ESSAYS

Reading Fascists Reading Shakespeare: Literary Populism in White Power Fiction

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Five days after he helped Donald Trump win the 2016 US presidential election, news broke that chief strategist Steve Bannon once penned a rap musical based on William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. The play, set amid the 1992 Los Angeles riots, features a grisly war between the Bloods and Crips, who trade poetic spars like, "I'm an OG from the hood," and "I will return to rep my peeps!" Rarely has Roman tragedy been such comedic fodder.

Within weeks, Bannon's collaborator leaked the script, and choice excerpts landed in the *New York Times* (Pollack-Pelzner 2016). By spring, *NowThis* (2017) had staged a table read with seasoned actors. Subscribers to *Vanity Fair* soon learned that this was Bannon's second adaptation. During his fabled time in Hollywood, the would-be playwright pitched an intergalactic take on Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (Desta 2017).

Reporting on the play is, understandably, hilarious—a bit of light within a dark one hundred days when brazen White supremacists filed into the West Wing and fractured liberal norms with a ferocious speed.[1] As newspapers mourned democracy's demise and prophesied fascism's rise in the United States for the first (but not the last) time in this century, stories on Bannon's Shakespeare fandom broke from the seriousness of it all.

What made them funny?

Apart from Bannon's tortured prose, the joke turned on an apparent opposition: here was a professional hothead in an emphatically lowbrow campaign for a candi-

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1. We capitalize both *Black* and *White* throughout this manuscript, as we are writing about movements centrally concerned with racialized identity.

date "indifferen[t] to the written word" (Graham 2018), and he had literary aspirations. It seemed the height of irony to many readers that a fiercely anti-intellectual, blunt-force chauvinist not only loved the bard but had pored over his lesser-known creations, and had reimagined one in gangland Compton.

Yet, Bannon is not the only angry White man with a soft spot for Shakespeare. Consider actor-turned-assassin John Wilkes Booth, who quoted *Julius Caesar* upon shooting President Abraham Lincoln. Or take White power activist George Lincoln Rockwell, who lambasts those who cling to the supposedly maniacal idea "that the only difference between Shakespeare and a savage is environment," rather than biology.[2] Then there is Brexit agitator Boris Johnson, who during his tenure as prime minister published a biography of the beloved writer. As Shakespeare scholar Ruben Espinosa (2023: 256) tells it, Johnson "has drawn on Shakespeare's cultural capital . . . to underscore his disdain for foreigners" in the United Kingdom and, more, to call for English as the region's proper language. To Johnson, Shakespeare represents an erstwhile past of "pristine linguistic similitude" that, forsooth, "never truly was" (Espinosa 2023: 259).[3]

We have encountered these engagements in the course of our research on the utopic dreams that animate a range of far-right projects, from revanchist environmental movements to the "trad wife" phenomenon. Based on one year steeped in movement literature, and on the ethnographic work that shades our reading of that literature, we hold that Shakespeare's presence points to something elemental—not exceptional—in fascism's public culture.[4] Here, we center movement figures in the United States and, to evade the shock and awe attached to characters like Bannon, examine the repeated invocation of Shakespeare and other Western literary giants in the lesser-known works of American ecofascist Harold Covington.

2. This quote comes from Rockwell's (1967: 34) book, *White Power*. Our reference section does not include this book, nor any movement propaganda, for two reasons. First, we wish to separate the troubling texts under examination from the texts that we draw lessons from in the course of that examination. Second, combining the works of fascist writers with those of seasoned researchers would duplicate the literary praxes that we later critique.

3. Johnson's actions reflect a tradition of "bardolatry" in the United Kingdom, which uses Shakespeare to stir nationalist feelings (Scaravelli 2016).

4. Over the past year, we have collaborated on a study of White power movement literature, beginning with works of speculative fiction, which led us to an online library hosted by the author of the "Northwest Independence" series. There, we paid attention to the content of the featured books, the context of their placement in thematic groups, and blurbs written to accompany each text. On the edges of the library itself, we scrutinized reading lists, listened to podcast segments, followed YouTube rabbit holes, and, when the authors led us there, we read Shakespeare. What follows is the culmination of this capacious media survey, undertaken by ethnographers as part of a broader project concerning the dark utopic worlds that sustain White power activism in today's United States, both online and off-screen.

Covington, the late founder of a White separatist movement called the Northwest Front, conceived a whopping twenty-three self-published books during his lifetime (1953–2018), brimming with Shakespearian allusions. These include the five novels in the "Northwest Independence" series which we examine in this piece, and which share space in a virtual library on the movement's website with treasured texts by Fyodor Dostoevsky, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley.

That we engage with fascist reading praxes at a time when "fascism" often looks like banning books is certainly no small coincidence. Granted, today's fascist hopefuls do ban books aplenty. As we write, librarians are losing jobs while Governor Ron DeSantis takes a red pen to curricula across the Sunshine State (Soule 2023). Youth now learn from a cartoon Frederick Douglass that slavery wasn't *that* bad, and that embracing climate denialism is just as principled as fighting the Nazis (Blow 2023). Universities in Texas have culled terms like *race* and *gender* from course titles (Rodrigues 2024), while other schools have dismissed tenured faculty who speak out against genocide (Lennard 2024) and while the second Trump administration vows to wage war on "woke" colleges (Hollingsworth et al. 2025). These "ed scare" trends extend to many other states (Friedman and Johnson 2022). The present is so patterned that you, upon reading critical coverage of the same, might get an ad for a $380 cashmere sweater embroidered with the words, "I read banned books."[5] The sweater is part of a promotional campaign for a movie about Judy Blume, whose novels are at risk of being banned in the country's quick advance into extremism.

This is why Bannon's literary exploits confound the cultured "we" who read about "them" in the *New York Times*, where "they" appear as simpletons and trolls, if not the enemies of intellect itself. But the truth is that fascists are engaged in intellectual production.[6] Understanding how and to what end—and why these figures seize on "canonistic" texts to do their bidding—is indispensable to any sound analysis of the far right today. It is also key to mapping the media worlds that shape the righteous disbelief with which progressive readers dismiss that which we ought to fight: the mounting force of fascist reading publics.

We count ourselves among the readers who, by virtue of our media consumption, have been hailed into this cultured "we" and presumed to share in its bewilderment. Algorithms regard Devin as a Shakespeare fanboy and good liberal who cannot abide the bard's appropriation by bad actors, and Chloe as a reader troubled by the "fascist creep" (Ross 2017) and pleased to wear this consternation on her sleeve (preferably in

5. See linguafranca.nyc/products/i-read-banned-books-crewneck.

6. This is a key lesson from scholarship on race science (e.g., Gould 1981; Macrakis 1993; Stern 2005) and apartheid medicine (e.g., Washington 2006), as well as work on fascist literary regimes (e.g., Anson and Banerjee 2023; Barbian 2013; Bjork-James 2020).

cotton). Uniting both stock types is a proprietary interest in literature as the unique possession of an educated class that understands itself as "knowing better" and whose self-image turns on snubbing the unlettered masses (Ahmann 2023). It is a classically elite positionality whose standard-bearers are essential to the spectacle they spurn, and which has fanned the flames of figures we describe as "literary populists."

As we conceive them, literary populists not only partake in reading praxes that reject "elites" and reclaim the canon "for the masses." They also marshal canonistic books *as masses* whose abundance does a "fash-ish" kind of authorizing work (Ahmann and Giles 2024). This is because despite its gestures toward a literary commons, such work vests authority in one, not many, voices—mirroring the "selective populism" (Eco 1995) that unfolds in archetypal fascist contexts when the phantom presence of "the People" boosts the voice of a tyrant, who then purports to be their singular interpreter. Within "selectively" populist movements, a fictive "People" empowers the will of a despotic leader, while the people as such cannot make a sound; they play an authorizing role (Asad 1993), but little more. When Trump, for instance, claims to speak for the "forgotten people of America" while dismantling the democratic institutions through which they might express themselves, he summons an aesthetic—not agentive—crowd to amplify his influence. Our contention is that this insight has some traveling power: for if we replace "the People" with "the Canon," then we can spot this move in fascist literature.

Literary populism is, to wit, a strongman's reading praxis that works to limit the interpretive terrain—not by banning books but by enrolling many authors into what, at core, are "monologic" schemes (Bakhtin 1981; Dent 2019). In what follows, we examine this phenomenon as it structures Covington's books and the library that hosts them (see fig. 1), both positioned as anti-establishment. Future studies would do well to focus on reception, which we lack space to substantially examine here. Instead, following a broad review of fascist literary practice, we train eyes on the author's authorizing labor, showing how venerated books work as loudspeakers in his texts, where White self-realization takes the form of literary mastery (Morrison 1992). We then move beyond the texts to a reading of the library as a mediating force (Mazzarella 2004) that combines classic works of literature, philosophy, and political theory with the verboten work of radicals like Covington, in an attempt to authorize the latter. Through this analysis, we show how extremist visions of the world-to-come gain ground as part of a storied intellectual tradition, whose texts are plotted by the Northwest Front as proof of an impending revolution, and whose status as "banned" knowledge is essential to its potency.

Before we do, a few matters merit more elaboration. First, we call our object of analysis a "fascist" reading praxis because of its authoritarian discursive form,

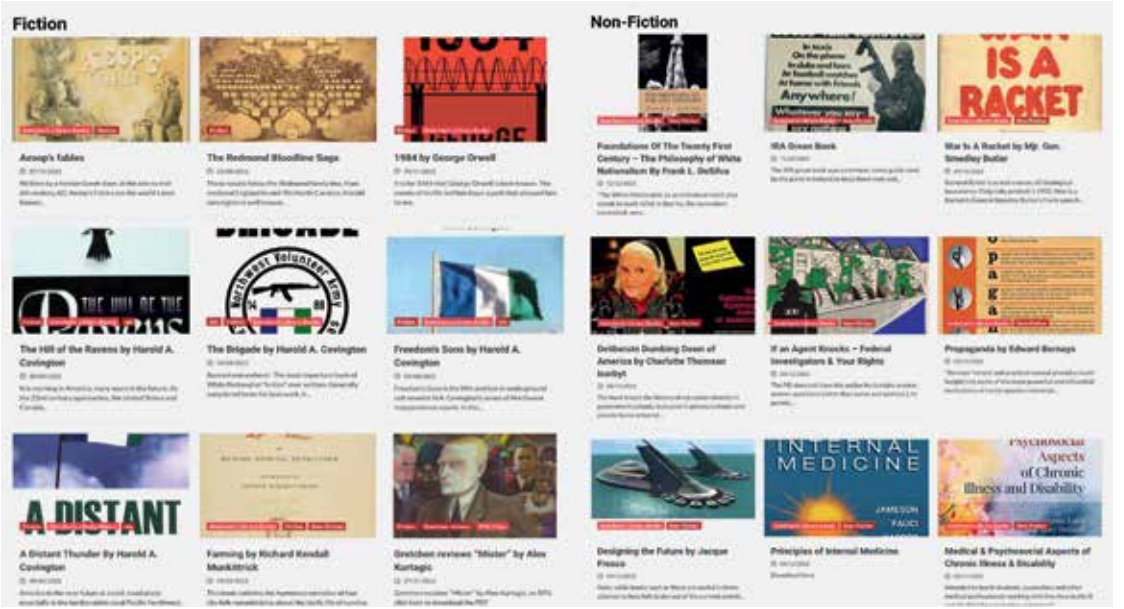

FIGURE 1 Screenshots from the online library hosted by the Northwest Front display a wide-ranging collection.

but also because we spotlight movements that are fascist in Umberto Eco's (1995) sense: they reject "modernity" and embrace "tradition," promote "action for action's sake," "appeal to a frustrated middle class," are conspiratorial in form, fear difference and penalize disagreement, turn on a "machismo" culture that ridicules the frail and worships a strongman, practice selective populism, and promote "newspeak" (Orwell 1949). This capacious definition allows us to bring proto-fascist regimes, like the first Trump administration, into conversation with a range of capital-*F* fascist projects—including the Northwest Front, whose founder was a self-identified Nazi.

The movements we discuss are also invested in "Whiteness" as an essential, rather than historical, concept—and we let this slippery category stand when we paraphrase their works. Most, too, are "White supremacist" in nature, engaged in overt assertions of White racial dominance like armed aggression and hate speech (though we agree with those who use the phrase to diagnose much subtler racial projects; e.g., Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020). White supremacist groups like neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, the Northwest Front, and hundreds more further advocate "White power": a belief that Whiteness is a racial identity; that it is superior among the human "races"; and that one way to guard against the so-called rising tides of anti-Whiteness is to buoy intraracial solidarity (Belew 2018). Some White power groups seek to break away and form an ethnostate, which makes them "sepa-

ratist" as well. Here, again, we count the Northwest Front, the culmination of Covington's long career.

Harold Covington was raised in North Carolina, where as a teen he referred to himself as the "school fascist" (Assael and Keating 2019). After a short stint in the army, he joined the National Socialist White People's Party, before moving to South Africa to fight for "Rhodesian Independence" in the 1970s. Following his deportation, he returned home and participated in the "Greensboro Massacre," which left five people dead (Killian 2015).[7] Covington then went on to lead the National Socialist Party of America. In the 1990s, he set up on Web 1.0 and began imagining the Northwest Front, beginning with the books we survey here.

The Northwest Independence novels, which we return to in more detail later, figure a race war that prepares the ground for the "Northwest American Republic." There, the "natural beauty" of both "race" and place are to be protected from the degradations of American modernity.[8] The White renegades who lead the fight are mostly poor kids from unstable homes who profess an abiding love for Western literature. They listen to Wagner, Mozart, and Handel. If they watch TV at all, it's *Andy Griffith*. They can all quote Shakespeare at a moment's notice. And they see themselves as existentially aligned against three groups of people. First are the primarily Black soldiers whose voices Covington depicts in mangled English, and whose hackneyed exclamations echo Bannon's *Coriolanus*. Second are the White traitors—educated and indoctrinated—who make up the American elite. Finally, there are the puppeteers who control both within this fictive world: an international Jewish cabal intent on obliterating the White way of life, beginning with White culture. As Covington narrates, more than one radical has "gotten their revolutionary start" salvaging "forbidden books and literature" from the "hungry incinerators" of the government, so that rough-and-tumble renegades might read them.[9]

Notice how both good and evil assume literary form within the texts, and how the "us" and "them" with which we started shape-shifts. Notice how these transformations change the ground from which one might proclaim they "read banned books" as a proxy for their ideology. The presumption that this statement must announce a liberatory politics—embedded in the ad campaign above and, more substantially, the public it addresses—is symptomatic of a possessive investment in literature as a surrogate for righteousness, and it betrays a high degree of disregard. It takes a certain hubris to suppose that fascists in the United States today do not con-

7. Covington's armed participation is contested, but he did send men to the skirmish (Belew 2018: 76).

8. This is why many call this group ecofascist, or at least embroiled in "alt-right ecology" (Taylor 2019).

9. These quotes come from Covington's *Hill of the Ravens* (2003: 21–22).

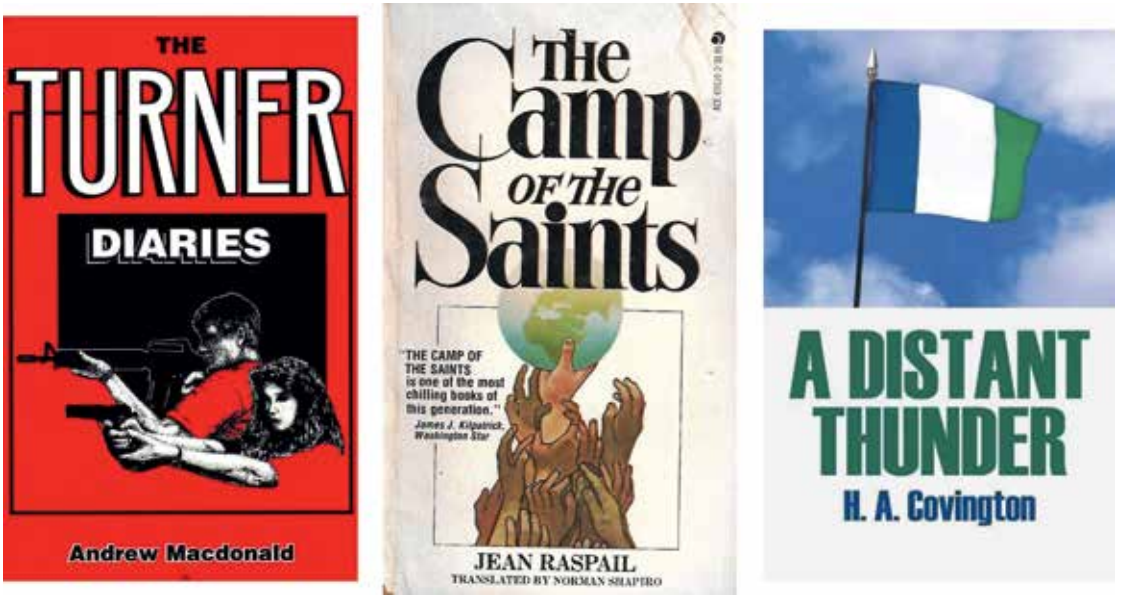

FIGURE 2 Book covers for three works of speculative fiction from the White power movement.

ceive of themselves as a reading class. On the contrary: our research suggests that reading is fundamental to fomenting fascist visions of a world worth fighting for, and for seizing the minds of "organic intellectuals" (Gramsci 1971) who might just bring those futures into being.

Reading Fascists

Grasping how means pushing past the old Geertzian (1973) trope of reading culture like a text and actually reading the texts on our interlocutors' bookshelves. Many of them read voraciously. White power activists have written fiction for as long as there has been a movement, and fiction plays a concrete role in organizing efforts (see fig. 2). Take the *Turner Diaries*, regarded by the FBI as "the bible of the racist right," which has sparked a spate of actual assaults since its publication in the 1970s (Jackson 2004). Or *Camp of the Saints*, a hyperbolic tale about Europe's "invasion" by a starving "horde" of migrants, which sits on the nightstands of far-right figures from Steve Bannon to Marine Le Pen (Peltier and Kulish 2019). Or Covington's own novels, which offer readers the fictional blueprint for what he hopes will be a bloody war to transform three US states into a "safe place" for White people.

It matters that these texts spill beyond the page over and over and over, giving new meaning to what ethnographers of reading have called "living textuality"

(Boyarin 1993: 2). When a reader like Timothy McVeigh sets down his well-worn copy of the *Turner Diaries* to blow up a Ryder truck as an act of war against the US state (Thomas 2001), he shows us in spectacular fashion that the phenomenal world often taken as the purview of qualitative social science, and the literary one set off for scholars "of the text," are anything but sovereign spheres.

This truth of course extends beyond extremist contexts, to wherever people live with and against religious texts (Bielo 2009; Boyarin 1991), read together in the space of schools and clubs (Cody 2013; Heath 1983; Radway 1984), skim the daily papers (Anderson 1983; Rosen 2015), and relate to documents within bureaucracies (Hull 2012; Riles 2006). Meaning also shifts as stories move through different media and distinct social groups (Boyer 2012; Mazzarella 2004). (This is how a plainly antifascist text like *1984* can be recast, by fascists, as a book about the tyrannies of "wokeness.") Text-objects, in short, shape social worlds—for the poetic is political (Clifford 1986; Rosen 2023). Fascists seem to understand this very well. After all, good propagandists must be social theorists.

The Nazi Party's expert use of literature, art, and media to move the German public inch by inch toward the gas chambers has been amply documented.[10] One biographer reminds us that propagandist Joseph Goebbels held a PhD in German literature and failed to break through as a writer before joining the party (Stephan 1949: 33). Once there, he drafted "individual screenplays" for electoral campaigns during Adolph Hitler's rise to power (Barbian 2013: 4), and slowly helped to seed a "media dictatorship" (Schütz 1995). In this work, books figured as explicit "object[s] of state care" because, as Goebbels held, "the *Volk* lives in the book" (Barbian 2013: 7, 250). Book burnings and book festivals alike gave form to this core ideology.

A central goal of this curation was to cultivate an Aryan reading public—Michael Warner's (2002) term for groups that crystallize in relation to specific media. Unlike the figure of *the* public, *a* public is defined by "active participation" in a universe of texts, not "ascriptive belonging" to an in-the-world collective (Warner 2002: 62). Publics conjure up the groups that they address, imbue them with particular traits, and enroll them in particular projects: like the making of a pan-Aryan nation existentially concerned with "foreign elements," or a raucous band of White Americans counterposed to liberal media regimes.

Evidence suggests this second public has grown over the past decade. In his first attempt to court a second term by vote, Trump announced a program to fight texts with texts, advocating patriotic education as an antidote to journalistic efforts like the "1619 Project" (Gaudiano 2020). Outlets such as Breitbart "red pill" readers

10. On fascism's ties to mass culture more broadly, see Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) 2007.

through their dim computer screens (Stern 2019).[11] Long invectives by mass shooters have recruited thousands into the White power movement, just as zines and pamphlets did in decades past, and some have triggered copycat assaults (Reid and Singh 2022). Close readings of those rantings surface ample cross-citation, leading some to call them emblems of a "suffocatingly self-referential . . . literary project" (Anson 2023): one where repetition gives a few men's musings a prophetic force, even turns their work into a canon.[12] Covington's books go farther yet, casting the author *as a prophet*: a surly character called the "Old Man" who, through his prescient texts, goes on to spark a White insurgency.

Fascism, in sum, is more than a political formation. It is also a literary project that props up a Manichean version of the world, leaping from text to life and back until it has made both in its image. And it is a project of treating strongmen's words as canon: a term we use to draw together two ideas. In its original religious parlance, *canon* describes "inspired" and "authoritative" scripture, though today most use the word to reference secular texts thought to have "enduring value" for specific groups.[13] In the analysis that follows, we keep both meanings close at hand, tracking the role of valued texts in the making of fascist authority.

But first, to probe two questions posed by anthropologist Adia Benton (2017: 32): How does a canon come into being in the first place, and compel a group to rush to its defense? What kinds of societies "need canons" to communicate their deeply held ideals? One answer is those insecure about the reproduction of their worlds, perhaps because they rest on flimsy hierarchies or because they fear their waning relevance. That insecurity is palpable among defenders of the "unbearably White" canon in *our* field (Davis and Mulla 2023; also Ahmann and Proctor 2024). Whiteness in this context names the racialized identity of many anthropologists and a "set of narrative structural positions, rhetorical trips, and habits of perception" forged in the colonial encounter (Dyer 1997: 12). One might therefore say that canons protect Whiteness just as Whiteness protects canons. We adapt this formulation from another, which holds that Shakespeare "protects whiteness as much as whiteness protects Shakespeare" (Little 2023: 11).

In a speech offered at the dedication of the Folger Shakespeare Library, founding director Joseph Quincy Adams nearly makes this claim himself, celebrating Shake-

11. "Red pill," drawn from *The Matrix*, is alt-right parlance for initiation into unsettling truths.

12. Anson and Banerjee (2023: 157) describe ecofascism, in particular, as a "speculative literary project" that ignores the world as such in favor of a fictional dystopia: an image of the earth ransacked by Others and only salvageable through the brave but violent work of Western heroes.

13. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "canon (n.1), additional sense" and "canon (n.1), sense 4," doi.org/10.1093/OED/8287483483 (accessed December 12, 2023).

speare's civilizing influence in the United States, where a "far-flung people who in race were still essentially English" made him the "symbol of culture." The playwright's role was even more important in the nineteenth century as migrants "poured into our land to threaten . . . that homogeneity." At a time when "America seemed poised to become a babel of tongues and cultures," the country instituted compulsory education and fixed Shakespeare as its humanistic center. Pupils everywhere, in every grade, were tasked with studying his plays, memorizing his prose, and composing essays on his art. With Shakespeare's help, Adams exalts, American schools transformed a "swarm" of swarthy foreigners into a dignified, assimilated people.[14]

In Adams's early 1930s portrait, Shakespeare appears as both metaphor and method for a cultural Anglo-Whiteness feared under siege in the United States—a United States that consequently *needs a canon*. And he was not alone in channeling the bard at that historic moment. English critic Arthur Chesterton, who published under the pen name "Coriolanus," transformed the *Shakespeare Review* into "a laboratory" for ideas about "cultural decay" that would go on to shape the Union of British Fascists (Macklin 2020: 182, 195). And later that same decade, *Hamlet* appeared as the single non-Germanic artwork sanctioned by the Nazi Party. In 1939, the media dictatorship staged a production of the play where Hamlet stood in for the Aryan nation. Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* explained that "the crime that had deprived Hamlet of his inheritance foreshadowed Versailles," and "Gertrude's betrayal that of the spineless Weimar politicians" (quoted in Symington 2005: 190). Hamlet's struggle to reclaim his rightful place from treacherous forces that would sideline and belittle him opens room for Hitler to ask whether Germany will do the same. Is the Aryan nation "to be or not to be?"

It seems that Bannon is in fitting company.

Reading Shakespeare

Let us turn at last to Harold Covington: an avowed National Socialist who idolized Shakespeare and railed against the threat of "White replacement." His Northwest Independence novels are set in a near-future United States where people rarely read. Instead, shallow TV shows and films impose a multicultural agenda that has turned White minds to mush. Children learn that "the rap of Booga-Booga B constitute[s] English literature" and Shakespeare is "a dead white European male from very long ago."[15] Conditioning like this, per Covington, is how elites control the

14. Speech delivered in Washington, DC, by Joseph Quincy Adams, April 23, 1932.

15. *Freedom's Sons* (2013: 862); *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 79).

masses and why White people fail to grasp the "truth" of their own subjugation. This self-consciously Orwellian backdrop is par for the course in White power fiction, though in Covington's hands it takes an overt literary form, where Shakespeare serves as prop, puppet, prophet, and prestigious leitmotif.

Literacy anxieties pervade Covington's novels and reflect his real concerns about White people's readiness to wage a fight against the "System." They also express his melancholy over the "replacement" of a Western canon with "substandard" texts by non-White authors in the name of cultural diversity.[16] Against this dreary backdrop, most of his books tell the story of a young man's racial awakening and ascension into the ranks of the Northwest Volunteer Army (NVA) through literary rites of passage. One such youth is Shane, who figures early in the series.

In the midst of multiple disintegrations that mark his upbringing in rural Washington, Shane's one saving grace is books. And not those taught in school, where White men only play the part of dupes and villains. Books set in "better times and places," Shane explains, "when everyone who mattered [looked like me]." This is the first clue readers get about the goal of Covington's five novels: to show young men like Shane what their lives "should have been" like and, if a brave few take to arms, what they might be.[17]

Shane's early learning is quite self-directed, and makes the most of what remains on library shelves after the government has culled books for burning in "a hate cache." But a series of fateful encounters leads him to Red Morehouse, an older man who wears "a Mr. Rogers-style cardigan" and is "the first live American National Socialist" that Shane has ever seen.[18] Red leads a covert school for "racially aware" White youth, who will go on to fight the War for Northwest Independence. Their lessons are pieced together from banned books whose mere possession in this world can net a reader time in penitentiary.

As students flip through Rudyard Kipling's "racial poems," George Rockwell's *This Time the World*, and other texts forbidden by the "anti-White" establishment, readers learn three things about Shane's universe.[19] First, banned knowledge is sacred for the hidden truths that it imparts, for only truth could be so dangerous. Second, this movement is led by educated subjects, not blubbering hotheads. Third,

16. Conspiracy theorist Renaud Camus, coiner of the "Great Replacement," similarly admonished the "dogmatico-antiracist doxa" that "replaces" national art with the "less flattering" works of foreigners. This quote comes from a lecture delivered in Lunel, France, on November 26, 2010.

17. *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 87, 88).

18. *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 136, 130).

19. *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 112).

one becomes an insider through reading. Against the force of a "PC" media machine and the docile public that it inculcates, Red, his students, and the rebels constitute a learned "counterpublic" (Warner 2002) whose members laud a Eurocentric canon. Covington underscores the importance of their know-how by juxtaposing them with Black and Brown cops made to speak in "gangsta" dialect that rivals Bannon's minstrelsy.

Oppositions such as this are patterned in White literature, where Black characters—if they are permitted speech at all—are often "made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to defamiliarize" their words, as Toni Morrison (1992: 52) has shown. It is precisely through their "reinforcing presence" (Morrison 1992: 45) that White characters like Shane come to know themselves as eloquent, educated, and superior. Ever insecure about his readers' capacity to grasp what he is up to as a writer, Covington makes this opposition clear as day. When readers meet a rebel who has Spanish language skills, for instance, the author intervenes to insist he does not speak the "pig-ignorant, peasant" dialect of immigrants whose growing numbers agitate the NVA, but in "classical Castilian, the Spanish version of Shakespeare."[20]

This is one of many invocations of the playwright as a marker of prestige within the texts—which culminate in the founding of a literate ethnostate that would make Joseph Quincy Adams proud. ("Instead of skateboards, Northwest kids got Shakespeare."[21]) The young men fighting for this cause recognize Shakespeare's works on one another's shelves and notch his words on gravestones. They quote the bard in daily life and cite his plays in briefings. In one memorable scene, rebels can tell a wanton woman is redeemable because she can call up a single Shakespeare quote from school, which she recites in perfect iambic pentameter to the delight of men who have come to save her from a sordid fate. And when at last they win the War for Northwest Independence, the NVA proclaims their victory in Shakespeare's voice, releasing three lines from *Henry V*, and nothing more, for recitation on news media.[22]

As a constant referent in the texts—synecdoche for truth and beauty in a world where both are spare—Shakespeare conveys cultural capital to the rebels and, through the rebels, to the author, who wants readers to know he is a learned man with refined tastes. Shakespeare does this in the world as well, as a figure long

20. *Freedom's Sons* (2013: 203).

21. *The Hill of the Ravens* (2003: 63–64).

22. *The Brigade* (2008: 423–24, 615). Those lines: "O God, thy arm was here; And not to us, but to thy arm alone; Ascribe we all."

deployed to bolster White authority (Little 2023; also Guillory 1993). In both contexts, allusions to the writer behave as "authorizing discourses" whose chief purpose is to signal something weighty will soon follow (Asad 1993): a reminder that authority is produced rather than possessed (Kuipers 2013). It is not enough, that is, to learn about the Northwest Front. We must also learn that its supporters are erudite men who read Elizabethan plays, and knowing this apparently legitimates their quest. Even when their Shakespeare references have no relation to the scene at hand, the writer's name is a discursive cue that we should take a speaker seriously.

In this sense, Shakespeare works as an index of intelligence (Peirce 1935; Silverstein 1993), pointing to the authority of those who would invoke him and conferring prestige upon the words adjacent to his presence. He functions as a prop. But sometimes he becomes a puppet for the rebels' proclamations—in spectral terms, a medium. This happens whenever characters quote Shakespeare to do symbolic labor: like when one comrade tells Shane "the gentler gamester is the soonest winner" to suggest the rebels should not punish "wayward" White Americans; or when they ventriloquize his play to mark their victory.[23] If authorizing discourses stand outside what they legitimate (Caton 2006), then puppeteering is a different sort of act. It bestows gravity upon the speaker *and* forces new meaning onto Shakespeare's verse without his license. This alone is not remarkable. Writers puppet Shakespeare all the time. But here the tactic serves a broader bid to station literary force behind one author's revolutionary dreams.

Shakespeare's "serviceable" presence (Morrison 1992: 28) also comes through in Covington's choice of quotes. It is not random that he selects *Henry V* to mark the NVA's success in battle. Lines from that play thread throughout the five-book series. This trend starts with a long quote from Henry V himself, urging men to battle on St. Crispin's Day, which appears as an epigraph to Covington's first book. It has a storied past. In the thick of World War II, Laurence Olivier delivered the speech to boost morale among the British troops, and in 2016, the architect of Brexit adapted it to celebrate the vote (Knight 2016). During the hotly contested 2000 election on this side of the Atlantic, the Florida legal team for George W. Bush recited the speech for inspiration before asking the Supreme Court to certify his victory (Flegenheimer 2016). In short, *Henry V* has long been used to stir political sentiments, and it surely does such work among the rebels. But it also furnishes this series with its plot: each book follows a youth, like Shane, who ascends to an eminence that is his birthright, recoding the play and the past it represents with White power movement themes.

23. *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 269).

Briefly, the Henriad—Shakespeare scholar Alvin Kernan's (1969) shorthand for the epic four-play narrative that includes *Henry V*—begins with Henry IV murdering his cousin, King Richard II, and then ascending to the throne. This throws England into turmoil, and sparks a rebellion led by "Hotspur" Henry Percy. Henry IV's son Hal, now prince, shows little interest in ruling and prefers to hang out at the tavern with the up-to-no-good Falstaff. It takes three plays, but eventually Hal realizes he must rise to the station he was meant for, divest himself of his immoral ways, and defeat Hotspur's rebellion. He succeeds against all odds and becomes Henry V, uniting England into an imperial regime.

The Henriad, in sum, is the story of an Anglo youth shrugging off the sins of popular culture to assume his rightful place as a leader among men—an appealing one for Covington, who models his own characters on Hal. Shane even names his gun "Henry the Fifth," lest this intertextual intent be lost on a simple reader (Briggs and Bauman 1992).[24] Other elements of the Henriad may have appealed to him as well, as some hold the plays are centrally invested in the "boundaries of English whiteness" (Wagner 2023; also Greenblatt 1992). Take Hal's insistence that his troops—English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh—unite behind their manhood, which could be read, anachronistically, as a call for pan-Aryan cooperation. Or consider lines about the "rape" of England by foreign powers such as France, which could be construed by someone trying very hard as a prologue to the "Great Replacement" theory.

Most felicitous of all, consider the goals of Shakespeare's Henriad, widely thought to be a teleological retelling of English history leading to the Tudor dynasty, as Shakespeare worked for Queen Elizabeth, a Tudor. It is teleological in that it narrates events with their rise to the throne in mind, framing the Tudors as a divine solution to an age of chaos and debauchery. Covington casts the Northwest American Republic in such light, and indeed foretells its victory on page one through reference to St. Crispin's Day. In the Henriad, that speech marks the end of Hal's long rise to power. By beginning with the same, Covington tells us that the ethnostate is preordained, and that what follows is a tale of righteous violence where the end justifies the means. More, he makes Shakespeare prophetic and the Tudors proof of concept—a sliver of the future in the past, a lesson one might learn if one would educate oneself. Like Shane, who learns from Red that books hold hidden truths, and is brave enough to act on what he reads.

Covington makes Shakespeare work for him throughout these novels: as a recurring marker of the rebels' intellect; as an authorizing discourse for their mission;

24. *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 238).

as a medium for messages that stretch beyond Shakespeare's intent; as a lesson in dynastic history. He seems eager to recode the writer's corpus to serve the cause of Northwest independence. That he attempts all this while sounding the alarm about replacement is no minor irony. But this contradiction is essential within what we call literary populism: that *aesthetic* invocation of the canon to bolster the voice of a strongman, much as fascist figures past have instrumentalized "the People" (Eco 1995). Ultimately, it is Covington who speaks louder with each mention of the playwright, who emerges as the wise man whose words merit close attention, and whose works belong on every White youth's shelf. It is Covington who offers prophecy.

If only readers of *these* books would let *this* writer shake them from their slumber—let him spark the War for Northwest Independence. The reading praxis in the texts would then echo to the world beyond, and Covington would join his idol as a Shakespeare for our century.

Reading for the Revolution

Like most things in Covington's world, this aspiration is explicit. Red's library nests within another: a virtual library hosted on the website for the Northwest Front. We are meant to take cues from protagonists like Shane and see it as a portal into hidden truths. This core objective is overt as well. Recall that, in the novels, Covington takes the form of an "Old Man" whose ramblings inspire the great "Northwest Migration," but it takes years for White people to "listen" and then "act on" his instructions.[25] So, too, on these shelves, where Covington is lauded as an "underground cult novelist" whose books constitute the "most important" works of "White Nationalist 'fiction' ever written" and are accordingly "banned everywhere!" As one triumphant blurb announces, "If you're wise enough to read the changing times, you'll see that [his] words hold a lot of truth": about a past in which White people reigned, a present in which they are "despised," and a future in which they will reclaim their rightful place. The first step is to choose a book. The right one might ignite a revolution.

There are many books to choose from on this segment of the website, christened "Gretchen's Library" in honor of a Covington admirer (see fig. 3). Besides the Northwest Independence novels, there are 18 further works by Covington and 140 texts by other authors that together authorize his movement. "Nonfiction" titles include the same "banned books" Red's students read in spite of laws that would have jailed them for this act, as well as more vanilla works by Noam Chomsky, Seneca, Sun

25. *A Mighty Fortress* (2005: 295).

FIGURE 3 Screenshot from "Gretchen's Library" on the website for the Northwest Front. A reverse-image search reveals the banner image to be a stock photo titled "Caucasian woman reading book in library."

Tzu, and Pat Buchanan. Ideological texts like *National Socialism and the Laws of Nature* share space with guides on how to forage food. Readers also get a detailed program for the fight that lies ahead, beginning with migration and ending with the seizure of state power, and founding documents, like a draft constitution. Each contains a tool rebels will need to develop racial consciousness, wage an efficacious war, or organize the ethnostate, and one might therefore read the compilation as a cosplay of the novels: an extended universe for fans that Covington believes his writing merits. But this would be to underestimate the author's self-importance. Just as literature works within his books to legitimate the rebels and convey the wisdom of the Old Man's call to arms, it works outside the books to situate the Northwest Front as the answer to an age-old drama. The fulcrum in a dialectic. Like the Tudors.

Gretchen's Library appeared online while Covington was hard at work on the final Northwest Independence novel, published in 2013. That novel, *Freedom's Sons*, takes readers past the war to its magnificent conclusion. From the ashes of America's disintegration comes a "paradise on earth" complete with hydroponic agriculture, green industry, clean air, a rebound in endangered species, a resurgence of White art forms, safe streets, full employment, and "traditional" values. This book carries different lessons than preceding texts in that it paints a picture of a world worth fighting for, and it suggests a man eager to secure his legacy as real-life founding father. As he tells readers, there are times when people have to act, not just sulk and "brood . . . like Hamlet."[26] He also tells them one such time has come with Barack Obama's reelection—and if they hope to secure paradise, the rebels must act soon.

Gretchen's Library puts this premonition into other writers' mouths through blurbs drafted by "Gretchen" to accompany each text.[27] One tells us Pat Buchanan fears the country is unraveling and will pass beyond the point of no return without dramatic intervention. Other writings credit Jews for this collapse, from works

26. *Freedom's Sons* (2013: xxvi, 873).

27. We have written more about Gretchen elsewhere—and specifically about her role as the deferential keeper of men's tales (Ahmann and Proctor 2023). This role is patterned: far-right intellectual production is often figured as "the bailiwick of white men writing from a decidedly masculinist perspective," while women in the movement typically serve as "managers of a patriarchal subculture" (Stern 2019: 96, 98).

by carmaker Henry Ford to church reformer Martin Luther. An education policy advisor instructs that schools are their core vector, designed to "make the people lemming-like" so they will acquiesce to live in chains, while a rogue physician warns that doctors do this work with pharmaceuticals.

Facing kindred pressures in the novels, Red not only taught banned books but coached his charges to read "kosher" texts against the grain.[28] Gretchen goads readers to do the same, hailing them into a conspiratorial counterpublic by virtue of engagement with this text-world and delighting in a paranoid poetic form foundational to many fascist groups. As an interpretive regime, fascism is promiscuous in its influence and "syncretistic" in its form; it offers up a "rigid discombobulation" (Eco 1995). And if its mess of inputs seem to be at odds, "it is only because they are alluding, allegorically, to the same primeval truth" (Eco 1995; also McIntosh 2022).[29]

Gretchen gestures toward this play of light and shadow on the library's nonfiction shelves, when she praises Friedrich Nietzsche for showing readers neither God nor science can lay claim to moral certainty. She winks when she bemoans that Seneca's "entire way of looking at the world is . . . practically extinct," for most no longer recognize the cold, hard facts of life. (The not-so-subtle subtext is: *But you still do*.) Other writings "strip[] away our illusions about government" and "recover" buried knowledge from the human past. Gretchen's blurb for one such text congratulates the author for explaining what "most people know," but which few are brave enough to say aloud. (*Except, of course, for you*.)

Moving to the fiction shelves, one finds a full two-thirds are penned by Covington, which is not surprising given what we know about the man. They sit alongside *Animal Farm*, *1984*, *Brave New World*, *The Stranger*, *Starship Troopers*, Plato's *Republic*, and other cherished texts that work to augment his prestige. Shelving Plato next to Covington is the library equivalent of Shakespeare in his role as prop, in that it intellectualizes movement visions of the world-to-come by making one adjacent to the other. But the blurbs achieve more yet, enrolling other authors as his puppets and urging readers to comb classics for submerged realities. Thus, Gretchen discloses that *The Stranger* tells the story of a Frenchman unfairly put to death for murdering an Arab, while *Starship Troopers* is an allegory for the Great Replacement. Meanwhile, *Animal Farm*, *1984*, and *Brave New World* presage a present marked by mind-

28. *A Distant Thunder* (2004: 137).

29. This is not just true of fascism, which besides being syncretistic in its form is conspiratorial in its suspicions. Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding (1999: 286) teach that apocalypticism is another "mode of knowing that promises, and delivers, [hidden] truth." Revelation sometimes takes a "hypertextual" aesthetic form (Urban 2000) and sometimes comes through in "apophenic" style (Lepselter 2016), where signs ring, repeat, and resound until resonance becomes a kind of proof.

numbing medications, depraved mass entertainment, and the "hidden influence" of globalist "elites."

And what should readers do with this swarm of inputs resonating with the buzz of something more (Lepselter 2016), this veritable "beehive" of ideas (Eco 1995)? Gretchen tells us in her write-up for *Mein Kampf*: each lesson gleaned from reading "must be treated as . . . a little stone to be inserted into a mosaic," until one has come to a true picture of the world. It is the perfect finale. For by the time one turns to Gretchen's hero's books, they have been primed to question truth as such and look for "little stones" of truth in the unlikeliest of places. Enter the forbidden books of an Old Man whose call to action is the climax of an ancient drama and whose success has been charted in the Great Books as the endpoint in a teleology.

Amid these resignifying acts, we get literary populism in full form: a band of texts lined up behind one man; they authorize him but their authors cannot speak. This move is *populist* because the authors stand in for the masses and against elites whose "PC" readings of their books keep people docile. It is *selectively* so because one man and his right hand impose interpretations on the public that they hail, substituting their analysis for that of all subaltern readers. In Eco's (1995) formulation of selective populism, "individuals as individuals have no rights, and the People is conceived as . . . a monolithic entity expressing the Common Will. Since no large quantity of human beings can have a common will," it emanates from an all-knowing leader. Eco's core examples come from the Piazza Venezia in Rome and Germany's Nuremberg Stadium, where quintessential fascist figures declared their own positions to be sanctioned by the silenced multitude before them. In much the same way as the masses' muzzled presence gave these tyrants the appearance of a mandate, the hollowed works of hallowed authors give this writer academic teeth.

Why? Why smuggle a classically authoritarian discursive form—a univocal form that won't abide dissent (Dent 2019)—under the appearance of a crowd? Why disguise monologue as dialogue? This is an indispensable contortion in a counterpublic set against elites' supposed dictatorship of meaning. And it is one that Covington must best if he is to be more than the author of mere books: if he is to be the author of a nation, immortalized in life and work within the canon of his people.

Beyond Banned Books

In this tour through the reading praxis of a would-be revolution, we have observed how Gretchen turns the authors on her shelves into mouthpieces for the movement, such that Covington's voice can be heard in others' words. And we have seen how reading works within his books to mark a move toward truth and, subsequently,

toward insurgency. In both Gretchen's Library and Red's, the curation of these texts and their framing as a storehouse of forbidden knowledge does work to summon a crowd behind the Northwest Front—to generate an echo through which Covington himself reverberates. Huxley, Chomsky, Sun Tzu, Shakespeare: all get cast as mediators in the process. Regardless of their politics, each lends his vision their authority.

What might appear to be a multivocal site is therefore little but a ruse—the orchestration of a literary populism where many books are used to amplify a single author, who makes a band of dead White men speak for his cause.[30] They are his props, puppets, and prophets in a world where books are said to pave a path toward freedom. In true Covington form, this equation is made literal as well: when Shane is locked up for his role in the rebellion near the end of the first novel, it is only when his captors pass him books that one can tell that his release is imminent.[31] Or consider, again, the spectacular ventriloquizing act when Shakespeare's words are used to mark the moment when the rebels win the war and, so we're told, emancipate White people.

Reading's symbolic power as a liberating force in Covington's world depends on a deceptive commonsense about how fascism works. In his books, the freedom-fighting rebels take up arms against a fascist "System" that cleaves the people from their literary roots and consequently from a truth that System fears. The irony, of course, is that this same deceptive commonsense permeates the media worlds in which we authors circulate, where the politics are different but the genre is analogous: books hold *our* dangerous knowledge; *they* prefer to keep the people dumb; *those* interpretations prop up despots; *these* readings will set us free. In this battle between strongmen's reading praxes, we will not get very far—not least because fascists have never been content with intellectual suppression. They often seize the means of intellectual production to broadcast truths positioned as the answers to some prior tyranny.

This is not an argument of crass equivalence. It is not a call to empathize with fascists. It *is* a nudge toward the hard work that comes in practicing an antifascist kind of reading. A kind that does not simply read the world against one's foes, but does so in a deeply dialogic mode that can abide some messiness; that might admire texts without rushing to their defense; that is anarchist and a bit iconoclastic.[32] A

30. Compare John Jackson's (2017: 21) discussion of a spirit medium he encountered in the field: "a free black man born in New York City in the early nineteenth century" who taught him that "'dead white men' could be made to speak in other voices."

31 .*A Distant Thunder* (2004: 353).

32. Thanks to David Boarder Giles for helping us think this through.

kind that need not limit the interpretive terrain to advance its liberatory vision, which is precisely what Covington attempts within his series.

So, to return where we began, it would be a tragedy if we were banned from reading Judy Blume. But it would be a travesty if readers learned to hear Covington in Shakespeare's verse—if all these texts became recoded through his bookish mise-en-scène. When fascists tread a path to power not simply by burning books but by reading them so close that they can find their "stones" of truth on any page, then they assert a totalizing right to making meaning.

And we know that when these movements are successful, that right includes the right to shatter borders between text and world, as Bannon did when he turned to writing dramas for the nation, and as McVeigh did when he dog-eared his book to bomb Oklahoma City. Toni Morrison (1992: 4) once wrote that writing is more than an imaginative act. It is about "becoming" something and extending that becoming to one's audience. If Covington is any indication, then this is reading's final aim in fascist worlds as well: not to delight in the escapism of fiction, but to spark the bloody war to realize fiction's promise. To make the speculative a reality.

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