

The Future is [White] Female: *American Horror Story: Coven* and Toxic White Femininity

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Hanna Rosin's book, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* captures current popular sentiments regarding changing gender roles in the United States. Case studies and interviews reveal that for the first time in history the perception is that women are surpassing men's accomplishments in education and work. Many feel that Americans are not experiencing a leveling of the playing field, but rather, an inversion of it. As women become increasingly visible and influential in male-dominated spaces, representations of women in television and film respond accordingly. New possibilities in the social allow for believable portrayals of strong, capable women that demonstrate, not only women's potential but also their ability to do all that men can do. Challenges to long-held conventions can conversely reanimate staid representations of women that should no longer register as sensical.

American Horror Story: Coven, appearing in October 2013 on the FX Channel, presents women as mystical, evil, and seductive, as monstrous. This article argues that *Coven* seeks to negotiate the rise of monstrous women by offering a more acceptable version of the empowered woman that reasserts white, male patriarchal authority by promoting toxic white femininity. The analysis reveals how the nation's legacy of white supremacy continues to inform representations of race and gender. *Coven* exposes the toxic white femininity that continues to not only permeate contemporary feminism, but also supports the claims of a disgruntled white America. Using an intersectional approach to unpacking portrayals of good and bad witches as they are connected to race and gender, the analysis reveals that ultimately *Coven* tempers the acceptance of monstrous, empowered woman by presenting her as a woman that maintains conventions and perpetuates white patriarchy.

The horror genre in general is an ideal site to examine questions of gender and race. Levina and Bui assert that monstrous narratives have long represented
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collective and social anxieties, but they are particularly needed in this present decade because these stories tap into the uncertainty over the changing nature of American culture and society (1-2). *Coven* presents viewers with a landscape to grapple with the inevitability of the “rise of women.” “In horror cinema, the recurrence of women-as-monster (witch, vampire, succubus, possessed body, primal mother, femme fatale) suggests that the dread of woman arises not from her lack but from her eviscerating power” (Kelly 86). Studies looking at the intersection of race and gender are necessary to correct and expand the years of theory that look at women in horror through the lens of assumed whiteness (Brooks 21). More specifically, “*Coven* is a particularly important site to examine issues of race because it directly addresses race, racial difference, and racism through multiple plot lines” (LeBlanc 2).

American Horror Story: Coven aired in the fall of 2013. In this moment, Americans were confronted with many challenges to white centrality. Our cultural and political terrain became rife with white male victimage beginning with the 2008 economic collapse that was followed by the election of the nation’s first black president (Johnson 17). Calafell argues that the “rise in conservatism and nostalgia can be tied to the 2008 election of Barack Obama” (76). Heteronormativity, which directly connected to the perpetuation and constitution of white masculinity, was compromised as “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies had been repealed in the military and the promise of marriage equality nationwide seemed more possible than ever. If this is not enough of a challenge to white hetero-patriarchy, some of the most influential women in America were black women. The beloved mother of the nation and first lady, Michelle Obama was touted as the queen of health and style. No one could match the impact and following of the musical artist Beyoncé. And finally rounding out the list is one of the most influential people and thought leaders of the last several decades, Oprah Winfrey. These powerful women present a double-threat to white patriarchy. As all of these assaults are mounted against white patriarchy something as archaic and reoccurring as the figure of the witch provides the perfect villain to quell national anxieties.

American Horror Story: Coven

American Horror Story is unique from many other television series in that each season is written more like a miniseries because each show run contains a different storyline and theme. The show is praised by critics and fans for its edgy storylines, cinematic filming, and the casting of well-known and respected actors. *Coven* is season three of the series and aired October 2013 through January 2014. Season three focuses on a coven of witches and their rivals that practice voodoo. The coven of Salem descendants hides under the guise of a boarding school. The headmistress, Cordelia Foxx, is a committed and studious witch that has lived in the shadow of her powerful mother, Fiona, her entire life. Fiona is the “Supreme,” or most powerful witch, that took her position by killing her mentor and is now seeking out the next “Supreme.” As the new head witch realizes her powers and matures, Fiona begins to die. This creates danger and tension in the household for the four young witches enrolled at the school. In addition to the in-house issues, the coven must also deal with the wrath of the high voodoo priestess Marie Laveau. A longstanding truce between the covens resulted in segregating New Orleans into white coven and black coven territories. Voodoo high priestess Marie Laveau threatens war because Fiona digs up a 200-year-old slave mistress, the sadistic and brutal Delphine LaLaurie, that Laveau had cursed with immortality and buried alive as punishment for the unspeakable torture and murder of her love. This division is put on pause when the coven and voodoo priestess are forced to form an alliance when faced with the threat of witch hunters.

Coven not only addresses gender roles and their corresponding power relations but issues of race as well. Marie Laveau is an immortal voodoo priestess that resents the coven of Salem descendants because she believes that the Salem witches were generously given magic by an African house girl. The coven of predominantly white women would not even possess the craft if their ancestors had not taken that gift so many years ago, perverted it, and used it to gain power on the magical playing field. The white women’s procurement of magic from an African woman directly mirrors colonial relations. The fictional erasure of women of color from the history of magic is consistent with actual American history. When recalling the Salem witches, history has tended to omit one of the first three women put on trial, Tituba. She was an “Amerindian slave” that admitted to learning “techniques of divination” from her encounters with African and Creole culture and religion on a plantation in Barbados (Breslaw 21-39). Without her

testimony Breslaw speculates that the trial might not have happened (108). What should be noted is that Tituba did not view herself as practicing witchcraft in the sense that her accusers were defining it. She believed in the nuances of white and dark magic, and therefore did not see her practice of witchcraft as evil (Breslaw 109).

The show harnesses many longstanding archetypes of women in film and culture. The female characters can be grouped into one or several common characterizations of women: (bad) mother, whore, bitch, good girl/bad girl, and the selfless woman. The male characters on the show are predominantly emasculated men destroyed by women with the exception of a few characters that represent conventional, heteronormative (white) masculinity. This article cannot speak to all these different characterizations. This analysis will focus on how the narrative generates two types of witches: the “bad witches” that represent repugnant, monstrous women that seek to dismantle white patriarchy and the “good witches” that represent women, that may be powerful, but do not completely disrupt the “natural” order. I argue that these two types of witches represent the promise and threat of two different Americas. Women have long been viewed as the “body” of the nation because she gives life to the next generation of citizens and rears them, shaping their minds and morals. Amy Kaplan cites Catherine Beecher’s 1841 *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, “to American women, more than to any others on earth, is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, that are to renovate degraded men” (18). Even though the women of *AHS: Coven* are monstrous they still represent the potential futures of the nation.

The Bad Witch

The bad witches, Fiona Goode and Marie Laveau, are those women that present a great threat to white patriarchy. Both witches are the elders of their two covens and could easily be conceived of as representing a bygone era. As will be illustrated by presenting these two women as figures that make more sense in the past, they also promote the belief in a post-racial, post-feminist era in America. Two notions that work in their own way to secure a white supremacist nation.

While virtually all mothers on *Coven* are “bad” mothers, none as stereotypically so as Fiona Foxx. She is consumed with her own power and enjoyment. She abandons her daughter Cordelia at the academy leaving her to be

raised by fellow witch Myrtle Snow (a good mother figure). Fiona demonstrates many times that her sole concern is her vanity and own survival.

Fiona represents all things that would be viewed as repugnant by white patriarchy, particularly the alt-right. She is enervating, power-hungry, and a bad mother. Her control and emasculation of men is illustrated most cruelly by her treatment of the coven's longtime butler Spalding. He is so loyal to Fiona that when his tongue was cursed to speak the truth he cut it out to protect her. He is further cast in less than masculine terms by being shown collecting dolls and wearing women's nightwear while having tea parties with them. Spalding in turn represents what the future could hold for men if women like Fiona come into power.

Given Fiona's age she could be viewed as representing the second-wave of feminism (1960s – 1970s), and all the progress the women of that movement set in motion. With the perceived success of feminist activity of the 1970s a wave of feminist backlash discourse begins circulating in culture and society. Amanda LeBlanc asserts that Fiona "represents contemporary 'enlightened' anti-racism" because of her famous tirade when confronting LaLaurie, "there is nothing I hate more than a racist" (6). Fiona's character is consistent with a common type of "colorblind" white folk that perceive at the least themselves, if not the entire nation, as beyond race. Despite how despicable Fiona may be, she appears to be both post-racial and the deliverance of all that anti-feminists predicted would become of women if we achieve gender equality.

The second woman that exemplifies the "bad witch" camp is Marie Laveau. The portrayals of Salem witches versus voodoo witches is heavily laden with racial codes that reference longstanding constructions of black femininity. Voodoo horror has been connected to characterizations of black women as "odd and primitive" (Means Coleman 38). Since the beginning of the film medium Voodoo depicts danger and is often achieved through the presence of a Voodoo Queen (Means Coleman 49).

Marie Laveau can be read (perhaps too simplistically) through several of the "controlling images" of black women identified by Patricia Hill-Collins. Laveau is portrayed as an "overly aggressive women" that emasculate her lovers (75). Brooks asserts that the monstrosity of black women largely stems from the stereotype of the black Superwoman, also known as the strong black women (25). This stereotype was popularized by the 1950s television character Sapphire (*Amos 'n Andy*). Sapphire characters are black women "depicted as evil, treacherous,

bitchy, stubborn, and hateful” (hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* 85). LeBlanc notes that these controlling images are consistent with Laveau's characterization “that relies on stereotypes of a particularly threatening and exotic kind of black woman, even as she is presented as strong and capable” (9).

While *Coven* can be critiqued for lazily referencing stereotypical and dangerous representations of black women, it should be noted that Laveau's character also harkens back to cinematic representations of black women as vanquishers of white supremacy and this reference serves an important narrative function. Just as Fiona could be said to represent the white feminists of the second-wave of feminism, Marie Laveau is the resurrection of female characters from that same era featured in Blaxploitation films. Her character calls to mind what Means Coleman has identified as the Enduring Woman, the 1970s powerful black woman that uses voodoo to combat racism (120). “Much like the White Final Girl, Black women stare down death. However, these Black women are not going up against some boogeyman; rather, often their battle is with racism and corruption” (Means Coleman 132). One can connect the Enduring Woman back to Tituba and her observation that voodoo was not solely evil, and it is more about how you yield and practice the power that matters. Tituba and the Enduring Woman point to a continued misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and vilification of cultures that are outside of Eurocentric standards of acceptability. Ultimately and importantly, Laveau's embodiment of the Enduring Woman's qualities make her more terrifying and monstrous than Fiona because she directly challenges and threatens not only patriarchy, but white supremacy as well.

These two witches pose a threat to white patriarchy individually, but when combined their powers represent the ultimate threat. One of the few conventionally masculine characters, Harrison Renard is the patriarch of his family that have been witch hunters for generations (which espouse rhetoric reminiscent of white supremacist and ethnic purity). Renard is also the CEO for a billionaire assets management corporation. It is interesting to note that the great white, corporate hegemon is not only a successful capitalist but his real purpose is to kill witches; to kill monstrous women with unpredictable and dangerous powers. Fiona and Marie Laveau join forces to cut off the supplies to the corporation and thus render it bankrupt. When Renard and the witches meet to come to a negotiation they refuse his offer of a 100-year truce between the hunters and the witches. They demand that the witch hunting must stop or they will kill him. He does not relent, resulting in his death. It is at this moment in the series

when it seems as though the notion that women are the destroyer of men has been realized. White, heteronormative masculinity has been defeated by the unification of the coven Supreme and Voodoo priestess.

Attacks on masculinity in the United States is also a direct threat to the centrality of whiteness. They have been inextricably linked since the founding of the nation because white men create the institutions and systems that guaranteed their hegemonic authority and privilege. The remasculinization of American culture has been ongoing since the end of the Vietnam War (Daniels 54). This is largely due to the proliferation of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that called into question white hetero-patriarchy. This decades long struggle has led to a crisis of masculinity where "... the growing power of women and sexual minorities is seen as a zero-sum game for 'real men' by attacking those who are perceived as threatening the status quo" (Blazak 177). "[F]eminism, multiculturalism, homosexuality, and Christian-bashing are all tied together, part and parcel of the New World order... so that multicultural textbooks, women in government, and legalized abortion can individually be taken as signs of the impending New World Order" (Ferber 155). It is because of the perceived threat of this New World Order that Fiona and Marie represent the embodiment of the ultimate hazard to white patriarchy and their generational representation holds powerful symbolism given that they stand-in for the second-wave of feminism and the Black Power movement.

Amy King provides an assessment of the significance of the alliance of Fiona and Marie, that *Coven's* "very obvious equating of women (both black and white) with magic underscores popular fears about women's power that, if united, would could undo patriarchal structures" (566). Their alliance demonstrates what is possible when white and black women form alliances; when they see that their liberation is intertwined. Such an alliance would also represent the end of the white supremacy and toxic white femininity that has plagued feminism in America since the nineteenth century and has prevented the alliance of white women with women of color.

The criticisms of white feminists have existed in the United States since the days of abolition where even though white women were seeking to free black women, as well as black men, white women rarely viewed or treated black women as equals and often refused to organize with them. As struggles for suffrage quickened in the United States many white women withdrew from struggles for race equality and focused on securing the right for *white* women to

vote. Angela Davis cites the Seneca Falls Declaration as the marker of the historical division between black and white women as evidenced by the fact that black women were in attendance at Seneca Falls but white women's documents make no mention of them (Davis 54). Barbara Andolsen addresses the shortsightedness of the majority of white suffragettes in the 1920s:

The moral irony of the American woman suffrage movement is that the suffragists committed the very sin for which they called others to task... They insisted on the universality of human rights principles when they were the beneficiaries of an application of those principles; but in their concern to defend their own rights, they gradually turned away from situations, in which they were called upon to demand unequivocally those same rights for black women and men. (130)

This "sin" continued into the next moment of increased feminist activity, often called the second wave of feminism, spanning the 1960s and 1970s. A group of black feminists formed the Combahee River Collective in 1974 and wrote the definitive text, "A Black Feminist Statement," which is arguably the theorization of feminism that Kimberlé Crenshaw coined as "intersectionality" in her 1991 article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." The CRC state "... we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and we see our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (233). Fiona and Laveau's victory demonstrate the potential of a truly intersectional feminism to disrupt patriarchy; when women are capable of seeing that they are united by a shared identity (witch, woman) and that one cannot ignore one group of women to ensure the advancement of the other. In short, the end of toxic white femininity within feminist movements.

Coven would conclude with a tidy ending if the destruction of Harrison Renard were the end of the story. The victory over Renard is short-lived as both women are punished in horrible ways. Due to tensions within the coven, which is mostly because of Fiona's unwillingness to let her power flow into the next Supreme, the story continues. Fiona tricks the coven into believing she has been killed resulting in the necessity to identify the next Supreme. She does this so the next leader will be revealed and she can kill her to capture her power and remain

living. In the end Fiona relents and dies in her daughter's embrace. Viewers see Fiona trapped in her own personal hell. She is stuck in a small house in the woods with her psychotic lover, serial killer the Axeman. With the Axeman she is not able to use her mystical powers to control him. Fiona's end seems a fitting punishment as she is relegated to the realm of the home, serving a man for all of eternity.

Marie Laveau meets an arguably more horrid end. Delphine LaLaurie is a demented eighteenth century socialite that committed unspeakable acts towards her slaves. She becomes the target of Marie's wrath when she kills Laveau's lover for having sex with her daughter (that the daughter initiated). Delphine is placed under a curse that grants her immortality so that Marie can bury her alive, where she remains until Fiona digs her up. In the end Marie is robbed of her immortality because Delphine dismembers her and she is not able to fulfill her promise to Papa Legma (a demon) of delivering one newborn sacrifice each year so he banishes her to hell. The combined fates of Fiona and Marie serve as warning to those that seek to disrupt the authority of white patriarchy, that dare to be monstrous women. The "good witches" of *Coven* provide a contrast to the cautionary tale of Fiona and Marie by presenting viewers with the preferred potential future of female empowerment.

The Good Witch

Cordelia, Queenie, and to a lesser degree Zoe, all serve as not only the good witch but as representations of the future of empowered women, of the future of feminism. Just as Fiona and Marie represented the generation of empowered women that experienced the height of their activism in the 1970s, these three women represent third-wave and millennial-aged feminists. While Marie and Fiona represent challenges to white patriarchy, these three witches present a vision of feminism that masquerades as women empowerment when it actually reinforces white supremacy and masculinity.

Just as the "bad witch" group contains an archetypal white women and black woman, so too does the "good witch" pair. Queenie is a teenaged, black witch that grew up in the foster system of Detroit. She possesses the unusual gift of being a voodoo doll in reverse. If she harms herself the damage will appear on the body of the person she is focusing on. Queenie is initially presented as angry, just like Marie, but that changes by the end of the season. When the witches in the

Robichaux's Academy meet Queenie there is a lot tension. Once she meets Marie she decides to join the Voodoo coven for a brief time before returning to the Academy to complete the Supreme trials. As the series ends, Queenie has found her place among her (white) coven and by Cordelia's side. Queenie becomes the "model minority" in that we no longer see her resisting white authority or succumbing to stereotypical behaviors. She reassures viewers that an idealized post-racial America where minority groups assimilate to white supremacy is possible and benefits Queenie.

The ultimate symbol of goodness (i.e. white feminine heteronormativity) and the future is Cordelia Foxx. She is Fiona's abandoned daughter that was raised by coven member, Myrtle. At the beginning of the series Cordelia is a gifted teacher, that cares for the girls like her own daughters, and is longing for children of her own. She is also married to an ordinary man (that is later revealed to be the son of Harrison Renard). Despite her inability to have children she is the best mother in the series.

The Supreme trial uncovers that the Supreme is not one of the young witches but rather Cordelia. This is an important point in the storyline for several reasons, by making Cordelia the Supreme the audience is provided with a corrective for all the negative portrayals of women as whore, bitch, and evil. Cordelia in many ways represents conventional and safe forms of female power. She does not seek to overpower others but rather empowers them, thus providing an acceptable form of female power to the viewers.

Cordelia possessed a strong desire to be a mother but was sadly unable to bear children. She in many ways plays the role of the good mother in how she cares for and disciplines the young witches. Like a good mother and woman, she puts the well-being of the coven before herself. She was rendered blind due to an acid attack made by the witch hunters. This allowed her to develop a second sight. She was able to use this sight to sense danger that threatened the coven. Once her eyesight was restored by her surrogate mother, Myrtle Snow, she is distressed to find that she has lost her second sight. In an attempt to protect and preserve the coven Cordelia stabs herself in both eyes with gardening shears rendering herself blind and disfigured. This act demonstrates the expected female qualities of selflessness and the instinct to protect her family unit.

Cordelia also does not desire power. She just wants to serve the coven and teach young witches. She does not come to power because she wants it but because Myrtle Snow encourages her to do so. It seems as though Madison may

be the next supreme and if that were to happen it would just be a repeating of the events that took place when Fiona was the Supreme. Cordelia ultimately decides to take the leadership role and realize her full power, not for selfish reasons, but for the greater good. She is even admonished by Myrtle Snow when she tells Cordelia that her “tasteful modesty is out of fashion” (“The Seven Wonders”).

Cordelia also creates racial harmony within the coven by appointing Queenie as an equal council member with Zoe (a young white witch). While Cordelia embraces Queenie and gives her an important place in the planning of the coven’s future, it is only under the condition that Queenie assimilates to the ways of the coven and practice Salem, i.e. white, magic. Queenie’s appointment to the council demonstrates that the Coven, like America, is founded on equality; whereby equality is premised on (a hegemonic form of) sameness. LeBlanc describes Queenie’s assimilation,

The last moments of the season show Queenie, a black witch, and Zoe, a white witch, accepting a position on Cordelia’s council. After Queenie tenderly reminds Cordelia that ‘I have your back,’ we see her descending the staircase of the (stark white) coven foyer surrounded by her all white peers and superiors. She has been fully and completely integrated into the white coven. (11)

This final scene supports Amanda LeBlanc’s overall thesis that *Coven* represents a post-racial America by presenting racism that exists in the past via the repugnant character of Delphine LaLaurie and by doing so presents the *false* notion that America has moved beyond the horrors and injustices of that past (3). If Queenie delivers on the promises of a post-racial America, Cordelia represents a postfeminist one. Calafell citing Jess Butler urges us to not merely think of post-feminism as backlash but also as achievement of gender equality rendering feminist activism obsolete and a reviving of natural sexual differences (76). Cordelia not only represents the championing of more conventional femininity but also reasserts the centrality of whiteness and white authority.

In the end Fiona relents and dies in her daughter’s embrace, the rebellious witch and “whore” Madison has died at the hands of Kyle, and Marie Laveau has been banished to hell. Thus, all the dark magic has been purged from the earth. The source of this dark magic was ultimately the result of the pursuit of power, vanity, jealousy, and revenge, in short monstrous women. Cordelia is the new

leader of the coven with her former beauty restored and with this an assurance that the world is safe from evil, monstrous women. She perpetuates the historical focus of feminism on “primarily white bourgeois women” (hooks, *Margin to Center* 43). She is the promise of a proliferation of safe (white) female power and a warning of what is to come if the dangerous women are left unchecked.

Cordelia Foxx: Tradwife of Coven

It stands to reason that as masculinity is called into question white supremacy groups will gain members. Because American masculinity is premised on whiteness an attack on one is viewed as an attack on the other. These groups restore a white man’s sense of place in a society that no longer resembles the America of his father and grandfather. Whiteness has long been used as a way to downplay class inequalities and divert the attention of white men away from economic disparities. Many white Americans idealize the mythic period of prosperity when blue-collar jobs and G.I. bills were plentiful, enabling most families to thrive. As the economic downturn has eradicated the promise of prosperity a discourse of racial discrimination against whites has diverted attention away from the real culprits of the loss of economic opportunity. Paul Johnson observes that white male victimage has been circulated via literature and cinema since the second half of the twentieth century and the television series *Breaking Bad* is one of the most influential of these contemporary texts:

For a long time being white and male has entailed imagining that you are on the run, hounded by a public that no longer appreciates your genius while harassed by a cavalcade of critics possessed of ‘political correctness;’ since 2008, it has also meant that to look to the political for reassurance leads to an encounter with a calm, collected, and racially Other man whose easy charisma exacerbates rather than reassures your anxieties.” (Johnson 23)

The rhetoric of white supremacy reassures followers that they are victims that merely need to regain their rightful place as the leaders of the nation.

A restoration of a social order that is under threat will require the cooperation and participation of white women. At the most basic level white women are essential to the continuation of the white race (Daniels 58). “Gender is further implicated in that one of the major arenas of threat is to the homes of white men.

The notion of ‘home’ again conjures up a vision of the nuclear family... it is within this ‘home’ that white women are located” (Daniels 44). The notion of home has been central to white patriarchy as it is not only the proverbial man’s castle but it also constitutes the division of the public and private sphere. Whiteness and heterosexuality work in tandem and each needs the other to sustain their power (McIntosh, “Victims” 162). Many white women have embraced their role of mother of the white race. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s *Mothers of Mass Resistance* chronicles the role of women in white supremacist movements and identifies their contributions in and outside of the home. Within the home white women “police[d] the relationships and racial identities of their neighbors” (6). Outside of the home they “maintain the ‘color line,’ they drew on evidence gathered from their work as registrars, social workers, and teachers and provided by local knowledge, local history, and even rumor” (6).

White supremacy does not only take the form of organized Nazi groups and militias. Many white Americans ignore their privilege and participate in unquestioned rituals and practices that reassert the authority and invisibility of whiteness. Dawn McIntosh explains how she, like so many other white women, did integrate these practices:

... white women overtly defend whiteness and heteronormativity through displacing the blame for many white men’s racist, sexist, and homophobic actions. We let out a disregarding laugh, shrug our shoulders and claim, ‘that’s the way it is.’ Defending white heteronormativity is how white straight women are taught to love white men, work for white men, and befriend white men. (“Victims” 164)

When white men and women “perform whiteness correctly [they] have no emotive understanding of these performances and/or the affective consequences these performances displace on Others” (McIntosh, “White Feelings” 155). The fact that white supremacist practices and ideologies are unconscious, and at times unintentional, does not excuse it and speaks to the nefarious nature of racism in the United States and illustrates how it continues to structure culture and society today.

The recent phenomenon of “tradwives” (traditional wives) illustrates how white heteronormativity, that perpetuates white supremacy, is being given a makeover. In her opinion piece for the *New York Times*, Annie Kelly reports that

alt-right movements in the United States and Europe are having to address “The Women Question” given the power of the female vote to swing elections. The answer, according to Kelly, is the rise of “tradwives.” These are women that use YouTube and social media platforms to promote the virtues of traditional motherhood that include staying home with many children and submitting to male authority. These women also hide under the guise of trending DIY activities such as growing your own organic produce and making your own nontoxic cleaning products. Kelly finds tradwives to be especially specious in that the women’s underlying discourse is that of white nationalism be it overt like the challenge from “Wife With a Purpose” to match or beat her “white baby challenge” to more subtle racist references. Kelly notes that these women’s grievances compliment those of the alt-right that we are living in a world that has been dismantled by diversity initiatives and immigration resulting in a loss of livelihood. These tradwives wish to restore the conditions necessary for them to return to an idyllic time when their men could provide and they would never have to consider employment to support a family. Kelly warns she has seen the number of tradwives and their followers dramatically increase since 2015.

Tradwives not only represent an acceptable form of female respectability to white supremacists but they also draw from longstanding tropes of womanhood that are also paradoxically directly connected to women being characterized as witches. Western civilization¹ has historically positioned woman as the binary opposition to man. Part of the reason is to maintain strictly defined power relations, but it is also because there is something perceived to be mysterious, mystical even, about women. It has always been imagined that women were more connected to the earth and the ethereal. In ancient Greece as Athenians made the move away from myth and towards science and logic, women were removed from society. Solon, the ancient Athenian leader, enacted strict laws that required women to have a chaperone and follow a strict dress code as they were believed to be temptresses. Perhaps even more severe was that he no longer permitted women to lament at funerals. Priestesses were prohibited from practicing in religious ceremonies that often included rapturous singing and dancing (J. Williams 15). Women represented an archaic, mystical past and as such were

¹ My discussion of the witch stems from a largely Eurocentric perspective because I am primarily considering how this trope is functioning within the narrative of *AHS: Coven*, which relies heavily on Eurocentric constructs in its treatment of witches.

characterized as vessels or conduits of all that was dark and evil in the world. This construction of women as dark vessels also provides plausible explanations for their sources of power as demonic, thereby labeling female spiritual leaders as witches. Charlene Spretnak explains:

In patriarchal societies that replace the earlier Earth-honoring and female-honoring cultures of Neolithic Europe, both women and nature were – and are – considered potentially dangerous and chaotic. Only by dominating and transcending both to those seats of supposedly threatening power could males experience spiritual deliverance, according to patriarchal religion. (272)

The notion that women were somehow closer to, or even a part of, nature is central to the logic that positions women as the opposite to men and also his inferior. Or as Catherine Roach succinctly states, “The basic argument is that in patriarchal culture, when women are seen as closer to nature than men, women are inevitably seen as less fully human than men” (56). The conflation of women and nature allowed for both to be viewed as things that were chaotic and unpredictable, but they were also things that needed to be tamed and made subject to the domination of man. Women then – just like the earth, animals, and nature – were something to be controlled by men, and both were also terrifying. It is not only the unpredictable and unknown, mystical elements of both that were particularly troubling, but also that to be close to one was to be confronted with a part of oneself that must be overcome.

Josephine Donovan citing Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, explains that the male maturation process is dependent upon the ability to establish an autonomous masculine identity. To achieve this, separation from the feminine/maternal is necessary. Because woman has been conflated with nature and beast, it has led to men’s desire to control and establish a firm separation from the female sex. To be close to one’s mother is to remind man of the thing that ultimately distinguishes men from women: women can give birth. This ability is seen as grounding women more in nature, the processes of her body – menstruation or pregnancy – are mysteries never to be understood by men, and it is her body that also renders her irrational and never capable of fully maturing intellectually. Donovan asserts that there exists a fear in men that their proximity to women can render man a beast. There is a fear that a closeness to woman/nature returns them to “the forest world

where men are turned into animals and held captive in permanent dependence” (180). For it is in nature that women are believed to be closer to their source of power and in this space man is far removed from his. If a man does not maintain his distance and control over women he and society will not evolve: “Western woman – in the guise of the irrational, the unlimited, the bestial, the inferior ‘other’ end of the good/evil duality – had unleashed all the evils of Pandora’s box upon men, and caused males to be flung out of Paradise” (Antonio 216).

This longstanding construction of woman as a mystical, destroyer of man has repeatedly throughout history taken the form of and given the name, *witch*. Victoria Madden cites Carol F. Karlsen, “Only by understanding that the history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women... can we confront the deeply embedded feelings about women... we still live with witches in our culture, however much their shape may have changed over time” (13). Women historians have shown that women were accused of witchcraft due to the “multilayered fears specific to early modern culture about the possibilities and dangers of female power” (Godbeer 475). Witches have become the container for the “ultimate male fear: uncontrollable females who, endowed with unholy powers, threaten to break free of the margins to which they must be confined” (Madden 15). It is imagined that in the twenty-first century that Western culture and society has, via logic and rationalism, moved beyond myth and the supernatural as possible explanations for phenomena in the world. In the age of the “rise of women,” it may perhaps be too plausible an explanation that *the witch is back*.

In a time when female empowerment is inescapable and the “woman question” unavoidable, tradwives represent the potential to direct women into traditional and safe spaces of power. For tradwives, female power is rooted in something old and natural, and takes the form of connecting to the earth via gardening and making jam. The mysterious female body is kept in check by producing (white) babies and continuing a male’s bloodline. Tradwives do not completely diminish or alleviate the anxieties surrounding women’s bodies and their potential power, but rather put those bodies in check in ways that secure and support white patriarchy. These women are “good witches” because they do not engage in masculine spaces or seek to assume or appropriate what has been traditionally defined as male power.

Cordelia is the ultimate good witch because in many ways she embodies the values of a tradwife. Her New Order is a coven of tame and disciplined witches. She represents a form of female empowerment that is not only heteronormative

but consistent with traditional values. This form of female empowerment restores women to what some may view as a lost place of privilege and purpose. Women were once viewed as being the rulers of their own domain, the home, and it is here that women had an important, respected, and even holy function in society (Kaplan 18). Cordelia disrupts the discourse of female empowerment being consistent with radical politics and instead represents a way that wayward and monstrous women can be domesticated and returned to their *natural* place: the center of a *white* home where men can be men and white patriarchy is restored in America.

Conclusion

This particular season of *American Horror Story* remains relevant in the aftermath of one of the most public witch hunts of our modern times. The presidential campaign of Hillary Rodman Clinton was for many the ultimate rise of women as she sought to break through the most impenetrable glass ceiling by becoming the first woman to secure the Democratic presidential nomination. Secretary Clinton was subjected to harsh scrutiny as well as numerous allegations of questionable, if not illegal conduct, regarding her use of private emails. Other accusations questioned the contributions made to her charity, The Clinton Foundation, as well as, claims that she was complicit in her husband's, President Bill Clinton, sexual harassment and assault of women. A common chant, some might say rallying cry, among Trump supporters, became "LOCK HER UP!" Margaret Talbot writes that Clinton has been criticized and judged in every manner a woman can be: for keeping her maiden name, for her labor intensive career as a lawyer while having a young child, her physical appearance, for not smiling, as well as common fearmongering reserved for women, she is a lesbian, a "Lacy Macbeth," she is responsible for the death of Vince Foster, and that she was not really capable based on her own merit but siphoned power from her influential husband, that cheated on her no less (19). Susan Fauldi wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed piece that Clinton was "cast not just as a political combatant but as a demon who, in the imaginings of the Republicans like Paul D. Ryan, the speaker of the House, and Representative Trent Franks, would create an America 'where passion – the very stuff of life – is extinguished' (the former) and where fetuses would be destroyed 'limb from limb' (the latter)." While Secretary Clinton

did ultimately win the popular vote in the 2016 presidential election, the public discourse surrounding her character and ability highlighted the persisting sexist attitudes prevalent in American culture, society, and politics, as well as, demonstrated the tendency to demonize and vilify powerful women.

Americans continued to witness the rise of women after Clinton's defeat the day following Donald Trump's inauguration as President. The Women's March on Washington incited political mobilization of women across the United States as well as the world. More Americans appeared in D.C. to protest the Trump presidency than to see him become president. The event featured many celebrity speakers from the entertainment and activist's realms. As 2017 progressed the organization E.M.I.L.Y., and others like it, began reaching out to women, offering to train them to run for political office. And at the close of 2017, Americans witnessed a string of sexual predators be brought to justice in the entertainment industry (Harvey Weinstein, Louis C. K., Israel Horovitz, and Kevin Spacey), the news industry (Charlie Rose and Matt Lauer), publishing (Hamilton Fisher V), and in politics (Roy Moore and Al Franken). The courage of the victims to name their violators sparked the social media movement #MeToo. While some may cite the problematic nature of the campaign by perhaps asking too much of victims and survivors to come forward, it has been a source of healing for others. What may prove to be one of the most important outcomes of the movement is that it exposes the ubiquity of sexual harassment and assault and by extension complicating and delegitimizing the trope of woman as seductress (one characteristic comprising the archetype of the witch).

As encouraging as this moment of women empowerment may be, feminists have been forced to confront one of the most contentious and divisive issues within feminist academic and activist circles: race. First, many Americans were puzzled if not disturbed to learn that the majority of white women (53%) voted for Donald Trump. Senior Correspondent for the *New York Times*, Susan Chira, states, "The dream that women would vote for a woman overlooked the seductive pulls and interactions among party, class and racial identity that have long divided women as much as their gender was assumed to unite them." While many were quick to characterize a Trump supporter as a white man from rural America, Senior Culture Writer for BuzzFeed, Anne Helene Petersen, warned of the "Ivanka Voter." The article profiling this particular portion of Trump supporters describe a white, middle to upper-class woman that lives in the suburbs of the Midwest where perhaps the majority of those in her community are viewed as

either liberal or not particularly political. What is significant about the “Ivanka Voter” is that Americans were quick to believe that it would be sexism that would potentially cost Clinton the election when in actuality many argue in the aftermath that race presented the biggest hurdle to securing a democratic win. For many, Hillary Clinton represented the continuation of the America changed by the Obama years and the threat to white centrality and normativity the election of the first black president presented.

The tension between white feminists and feminists of color recently surfaced during and after the Women’s March on Washington in 2017. The moniker “Becky” was used in news outlets and social media postings to refer to the white feminist that was blind to, or may even embrace, her white privilege. The brief tracing of the history of division between white women and specifically black women (but also more generally non-white women) I provide is significant to the analysis of *Coven*. Elisabete Lopes asserts that *Coven* presents a feminist subtext that subverts many fairytale conventions, but this argument should be countered that while this may be partially true, its feminist potential is rendered impotent (np). LeBlanc supports my assertion, “*Coven* is situated within a (pop)cultural landscape that purports to tell stories about strong and resilient women, while collapsing the category of woman into a singular (white) experience” (12). The conclusion of the series robs it of any subversive potential because the brand of feminism that is forwarded and celebrated is one that is patently white and meek. *Coven* render witches no longer monstrous. This diminishes the potential representation of radical politics because it is in their monstrosity that witches are their most powerful and present the largest threat to white patriarchy. It stands to reason the rise of empowered women could increase white supremacy movements because threatened masculinity, as was discussed, leads to an increase in white supremacist ideology, but white women and white feminists should also not overlook how the embracing of their white privilege also contributes to a system of white supremacy and toxic white femininity. Taking this into account could very well offer some new avenues for understanding the rise of the Alt Right and a Trump presidency. This article encourages scholars to tend to the intersections, particularly the connection between American identity, whiteness, and masculinity.

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