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Valorizing Trump's Masculine Self: Constructing Political Allegiance during the 2016 Presidential Election

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Abstract

Presidential candidates' gendered self-presentations may help secure political support, but a 'gendered self' is a construct grounded in an audience's interpretation as much as it is in a politician's performance. The 2016 U.S. presidential election provides a unique opportunity to investigate how voters construct politicians as gendered. Based on pre-election interviews, we analyze how Trump supporters accounted for their allegiance by constructing and valorizing Trump's masculine self—a cultural construct centered on exerting or resisting control. Interviewees (A) praised his politically incorrect spirit, (B) glorified his entrepreneurial spirit, and (C) celebrated his fighting spirit. We argue that understanding how people construct others' gendered selves is important for scholars of both politics and manhood.

Keywords

dramaturgy, electoral politics, manhood acts, Trump, masculinity

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During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump presented himself as an icon of American manhood: a confident, savvy, and aggressive businessman who had the guts to take on the political establishment (Schrock et al. 2018; Katz 2016). He also portrayed himself as dominant over women in part by "positioning them as sex objects" and superior to other men by painting them as "weak" or "dangerous" (Pascoe 2017, 129, 131).[1] What he lacked in experience or knowledge of politics, he compensated for with manhood. Trump praised hyper-masculine right-wing authoritarians (Calamur 2019) and often adopted their communication practices (Fuchs 2018),[2] although he fluidly moved between styles of masculine performance (Messerschmidt and Bridges 2018). Trump's symbolic (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017), emotional (Schrock et al. 2017;), and racialized discourse (Bobo 2017) seemed designed to, and actually did, appeal to the white working class (Hochschild 2016; Morgan and Lee 2018), yet voters' sexism significantly affected their support (Knuckey 2019). Both liberal magazines (e.g., Hamblin 2016) and conservative outlets (e.g., Watts 2017) suggested Trump's presentation of manhood fostered such support, but such claims were not based on empirical evidence and assumed Trump supporters were passively swayed rather than actively participating in the construction of Trump as manly. Did Trump supporters actively frame Trump as gendered? If so, how did they do it?

We investigate these questions by analyzing how Trump supporters we interviewed during the run-up to the 2016 presidential election talked to us about why they supported Trump. Instead of taking a positivist approach in which we tested hypotheses, we took a grounded theory approach in which we bracketed expectations and discovered patterns in the data, from which we developed a more generic conceptual rendering that aims to be useful (and refined) in analyses of other groups and contexts (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967). Instead of taking a psychological approach in which we viewed interviewees' words as indicating their attitudes or consciousness or their influenceability, we take a dramaturgical approach and view them as rhetorical accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) that justified their support. Similar to research on how speakers' accounts impose morally tainted or valorized gender identities on others (e.g., Scully and Marola's [1984] study of rapists), we analyze how interviewees *constructed and valorized Trump as a man*.

We conceptualize interviewees' accounts as valorizing Trump's "masculine self" because they emphasized the key cultural codes of such an alleged self: the capacity to exert control over or resist being controlled by others (Johnson 2005). We thus employ a critical dramaturgical perspective that views a credible masculine self as a fictional yet culturally powerful status that audiences bestow on actors (Schwalbe 2005). We use the terms "masculine self" or "manhood" rather than "masculinity" to signal we are grounding our analysis in a manhood acts approach (e.g., Schwalbe 2014; Ezzell 2016) rather than a multiple masculinities approach (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Overall, we aim to encourage political scholars

to examine how audiences discursively invoke cultural codes of gender to justify political support and gender scholars to study how people not only enact manhood but also implicitly frame others' actions as gendered or indicative of "masculine selves."

Before contextualizing this study in the literature on politics and gender, let us first contextualize Trump's political persona by comparing it with Barack Obama's. On the 2008 campaign trail, Obama presented himself as "keeping it real" to connect with the black community and "keeping it proper" to connect with mainstream and white voters (Young 2011). Obama's speeches (Gooding 2016) and his campaign's framing (Gorzelany-Mostak 2016) presented him as a reserved, responsible, and respectable man—disaffiliating from stereotypes of Black men as untrustworthy, uncontrollable, and uncouth (see e.g., Collins 2004). Trump's wealth, celebrity, and whiteness arguably constituted a "status shield" (Hochschild 1983, 163), enabling him to forgo civility and present a notably crass masculine self. Similar to how the 1980 electorate reacted against the diplomatic persona of the preceding president Jimmy Carter by electing the more militaristic Ronald Reagan (Orman 1987), many arguably reacted against Obama's even-tempered persona by endorsing the brash Trump. Trump's racial discourse and work with white nationalists further distanced him from Obama, against whom he fostered racial resentment by perpetuating the myth that Obama was not born in the U.S. (Tope, Pickett, Cobb, and Dirlam 2014).

Understanding supporters' valorization of Trump during the 2016 election also requires taking into account his opponent, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Unlike Trump, Clinton's gender status was a political liability (Bordo 2017; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019). Conservatives and the media began publicly branding her as a "bitch" during the 1990s (Anderson 1999) and more subtly degraded her as "bitch-like" (i.e., overly assertive and manipulative) during her 2008 primary run against Obama (Lim 2009). Sheeler and Anderson (2013, 134) situates such bitchifying within the increasing "pornification" of political culture, an anti-feminist backlash that is "increasingly misogynistic as women close in on the office of US president." During the 2016 campaign, mainstream news, conservative social media, and Internet outlets derided Clinton as either weak and feminine or masculine and deceitful (Bordo 2017). At Trump rallies, she was framed as a bitch through chants and merchandising, and our interviewees characterized her as using her alleged bitch-like personality to engage in profiteering, power plays, and the evasion of legal accountability (Erichsen et al., N.d.). In his study of nine working class white men who voted for Trump, Francis (2018) suggests aversion to Clinton was key. Voters, pundits, and media thus drew on gendered cultural codes to demean her *as a woman*. In contrast, in this article, we show how voters used gendered cultural codes to valorize Trump *as a man*—despite (or perhaps because of) his history of attacking women, exploiting workers, stereotyping minorities, and bankrupting businesses.

Gender and Electoral Politics

Sociological research on gender and electoral politics typically examines how women and men differentially support political parties and candidates. Women voters are more likely than men to vote Democratic, and this gender gap has intensified over time (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Manza and Brooks 1999). The 1996 U.S. presidential election has become emblematic of this chasm, as there was a 14-point difference between men and women's Democratic votes—the largest gulf since 1948 (Kauffman and Petrocik 1999, 865). Political sociologists have proposed distinct causes of the gap, attributing it to women's increased workforce participation (Manza and Brooks 1999), adoption of a feminist consciousness (Manza and Brooks 1998), and liberal political stances (Studlar McAllister, and Hayes 1998). The Republican party's 1980s shift toward emphasizing identity politics and the Democratic party's "greater willingness to support . . . social services" likely also reinforced the gap (Manza and Brooks 1999, 235). Such work suggests that transformations of the gender order and political strategies shape the gendering of elections, yet reveal little about voters' gendered conceptions of candidates.

Many psychologically oriented scholars focus on people's gendered attitudes and voting preferences or gendered perceptions of leadership. Simis and Bumgardner (2017) find that believing that "gender inequality is nonexistent" is associated with voting for conservative presidential candidates. Rossenwasser Rogers, Fling, Silvers-Pickens, and Butemeyer (1987) show how people rate male presidential candidates as more competent at "masculine" tasks (e.g., dealing with the military and national defense) and female candidates as more competent at "compassionate" tasks (e.g., improving education and equal rights). Johns and Shepard (2007) find that voters also judge male candidates more harshly on compassionate issues and female candidates more harshly on military issues (see also Lee 2014). Such work resonates with Eagly's classic work demonstrating how people perceive leadership as masculine (Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky 1992) and view male leaders more positively and "role congruent' than women leaders (Eagly and Karau 2002). Others also find that people express preferential attitudes toward political candidates when perceived as possessing masculine traits (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Although such work suggests gendered attitudes shapes political support, it sheds less light on how people linguistically construct candidates as gendered.

Scholars do study how politicians themselves construct or "do" gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). Much work focuses on how male politicians present themselves as men. Kimmel (1996, 36–37) discusses how during the 1840 presidential election, William Henry Harrison used log cabin and hard cider imagery to "outmasculinize" his opponent. Messner (2007) examines how California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger presented himself as both tough and compassionate, creating a "hybrid masculinity" that resonated with diverse audiences.

Coe et al. (2007) find that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, George W. Bush re-masculinized himself as a "war president" capable of leading a "war on terror."

Messerschmidt (2016, 167, 170) examines how both Bush and Obama drew on "villain–victim–hero" discourse when talking about the Iraq war, which he framed as "fashion[ing] themselves regionally as *hegemonic masculine heroic protectors* of all U.S. citizens, situating them as superior to their subordinate, dependent, and emphasized feminine subjects." Outside of the U.S., Norocel (2010) analyzes how Romanian right-wing politicians cast themselves as "guiding fathers," Foxall (2013) shows how Russian President Vladimir Putin portrays himself as a muscular hunter, and Maiolino (2015) examines how Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau signified manhood by engaging in and winning a charity boxing match. Overall, this work examines how candidates present themselves, but overlooks how audiences make sense of such posturing. As Alexander (2004, 545) suggests, although it is important to understand politicians' "performances," supporters are not "passive receptacles" but "active, interpreting audiences."

Other scholars examine how the media constructs candidates as gendered. Some find that media frames women and/or gay male politicians as unsuitable for leadership (Trimble, Raphael, Sampert, Wagner, and Gerrits 2015), impair women's campaigns by focusing on their appearance or lifestyle (Meeks 2012), and dedicate less space for women candidates (Shor, Rijt, Ward, Askar, and Skie 2014). The national media often invokes gendered language to emphasize presidential candidates' masculine characteristics (Conroy 2015), including their sporting abilities (Moore and Dewberry 2012).[3] The media also portrays some male politicians as insufficiently manly, as was the case in 2004 when U.S. presidential candidate John Kerry was painted as French-like and feminine (Fahey 2007). Although research on how the media and politicians themselves construct gendered political personas moves beyond viewing gender as a categorical variable or trait, it does not shed light on how *voters* themselves discursively construct candidates. However, such research suggests that it is likely that voters valorize masculine selves when giving verbal accounts of political support.

Manhood Acts

We believe it is important to examine how individuals construct candidates as gendered because of our interactionist approach. Gender is more than an ideology, category, attitude, performance, structure, or media representation—it is also embedded in an audience's interpretation or framing (see, e.g., Ridgeway 2011; Westbrook and Schilt 2014). A basic interactionist proposition is that meaning is not inherent in an object or action (Blumer 1969). Rather, humans actively use language to assign meaning to things—including selves. Following Goffman (1959), we do not view the self as an innate thing that exists inside a person (i.e., a "true self"). Rather, the self is a construct that audiences impute onto others. Importantly, the larger culture provides an "identity code," or a shared understanding of what kinds of acts or bodily signs are indicative of a particular kind of "self" (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Audiences use this identity code as an

interpretive resource to assign gendered (and other) meanings to people's presentations. From this perspective, no behavior is "essentially" masculine or feminine; instead, people invoke cultural codes to frame people's actions as gendered.

Instead of situating our analysis within traditional masculinities theory (e.g., Connell 1995) or psychological approaches to gender, our approach draws on the manhood acts framework. A key assumption of this approach is that while inhabiting a male-typed body is usually (but not always) enough to be granted membership in the social category "man," expressing the capacity to exert control or resist being controlled by others is key to signifying the possession a credible masculine self (Johnson 2005). Such performances are called "manhood acts," a concept Stoltenberg (1993) coined and Schwalbe (2005) developed to take into account dramaturgical principles of self-presentation and concerns about contemporary "masculinities" theorizing.[4] A manhood acts approach resonates with other scholarship on men in that it emphasizes language, embodiment, emotion, interaction, and organizational processes (see Schrock and Schwalbe's [2009] review). But rather than conceptualizing men's actions as indicative of a specific type of masculinity (e.g., Black, inclusive, hybrid), scholars taking a manhood acts approach typically unpack the dramaturgical processes (e.g., narrative, emotional, virtual, embodied, etc.) through which people construct gendered selves.

Taking a manhood acts approach means that we are adopting a perspective that shapes what questions we ask and how we make sense of empirical patterns. Although some may see "the male sex role," "masculinity," and "manhood" as interchangeable concepts, sociologists typically use these terms to indicate a particular perspective. These terms were developed in part because early sociologists often employed a gender-blind perspective in which they did not conceive of men's behavior as gendered. After sex role theory conceptualized the "male sex role" as being tough and emotionally inexpressive, analysts often framed men exhibiting such behavior as enacting the male sex role (e.g., Brannon 1976). After Connell developed multiple masculinities theory (e.g., Connell 1995), analysts began framing men's behavior (e.g., acting tough, etc.) as indicative of a type of masculinity. Because a manhood acts approach defines exerting or resisting control as signifying a credible "masculine self," scholars using this approach would view trying to secure others' deference by acting "tough" as a manhood act. Scholars with different perspectives may thus frame a man acting in the same way (e.g., tough) as an element of the male sex role, a type of masculinity, or as signifying a masculine self. This is the case even if the subject being studied does not explicitly refer to the behavior as gendered (e.g., "I'm tough because I'm a *man*"), which is to say analysts' perspectives shape their interpretations. Although readers are likely more familiar with Connell's framework, there have always been "coexisting paradigms" in scholarship on men (Borkoski 2018) and allowing space for developing perspectives is arguably beneficial for the field (Bridges 2019).

Research adopting the manhood acts perspective typically focuses on the strategies through which men signify the possession of "masculine selves." Work on

men's violence shows how presenting masculine selves involves controlling one's own emotional expression (as is the case with some mixed martial arts fighters [Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe 2011] or telling stories that characterize oneself as controlling others or resisting organizational control (as is the case with some batterer intervention program graduates [Schrock, McCabe, and Vaccaro 2018]). Others examine how men signify masculine selves in a compensatory fashion, including how men who post revenge porn online justify their non-consensual sharing of ex-partners' images (Hall and Hearn 2019), how men in a LGBT church marginalize lesbians and effeminate men (Sumerau 2012), how drug treatment program participants put down women and gay men (Ezzell 2012), and how a man undergoing a vasectomy symbolically reasserts control (Cragun and Sumerau 2017). Scholars also analyze constructing masculine selves via heterosexual identity work, including how men present themselves as heterosexual when talking about their children's sexuality (Solebello and Elliott 2011), how Black collegiate men talk about sexual relationships (Wilkins 2012), and how men's online sexualization of women constitutes "virtual manhood acts" (Moloney and Love 2017).

Our study builds on the aforementioned research by showing how people implicitly construct someone else—in this case, Donald Trump—as possessing a masculine self. Instead of analyzing how people align their self-presentations with gendered cultural codes to signify credible masculine selves, we show how people invoke the same cultural codes when representing someone else—which implicitly imputes a masculine self. Our interviewees do not explicitly say that Trump has a "masculine self" or volunteered that they liked his "masculinity," "manhood," or "gender." Rather, similar to analysts who interpret men's stories that characterize themselves as exerting or resisting others' control as constructing a "masculine self" (e.g., Ezzell 2012), we interpret our interviewees' stories that characterize Trump as someone who exerts or resists control as constructing Trump's "masculine self." We frame such talk as "valorizing" because we asked them to tell us why they liked Trump. Their accounts emphasized Trump's political incorrectness, entrepreneurial experience, and combative orientation.

Method

We conducted in-depth interviews with 29 Trump supporters during the run-up to the 2016 election.[5] All identified as Republican, 93% were white and 79% were men, all said they were middle class, 79% were in college or had completed a college degree, and they were all between 18 and 82 years old (see Table 1).[6] We recruited supporters through our personal and professional networks, fieldwork at local Republican groups, posting on politically oriented Facebook groups, and posting flyers in our campus and mid-sized southeastern city. Our convenience sample does not aim to be representative of a larger population, but aims to secure rich data that can help us develop "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969) that may be useful (and refined) in future research.

Table 1. Formal interviews with Trump supporters

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Class	Education	Recruitment	Date
Matthew	18	Male	White	Upper middle	In college	College Republicans	9/29/16
Lucas	18	Male	White	Middle	In college	College Republicans	9/30/16
William	18	Male	White	Middle	High school	Facebook Group	9/15/16
Carlos	18	Male	White	Upper	In college	College Republicans	9/29/16
Mikayla	18	Female	White	Upper middle	In college	Referral	10/27/16
Kenneth	19	Male	White	Upper	In college	College Republicans	9/29/16
Virginia	19	Female	White	Middle	In college	College Republicans	10/6/16
Daniel	20	Male	Latino	Middle	In college	College Republicans	9/29/16
Keith	20	Male	White	Upper middle	In college	Interviewee referral	10/6/16
Miguel	20	Male	White/Hispanic	Middle	In college	College Republicans	9/23/16
Duke	21	Male	White	Upper middle	In college	College Republicans	9/13/16
Leo	21	Male	White	Middle	In college	College Republicans	9/30/16
Gary	26	Male	White	Upper	In college	College Republicans	10/6/16
Jason	30	Male	White	Lower middle	Associate's degree	Personal Connections	10/24/16
Owen	32	Male	Native American	Lower middle	Technical college	Personal Connections	10/26/16
Collin	35	Male	White	Lower middle	In college	Referral	11/4/16
Bill	37	Male	White	Middle	Marines	Referral	11/2/16
Robert	39	Male	White	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Facebook Group	9/16/16
Shirley	40	Female	White	Middle	High school	Facebook Group	9/20/16
Garrett	40	Male	White	Middle	Technical school	Referral	11/1/16
Kevin	40	Male	White	Upper middle	Master's degree	Personal Connections	10/29/16
James	42	Male	White	Lower middle	Some college	Facebook Group	9/22/16
Joe	52	Male	White	Upper middle	Bachelor's degree	Personal Connections	11/2/16
Christina	60	Female	White	Middle	High school	Trump Rally	11/2/16
Theresa	62	Female	White	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Referral	10/30/16
Gregory	72	Male	White	Middle	High school	Referral	10/30/16
Janice	73	Female	White	Middle	High school	Referral	10/30/16
Connor	77	Male	White	Upper middle	Master's degree	Referral	11/7/16
John	82	Male	White	Middle	Bachelor's degree	Trump Rally	8/11/16

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, and took place in private settings (e.g., an office) or over the phone. About half of our 29 interviews were conducted by women (14) and half by men (15).[7] Interviewers followed a basic one-page interview guide that contained open-ended questions surrounding five topics: why they supported Trump for president, if/how they publicly expressed their support, what they viewed as key issues facing the country, their personal background and current life, and their hopes and fears about the future. We did not explicitly ask them to talk about gender or Trump's manhood. Following standard techniques of in-depth interviewing (Weiss 1994), we remained open to what interviewees told us and asked follow-up questions in an ongoing conversational fashion with the aim of securing detailed accounts. Our research team recorded and transcribed all interviews.

Our inductive analysis followed standard grounded theory procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967). We initially read through transcripts and reflected on the main themes of interviewee discourse, which included how they talked about Trump, Clinton, contemporary social problems, etc. After narrowing the focus of this paper to Trump talk and uploading transcripts into a qualitative analysis program, we coded for the different ways they talked about Trump. Initial codes included: building a good team, business experience, the economy, law and order, national security, toughness, etc. Using grounded theory techniques (Charmaz 2006), we compared and contrasted such codes and sorted similar codes into larger families or groups (e.g., the first three codes mentioned above were brought together into one group; the last three into a separate group). We then devised labels to best capture each group's substantive character: (a) praising politically incorrect spirit; (b) glorifying entrepreneurial spirit; and (c) celebrating fighting spirit. Because all three types of accounts characterized Trump has having the ability to exert and resist control, we conceptualized them as valorizing his "masculine self."

Valorizing Trump's Masculine Self

Praising Politically Incorrect Spirit

All 29 interviewees praised Trump for being politically incorrect, a total of 50 times. They viewed political correctness as a constraining force that quelled self-expression and free speech. Supporters constructed him as not just "speaking off the cuff" but as resisting being controlled by a political culture that restrains discourse. From a dramaturgical perspective, the implication was that Trump had a credible masculine self because he would not submit to the language police. Our Trump supporters said that "career politicians" were so concerned with being politically correct that they avoided talking truthfully about dire social problems, and as a result were unable to fix them. In contrast, they admired Donald Trump for confronting a culture of political correctness, which they believed would enable him to effectively address the country's problems. In doing so, they valorized Trump as

having the capacity to resist being controlled by others, which resonates with cultural codes indicative of “masculine selves.”

When asked what they liked most about Trump, many emphasized his willingness to say things that other politicians would not for fear of being labeled politically incorrect. For example, when asked what he liked most about Trump, Garrett responded:

> I think he doesn’t hold anything back . . . he says it how it is, and if that offends people . . . he seems to be okay with saying that, even if people have a problem with it. [H]is personality does seem abrasive and not always the best way to go about things . . . but I felt like he was saying a lot of stuff upfront that needed to be said that nobody would say.

Echoing others, Garrett suggested that although he sometimes questioned Trump’s “abrasive” delivery, he constructed Trump as being willing to talk about important things that other politicians would not address because they were too worried about offending people. They characterized him as the kind of man who would not succumb to political correctness.

Interviewees expressed admiring Trump’s violation of the typical rules of political discourse in a variety of ways. Theresa, a retired woman, similarly said she “really likes the fact that he says it how it is.” When talking about Trump’s anti-PC talk, college student Matthew rhetorically asked, “Would you rather have it sugar-coated or would you rather have the real thing?” Interviewees said they admired Trump’s political incorrectness because they felt it indicated that he cared more about telling the truth than he cared about upsetting people. Christina, who is middle-aged, liked that Trump was, not a scripted politician: “Well, it’s what’s gotten him into trouble, he doesn’t read off of a teleprompter [or] have a speech-writer who’s telling the politician, ‘This is what you need to say because this is what . . . we think the American people want you to say’.”

Christina and the others justified their support by saying they liked that Trump did not follow a script, “sugar coat” his words, or “hold back.” They valorized Trump as unable to be restrained by “what people want you to say” even if it even if “people have a problem with it.” They thus represented Trump as someone who could not be controlled by political correctness. Although they did not explicitly say that such qualities were linked to manhood (and we did not explicitly ask), their storytelling framed Trump as possessing a key characteristic of the culturally coded masculine self: he could not be controlled by others.

Interviewees often explicitly referenced political correctness and sometimes used their valorization of Trump’s anti-PC persona as a kind of symbolic cover enabling them to express support for his positions that have been deemed as bigoted or outside the bounds of usual political discourse. As Leo put it:

> Our country's free speech is often stifled by the politically correct culture, and often it just amounts to a beating around the bush of the real issues. I like that he was so unashamedly confronting the border issue and how corrupt politicians are and stuff like that. That's all it is.

John said:

> Trump is, like, really—he's like me. Like, how he talks is how I would talk to somebody . . . he speaks, like, what he's thinking . . . Like making it harder for refugees and stuff. Like, I don't think we should build the wall, I just think we should make immigration harder. I don't think we should be bringing in all the refugees that we're bringing in . . . . I think [political correctness] is bunch of crap. I mean, who sets the standard for what's politically correct?

Even though he disagreed with building a wall along the Mexican-US border—one of Trump's key campaign pledges—John felt Trump was trustworthy because of his political incorrectness, including his tough lines about against immigrants and refugees. John framed Trump's talk as reflective of what Trump himself was actually thinking, as opposed to other candidates' talk, which he believed was more carefully crafted and inauthentic.

Because expressing one's "true self" is culturally defined as being unrestrained by institutional and cultural norms (Turner 1976), and resisting control is a powerful way of signifying a masculine self (Schwalbe 2005), interviewees' commendations of Trump's anti-PC persona arguably gave him credit for being authentically and potently masculine. Within this cultural context, Trump's frequent cursing, racist and sexist language, support for torture, white nationalist politics, and aggressive and violent posturing could be read as something more palatable for many conservatives: honorable, "real" manhood (see also Pascoe 2017). Interpreting his performance in this way was arguably aided by the media framing political correctness as feminizing men and weakening America (Peter and Martin 2011; Stroud, Muddiman, and Lee 2014), and Trump's demagogically styled masculine victimhood (Johnson 2017).

Although interviewees acknowledged Trump's opposition to PC culture and "telling it like it is" got him into trouble, they often excused it as part of his "nature." For example, although Keith described Trump as having "really, really thick skin," he felt journalists, including those moderating presidential debates, triggered Trump: "He was honestly antagonized by a lot of the [debate] moderators and . . . he shoots off at first." After being asked why they thought he did that (i.e., "shoots off"), Gary (who was interviewed with Keith), said, "It's literally just almost second nature to him." The implication here was that Trump's masculine self was a natural and authentic force that could not be leashed by political correctness.

Our respondents sometimes acknowledged that Trump took it too far, although they had various ways to justify it. When respondents were asked if they were bothered by the *Access Hollywood* tape on which Trump bragged about being able to non-consensually kiss and grope women because he was famous, some justified it by saying "rich men like pretty women" or, echoing Trump, minimized it as "locker room talk." Jason said, "I don't really care, you should hear some of the stuff that I say in front of my friends. [It's] way worse than what he said in that video." When asked if there was anything that Trump did that bothered her, Christina said,

> There's so many (laughter). I think the worst, for me, was the night that he started attacking the women that were brought out to say that he had sexually harassed them. Donald, you're now the Republican nominee. Shut up. [*Question: Can you remember how you felt?]* Yeah, Donald, shut up. Just shut up, leave it alone, talk about the issues.

Echoing others, Cristina thought Trump's sexual misconduct was not as worrisome as how his opponents could use such allegations to attack him.

Overall, although some expressed being bothered by the allegations and Trump's fiery rhetoric, their valorization of his masculine self seemed to overwrite their concerns and sustain their political allegiance. Interviewees' talk resonated with variations of the classic "boys will be boys" defense that legitimizes men's aggressive and predatory behavior (e.g., Weiss 2009): his "nature" compels him to "shoot off," degrade women, and brag about it—despite norms of civility. From our dramaturgical perspective, when interviewees characterized Trump as going "too far," they symbolically aligned him a key cultural definition of a masculine self: resisting others' control. They arguably constructed his masculine self as more beneficial than harmful.

Glorifying Entrepreneurial Spirit

While being a successful entrepreneur is often culturally defined as an archetype of manhood (e.g., Kimmel 1996), it is arguably so because it is a sign of one's capacity to control others to reap monetary rewards. In 1896, sociologist C. R. Henderson (1896, 385–386) wrote that successful businessmen had a "type of manhood... characterized by vitality, energy, concentration, skill in combining numerous forces for an end [and] manners [that are] somewhat severe and offensively dictatorial." As the figurehead of various Trump-branded products and buildings, and the star of an entrepreneurial-themed reality television show, Trump is arguably one of the most famous "businessmen" in U.S. history. As such, it is not surprising that political supporters' emphasized entrepreneurship, especially because he had no political experience. Our interviewees glorified his entrepreneurial spirit by casting Trump as a successful man who knew how to make deals, manage subordinates, and remain free from others' efforts to control him. By framing his alleged success as springing

from Trump's personality, our interviewees implied that there was something about his personal self that generated such success.

The majority of interviewees (20 out of 29) brought up Trump's business experience in a positive manner, with 38 references to his business experience in total. Some mentioned this experience in a matter-of-fact way. Christina answered a question about what she liked about Trump by saying "he's a successful businessman." Owen answered a similar question by calling Trump a "financial genius." Gary said, "I don't typically trust politicians to handle certain aspects of the economy, which I don't think they're educated enough in. I mean, obviously we have a $20 million deficit, that's because we haven't had enough business minds involved and [Trump] is a business mind."

Those who spelled out why Trump's business experience was politically pertinent typically suggested that there was something about Trump, as a person, that was relevant. Interviews sometimes suggested that there was something about Trump's personality that led him to be financially successful. When asked why he supported Trump, Matthew said:

> To me, what I see with him is experience in fixing economies, a businessman who has obtained over a billion dollars. You don't get rich by magic, luck, or inheriting your father's worth. He got there by building a company over the past 40 years and I believe that he can do that with this country.

To Matthew, "building a company" was the secret to Trump's success, and implied here is that Trump's self was imbued with enough entrepreneurial spirit to pull this off decade after decade. He also discredited the idea that Trump passively inherited his riches, further granting him manhood status. Duke furthered this point by comparing his own personal history to Trump's:

> Coming from a business perspective myself, [I like that] he's grown a company so huge, whether he's done it totally ethically or not—with all the reports coming, you know, you can't guarantee it. But I still like his knowledge and expertise and past experiences. I think that what he could do is actually get things done.

For Duke and others, whether Trump acted ethically was less relevant than the notion that Trump's business success indicated he was the kind of man who could "get things done." The implicit moral of such stories, from a dramaturgical perspective, was that Trump's masculine self was potently agentic and could not be bound by ethical concerns.

Other interviewees more explicitly constructed Trump as having the kind of self that would make him not only a successful businessman but also a political leader. Retired Conner imputed an agentic self to Trump when expounding on why he believed his experience in business was "extremely important" for becoming a good president:

> Compared to Obama right now—he's been in there for almost eight years and I don't know of anything he's done as far as business . . . . I don't think he understands business . . . . I think Trump's a doer and a go getter, and he knows how to get things done, and he does get them done. He seems to be interested in completing projects in a timely and efficient manner . . . . I think that's a big part [of my support].

Conner characterizes Trump here as the kind of man who "gets things done." The implication is that Trump possesses a self with the drive and capability to control the world around him. Without calling him "manly," they used his reputation as a business tycoon to impute and valorize a masculine self that they believed would propel the country towards greatness.

Respondents often said they believed Trump's managerial prowess would make him an effective president. Theresa said, "I really think he's a smart enough guy. He's going to put the right people under him to do the right thing to the country." When asked if there was anything about Trump that appealed to him emotionally, business owner Joe declared:

> No, I'm smart enough to know what strings he is pulling. I would say the largest appeal to me for Trump is that I do think that he's a good enough business person. [W]e need a business person—someone that can look at decisions and evaluate them on their own merit and make some good decisions. [And] I actually think he'll appoint a good cabinet. I think he will get smart enough people around him that will make some good decisions. And I do think too that he will be a decent negotiator for both sides of the aisle, and he will look at more things objectively. I think the [politically incorrect] campaign rhetoric won't match the actual administration.

Implying that Trump possessed a masculine self capable of making rational decisions, conducting beneficial negotiations, and putting together a good managerial team, Joe thought Trump would make a good president. John, who was in his 80s, similarly said that Trump "knew how to run a business, he's smart enough to put some good people into security, and in his staff, in the military. He'll have the best." Conner similarly believed Trump would "hire the best team" to tackle the challenges of the administration. By painting Trump as a rational decision-maker and manager, interviewees neutralized the idea that Trump's political incorrectness indicated that he was compulsively impulsive, emotionally volatile, and selfishly shortsighted.

In addition, interviewees believed that because Trump had not been a politician and was financially successful, that he could resist being influenced by corporations, donors, and other political operators. Nine explicitly labeled Trump as "independent" and all suggested it by saying, for example, "he's his own boss" (Theresa) and "he could not be bought" (Bill). Conner said, "[T]he federal government in particular is so corrupt and they're so in bed with each other that I think the system has to get some new blood in there . . . and that's why I think we

have an opportunity with Trump." When asked why he was supporting Trump, John said:

> Because he is not owned by—he has no, like as far as I can tell, there's no side deals with other people, like, "Hey if I get into office . . . I'll get some of this stuff added into this bill to pass so that way it helps you out," like the kickbacks.

Respondents often pointed to Trump's alleged financing of his own campaign as evidence of his independence. As Leo said:

> I'm frustrated with politicians just being bought out by special interest groups, lobbyists, big donors. [I like] how he was self-funding for a while, and even now he's not taking a lot of big money like he could. I think he just represents . . . sticking it to the money-in-politics dynamic.

Overall, respondents suggested not only that Trump's masculine self cultivated business success but also that his success created the conditions under which his masculine self would freely exert itself in the political arena, despite lobbyists and donors attempts to exert control. Glorifying his entrepreneurial spirit thus reinforced the notion that Trump's masculine self was capable of controlling the government and leading the country.

Celebrating the Fighting Spirit

In addition to praising political incorrectness and entrepreneurial acumen, interviewees also valorized Trump's masculine self by defining him as possessing a fighting spirit that drove him to clash with others and emerge victorious. They constructed Trump as a tough and aggressive man who would not back down from a fight. Echoing how Trump defined himself as a "counter puncher," they admired his willingness to fight back if attacked, especially when the odds seemed stacked against him. The implication was that they valued his masculine self from which such grit sprang. Our pre-election Trump supporters liked his approach to interpersonal dominance and believed that it could be effectively applied domestically and internationally. Embedded in such rhetoric was the notion that the nation had become feminized and needed to better flex its muscles to secure deference from internal troublemakers and other nations' leaders.

Eleven interviewees constructed Trump as possessing the capacity to exert control by explicitly describing him as "tough" or "strong," a total of 18 references. When comparing Trump's character to Clinton, for example, Roger said, "Hillary is a liar and we need someone who is strong." Keith celebrated Trump's fighting spirit when talking about what he remembered about the presidential debates: "I like how Trump . . . can come back and dominate onstage." When asked why he liked Trump over his opponents in the Republican primary, Miguel said:

> So, not only was he unique in his rhetoric as a speaker and his attitude towards other candidates, when people attacked him, he either gave the same back to them or doubled down to show that he wasn't there to be pushed around and he had a goal to accomplish.

The implication of Trump being a person who was "strong," "tough," and could "dominate" and "double down" was that he had a formidable masculine self. Interviewees constructed Trump's self as able to exert control over any situation, regardless of how he was attacked.

Interviewees believed that Trump's fighting spirit would benefit the country. When Bill was asked to clarify if he thought there was "a kind of toughness about Trump," Bill replied: "Hell yeah.... He is willing to put it out there and be what we need him to be in order to protect and defend this country, both economically and militarily." Nine respondents linked Trump's alleged strength to national security in this manner (18 times in total) and five respondents explicitly referred to Trump as a "Law and Order candidate" (7 times in total). Matthew, for example, said, "I do agree with him on the social problems right now and like that he has the support of the fraternal order of the police. And so I think that he is right, we should bring law and order back to the country." Referencing Trump's "guts," Leo said:

> All Iran ever does is talk about how they want to blow Israel up, you know, so obviously the Iran deal needs to be stopped and Iran needs to be stood up to and, like, put in its place for the sake of Israel and the U.S. And I think Trump would actually have the guts to do that if he was the leader.

The implication was that Trump's masculine self would enable him to stand up to and "put Iran in its place," as if Obama feminized the U.S. Reflecting similar research on Trump's masculine appeals (e.g., Messerschmidt and Bridges 2018; Pascoe 2017), our respondent's glorification of Trump's domineering nature indicated that the project of "making America great again" also implied making America "manly" again. Exemplifying how putting on a manhood act often involves instilling fear in others (Vaccaro et al. 2011), Leo continued:

> I think if Trump wins I think we're going to have a return to patriotism on the national stage, a return to championing American exceptionalism. We're gonna have a military that is stronger and that has not been emasculated. I see us having a leader that other countries will respect and that our enemies will fear. I think it would be Reagan-esque, it would be sort of a new nationalism, and it would be like America returning to prominence.

Leo thus suggested that Trump had what it takes to reestablish U.S dominance and "exceptionalism." James, when talking about how we need to "keep America safe," also argued that Reagan-era politics were ideal:

> If you look back on it, Reagan was a great president. Nobody really messed with us then. Let's put it this way: he basically got on TV and said, "You don't want me to come [over] there," because everybody knew he would do what he said he would. But then he said, "If I got to come over there, you are not going to be happy." And people backed up because they were afraid of our military, and because we actually had a strong military, we actually *protected* our country, and we gave a damn.

Associating Trump with Reagan, another tough-talking, pro-business masculine icon (Cohen 2011), was another method of valorizing Trump's masculine self. Reagan famously confronted the nuclear-armed Soviet Union, dubbing it "the evil empire," which led the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (1984) to dial their well-known Doomsday Clock much closer to midnight than it had been since the 1950s. While their styles of presentation were notably different—Reagan exhibited decorum even when threatening others (Orman 1987)—the two men were quite similar in their willingness to threaten military violence. Although Trump painted Russia as a potential ally during his presidential campaign (in contrast to Reagan), Trump used Reaganesque rhetoric of American dominance over "evil empires" when describing terrorists and rival nations (such as North Korea and China). Overall, our interviewees celebrated Trump's fighting spirit and believed that if elected as the commander and chief of the military, he could compel other countries to defer to U.S. national interests. Trump's masculine self was presumably powerful enough to make America greatly feared.

Conclusion

When accounting for their pre-election allegiance to Trump, our interviewees praised his politically incorrect spirit, glorified his entrepreneurial spirit, and celebrated his fighting spirit. All three types of accounts construct Trump as possessing an agentic self that was not restrained by cultural norms, financial limitations, or political influence. Even though our interviewees did not explicitly talk about Trump's "manliness," their valorization was not gender-neutral. Similar to how the gendered degradation of Clinton did not require explicitly invoking the fact that she was a woman (Bordo 2017), our interviewees' accounts of why they supported Trump did not explicitly invoke that he was a man. Rather, their construction of Trump resonated with culturally exalted codes of a "masculine self": to exert or resist control. When our interviewees emphasized Trump's ability to control others and resist being controlled, they bestowed manhood status upon him. Our findings thus provide some evidence to journalists' (e.g., Hamblin 2016) and academics' (e.g., Pascoe 2017) suggestions that Trump's manhood appealed to supporters.

Our analysis contributes to the study of gender and politics by investigating how voters construct and valorize candidates' "gendered selves." Political sociologists have studied men's and women's voting preferences, and political psychologists have analyzed how beliefs in gender stereotypes or inequality shapes support for

men or women political candidates (e.g., Simis and Bumgardner 2017). Much of this work views gender as a variable and measures its associations with voting preferences rather than analyzing the discursive construction of gender. Others take a "doing gender" approach and analyze how candidates signify gendered personas (e.g., Messner 2007) or how the media characterizes candidates as gendered (e.g., Maiolino 2015). Much of this work is situated within Connell's (1995) approach, and it typically frames politicians' performances as types of masculinity (e.g., Messner 2007; Messerschmidt 2016). Our research complements such work by examining how *supporters* frame and valorize a candidate as gendered by employing a dramaturgical approach to manhood.

Our study is limited in several ways. Because our convenience sample is relatively small, homogenous, and non-random, our findings cannot be generalized to a larger population of Trump supporters. Our aim, however—like most interactionist work—has been to conceptualize and unpack processes that might be applied and refined in future research (e.g., Blumer 1969). We believe that constructing candidates' gendered selves is a generic interpretive process that voters often engage in to justify political support. Because we focused only on how Trump supporters constructed Trump, however, future research should investigate how people invoke gendered cultural codes to construct not only their favored men politicians but also their favored women politicians as well as their disfavored candidates. Exploring how, under what conditions, and who constructs candidates' manhood as a liability is also needed.[8]

Our study may also be of interest to scholars investigating the rise of right-wing populism. As Jansen (2017) points out, populist politicians emphasize their opposition to "establishment politics" by cultivating an "outsider" persona who can take control in times of social turmoil. While other analyses have emphasized that Trump's self-presentation was similar to authoritarian populists (Agnew and Shin 2016, Fuchs 2018), we show how people use cultural notions of gender to valorize such acts. Valorizing manhood may be a method to gloss over the more harmful aspects of right-wing populism such as the targeting of immigrants and refugees, journalists and activists, and racial, religious, gender, and sexual minorities. Interviewees' valorization arguably enabled them to feel morally righteous and cathected to or identified with the charismatic Trump. Although valorizing manhood is largely rhetorical, it may have the consequence of locking many of us in legal, metaphorical, and literal cages.

Our study also contributes to research on manhood acts and the study of men and masculinity more generally. Studies of manhood acts have focused on the various embodied, rhetorical, and emotional strategies people use to signify the possession of masculine selves, or the capacity to exert or resist control (e.g., Ezzell 2012; Moloney and Love 2017; Sumerau 2012; Vaccaro et al. 2011). Although the manhood acts perspective was developed in part as a critique of masculinity studies, they typically share a focus on how people talk about or enact manhood/masculinity. Whether analysts conceptualize such acts as signifying a masculine self or as

constituting a type of masculinity, they typically neglect how audiences themselves interpret or construct such acts as gendered. Our study of Trump supporters reminds gender scholars—regardless of one's approach—that it is important to examine how people not only enact gender but how they frame others' presentations of selves as gendered (see also Ridgeway 2011). We must remember that how one acts and how others frame those actions are often two sides of the same masculine self.

It is also important, of course, for critical studies of men to acknowledge masculine selves are social fictions that are rooted in a social system advantaging men as a social group vis-à-vis women and marginalizing others. Although much work has shown how manhood acts reproduce inequality (see, e.g., Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), how might the construction and valorization of others' masculine selves be implicated? Our study suggests that such valorization promotes and justifies keeping institutional power in the hands of men, even when there are more qualified women candidates. We can also see how bestowing manhood status on someone can shield them from the stigma of unethically taking advantage of women and other men for their own selfish interests. And honoring manhood can be a means to ignore and be complicit in reinforcing inequalities based on race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, ability, and so on.

In addition to reproducing inequality, valorizing masculine selves may also increase our vulnerability to human-made global catastrophes. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (2017) said Trump's presidential victory led them to set the Doomsday Clock closer to midnight than it has been since the U.S. and Soviets first tested hydrogen bombs in 1953. Of course, millions of people's lives are already catastrophic, and human-caused suffering grounded in asserting control over others and resisting others' control is widespread. Although multifaceted interventions are needed, devalorizing masculine selves is clearly necessary. For as long as audiences glorify and reward controlling others, the more people will stake their self-worth on enacting manhood and the damage will continue until, perhaps, the job is finished.

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Notes

1. See also Ott (2017) on Trump's Twitter discourse and Smirnova (2018) on gendered humor in the 2016 election.
2. Although Trump is often compared to Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, Agnew and Shin (2015, 269–270) convincingly argue that Trump most resembles Silvio Berlusconi, due to their shared "shamelessness," entrepreneurship, "post-truth" claims, "trophy wives," sexist and racist scandals, and the "lifts in [their] shoes."
3. In contrast, Hayes and Lawless' (2016) study of 2010–2014 House races suggest that gender was not as significant as partisanship in shaping campaign messages, local news stories, or voters' assessment.
4. Such concerns include that it tends to take the identity 'man' for granted, defines almost anything males do (including femininity) as a type of masculinity, and sometimes delinks masculinity from inequality (see Ezzell 2016, Hearn 2012, Martin 1998, McCarry 2007, O'Neill 2015, Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, Schwalbe 2014).
5. All but our first interview took place during the eight weeks prior to the election. We stopped at 29 interviews because we had a relatively short time period to conduct *pre-election* interviews. We initially planned to interview Clinton supporters, but concluded that we did not have enough time, personnel, or funding to do so.
6. Our sample was more highly educated than the larger population of Trump voters and more likely to be men (79% vs 54% men), but was similarly mostly white (93% vs 88% white). See, for example, Pew Research Center (2018)
7. Women interviewed 3 women and 11 men; men interviewed 3 women and 12 men. Being a same- or cross-gendered interviewer did not shape whether or not interviewees valorized Trump's manhood, although the men who alluded to their own sexism were more likely to be interviewed by men.
8. Anecdotally considering the events of the 2016 election, we might expect that valuing gender equality, the public revelation of candidates' sexist behavior, and loyalty to an opposing political party may increase the likelihood that voters use manhood to discredit a candidate.

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