



"Feminine, Not Feminist"

Trad Truth-making on Social Media

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This article investigates the truth-making practices of networks of antifeminist women on social media who identify as "traditional" or "trad" for short. Demonstrating how trad truth-making emerges in response both to the tensions inherent in right-wing nationalism and neoliberal postfeminism, it argues that the potential solution trad women pose depends on the ways they harness social media to limb public and private spaces and personal and political concerns. Paying particular attention to the entanglement of emotions and technical affordances, I use instances from my fieldwork in trad networks to frame their outreach as a form of truth management equally invested in carving out a space for their own (semi)public presence as in combatting the perceived dangers of feminism.



The Woman Question: From Neoliberal Feminism to the Alt-right

“Traditionalism is truly the revolution of our modern age,” Willa told me at the beginning of our interview. Part of an increasingly international network of women on social media who identify as “traditional,” or “trad” for short, Willa has joined ranks with other self-styled homemakers, “submissive” Christian wives, and hyper-feminine women who feel marginalized by mainstream feminism. Unlike the deluded “normie community,” she explained later in our conversation, “the trad community thrives off of truth. Being conservative or whatever we get that from feeding off of truth, reading, comparing facts and fiction, and realizing that the narratives we’ve been fed were just that: narratives, not actual facts.” The “truth” driving the trad trend includes both a traditional view of femininity as domestic, subordinate, and inherently different from masculinity, and the idea that feminism, in challenging this distinction, is effectively antifeminine. Sharing findings from my ethnographic fieldwork in this binary world of men and women, normies and trads, facts and fiction, this article shows how trad truth-making practices spin women’s decision to be “feminine, not feminist” as a matter of common sense in the face of false modern narratives.

Trad women’s preoccupation with rescuing the truth from feminist narratives while endorsing a spate of well-honed counter-narratives situates traditionalism in a broader “post-truth” climate where it is said that “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). The post-truth moniker became common parlance following Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential election and the rise of the “alt-right,” a neologism referencing an eclectic range of online actors rallying to reverse patriarchal decline and shore up allegedly imperiled White identity (Marwick & Lewis 2018). It is telling that the term “trad” initially emerged in this context along with terms like “normie” and “red pill” as part of a larger in-group vernacular that works as a means of signaling identity and tying together diverse interests under the alt-right umbrella (Squirrel 2017). While the precise political affiliations, motivations, and influences behind it were scattered, the alt-right was “decidedly white, male, and aggrieved” (Stern 2019: 5), leaving little room or incentive for women to participate. As the alt-right gained traction, however, it was forced to grapple with “the woman question,” a phrase used in right-wing nationalist circles to refer to the conflicting need to involve women to make the movement viable while maintaining their subordination to men.

At the same time, a related neoliberal “woman question” manifested across the political spectrum. As Rottenberg (2018) describes it, the emergence of “neoliberal feminism” centers around an increasingly commonplace “woman question” querying why, after the apparent triumph of feminism, women still don’t “have it all” and

struggle to combine career ambitions and family life. The faltering of the second-wave feminist promise that led Hochschild (1989) to speak of a “stalled revolution” surrounding a “second shift” of housework and childcare faced by many working mothers in the 1980s evidently persists several decades later as growing numbers of highly educated women are eschewing this double burden and opting out of the workforce to raise children (Orgad 2019). Following in the wake of turn-of-the-century “postfeminism,” which reflected the popular sensibility that feminism was no longer relevant since the fight for gender equality had apparently been won (Gill 2007), neoliberal feminism re-establishes the necessity of feminism in name, but does so in wholly individualistic terms. Reflecting the increasing permeation of market rationality into all areas of life, both postfeminism and neoliberal feminism pose the normative, why-can’t-women-“have it all” question and make individual women responsible for solving it by becoming entrepreneurial subjects that perform capital-enhancing productive labor in the workforce while retaining the primary responsibility for reproductive labor in the home.

The embattled discourse surrounding feminism – including but not limited to far-right antagonism – ties together the different versions of the woman question from neoliberal postfeminism to alt-right patriarchy. This article positions trad femininity at the heart of this contested terrain and conceptualizes a form of trad truth-making that answers to the neoliberal and right-wing nationalist versions of the woman question, even while trad women themselves rarely acknowledge these structural pressures. As popular English trad influencer Alena Pettit (2020) put it in a blog post defending the “tradelife”: “We found something in this mad, upside-down world that makes sense to us.” Despite the inspiration it takes from 1950s imagery, ancestral folklore, and conservative values of yore, I frame trad femininity as an attempt at securing everyday life in a contemporary moment that feels anything but secure. Trad women’s feelings of insecurity and marginalization in a modern world gone mad return me to the Oxford Dictionaries’ (2016) definition of post-truth, which reflects the widespread sense that, at present, feelings are triumphing over facts to the detriment of rational public discourse.

As part of my investigation of trad truth-making, I show how trad women instrumentalize the perception that there are somehow more emotions in politics these days (Boler & Davis 2018) through emotion practices that imbue traditional gender roles with a feeling of factuality and drive a form of feminine truth management on social media. Scheer’s (2012) understanding of emotion practices makes the notion of practice, which has been used to conceptualize an everyday, embodied “nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki 1996: 89), consonant with emotion, suggesting that

emotions themselves should be considered practical engagement with the world. In keeping with a feminist treatment of affect, I frame emotion as performative and collectivizing rather than private or belonging to individuals. If, as Ahmed (2004: 118) argues, emotions are “not simply ‘within’ or ‘without,’” but “create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds,” then feelings of pride, hope, and happiness (and relief from shame, despair, and anger) that I found to be a cornerstone of the trad experience unite trad women under the heading of being feminine, not feminist.

Returning to Willa’s statement, this article renders trad women’s binary, black and white truth claims in shades of gray through an ethnographic investigation of their involvement in trad networks online. Inhabiting “a virtual space that is simultaneously public and homebound” (Stern 2019: 120), trad influencers harness social media to make their voices heard while adhering to traditional norms of femininity. Through a combined analysis of technical affordances, emotion practices, and gender, I conceive of trad truth-making as a sociotechnical solution in practice to the interrelated versions of the woman question. After explaining relevant aspects of my fieldwork, I outline the trad treatment of truth as both a timeless, abstract ideal and a practical lifestyle hack, as well as the ways trad women instrumentalize the post-truth binary between facts and feelings. I then detail practices of truth management that make space for these women to act in a public but ostensibly apolitical capacity, while at the same time reinforcing structures of race, class, and gender oppression.

Immersion and Interviews in Trad Networks

In March 2020, I began to immerse myself in trad homemaker networks primarily on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Initially following a handful of more well-known alt-right and trad female influencers, I let the platform algorithms assemble my field site through follower suggestions that linked one trad account to the next. Over the following 16 months, I collected a range of posts, images, and video content, and conducted 22 interviews, most of which took place over the phone, lasting between 1 and 2.5 hours. Given the potential threat of harassment in a research field impacted by the “alt-right gaze” (Massanari 2018), my profiles featured no content of their own and included only my first name and a description of myself as a “digital ethnographer researching traditional femininity and social media”. Many of the interview requests I sent via direct messages went unanswered, while several of the responses I received were laced with suspicion. After providing more information about the project to one particularly wary user, she sent me a post by another account I followed warning fellow trad women to “think twice” about talking to news outlets interested in the

movement, given that the majority of the media “is the enemy of the people.” I wasn’t a journalist, but the message was clear: Any outsider asking for more information was likely bad news.

Eventually, however, I found women from a range of backgrounds who were willing to talk with me (all of whose names are altered in this article). Although trad networks are increasingly transnational, the women I followed hailed primarily from the US and Europe, reflecting trad femininity’s imbrication with the wayward trajectory of Western feminism and alt-right digital cultures alike. Further, trad networks are composed of a cross-section of millennials and Gen Z-ers, usually between 16 and 35 years old, underlining the mediated aspect of a supposedly retro #trادلife that is actualized in the hands of “digital natives.” While some trad women are active influencers with over 100,000 followers, many are lesser-known users with just a few hundred. Regardless of where in this demographic range my interview partners were situated, I began by asking each respondent what traditionalism meant for them, what they thought the role of social media was for trad women, and what platforms or websites they used to engage with traditionalism online before moving on to other topics. I asked roughly the same set of questions to most of the women I spoke with, but conducted interviews in an open, conversational manner that left me grateful for my interview partners’ willingness to relate a range of personal experiences as well as their efforts to provide me with expansive, well thought out answers that shaped my understanding of traditionalism in new ways.

My conception of trad truth-making also grows out of encounters that prompted reflexive insights, reframing my own position relative to the field and the women I was connected to (Hine 2017). During my conversation with Emma, a 24-year-old Mormon, she mentioned several times that she expected right-wingers would soon be rounded up by the US government and put into “gulag camps.” Toward the end of our interview, I realized she had assumed I was trad and corrected her, leading her to worry I thought she was “nuts” for her extreme views. After I reassured her that my research was driven precisely by my desire to understand the logic behind her thinking, she reflected, “I guess it’s just because from my experience, if somebody is willing to talk to me about it and willing to be respectful, usually I think that they’re traditional,” and then added: “You’re probably more traditional than you realize.” This was not the first time – nor would it be the last – that I would be compelled to consider how I myself was impacted by gender norms, mainstream representations of feminism in various media, and neoliberal work culture, all of which trad femininity responds to in its own way.

These questions resurfaced when I spoke with Janine, formerly a PhD student at the University of Chicago working under the supervision of esteemed feminist scholar

Lauren Berlant. Narrating her transition from a budding Black feminist academic to a stay-at-home tradwife, Janine laughed at my bemused reaction saying, “Girl, I knew I was gonna blow your mind,” and then on a more serious note confided, “I feel like you’re my psychiatrist right now in a way because no one understands the level of pressure that I put myself in.” This pressure was only heightened on her part by the fact that she is a Black woman who grew up in inner-city Chicago, “literally in the shadow” of the prestigious university she would later attend, and was the first person in her family to pursue higher education, prompting me to evaluate the glaring differences and surprising similarities between our experiences. On the one hand, Janine and I had a shared understanding of the pressures of a highly competitive field where positions and funding are scarce. On the other, having grown up in a White, upper middle-class family in Seattle – known as a liberal haven in the US even while remaining severely economically and racially stratified – I have not encountered the same barriers that Janine did in my own climb up the academic ladder. Encounters like those with Janine and Emma challenge me to craft a more complex tale than simply pinning trad women as delusional villains working against their own self-interests, while remaining committed to the revitalization of a more radical and inclusive form of feminism.

Facts, Feelings, and Truth in Practice

In their words, the women I followed are both “traditional” and “feminine.” These keywords serve as sticking points for a range of women interested in slow, sustainable living, Christians of varying denominational stripes, the naturopathic and spiritually inclined, Trump supporters and “patriots” hoping to “make America great again,” White ethno-nationalists as well as Black conservatives, homesteaders and homeschoolers, self-proclaimed introverted and anxious individuals seeking comfort and security, and even a number of formerly feminist, progressive women like Janine. However, the relative flexibility of the trad moniker is strictly limited in at least one sense, given that, as my interview partner Ingrid acknowledged, it would be “very isolating trying to have a traditional family or trying to be in the traditional community without having a traditional gender role.” Tied together by an essentialist understanding of femininity and masculinity, trad women often position strict adherence to gender roles as the lynchpin of Western societies and the literal and figurative reproduction of tradition. By calling these roles into question, feminism, so the trad tale goes, is disrupting the transmission of tradition and preventing women from leaning into their natural, God-given femininity. This sentiment is captured in the popular slogan “feminine, not feminist,” which crops up in a slew of hashtags and usernames across trad networks and functions as a positive, apparently apolitical mode of identification by and for

women that stokes a sense of empowerment similar to the feminist movement – only in relation to being a stay-at-home wife and mother.

The apparent timeless relevance of traditional gender roles led my interview partner Emma to surmise that “over the course of human history there are certain values that are just true, and truth is there no matter what culture changes or no matter what historical events happen, no matter what religion you believe.” Her conception of truth as an abstract, omnipresent value resonates with other instantiations of right-wing truth politics globally, in which, as Hentschel observes of the contemporary German far-right, truth “returns in the prophetic fashion that Foucault thought had long passed” (2018: 220). Branding themselves as the pro-truth option in a chaotic field of conflicting narratives, an increasingly transnational far-right is united in shared antipathy toward the norms of political correctness. Hochschild (2016) illustrates this antipathy in her landmark study of Tea Party supporters who felt constrained by liberal “feeling rules” and opted to act in their own “emotional self-interest” instead. Significantly, she frames the Tea Party (and an incipient Trump support base) as cultural entities rather than official political groups, or a “way of seeing and feeling about a place and its people” (2016: 19). The same could be said of trad truth-making practices, which proceed on the principle that “politics and traditional values should never mix,” as one of my interview partners, Lily, told me. While I found Lily’s position somewhat stymying given the frequent sexist (and sometimes racist) undertones of trad content as well as references to elections and other pressing political issues like abortion, the majority of the trad women I spoke to shared her opinion. Further, in the few cases when they did acknowledge the political dimension of their outreach, it was often framed as just plain common sense. Willa, for example, claimed that her liberal left-wing acquaintances have issues since they’re “following something that isn’t real.” When it comes to politics, she argued, it’s important to ask: “How does it benefit the actual hearts and souls of the people? What is it doing to their mentality and mental health?” Her reduction of the political to the personal refutes the classic feminist maxim that the two are interconnected and illustrates how trad truth-making functions as a means of coping with everyday life.

The seamless entanglement of antifeminist politics with everyday lifestyle is personified by popular trad influencer Mrs. Midwest, a young housewife whose peppy, relatable YouTube presence as she walks her followers through her cleaning routine or shows off what she’s making her husband for dinner connects women from various backgrounds. In a YouTube interview hosted by Yogi Oabs (2019), a commenter from the raft of misogynist blogs, online forums, and channels known as the “manosphere,” Mrs. Midwest reflects on the process of connecting to the trad lifestyle via her discovery

of the “red pill” in the wake of her struggle to find work after graduating college. A reference from *The Matrix* repurposed by the alt-right as a metaphor for the truth “normies” refuse to see, the red pill is a cornerstone of alt-right “metapolitics,” or the idea that institutional political shifts can be brought about by instigating cultural change (Zúquete 2018). The metapolitical approach works by cloaking deeper political implications in layers of countercultural appeal or tying them to seemingly mundane lifestyle hacks. As Mrs. Midwest relates in the interview, it was in the course of looking for weight loss tips online that she stumbled on the “Return of Kings” blog (a staple of the manosphere run by notorious misogynist Roosh V) and familiarized herself with alt-right gender ideology including sexual market value (SMV) and the distinction between “alpha” and “beta” men (Ging 2017). Gleefully surprised that the “simple housewife” is evidently familiar with key alt-right references, Oabs remarks, “I guess that’s how the internet works.” Calling attention to the integral role of social media in metapolitical radicalization, Oabs goes on in the same video to frame the tradlife as a simple “method of living” and “a hack that’s already been around for thousands of years.”

In our email interview, Elsa similarly emphasized both the mediated and pragmatic aspects of the tradlife, explaining, “Tradition isn’t necessarily ‘pure’ or ‘refined’ in any way. It may not be what we consider to be ‘virtuous.’ It’s what works in practice.” Later in our exchange, she connected her practical take on traditional living to technology saying, “I like to think myself part of this type of people, who acknowledge that we don’t hold all the wisdom, or haven’t seen or thought about everything. That’s the great advantage of social media, to have it all so accessible if we just adjust our minds to receive it.” Another interview partner, Cassandra, extended this logic, saying that social media itself allows women to “revere their deeper desires” rather than be ashamed of them. The shift she describes from shame to pride points to an entanglement of emotions and technical affordances, which Bareither (2019) conceptualizes as “emotional affordances” or a specific media technology’s “capacities to enable, prompt, and restrict the enactment of particular emotional experiences unfolding in between the media technology and an actor’s practical sense for its use” (2019: 12). This sociotechnical, practice-based perspective helps highlight that the stickiness of the keywords “traditional” and “feminine” derives not only from platform affordances that algorithmically link related users and content, but also from their emotive currency.

As Ahmed explains, emotions themselves “do things” and “work by sticking figures together, a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective” (2004: 119). Providing the infrastructure for an affectively resonant form of trad collectivity, social media platforms allow modern-day homemakers to act in their emotional self-interest for

an affirming #femininefamily, as one popular hashtag puts it. In conversation with Christine, however, I learned that her decision to “be a member of this area of the internet” was less due to loneliness or the search for new connections and more to the sense of hope she gets that others out there think the same way. While she feels helpless and alone when she watches the news on TV and realizes “we’re being lied to” by the mainstream media, her experiences online reassure her she is not the only one who can “see through the ruse,” motivating her to “help reach out and provide that reassurance to other people who are kinda being gaslit into thinking they’re the crazy ones for wanting a family and being left alone.” Harking to Alena’s framing of traditionalism as a means of coping with a “mad upside-down world,” Christine’s grasp of the emotional affordances of the platforms she uses help her transmute despair to hope, and further, spread the feeling of hope to others who think like her.

Despite being driven by emotional rationale, trad truth-making typically approaches the quandaries of a mad world by spinning conservative views as logical, while anything that contradicts them is discredited as being emotion-driven. This is perhaps most clear when it comes to the ways trad women instrumentalize the general tumult in the post-truth moment surrounding the distinction between facts and feelings. One YouTuber I followed, for example, sported a popular quote in her bio from conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, “[f]acts don’t care about your feelings,” while Alena warned other trad women after receiving critical media coverage that “fake news is a real thing” due to journalists’ inability to lay out the facts when they feel something personal about the story. Summing up the true facts from the trad perspective, a stay-at-home mom who cut her blossoming career as a lawyer short when she got pregnant with her first child made the case for traditional gender roles in a tweet that read:

Fact: Women have limited time in which to bear children.

Fact: Time passes. Relentlessly.

Fact: Family makes us happy because it gives us meaning and purpose.

People, my views aren’t extreme; nature is ♡

While the first two facts may be indisputable in a basic sense, they are clearly more primed to elicit an emotional response than promote knowledge in stirring up followers’ fears of missing out on motherhood. This emotional tuning frames the final “fact,” which is largely a value judgment that true happiness derives only from family life without providing any basis for the claim. Finally, the author of the tweet caps off her list by suggesting what she’s claiming only reflects the laws of nature, not extreme

ideology. In a similar manner, my interview partner Rachel turned to rudimentary evolutionary biology to make the case that women are submissive by nature. Claiming that in prehistoric times, men took on the more aggressive hunter role and women the gentler gatherer role, she traced allegedly gendered characteristics back to “primal instincts deeply rooted in our DNA.” This simplistic extrapolation from biological basics to societal gender roles uses bits of truth to validate her larger belief that gender is binary and innate.

Trad truth-making practices make reference not only to a natural order based in biological rationale, but also to a divine one based in Christian theology. Separating feelings from facts along biblical lines, one Instagram post featured a close-up of a bouquet of flowers clasped against a woman’s chest with overlaid text reading: “Your offense at the message of the Gospel is not a thermometer for determining whether or not it’s true.” In this case, emotion-driven liberal normies and their characteristic sense of outrage contradict not only common sense or biological fact, but biblical truth (at least as this user interprets it). Though she herself identifies as an atheist, Rachel complemented her biologically based rationale for traditional gender roles with a Christianized version, saying: “In the Bible it’s very obvious God made man first and woman second. He made the woman to be his helpmeet and not to rule over the man.” These apparently factual, rational reasons for being trad, however, did not wholly align with what she reported as her primary motivations for getting involved in trad networks.

Telling me she never really identified with the strong, independent woman trope, Rachel explained, “I can just see – and statistically we can see – that people have become less happy, more depressed, there’s a lot of issues. For me [traditionalism] is just an escape, a different world, and I feel more comfortable in it.” While she includes a vague reference to statistics, it is apparently more the feeling of comfort she derives from the tradlife that drives her. This impression was reinforced when she described how her childhood desire for a big “healthy” family in contrast to the small “toxic” one she grew up in as an only child with divorced parents attracted her to traditionalism, concluding, “[a]nd now I actually have the facts to back up how I felt as a child.” Figuring here as a form of reliable intuition, feelings are less trustworthy when it comes to feminism, which she later discredited as being an “emotion-based movement” not anchored in reality. Emotions, then, are framed as a means of both determining and distorting truth (in the interests of bolstering the trad perspective and discrediting a feminist one). The ways in which trad women endeavor to imbue the gender binary with a feeling of factuality or factual feel underline how trad truth-making is spurred by and further reinforces particular patterns of emotional common sense. In what follows, I expand my analysis of trad women’s emotion practices to include a form of truth management that addresses both neoliberal and nationalist valences of the woman question.

Truth Management: In Search of Balanced Solutions

At the outset of my fieldwork, I was struck by the prevalence of women in trad networks, an impression I tested by asking my interview partners if they encountered many men in their online circles and whether their husbands were involved in trad outreach as well. In conversation with Alice, she speculated, “I think a lot of men (like my husband) are really happy to live that way, but not necessarily interested in talking about it. Apart from being the sole wage earners, I don’t think it hugely affects their lives, whereas for women there’s a big difference between going to work and not having children (or not raising your children personally) and staying home looking after a family.” Her reflection introduces the possibility that the outsized impact of traditionalism on women’s lives and their primary role in domestic, private spaces is precisely what propels them to take on more active roles in the public digital spaces where trad truths take shape. Ingrid rationalized this seeming contradiction through a description of trad women’s apprehension of technical affordances:

I think that social media, because it is in our homes, we feel more confident in that sense. I also think that because it is engaging with another group of women, they know they won’t be talked down to... I really think that has given a lot of women a voice when they were told it was otherwise not acceptable.

Incorporating a logic that would likely be read as feminist in any other context, Ingrid’s rationale demonstrates how the ways social media platforms are interwoven into domestic life and experienced as a semi-private extension of the home give her the sense of confidence to take on a vocal public presence. The answer trad truth-making provides to both versions of the woman question, then, is facilitated by social media platforms that afford a range of “privately public and publicly private behavior” (Lange 2007). My interview partners’ accounts demonstrate both the emotional, intuitive actualization of technical affordances in practice as well as the always gendered dimension of these practices given the correspondence of the public/private and emotion/reason dichotomies through which women were traditionally classed as too emotional to be rational political actors (Jaggar 1989). In this sense, trad women activate the potentially revolutionary capacity of social media to connect women across the bounds of individual patriarchal households that historically prevented collective action (Scott 1990), even while they use social media to advocate for continuing those very arrangements. Recognizing the significance of the convergence of emotion, affordances, and gender, this article makes the case that, while trad truth-making may incorporate a right-wing pro-truth discursive strategy that claims to eschew feelings in favor of facts, it depends on a form of emotional metapolitics expertly wielded by

trad women who stretch the limits of personal and political, public and private digital spaces, a practice that I refer to as *trad truth management*.

Trad truth management practices encompass the emotional rationale through which trad women navigate a range of interconnected platformed digital spaces. When I conducted my fieldwork, trad women felt particularly at home on Instagram. While most of my interview partners told me they watched trad-related content on YouTube (though only a handful produced videos themselves), they tended to consider it a useful site for knowledge-sharing rather than the place where the posting, engaging, and messaging that foster a sense of trad community play out. When I asked if they made use of other social networking platforms like Twitter and Facebook, respondents often framed these sites as “hostile” and “toxic.” During our interview, Ingrid described Twitter as “a little aggressive” and asked me if I thought the content there was “less homemaking, more values.” Her uneasiness with the more overt manifestations of trad politics was echoed by Willa who was in several trad Facebook groups but expressed her annoyance with users there who tended to “act like teenagers.” When I asked her what she meant, she explained that as a mixed-race person, she had encountered a barrage of racist remarks suggesting she wasn’t White enough to be trad. As a result, she describes how she and other like-minded traditional women “basically just went on Instagram and hung out by ourselves and met actual genuine people of all races and nationalities and backgrounds who were being traditional.”

Toxicity on trad social media is also linked to male presence, even though many of the women I spoke with connect primarily with other women online. Describing the small enclaves of typically young, unmarried men in trad networks she sometimes interacts with, Willa admitted: “Any guy who says trad or traditional in his bio is kinda bad news.” She told me she often sees comments from them like, “[a]ll you moms do is get on the internet all day gossiping instead of taking care of your kids. I bet your husband is starving!” and admitted to me, “[i]t gets really nasty and judgmental to where you almost feel like you can’t have social media because you feel like you’re gonna be judged for having it.” Her experiences illustrate how online misogyny works as a “methodology of female subjugation and exploitation” bent on excluding women from participating in the building of a common technological future (Siapera 2019: 37). The range of emotion practices through which trad women maneuver around the more violent incursions of alt-right White nationalism and misogyny, however, illustrate Stern’s (2019: 121) point that these women are not “passive playthings” but “superb managers of a patriarchal subculture.” In Willa’s case, this entails swallowing her anger and managing misogynistic comments by, for example, encouraging men in her networks who complain that they can’t seem to find a virgin to marry to focus on other aspects, such as how caring and feminine their future wife might be.

Truth management practices also typically pose less of a blanket opposition to feminism than a subtle undermining of its most radical aspects, playing off the neoliberal mainstreaming of feminism that reduces female empowerment to individual optimization in the form of climbing the corporate ladder and embodying the “girl boss” ideal. As Ging (2019) argues, the same strategy characterizes a range of antifeminist digital cultures that use postfeminism both as an ideological blueprint for doing away with a structural perspective and an easy target for attack and ridicule with its hollow empowerment tropes. If postfeminism itself is marked by the simultaneous incorporation and repudiation of *feminism* in popular culture (McRobbie 2009), trad truth-making evinces a simultaneous incorporation and repudiation of *postfeminist* themes. This pattern is evident in a Mrs. Midwest YouTube video (Huber 2020) addressed to “aspiring homemakers” where she reasons: “Because people have so much internalized misogyny, they desire to control women. And it’s not better just because they want to control you into independence in the workforce – that’s not better than controlling you into the home.” Using mainstreamed pop feminist terminology like “internalized misogyny” and interpreting women’s access to paid employment as a cultural mandate akin to their previous subordination in the home, she does not refute (post)feminism altogether so much as twist it to defend traditional gender norms and paint homemakers as the victims of an increasingly intolerant progressive society.

In an interview with the sort of aspiring homemaker the video addresses, Mariana, a 17-year-old from Brazil, told me how Mrs. Midwest served as a “door” to the trad world, saying: “She took a lot of the guilt out of you don’t have to be a boss babe, you don’t have to be grinding and that kind of stuff... that’s really marketed toward teenagers now.” Mariana’s comment on the pressures of always-on neoliberal work cultures in which young women are hailed to balance the demands of career and motherhood bolsters Rottenberg and Orgad’s (2020) observation that, despite its vintage aesthetics and nostalgic leanings, the trad trend is a product of the contemporary moment, both “a symptom of – as well as a reaction to– the increasing insecurity of our times.” Ingrid similarly described the larger traditional movement as “a great comfort to women who can’t meet that new social expectation of being a feminist powerhouse,” even while admitting she identifies as a feminist in some respects. By way of explanation, she recounted the results of an online bias test she took that alerted her to the fact that her worldview was shaped by feminism, saying: “It’s because I kept associating management with home because that’s what I do: my job is my career is my home.” Rather than a progressive take on gender roles, Ingrid’s “feminist” tendencies meld the “naturally feminine” domestic space with a managerial discourse, falling into step with a wider range of contemporary

stay-at-home moms who justify their decision to opt out of the paid workforce by taking on the role of what Orgad (2019) calls the “family CEO.”

The apparent need to frame their work as a legitimate occupation reflects the weight of the neoliberal feminist imperative to “create a felicitous balance between public and private aspects of the self” (Rottenberg 2018: 14), meaning women who choose to stay home with the kids fail to conform to the balance ideal and, by extension, become good neoliberal subjects who bolster the paid workforce while also picking up the slack of unpaid domestic labor. The prevalence of the “motherhood as career” discourse in trad networks suggests that even while they may opt out of the double burden neoliberal postfeminism places on women, trad women continue to be impacted by the pressure to conform to a metric of economic valuation. In this sense, the notion of motherhood as career in trad networks does not shed a critical light on the role of unpaid social reproductive work in sustaining a capitalist system that provides no other means of care for the laborers it depends on (Fraser 2017). Indeed, trad women themselves rarely acknowledge this structural reality or the fact that subsisting on a single income is not something all women can aspire to, particularly given the attrition of the family wage under neoliberalism (although a handful of trad influencers give tips on how to cut corners and save money through DIY hacks and tight budgeting). In giving women a tool to counter their own interpellation by the cultural ideal of the “feminist powerhouse” and take pride in being homemakers, trad truth-making, like other contemporary instantiations of right-wing gender politics, figures as a feel-good “language of resistance” to neoliberalism (Korolczuk & Graff 2018) when, in practice, it may actually serve a neoliberal agenda in carrying out social reproductive work without recognition or remuneration.

The ineffective push-back trad truth-making mounts against neoliberal post-feminism is further compromised by its ties to White supremacy. While Elsa, a self-identified “ethnocultural nationalist” from Sweden, is critical of a neoliberal feminism that revolves around “consumerism, short-term happiness, and economic success above all else,” her critique takes on an extremist slant when she derides feminism as part of “a Cultural Marxist, deconstructionist society.” Her use of the term “Cultural Marxism,” an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory popularized by the alt-right, highlights the nefarious link between the euphemistic discourse of traditionalism and resurgent far-right nationalism, which has earned trad women a reputation as “the housewives of White supremacy” (Kelly 2018). Though some of the women I interviewed were quick to address the discomfort they felt on encountering racism in the movement, others were self-identified racists. Still others like Nellie, a 20-year-old living in Texas, skirted around the issue by making the case that terms like alt-right, conservative, and

racist “have no real meaning anymore” since they’re overused and undefined. Like many of my other interview partners, Nellie described herself as “un-political,” a fact that she argued differentiated her from more overtly political and “immature” White nationalists who nonetheless shared many of her values. Through our conversation, I understood how antifeminism could work as a cover up for White supremacy when she described her decision to focus her content on gender rather than race since platforms were more likely to censor posts with “slurs and things of that nature.” Speaking not only to the ways that trad truth-making is entangled with algorithms and content moderation practices, Nellie’s account also shows how, in a setting where racism is problematic only because it’s too political, sexism offers a more balanced metapolitical solution to the woman question.

Despite the telltale signs of White supremacy in the movement, a growing number of women of color are turning to traditionalism. For Janine, embodying trad femininity was nothing short of revolutionary since, historically, being a housewife was a distant reality for Black women who were “supposed to be the mules of the society.” With this, she seems to echo key intersectional feminist critiques that, for example, call attention to Black women’s labor market victimization as “mules” (Collins 2000: 51), or reframe seminal second-wave feminist concepts like Betty Friedan’s (1963) “feminine mystique” by pointing out that it applied mostly to White middle and upper-class women without considering the fact that poor women and women of color had long worked outside the home by necessity (hooks 2014). The resonance Janine’s statement struck with these perspectives (perhaps unsurprising given her academic background), however, dissipated in her attempt to challenge white supremacy while upholding patriarchy rather than deconstructing them in tandem.

The pointedly partial structural perspective Janine advanced was absent altogether in the case of Audrey, a former Black Lives Matter activist who told me she now considers the BLM movement to be a “stronghold on the mind” that just makes people angry. When I asked her how she thinks about instances of racial injustice since exiting the movement, she told me, “I’m more focused on my impact, Audrey’s impact, rather than it’s us against them, which is a very prevalent mentality in the Black community.” Illustrating how trad truth-making often shares the prerogatives of a White neoliberal postfeminism that advocates self-management over structural change, her statement further underlines the key role emotion plays in these framings, a convergence that Ahmed (2010) has identified as part of a larger cultural turn to happiness. Audrey’s attraction to the tradlife despite her marginalized position was motivated by her desire to feel happy instead of angry in a manner similar to my other interview partners who relished feelings of pride and hope in the place of shame and despair. While they

themselves cast these affective shifts as the natural outcome of their escape from a mad world to one ruled by traditional common sense, I have framed them here as indicative of the ways in which trad social media offers women an avenue for managing the uncomfortable truths behind the woman question.

Conclusion

During my interview with Willa, she flip-flopped from arguing that “feminism in its fullest forms is truly damaging” to claiming that “true traditionalism is feminist in a way because it’s not this submissive, oppressive thing.” The ambivalence in her account suggests that trad truth-making practices may function to continuously manage the definition of what counts as “true traditionalism” (as well as “true feminism”) in the interests of simultaneously coping with and sustaining patriarchal gender norms. To these ends, trad women harness the emotional affordances of social media to celebrate their retreat to the domestic sphere even as they appear in a public capacity, the political implications of which are repackaged as a pragmatic approach to a mad world. Trad women likewise repackage the traditional gendered division of labor wherein women are responsible for the majority of the housework as the antidote to the postfeminist cultural mandate to be a corporate girl boss. The anticapitalist potential of this approach, however, is compromised in introducing a managerial logic into the domestic sphere where unpaid social reproductive labor is carried out. This effectively extends the reach of neoliberal logic, and further, fails to critically engage with the fact that the tradlife is only possible for families able to subsist on a single income.

The ambiguous, by no means binary approach trad truth-making takes to feminism may reflect the increasing entanglement of neoliberal and right-wing nationalist prerogatives and the ways in which feminism is being co-opted to serve these ends (Farris 2017). This necessitates a recalibration of feminism and a rearticulation of its aims, especially when it comes to right-leaning Christian women for whom evangelicalism (in the stead of feminism) lends “a discourse and a set of practices through which they can manage insecurity” (Fraser 2008: 219). While there is not space to elaborate here on how to better establish critical feminist alternatives to the tradlife, this article has shown how trad women’s truth management practices help to maintain a strategic balance, running the gamut from toning down overt racism in the movement to ensuring racism persists in an apolitical guise, and from endorsing blatant antifeminist misogyny to disavowing feminism in name while sharing stances on women’s rights and gender equality that are not so far from a mainstream postfeminist perspective. Trad truth-making, then, is based less on a singular feminine identity than on emotion practices organized by the keywords “traditional” and “feminine” online that tether together an

expanding range of ideological, aesthetic, affective, and identity-based associations. Though these sociotechnical practices may entail some acknowledgment of capitalist exploitation (as well as some efforts to mitigate the more violent incursions of race and gender-based oppression), they ultimately locate the problem in the dissolution of traditional gender norms and endeavor to transmute bad feelings into good ones rather than effect structural change.

As such, trad women's decision to align as feminine, not feminist should not be understood simply as a form of internalized misogyny that runs counter to their own interests, but as a means of coping – and feeling good – within the confines of capitalist, White supremacist patriarchy. This point casts the feelings of happiness, pride, and hope trad women seek through living the tradlife in a darker light. Indeed, it raises the question of whether traditionalism gives women hope or, instead, compels them to abandon hope in the possibility of living otherwise. Adopting the words of Janine's former mentor Lauren Berlant (2011), though trad women may have rejected the "cruel optimism" of a gendered work-family balance ideal that promises women happiness while actually stoking feelings of failure, they may be reforging a cruelly optimistic attachment to a binary ideal of traditional femininity that has proven unrealistic through decades of feminist (and even antifeminist) practice. In this sense, traditionalism is not "truly revolutionary" as Willa would have it, but rather a pragmatic means of managing the tensions surrounding feminism's still stalled revolution well into the 21st century.

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