does not isolate transgender women from being systemically denigrated based on femininity or even female anatomy. As Serano put it:

This is most evident in the fact that, while there are many different types of transgender people, our society tends to single out trans women and others on the male-to-female (MTF) spectrum for attention and ridicule. This is not merely

because we transgress binary gender norms per se, but because we, by necessity, embrace our own femaleness and femininity. Indeed, more often than not it is our expressions of femininity and our desire to be female that become sensationalized, sexualized, and trivialized by others. While trans people on the female-to-male (FTM) spectrum face discrimination for breaking gender norms (i.e., oppositional sexism), their expressions of maleness or masculinity themselves are not targeted for ridicule—to do so would require one to question masculinity itself.<sup>20</sup>

Because trans women are *trying* to be women, even those who maintain that we never can be also attack us based on the denigration of femininity: we are inferior because we *desire* to be female or feminine. Previous research in rhetoric by John M. Sloop has noted the danger in searching for a “real” gender identity that underlies transgender people’s lives and experiences.<sup>21</sup> The cases of neoreaction and #GamerGate indicate that hegemonic forces are less invested in exposing transgender people’s “real” identities, and more in weaponizing multiple prejudices simultaneously. Ultimately this is perhaps best illustrated by a #GamerGate poster’s assertion that “TERFS [trans exclusionary radical feminists, such as Janice Raymond] are cool,” unlike “intersectional” feminists who support trans rights (and oppose #GamerGate).<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that radical feminists of any kind would be unlikely to support #GamerGate, supporting them appears to be worthwhile in order to strike against trans women.

A second implication for rhetorical studies of gender is a strengthened support for

the idea that crises of masculinity are often fought through the targeting of women and (especially feminine) queer people as scapegoats. The term “crisis of masculinity” is a term of art used by scholars to discuss reactions by men and masculine people to “the erosion of masculine privilege in recent decades” and “the perceived feminization of men engendered by rather dramatic changes in the broader social and cultural landscape.”<sup>23</sup> In cases like metrosexuality, (heterosexual) manhood reconciles with the “general objectification of the male body” in consumer culture by, among other rhetorical moves, negating both homosexuality and womanhood.<sup>24</sup> From the relatively innocuous male victimization narrative of *Ender’s Game* to the violent misogyny of #GamerGate, the countermasculine identity of nerd/geek engages in constant movements of negation and hostility toward the feminine and the female. Gay masculinity has often been maintained through erasing women and “effeminates”;<sup>25</sup> women and other minorities have often appropriated images of male genitalia and the phallus to gain empowerment.<sup>26</sup> Nerd/geek masculinity serves as another, poignant example of this trend of negation and affirmation of new forms of manhood at the expense of womanhood.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Nerd/geek culture is going to remain a crucial area of research and investigations for scholars in the coming months as #GamerGate continues. Newer crises connected to, but separate from, #GamerGate and neoreaction are already spawning; in particular, neoreactionary sympathizer Vox Day and right-wing science fiction writer Brad Torgerson launched efforts to dominate science fiction’s Hugo Awards and resist alleged

infiltration of science fiction by social justice “cliques.” Torgerson’s project, known as the Sad Puppies, and Day’s, known as the Rabid Puppies, managed to secure the bulk of nominations for the prestigious awards for writers like conservative, anti-gay writer John C. Wright. As blogger Todd VanDerWerff puts it, “a war for the soul” of geek culture is in progress.<sup>27</sup> This war is a war that is, more than anything, about gender. While Day and other rhetors on the conservative side of geek culture certainly mention economics, race, and other issues as points of contention, #GamerGate’s targets have been overwhelmingly queer women, as have the people most brutally critiqued by neoreaction.

In order to understand -and, hopefully, counteract -this growth of toxic masculinity, it will be important for scholars to understand nerd/geek misogyny as the outcome of real feelings of disillusionment and oppression. Jeffrey Nealon writes that white males who experience anger and rage that is channeled into racism or homophobia really do, from their subjective point of view, experience a kind of failure or marginalization, even if they are blaming the wrong targets.<sup>28</sup> Nerd/geek masculinity is often expressed by men who have faced very real bullying and exclusion at the hands of those who seem to be performing masculinity “better,” or benefiting from types of male privilege that are not offered to nerds and geeks. My own interest in this topic predates my own gender transition, and at a time when I firmly believed I was male, I nonetheless felt deep concern with how I was being pushed toward misogyny by a culture that truly had helped me understand and deal with social isolation that came from the label of “nerd.” Some of my earliest experiences of being targeted with homophobic slurs came from

being mocked for my enjoyment of *Star Wars*, at a time when I was a fourteen year old “boy” earnestly presenting a “normal” gender expression. *Ender’s Game* was to me, like many other nerdy boys (and girls), a promise from Orson Scott Card to me that he understood our pain, that we were not alone in our feelings of hurt and marginalization, and that we could accomplish great things with the very traits that marked us as unusual or as failures at manhood.

One direction for scholarship on this topic would be to explore the genre of the “nerd *bildungsroman*,” texts which present a specifically nerdy coming of age story. The link between experiences of marginalization and interest in science fiction and fantasy is well-established; what can be said about the ways in which such fantasy and science fiction texts provide language and metaphors to talk about the experiences of loneliness, bullying, and marginalization experienced by nerds and geeks? Are such texts inevitably hegemonically masculine, transphobic, and sexist, or might there be room for queer and feminist nerd coming-of-age stories? In other words, such a project would expand the work I’ve done in the *Ender’s Game* case study to look at similar works, such as the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the novel *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman, and perhaps even works that have achieved broader popularity such as the *Harry Potter* series.

Another key area for investigation will be activism by queer and feminist geeks to retake geek culture, or at least to carve out a space within it. I’ve focused on the reactionary and conservative movements within geek culture, but these movements are in a very real way reactions to the important work done by women in geek culture,

including Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, and others. Studying games like *Depression Quest* and *Revolution 60* as rhetorical artifacts will go a long way toward counteracting the previously cited harmful impacts of #GamerGate on gaming. I've done my own research on gender and queer themes in mainstream video games such as the *Mass Effect* series, and I intend to continue and expand this research. Geek culture's current battle has vastly increased the corpus of open discussion on these topics between creators, fans, and critics.

This dissertation project has provided extensive evidence for the existence and power of nerd/geek masculinity. Nerd/geek masculinity promotes misogyny, transphobia, and homophobia among those identified with geek/nerd culture, and it does so by offering empowerment narratives that slant toward men and boys who conform to specific nerdy/geeky roles. Future research will expand scholarly as well as popular understandings of geeks and nerds, and how gender is performed in this culture -a culture that is far more diverse than its most reactionary proponents wish to admit. It has become clear that no one involved with geek/nerd culture can afford to ignore the topic of gender any longer.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald G. Turnbull, quoted in Helen Merrick, *The Secret Feminist Cabal: A Cultural History of Science Fiction Fandom* (Seattle, WA: Aqueduct Press, 2009), Amazon Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, "No.37474498," 4chan: /pol/, October 19, 2014, accessed April 25, 2015, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/37459325/>.

<sup>3</sup> N.G. Geist (@NG\_Geist), "When We Are Bullied by Jocks, Radfems, Sjws, or San Fran Trust-Fund Babies, We Stand Together, Arm in Arm.," Twitter, October 9, 2014, accessed April 25, 2015,

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[https://twitter.com/ng\\_geist/status/520248494112534528](https://twitter.com/ng_geist/status/520248494112534528).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Anissimov, "Reconciling Transhumanism and Neoreaction," *MoreRight*, May 23, 2013, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/reconciling-transhumanism-and-neoreaction/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kent R. Colbert, "The Effects of Debate Participation On Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggression," *Communication Education* 42, no. 3 (July 1993): 206-14.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Butler, "Evidence Evaluations in Competitive Debate: The Judge's Role," *Florida Communication Journal* 11, no. 1 (March 1983): 6-10.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Anissimov, "The Purpose of Reactionaries," *MoreRight* (blog), May 27, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/the-purpose-of-reactionaries/>.

<sup>8</sup> Anissimov, "Reconciling Transhumanism."

<sup>9</sup> Frans Mäyrä, Jussi Holopainen, and Mikael Jakobsson, "Research Methodology in Gaming: An Overview," *Simulation and Gaming* 43, no. 3 (2012): 295-99, accessed April 25, 2015.

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<sup>11</sup> Zennistrad, Rebecca HG (@8bitbecca), Katherine Cross, Jim Avery (@TheSoundDefense), 8 Bit Jerk (@mylittlepwnies3), Sigurd Arensson (@PutinsFinest), Reptilian Hunter (@ReptiliansExist), and Dante (@FightDanteFight). "Gamergate Is Killing Video Games." Tumblr. 2015.

<http://zennistrad.tumblr.com/post/113151511988/gamergate-is-killing-video-games>. Accessed April 25, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Kendall, Lori. "Oh No! I'm a Nerd! Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum." *Gender and Society* 14, no. 2 (April 2000): 256-74. 10.1177/089124300014002003.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2014), Amazon Kindle edition.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Anissimov and James A. Donald, "Jim On Civilization," *MoreRight* (blog), March 20, 2014, accessed April 20, 2015, <http://www.moreright.net/jim-on-civilization/>.

<sup>15</sup> Eleanor Amaranth Lockhart, "Neoreaction, Plato, and the Latter Day Philosopher Kings: Or, Why Can't Justine Tunney Be Empress of the World?," *Bootleg Girl* (blog), March 6, 2015, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.bootleggirl.com/neoreaction-plato-and-the-latter-day-philosopher-kings-or-why-cant-justine-tunney-be-the-empress-of-the-world/>; Eleanor Amaranth Lockhart, "Transphobes Are Reading My Blog. Let's Talk About That.," *Bootleg Girl* (blog), March 8, 2015, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.bootleggirl.com/a-nuntitled/>.

<sup>16</sup> I am unable to provide direct citations to Anissimov's posts, as after several days of engagement he blocked me from viewing his posts. I have screen captures of the posts, confirming that they were made.

<sup>17</sup> trvdante, "Some Bitch Tries to Write About Neoreaction, Fails Miserably," *The Right Drama* (blog), March 7, 2015, accessed April 26, 2015, <https://therightdrama.wordpress.com/2015/03/07/some-bitch-tries-to-write-about-neoreaction-fails-miserably/>.

<sup>18</sup> Nick Trujillo, "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 3 (September 1991): 290-308.

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, "1413854729834.jpg," 8chan (blog), October 20, 2014, accessed April 26, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1569278193301996&set=pb.100006594903026.-2207520000.1430030818.&type=3&theater>. Archived on my Facebook account; 8chan does not save old posts.

<sup>20</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman On Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (New York: Seal Press, 2009), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Sloop, John M. "'This is Not Natural:' Caster Semenya's Gender Threats." *Critical Studies In Media Communication* 29, no. 2 (June 2012): 81-96; Sloop, John M. "'A Van with a Bar and a Bed': Ritualized Gender Norms in the John/Joan Case." *Text & Performance Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (April 2000): 130; Sloop, John M. "Disciplining the Transgendered: Brandon Teena, Public Representation, and Normativity." *Western Journal Of Communication* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 165.

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<sup>23</sup> Helene Shugart, "Managing Masculinities: The Metrosexual Moment," *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (September 2008): 280.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-84.



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<sup>26</sup> Addelston, Judi. "Doing the full monty with Dick and Jane: using the phallus to validate marginalized masculinities." *Journal Of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (Spring99 1999): 337-352.

<sup>27</sup> Todd VanDerWerff, "How Conservatives Took Over Sci-Fi's Most Prestigious Award," *Vox* (blog), April 26, 2015, accessed April 26, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/4/26/8495415/hugos-sad-puppies-controversy>.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 150.

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