

A. Khasnabish
Race in a Glass Nation
November 17, 2017

This talk is not about free speech. I'm not here today to debate the merits of some decontextualized and disembodied principle in abstract terms. These kinds of circular morality plays fill our pages and screens these days and serve as endless distraction from what's really at stake, masking relations of ruling behind a smokescreen of sanctimonious pontificating over the imagined enlightened pillars of western civilization. From our daily experience we should all know there's no such thing as absolute principles, our social ideas and practices always exist in context and in relation to others. In the context of formal political rights, free speech protections exist to protect citizens from persecution by the state, not to defend any speech in any context vis-à-vis other members of that society. This isn't an argument against free speech but it's a principle worth remembering as we confront white supremacists using "free speech" as a guise for provoking and escalating conflict with whole groups of people who they promise to exile, dispossess, brutalize, and kill. And that's exactly what's been happening as aggrieved whiteness and masculinity literally rampage across the continent and around the world. Meanwhile, compliant or explicitly complicit corporate media traffic in stories about the assault on critical thought, free speech, and other hallowed pillars of modernity waged by the "intolerant" and radical left, particularly on university campuses.

But there's also something much more intentional and nefarious going on here which doubles down on why it's so important not to get caught up in the disingenuous free speech debate. As recently revealed by *Buzzfeed*, alt-right troll Milo Yiannopoulos and the Breitbart media platform served as a critical link in laundering explicitly neo-Nazi and white supremacist positions for mainstream dissemination. White supremacists and neo-Nazis were literally

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writing copy for stories that Milo would then get the byline for as a way of injecting these ideas into mainstream discourse. In the Canadian context alt-lite media outlets like *The Rebel* seek to inject similar ideas into mainstream media and popular culture while *Frank Magazine* peddles in casual racism and misogyny that underwrites everyday oppressive hierarchies. These relationships between the alt-right and the alt-lite are disavowed publicly, allowing for more polite racists, misogynists, and queer- and transphobes to maintain an air of respectability and continue to intervene in public discourse. This isn't only about culture wars either, although that's certainly a terrain the alt-right has enthusiastically entered. This is a long-term strategy aimed at winning the hearts and minds, particularly of aggrieved white folks, and laying the groundwork for winning political power. The protofascist wave that's been sweeping liberal democracies across the global north in recent years is one symptom of this.

Just like the alt-right talks about "white nationalism" and not "white power," "race realism" and not "miscegenation," a "white ethnostate" and not a "race war," "free speech" has become a dog whistle for a campaign against ideas and movements that dare to question entrenched relations of power and privilege. It doesn't matter that most of these critiques are entirely bereft of substance and, apparently, any actual knowledge about their targets. Much like the alt-right story that anti-fascists were going to launch a civil war to topple the Trump/Pence regime on November 4 such stories tell us more about the intentions of those advancing them than about their subjects. Another critical aspect to such strategies is that they aim not to stimulate dialogue and debate but to foment conflict, crisis, and fascist spectacle. In one example, posters have been appearing across campuses stating, in black lettering on white

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paper, “it’s okay to be white.” This seemingly innocuous statement is actually part of a white supremacist campaign to provoke reaction to the posters as a way to denounce critics as “anti-white” as organizers discussed explicitly on *4chan*. Inside the university, academics producing, at best, mediocre scholarship are turned into cause célèbres when they publicly campaign against “political correctness,” “cultural Marxism,” and “social justice warriors.” The caricatures they deploy of feminism, Marxism, critical race studies, and a host of social justice movements betrays their intellectual bankruptcy, laziness, and their naked, desperate defense of their own entitlement and self-interest.

Alt-right poster boy Jordan Peterson, a sometime professor of psychology at U of T and a full-time troll of all things social justice, maligns what he considers the corruption injected into society by “postmodern neo-Marxism” a phrase devoid of real meaning and which references ideas critical of the relations of ruling so central to Peterson and his ilk’s sense of entitlement. While Peterson has famously refused to acknowledge the existence of trans and non-binary people and adorns his attacks with the trappings of a principled defense of free speech he has recently announced his intention to develop a website that will allow people to detect and then list the professors, courses, disciplines, and universities that have succumbed to his “postmodern neo-Marxist” boogeyman. The disciplines he considers to be particularly “corrupted”? Women’s, ethnic, and critical race studies, sociology, anthropology, English, and education. He aims to cut enrollments in these disciplines by 75% over the next 5 years and publicly proclaims them a source of social degradation. A telling perspective from someone who is supposedly a staunch defender of freedom of speech and expression. Similar campaigns

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have been waged across the US and Canada by conservative and alt-right groups aimed at harassing and intimidating faculty perceived to be left-wing or progressive in political orientation. Drexel University professor George Ciccariello-Maher's exile from campus following his linking of whiteness and mass shootings in the US which drew a slew of harassment unleashed by the alt-right is a current and deeply concerning example. Ciccariello-Maher's banishment from the campus is only the latest event in a systematic alt-right harassment campaign against him that's threatened his job and even his life. Locally we see these same kinds of campaigns of harassment and intimidation orchestrated by paleoconservatives and alt-righters against a variety of targets including social justice activists and academics. *Frank Magazine's* notorious caricature of El Jones is only the tip of the iceberg, it's deeply racist, misogynist, and reactionary character only truly appreciable in the context of the campaigns of harassment it promotes and celebrates. *Frank's* staff hide, predictably, behind the shield of satire and free speech but, once again, it's worth recalling that satire has been a genre of expression that's historically been directed at elites to humble and socially expose and shame them for their excesses and abuses. It's interesting that *Frank* reserves its most enthusiastic and long-term campaigns for those challenging the status quo – particularly when those people are women or people of colour. In their vigorous defense of the status quo and the unjust relations of power and privilege that animate it these aggrieved academic patriarchs are elevated to the status of noble iconoclasts – presumably for their willingness to dehumanize, ridicule, and harass those with less power and privilege than themselves. They are avatars of aggrieved white masculinity in an imperiled, anxious, and crisis-ridden age and the action they are fighting

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is fundamentally reactionary. The tactics of the alt-right betray their intentions and principles at every turn. Where are the voices of these free speech defenders when it comes to the silencing of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement on Canadian university campuses? Where is their principled activism in the face of a dramatically augmented security and surveillance state facilitated by legislation like the “Anti-Terrorism Act” formerly known as Bill C-51? Where are they when Indigenous and environmental activists are targeted, infiltrated, surveilled, and brutalized by the state’s police and spies? Where are they when Masuma Khan faces sanction by Dalhousie University for expressing a clear and unambiguous rejection of settler-colonialism? The silence is deafening and indicative.

We are living in a crisis-ridden era. To call it “apocalyptic” isn’t an overstatement if we recall that the Greek root of that word means not “the end times” but an uncovering, a revelation. As a system of wealth accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation, capitalism generates incredible profits for a tiny fragment of humanity while the vast majority makes do with less and less, many with almost nothing at all. But as history tells us, as robust as it is, capitalism is inherently productive of and prone to crisis and such moments present openings revealing the system’s quotidian brutality and illegitimacy. As a species we have crossed ecological thresholds as a result of our activity that have ushered us into an era of climate chaos that we are truly beginning to see. At the same time, people’s movements for justice and change have revealed oppressive and exploitative social relations and, in many cases, successfully challenged and even transformed them. Social identities are closely tied to the relations and context to which they belong. None are eternal or universal and there’s no

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natural content to any of them, they are things we figure out as we construct our lives together.

Masculinity need not be toxic. Whiteness need not be supremacist. Settlers need not be genocidal. More than reconciliation, justice and collective liberation become possible when we see hope not in clinging to identities attached to unearned privilege derived from brutal, elaborate relations of oppression and exploitation but in being treasonous to them and committing ourselves to their transformation through the abolition of those oppressive and exploitative relations from which they spring.