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# "Pageantry of aggression": QAnon, animality, and the violent pursuit of whiteness

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While the specifics of the far-right COVID-denying QAnon movement may remain cloudy within popular consciousness, in contrast, many can easily conjure the image of Jacob Chansley, the so-called "QAnon Shaman," when evoking the January 6th US Capitol riot. Chansley, face-painted in the American flag and draped in faux regalia—a virtual menagerie of animals: coyote, buffalo, and eagle—appears clearly, spear in hand, as if parting the fog of war. Photos of Chansley howling or brazenly posing on the Senate dais are indelibly sketched into our collective memory. Some may conjure him simply as a buffoon, but his trespassing and seditious antics are interwoven with a costume that pulls at the long thread of European and American colonialism. This article posits that Chansley's animalized insurrectionist attire and his ability to play at the borderlands between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized, was an enactment of white supremacy. Insulated by conjoined racist and speciesist legacies, his ensemble placed him closer not only to Western constructions of nature, but also to animality, all without threatening his human status. Working at the intersections of critical race theory and critical animal studies, and illustrated with mainstream news accounts, this article considers broader cultural contexts that reveal Chansley's sartorial representation as anything but benign.

## KEYWORDS

QAnon, colonialism, white supremacy, conspiracy, COVID-19, racialization, racism, animality

*It's ironic that a white man would borrow an exoticized image of an aboriginal [sic] holy man while storming the Capitol to secure a Trumpian hegemony, but it's certainly in line with the greater trajectory of the QAnon community (Winkie, 2021).*

*Visual representation, whether consciously or not, frequently implied an evolutionary advance from blackness to whiteness, from naked and primitive to clothed and civilized. Clothing, as Ruth Barcan notes, separated humans from animals (Levine, 2008, p. 212).*

*Chansley is an active participant in—and has made himself the most prominent symbol of—a violent insurrection that attempted to overthrow the United States Government on January 6, 2021. (Prosecutors making a request to an Arizona federal court judge to keep Chansley in Government custody, a week after the U.S. Capitol attack; cited in Mallin, 2021).*

## Introduction

Through the January 6th U.S. Capitol insurrection, Jacob Anthony Chansley, the self-proclaimed "QAnon Shaman" (Winkie, 2021), arrived as a fantastical figure in the mishmash election-denying, white supremacist, COVID-19 conspiratorial cosmos, donned in faux head regalia, including a fur hat embellished by two black horns, and alternatively toting a "Q Sent

Me!” sign or, in the case of the January 6th Capitol insurrection, brandishing a spear.<sup>1</sup> The routinely bare-chested Chansley, aka the “Yellowstone Wolf” (Menon, 2023; Jenkins, 2023) has been dubbed the QAnon “mascot” (Hsu, 2021).

In this article, I centrally argue that Chansley, honed by a centuries-long patina of privilege, touted signifiers of animality without the fear of being dehumanized, his proximity to animality inoculated by centuries of whiteness. Laden with furs, feathers, and horns, Chansley became the American-flag-painted face of the QAnon conspiracy. His curated animality served as a tool of white supremacy; like a mascot branding a sports team, his animalized physicality became an emblem for the far-right. At the same time, the animals he wore registered only as accessories: The histories and cultural meanings attached to these materials profoundly receded into the background; the lives that made Chansley’s garments possible remained all but forgotten.

While others have written about Jacob Chansley, including lucid sartorial critiques and cultural commentaries (Cimino, 2023; Pierce, 2021), none have specifically attended to the pivotal role animality played in Chansley’s propagation of white supremacy. To this end, I primarily employ insights from three pathbreaking critical race scholars, Kim (2015), Jackson (2016), and Gosine (2021), who analyze the interconstitution of animality, coloniality, and racialization. In article’s final section, I turn more definitely to gender, indissoluble from Eurocentered capitalism (Lugones, 2007), and apply Muller et al.’s (2024) analysis of “primal rhetoric” to Chansley’s stylings. I conclude by situating Chansley’s celebrity within the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting both phenomena represent crises of Western liberal humanism. Throughout, I draw heavily on American media reports and commentaries published shortly after the January 6th Capitol insurrection, which often feature photographs and videos of Chansley and others involved in the riot.

## Background

In their analysis of the U.S. Capitol riot symbology, Marissa J. Lang and Razzan Nakhlawi of *The Washington Post* provide a concise synopsis of the disparate QAnon movement: “QAnon is a sprawling online conspiracy theory whose adherents believe Trump is leading a crusade against a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who encompass a majority of the nation’s elites, including politicians, celebrities and executives” (Lang and Nakhlawi, 2021). Stated succinctly, QAnon believers “have constructed a narrative in which the root of the most heinous evils can be traced to a single source, the cabal of elites who hold control over all global events. Framing global events in this way provides a simplistic moral binary of good and evil” (Conner and MacMurray, 2022, p. 1054). Similarly, Packer and Stoneman (2021), outline QAnon’s basic mythos:

Hillary Clinton and Katy Perry drink the blood of murdered children to live forever, Barack Obama and Tom Hanks participate in the sex trafficking and molestation of children, and a cabal of

Satan worshippers control global events from behind the scenes. Do not worry, though, because President Trump and his military allies are working secretly to unmask this elite coven of cannibalistic, child-murdering pedophiles and to make sure that they are carted off to Guantánamo and hanged for their crimes. This was the central, animating idea behind the QAnon conspiracy theory, and it makes other political conspiracy theories appear almost quaint in comparison, both in terms of content and extensiveness. The scope of QAnon is in fact so extensive that it easily assimilated less far-reaching (but no less right-wing) conspiracy theories, as it did with the so-called COVID-19 *plandemic*. (pp. 255–256).

The center of the QAnon spectacle, most profoundly consolidated in the public imagination, was the January 6th Capitol attack. At the center of this center was Jacob Chansley (aka Jacob—or Jake—Angeli), whose bare-chested outlandish representation involved a horned fur headdress that fell past his shoulders, including two bushy tails affixed with two beaded eagle feathers, which hovered over a large pectoral-flanking black and white tattoo. The U.S. Department of Justice (2021) offered the following sober description:

It is alleged that Chansley was identified as the man seen in media coverage who entered the Capitol building dressed in horns, a bearskin headdress, red, white and blue face paint, shirtless, and tan pants. This individual carried a spear, approximately 6 feet in length, with an American flag tied just below the blade.

Kunkle (2021) reported in *The Washington Post* that Chansley wore “a headdress made of coyote skin and buffalo horns (not bearskin, as alleged by authorities)...”<sup>2</sup>

Footage from the Capitol shows Chansley among a cavalcade of men breaching the building to chants of “This is our country!” “This is our house!” “U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A!” (WUSA9, 2021). Chansley is also shown hollering within the Senate chamber and, at one point, leading a

2 Extermination of coyotes and buffaloes intimately figure into the violent settler colonial history of the United States. Informed by Indigenous scholars, *Taschereau Marners* (2019) emphasizes, “...the historical horror of settler colonization has always been a multispecies endeavor...” (p. 12). Buffalo extermination greatly impacted plains Indigenous lifeways, including their economies, social and political relations, and cosmologies. Such profound disruption enabled conditions for colonial domination, through prairie land access, unjust treaties, and the reserve and reservation systems (*Taschereau Marners*, 2019). These actions also expedited the violence and commodification of domesticated animals through the rise of cattle production. As *Alexander et al.* (2023) observe, “[T]hrough the replacement of buffalo with livestock, livestock were used strategically to formalize colonial land grabs and enclose capital” (p. 6). Relatedly, coyotes have long suffered as targets of European colonists and settlers today, persecuted as pests and threats to agriculture and human communities, while also killed for their pelts through leghold traps and other brutal means (*Boesel and Alexander*, 2020). Concurrently, Indigenous peoples’ specific relations with coyotes, buffaloes, eagles, and the variable ways they figure as significant presences within place-specific stories, are arguably made a mockery through Chansley’s cultural appropriation, their lives again forcibly enlisted into colonial iconography and nation-building.

1 Pageantry of aggression” is a phrase used in *Friedman’s* (2021) *New York Times* article, “Why Rioters Wear Costumes.”

group in prayer (Romero and Bruggeman, 2021). From prison, Chansley reflected, “I sang a song, and that’s part of shamanism. It’s about creating positive vibrations in a sacred chamber” (Inside Edition, 2021).

As the January 6th events unfolded, and in their aftermath, images of Chansley proliferated. BBC journalist Mike Wendling describes Chansley as “one of the most recognizable faces” of the riot (Wendling, 2023). In one picture, he stands on the Senate dais holding an American flag, attached to a spear-tipped flagpole, where “[h]e flexes a bicep in defiance, as if he has just conquered a foreign land” (Pierce, 2021). The astonishing transgression of the day—the storming of the Capitol and the direct rebuke of democracy—seemed well-encapsulated by the jolting imagery afforded by Chansley, who paraded animal signifiers while not being publicly dehumanized by them. Pointing to the gendered quality of such displays, Cristiana Cimino (2023) asks, “Does he want to instill fear and declare to the world that he has none? Does he want to flaunt his masculine ‘animality’? Probably: Freud said that he who whistles in the dark does so to make himself brave, therefore he is afraid” (p. 47). When asked about his attire, in a 2020 interview with *The Arizona Republic* (Ruelas, 2021), Chansley simply stated that he wanted to draw attention to himself and convert potential QAnon followers.

Providing a less innocent explanation, scholars draw attention to the decidedly colonial roots of Chansley’s stylings. For example, Therèsa Winge, an Associate Professor of Apparel and Textile Design at the University of Michigan, told *The Atlantic* that Chansley “most likely intended to visually harken [to] the spirit of the Indigenous warrior” (as cited in Winkie, 2021). Joseph Pierce (Cherokee Nation), Associate Professor in the Department of Hispanic Languages and Literature at Stony Brook University, traces this analytic in his *artnet* op-ed, “The Capitol Rioter Dressed Up as a Native American Is Part of a Long Cultural History of ‘Playing Indian.’ We Ignore It at Our Peril,” published January 18th, 2021, shortly after the insurrection. Pierce refutes the media’s characterization of Chansley’s outfit as “vaguely Viking in origin,” suggesting such myopia neglects a broader cultural history:

Tropes of Native American wildness and proximity to nature were harnessed by Romantic-era artists in Europe who were disenchanted with the materialism brought by industrialization and longed for a return to a supposedly unspoiled, pre-modern life.

In the mid-19th century, German painters turned to idyllic if moody landscapes and revived (or invented) Norse folk traditions in literature and music. This imaginary of pre-industrial life was itself influenced by earlier depictions of American nature on colonial map[s] and of Native Americans as *part of nature itself*... [I]t is important to understand that the Germanic revival of Norse mythology was, from the beginning, influenced by tropes of spiritual connection to land that can be traced to colonial depictions of Native Americans (emphasis in original, 2021).

Thus, Chansley’s stylings are inseparable from colonial representations of Indigenous peoples. The (fictitious) resurrection of Norse mythology was deeply fused with colonial constructions of non-Europeans, which percolate over centuries into Chansley’s visual motif.

Pierce further explains the essential ways American colonialism entails appropriation of Indigenous iconography as a means of legitimizing colonial claims to land, while simultaneously erasing actual Indigenous peoples from their territories: “They imitate

Indigenous people and they justify their actions by imagining themselves as the natural heirs to a land retroactively emptied of Native Americans” (Pierce, 2021). Such moves are emblematic of settler colonialism in the United States. Pierce underscores that Chansley, from his dress to his physical posing within the Capitol, should not be regarded as aberrant, but continuous with a history of a colonial white supremacy in the United States, which never ended:

Storming the Capitol was an expression of the inability to imagine a world in which white people do not automatically and inevitably wield the power over life and death in this country built on genocide and slavery. But this imaginary is unthinkable without first positioning Native Americans as inherently closer to “nature,” only to erase us from that natural landscape, and then, finally, replace us with white men posing as Indians (Pierce, 2021).

Likewise, Philip Deloria (Yankton Dakota) (Deloria, 1998) in his book, *Playing Indian*, notes, “Americans wanted to feel a natural affinity with the continent, and it was Indians who could teach them such aboriginal [*sic*] closeness. Yet, in order to control the landscape they had to destroy the original inhabitants” (p. 5) This destruction crossed species boundaries. Kim (2015), for instance, elucidates the violent necropolitics that rendered disposable both racialized Indigenous humans and wildlife.<sup>3</sup> Underscoring Enlightenment thinkers’ progressivist view of history, Kim explains how Indigenous peoples were understood as fixed in a natural state, unable to advance toward civilization, unlike Europeans: “Like the wolves in the forest and the buffalo on the plains, they had to give way in the face of advancing white civilization” (Kim, p. 48).

## Discussion

### QAnon and the hierarchies of man

Building on Pierce’s (2021) insights, I argue that Chansley’s attire not only employs colonial tropes that construct Indigenous peoples as closer to *nature*, but also as closer to *animality*, as part of that move. That is, there is something particular about the animal that is evoked through such performativity. For example, commenting on the colonial and postcolonial Caribbean, Andil Gosine, Professor of Environmental Arts and Justice at York University, explores “clothing’s function as an arbiter of humanness/animality in the region” (p. 38). Gosine demonstrates how clothing serves as a vital terrain for European colonists to impose notions of civilization, in which Caribbean people are forced to prove their humanity (and, simultaneously, enact their distance from animality) through clothing. Such colonial demands are relentlessly—and by design—only ever aspirational for colonized subjects. As Gosine suggests, this arrangement of power, in which

<sup>3</sup> Unable to be pressed through educative or other means into “making progress toward civilization,” colonists marked Indigenous peoples for forced displacement and eradication (pp. 48–49). Reflecting on the American nationalism and exceptionalism of the late 1700s and early 1800s, Kim notes that “Indians were often tightly linked with animals of the wilderness as obstacles overcome in the journey of progress” (p. 49).

colonists dictate the terms of being human and strike them as a cudgel upon Others, suggests that—by design—nonwhite people never arrive as fully human, further reifying the colonizer's superiority. The “symbolic use of clothing was especially activated during the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas,” remarks Gosine (p. 39.) Stating further, “The use of nakedness to characterize nonwhite people as animals goes back to the very conception of natural history” (Gosine, p. 39).

Among his examples, Gosine notes the inclusion of an image of Sarah Baartman, an African Khoekhoe woman (or the so-called “Venus Hottentot”) in a massive work by Frédéric Cuvier and Étienne Geoffroy Sainte-Hilaire on the history of animals. Baartman's image is the only human represented within their volumes replete with animals. Cuvier's taxonomic ordering of animals found its reflection in his racist ordering of nonwhite people, who were deemed closer or farther from animals based on their supposed level of “civilization.”

Drawing on Phillipa Levine's analysis of the imperialist “naked native” trope, Gosine underscores how nakedness in the British imaginary stood for “colonial primitiveness, savagery, and inferiority” (Levine in Gosine, p. 40). The fusing of nakedness within uncivility/primitiveness resonates within the Christian tradition, which pairs nakedness with shame, from the Garden of Eden to European missionaries' efforts to cover the people they encountered. “Placed thus low on the scale of progress and rendered pitiful rather than threatening, naked savages could find salvation only through clothing and Christianity, chastity and containment,” remarks Levine (cited in Gosine, p. 40).<sup>4</sup>

The taxonomic ranking of humans is concretized through the Christian construction of the Great Chain of Being (*scala naturae*), which arranged all life from Heaven to Earth on a hierarchy, with God reigning supreme, followed in descending rungs by angels,

4 Clothing is just one element that European colonists have used to construct nonwhite people as closer to animals. Gosine (2021) argues throughout this text, *Nature's Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean*, that constructions of animality, and rendering of nonwhite people as subhuman, are central to European colonization. For instance, he demonstrates the key role that sexuality and sexual regulation played in the dehumanization inherent to colonialism, in which colonists cast Indigenous peoples as animal-like. Evidenced through the historical record, sixteenth century Spanish colonists characterized Indigenous peoples, including Trinidad and Tobago's Kalinago, as rampant sodomites. Such portrayals reinforced the early century's representations: “In his much-cited and circulated letter of 1495, Michele da Cuneo, childhood friend and shipmate of Christopher Columbus, offers deliberately exaggerated claims that the Kalinago/Carib people he encountered widely practiced sodomy, although, significantly, he also notes that they were likely unaware of homosexuality as a sin. This complex denigration redoubles the sense of the Kalinago/Caribs as more animal by coupling the act of sodomy with an animal-like lack of ethical perspicacity about sexual behavior, and an unawareness of a European moral code that he presents as natural—an irony given that da Cuneo was a notoriously brutal rapist who preyed upon those same Kalinago/Carib people whose sexual morality he judged inferior to his own. Their dehumanization was necessary to justify their displacement, enslavement, and genocide, and the citation of sodomite practices was central to that justification” (Gosine, pp. 5–6).

humans, animals, and inanimate objects (Jackson, 2016). As Jackson (2016), Assistant Professor of Literature at Duke University, incisively argues, proto-scientific Western humanism “provided a sense of order stability at the dawn of an expanding imperial order, newly conceived in global terms,” (p. 100) in which New World slave labor and its corollary black(ened) humanity functioned as an essential and mutable fastener between human and animals, a crucial anchor in the production of the “modern grammar of the Subject” (p. 100). The articulation of “the human,” then, is anything but self-evident, but rather emergent through slave labor, which should “be principally understood not as forced unwaged labor exploitation in the master's enclave but as an essential enabling condition of the modern grammar of the Subject, a peculiar grammar of kind or logic of species” (p. 100), which rests on the violent co-constitution of racialization and animalization:

As exemplified by the Chain of Being, modern racialized animalization stratified humanity, preemptively barring or excluding black participation in the symbolic order while also establishing or including black humanity as an object in the discursive-material institution of proto-scientific Western humanism. Here, human recognition is extended, but only to serve further objectification. The recognition of the slave's humanity was cast in the terms of a globally expansive debate over what kind of human black(ened) people represented...[T]he discourse of race is a discourse a speciation and thus indissociable from the historical development of what Cary Wolfe has called the “discourse of species” and “the animals” as a fundamental site of onto-epistemo-ethical reflection (Jackson, p.100).

That is, slave labor and blackened humanity, were enlisted in the violent creation of the modern Subject.

The mid-century biologization of race and the monogenism/polygenism debate entrenched Black and Indigenous peoples within the colonial schema, fortified by craniometric studies propagated by polygenists such as Samuel George Morton, Josiah Nott, and George Gliddon (Kim, 2015). Reflecting on the racial scaffolding detailed in Nott and Gliddon's book *Types of Mankind*, Kim (2015) observes,

Whites, the Chinese, Indians, and Negroes are ranked according to their degrees of humanity/animality. Only the fully human whites reach the apex of civilization, and the Chinese come in second, while the Negro slaves merely “fatten and multiply” and the Indian savages “skulk” and “gallop” through the wilderness (p. 50).

Considered collectively, we might understand the sordid history of Christianity, European colonialism, and racist natural history as united in casting nonwhite people as closer to animals, using attire as one key marker of this supposed racial difference and degeneracy. How do we make sense of Chansley outlandish getup in the fray? *New York Times* reporter, Friedman (2021), lamented the motley fashion: “It may seem entirely irrelevant to the unprecedented nature of the moment. Yet these choices also helped feed the frenzy of the event, as the pageantry of aggression turned actual.”

A week after the Capitol riot, journalist Winkie (2021) pondered the following: “What is up with all the animal skins? Why, during one of the scariest periods in recent national history, were hinterlander cosplayers parading through the Senate? Since when are raccoon furs



a crucial emblem of the Pizzagate front?”<sup>5</sup> Winkie observed that Chansley’s was not alone in his animalistic motif. Indeed, animal tropes featured throughout the insurrection, comprising a virtual menagerie. Fellow insurrectionist Aaron Mostofsky, notes Winkie, was crudely adorned in a what seemed to be a “fox-hide hood” whose flattened face and erect black ears draped over a crop of Mostofsky’s curly hair; a “fuzzy gameskin” underlaid a bulletproof vest that read, “POLICE.”

Animal imagery extended beyond the rioters’ outfits, though, as white nationalist, alt-right, neofascist, QAnon symbols were sewn into the literal and figurative fabric of the marauding crowds (Rosenberg and Tiefenthälar, 2021; Washington Post Staff, 2021). One protestor wore a giant eagle head, like an out of season trick-or-traitor, with an American-flag themed business suit (Friedman, 2021). Another scaled the Senate side of the Capitol in an oversized leopard print vest and star-spangled shorts (Friedman, 2021). Others waved the traditional yellow Gadsden (“Do not Tread on Me” flag) or altered Gadsden flag featuring the iconic coiled rattlesnake (Simon and Sidner, 2021; Iervese, 2024).<sup>6</sup> Pepe the Frog, an Internet meme widely adopted by the far-right, emblazoned a shirt (The Washington Post Staff, 2021) and waved on a flag (Snodgrass, 2022). “It’s like the Storming of the Bastille as recreated by the cast of National Lampoon’s Animal House. These photos will outlive us all,” Ben Sixsmith tweeted (cited in Friedman, 2021).

While each animal image warrants further examination, particularly as these images help define the symbolic visual landscape of the contemporary far-right, I stay with Chansley as an opportunity to explore the interpenetration of animality and white supremacy. Friedman (2021) underscores the unique stature of Chansley’s presence:

When you leave the totems of your usual identity behind you free yourself from the laws that govern that identity and assume those of another character—a frontiersman, a hunter, a warrior, even a superhero—that can then be twisted through a dark mirror into

5 For an exhaustive examination of the intertwined genealogies of Pizzagate and the QAnon conspiracy, see Bleakley’s (2023) excellent article, “Panic, pizza and mainstreaming of the alt-right; A social medial analysis of Pizzagate and the Rise of the QAnon conspiracy.” Bleakley concludes, “The internet is a place where wild conspiracy theories are rife, but there have been few cases in recent times that can match the prolific spread of Pizzagate—a narrative incorporating devil-worship, ritual child sexual abuse and murder taking place under the protection of a political ‘deep state’. What began as a speculative interpretation of leaked emails, fuelled by non-factual news, has evolved in the four years from 2016 to 2020 into a resilient and (for many) persuasive explanation for recent events. Incorporated into the wider QAnon mythos from 2017, Pizzagate is just one component of a multidimensional (and complex) alt-world imaginary in which the COVID-19 pandemic is a fraudulent attack on American freedom and 5G cellular towers can be used to brainwash the public” (p. 521).

6 The original symbolic iteration alludes to Benjamin Franklin’s 1751 article, “Felons and Rattlesnakes,” which begrudged the deportation of criminals to the English colonies in America; as castigation, Franklin suggested sending rattlesnakes in their place (Iervese, 2024). Franklin snidely remarks, “Rattlesnakes seem the most suitable returns for the human serpents sent us by our Mother Country” (cited in Iervese, 2024).

the outfits of the insurrection. There was no clearer image of what that meant than a shirtless man in what looked like a cross between a coonskin cap and a horned spirit hood, with face and body paint, standing gloating behind a desk in the Senate chamber as if he belonged there, after the actual elected lawmakers had been rushed away for their safety.

In essence, Chansley shed his civilian clothes to cosplay with other self-righteous seditionists and consecrate himself as their leader.

On January 6, 2021, members of QAnon, including centrally their “mascot,” Chansley, marched with determined force into the inner sanctum of the U.S. government and installed themselves in the symbolic seat of national (if not global) power, lockstep and shoulder-to-shoulder with a sprawling entourage of members from the Proud Boys, Oath Takers, MAGA supporters, white nationalists, militia members, and “small government fanatics” (Heine, 2021, p. 128). White supremacy was on full and unapologetic display:

The Confederate battle flag was paraded through the corridors, as Trump supporters displayed assorted paraphernalia, including t-shirts emblazoned with “Auschwitz” and “6mwne” (“Six Million Was Not Enough,” a grim allusion to the number of victims of the Holocaust), combat gear, shaman-like dress, and the ubiquitous maga red hats, some of which were placed on the heads of various statues and busts, including that of George Washington. The “n” word was used repeatedly by the members of the overwhelmingly white mob as they pushed and shoved black Capitol Police Officers, in some cases hitting them with the poles of flags of Blue Lives Matter, the movement that defends the rights of the police<sup>7</sup> (Heine, 2021, p. 128).

Indisputably, the politics of QAnon are infused with the politics of whiteness. Overtly, the highly mutable and adaptive QAnon movement has merged with white supremacist groups (Conner and MacMurray, 2022) and has dedicated itself to cleansing and reforming the American Empire:

In the apocalyptic vision of QAnon, ‘Make America Great Again’ pulls on the worship of a certain vision of the American Empire, whereas ‘the swamp’ is ‘Rome’ is ‘the Beast’ and has made such an enterprise unholy and in need of a redemptive return through the means of violent upheaval of the status quo. This is rooted in a particular radicalized and emotionally charismatic form of religio-political violence that sees itself as inherently legitimate. It involves the tones of ‘crusade’ and all the props and paraphernalia of a uniquely American version of holy war—it is an alternative narrative of legitimacy and the

7 In sad irony, Brian Sicknick, a Capitol police officer, died a day after being attacked at the January 6th riot. Although the Washington Chief Medical Officer, Francisco Diaz, ultimately concluded the Sicknick died of natural causes (namely, multiple strokes), Diaz also noted “all that transpired played a role in his condition,” which included being sprayed with a chemical substance (Feuer and Montague, 2023). Notably, as well, four police officers who responded to the Capitol riot have killed themselves (Wolfe, 2021). Over one hundred officers endured injuries (Wolfe, 2021).

charismatic message fuels it beyond appeals to ‘normalcy’, or law. The legal-rational system of law is destroyed through charismatic authority.... It is a call for return to the ‘good ole days’ after the (perceived) disintegration and dissolution of uniquely American institutions (MacMillen and Rush, 2022, p. 1002).

While important context for Chansley’s motivations, my point is not to mount an argument about the racist ideologies that fuel QAnon and its associated groups, as the roots of these movements have been thoroughly explored (see Bleakley, 2023; Conner and MacMurray, 2022). Instead, I forward an argument to indict white supremacy not simply as a rearticulation of the overt discourses of white power and its associated visual symbols, as produced by QAnon or other groups and movements. Nor do I linger here on the rioters’ flagrant spatial transgression, in which a largely white mob stormed American halls of power—thoroughly outfitted with symbols of white power and Nazi insignias—but I instead draw our focus to the ways that Chansley’s costume, his casting off of “civilization” through his viral physical image and revelry of animality, *was itself an enactment of white supremacy*.

The project of white supremacy, which makes racial capitalism and colonialism possible, allows for the production of whiteness through contradictory practices in which white people both assert humanity over those it deems subhuman and animal and, simultaneously, flirt with the edges of the human/animal boundary, without jeopardizing their human status, and indeed, through white privilege, reinforce it. Playing at the boundaries of humanity/animality, without fear of being rendered subhuman and nonhuman, enables the rearticulation and assertion of whiteness. I argue that the playfulness, the ability to publicly step into costumes half-naked and draped in animal pelts, is itself an enactment of white supremacy, part of the playbook of white supremacy; here white men can adopt the tropes of animality, without absorbing the threat that similar representations can and do entail for racialized and other marginalized people (Gosine, 2021).

In America, white men like Chansley have never hovered at the borderlands of humanity and animality, their human status a necessary given. Indeed, white liberal humanity is made possible through both the degradation of others as animals or animal-like (Kim, 2015; Jackson, 2016), with a concurrent self-appointed permission to produce the tropes of animality and revel in one’s animality without reproach. That is, the brashness in which one can flaunt the signifiers of animality without fear of retribution or dehumanization *affirms rather than disrupts* the colonial metrics of race and white supremacy, in which one’s humanity was always defined in proximity to the animal. Within the white colonial imagination, white men like Chansley were always Subjects. No costume can compromise the “imperial racial hierarchy” (Jackson, 2016, p. 97); in fact, it does the opposite.

In his often-autobiographical text, *Nature’s Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean*, Gosine (2021) reflects on the acute demands to discipline his behavior, including his dress, for fear of being marked by animality, demands that were ever-present as a young person from the Caribbean living in Oshawa. Such vigilant containment was not merely aesthetic: Any breach carried potential real threats. In this way, those who can safely break with the civilizing expectations in behavior and dress are firmly recognized as human. Their status remains unjeopardized through their playful or otherwise casual or even

forceful “transgressions.” Gosine (2021) details this analysis in visceral political terms:

Some people get to embrace their animality more than others, depending on the context in which they live... [The sons of elites] can indulge in a kind of visceral animality that others cannot because they would receive no second chances.... Indeed, what makes people like Trump more appealing is the brazen expression of animality. Trump’s persistent lying in his self-interest and absence of sophisticated analytical skill about most pressing issues were read as “authentic” for his single-term presidency. Privileges of masculinity, able-bodiedness, class, heterosexuality, and whiteness allow some people to “get on like animals” without consequences that could be terminal for marginalized subjects (p. 141).<sup>8</sup>

Arguably, no one got on more “like an animal” than Chansley during the Capitol attack.

The aim, for Gosine and for Jackson, is not to be fully recognized as “human,” as articulated through colonialism, in which the liberal human Subject is conceived and enacted; rather they seek to excavate its violent nascence and operations. When one identifies liberal humanism as a historically forged phenomena, infused at its inception with racist asymmetrical power and necessarily blanched in white supremacy, efforts to “humanize” or rectify those “denied humanity” or redress the “exclusion,” as Jackson (2016) maintains—in which Black people are recognized and folded into “universal humanity”—are patently miscalculated. As Jackson contends, it is not that Black people have been *excluded* from a conception of “universal humanity,” rather “humanization and captivity go hand in hand” (p. 96). Following Saidiya Hartman, Jackson powerfully asserts, “the process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of the enslaved’s humanity rather than the denial of it. Thus, humanization is not an antidote of slavery’s violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human” (emphasis in original, p. 96). As Chansley participated in the *longue durée* of racial and gender entitlement, ironically sanctioned through the very institutions and mechanisms he ostensibly sought to destroy, we might also think of him as reenacting an idealized liberal humanist Subject through his animalized performativity, one that cashes in on the white privilege of not having one’s humanity abjected. Indeed, this impossibility of abjection predicates the Subject.

## Conspirituality and Meatsculinity<sup>9</sup>

I would be remiss not to mention how Chansley’s garb and grandstanding did not just position him as “closer to nature”

<sup>8</sup> Furthering his point, Gosine (2021) notes the jarring differences between the Capitol police’s behavior toward the Black Lives Matter protestors versus the January 6th insurrectionists: “Had those insurrectionists been Black, no doubt the death toll and arrest rate would have been far higher and the condemnation more universal” (p. 141).

<sup>9</sup> I have not seen the neologism, “meatsculinity,” used before; through coining the portmanteau, I aim to emphasize the dominant Western fusion of meat and masculinity, which feminists have long detailed.

(Pierce, 2021; Deloria, 1998), and closer animality in particular—as part of a white supremacist tradition of “playing Indian”—but also reverberated within the frenzy of the contemporary manosphere, where raw meat eating and “ancestral diets” (Muller et al., 2024) are aggressively promoted by jacked up influencers and their devotees. This fetishistic pairing of (raw) meat with masculinity is long detailed (Adams, 2010), but discovers fresh purchase and new audiences online:

As a “politico-spiritual philosophy,” conspirituality has two core principles: first, that a “secret group” controls societal ordering, and second, that in opposition to this group, humanity is undergoing a spiritual paradigm shift. As this paradigm shift neatly overlaps with alternative wellness rhetorics, conspirituality is a pertinent framework to understand the carnivore diet’s role within primal rhetorical networks. Conspirituality’s linkage with alternative health and wellness discourse stems from the idea of “bio-conspiracy”—the “conspiracist belief surrounding manipulation of the natural world” (Ward and Voas, 2011, p.107; Muller et al., 2024, p. 4–5).

Conspirituality finds a potent mix in the likes of Chansley, who makes repeated public appeals to his shamanism and claims both Indigenous and Nordic ancestry (although he has no proof to substantiate this; Jenkins, 2023). He also made a religious liberty request to eat only organic food in prison. His lawyer, Albert Watkins, argued that given his “shamanic belief system and way of life, eating food that is not organic or has ‘unnatural chemicals’ would cause... Chansley ‘systemic responses that are not simply discomforting, but debilitating and, notably, dehydrating’ (Leonard, 2021). Instead of combining hypermasculinity with meat, Chansley did it with fur, feathers, and horns.

As suggested by some anthropologists, according to Malcolm Barnard, a senior lecturer on visual culture at Loughborough University, wearing raw animal pelts may derive from an ancient belief that the wearer might derive some of the animals’ traits (Winkie, 2021). Although Chansley claims he does not promote a carnivorous diet, his signature outfit offers up another form of animal consumption through his vestural use of animal products.

We might recognize some continuity between the current hegemonic masculine obsession with meat and Chansley’s predilection for animal attire, draped over his exposed muscular torso. Muller et al. (2024) state, “The political right’s fascination with animal consumption is intimately tied to circulating cultural narratives about masculinity in-crisis and... white masculinity in particular” (p. 2). Again, writing specifically about men and carnivorous diets, Muller et al. provide an analytic of “primal rhetoric” to understand the “gendered, raced, and politicized implications of carnivore diets”: “Primal rhetoric is, we posit, a rhetorical genre that ties the consumption of nonhuman animals to cisheterosexist and white nationalist ideals. It is premised upon reclaiming a spiritual ‘wild-ness’” (p. 2). Although factory farming is eschewed by some infamous “carnivore traditionalists,” such as the Raw Egg Nationalist, purveyors of the diet frequently rely on the spoils of the animal industrial complex and its attendant “multispecies trauma” (Corman, 2024), given the accessibility of these foods and a staunch belief in their health benefits (Muller

et al., 2024).<sup>10</sup> Profound racist and speciesist violence against workers and animals undergirds the diet, as evidenced throughout the commodity chain, from production to consumption (Corman, 2024).

Chansley would find himself at home among the buff men online who pugnaciously “sell’ their primal lifestyles” (Muller et al., p. 3), including through actual merchandize of his howling face and animal headpiece emblazoned on “stickers, buttons, mousepads, copies of Chansley’s mugshot, yoga mats, yoga leggings, t-shirts, baseball socks (currently sold out), hoodies, and mugs” (Gilbert, 2023). Through potent imbrications of masculinity and animality, Chansley forcefully violated a sacred bastion of U.S. power, crowned with animal furs, feathers, and horns. Here Chansley’s antics dovetail with “gurus” that vaunt meat’s ability to save (white) men from the great anemia of “leftists” who threaten to rob them of hamburgers as much as their masculinity. Given the zeitgeist, men like Chansley—the newly self-appointed “American Shaman” (Ruelas, 2024)—arrive as messianic figures who promise to save the country as much as its manhood: The cultural seduction of meatsculinity enrobed in vestments of animal flesh.

Of course, the above imbrications of gender and animality cannot be separated from what Lugones (2007) calls “the colonial/modern gender system,” and its relations to global Eurocentred capitalism. Infused with animality from its inception, the colonial/modern gender system relied on animality to inscribe gender’s structure and meaning:

It is part of their history that only white bourgeois women have consistently counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in the sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals. They were understood as animals in the deep sense of “without gender,” sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity. Women racialized as inferior were turned from animals into various modified versions of “women” as it fit the processes of global, Eurocentred capitalism. (pp. 202–203).

While beyond the scope of the paper to elaborate on Lugones’ incisive analysis, I point to her theory to underscore that meatsculinity arises from—and continues—legacies of colonialism.

## Conclusion

While liberal humanism is discursively seeped in notions of animality, as starkly illustrated by Chansley, human-animal relations and their materialities are indivisible from such deployments. My interruption of the discursive frame that Chansley operates within and

<sup>10</sup> Propelled in part by fears of “human domestication” precipitated by grain consumption, the Raw Egg Nationalist scaffolds speciesist hierarchies onto racist ones, in which people of ancient societies are understood as more or less human depending on their animal consumption: “Grain eaters” and “grass-eating peoples,” such as the Mongols, are positioned as animals, while meat-eaters transcend their animal status to become human (Muller et al., 2024).

benefits from, serves as one attempt to unsettle how constructions of whiteness and humanity are enabled through the disavowal of animality. Both the negation and weaponization of animality translates to, and is reinforced by, desecrated material relations with nonhuman animals and “animalized humans” (Wolfe, 2003). Chansley himself arrived in the melee of a global pandemic that on one level represented an inequitably distributed public health catastrophe, and on another, pointed to a grave ecological crisis, triggered by acutely distressed human-animal relations.

A staggering 75% of pathogens associated with emerging diseases are zoonotic and risks associated from zoonoses are anticipated to rise (Tomori and Oluwayelu, 2023). Although the causes of zoonotic spillover are well documented, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public dialogue generally did not engage with these likely culprits, and the structures of power they might implicate. Indeed, in North America, stories of sinister animals or sinister secret cabals effectively dislocated COVID-19 from indicting deeper, more troubling economic and cultural processes that had long been inflicting terrible harms, which had likely precipitated the crisis.

Nonhuman animals were at the center of much COVID-19 (social) media storytelling, from racist diatribes (see, Bryan Adams; Lorinc, 2020; Beaumont-Thomas, 2020) to return-to-Eden fantasies (MacDonald, 2020), and many others. As COVID-19 spread around the globe, the mainstream coverage of the crisis rarely dug into the root causes of the pandemic, leaving the wildlife trade (D’Cruze et al., 2020; Warwick and Steedman, 2021), deforestation (Austin, 2021), habitat encroachment (Johnson et al., 2020), international economic inequalities (Austin, 2021; Shah, 2016), climate emergency (Austin, 2021; Shah, 2016), and factory farming (Foer and Gross, 2020; Shah, 2016) largely untouched as viable explanations for the rise in zoonotic disease, including, potentially, the one ensnaring us. These reasons, which would require much more than medical fixes in the form of vaccines (Shah, 2016), brought us face to face with the Anthropocene (O’Callaghan-Gordo and Antó, 2020), offering an opportunity to directly reckon with it and its effects, an opportunity largely lost.

As the crisis wore on, the consequences were unequally meted upon racialized and impoverished communities (Ken and León, 2021; Nonini, 2021), as anxieties about not just animals but animality ignited: Anti-Asian discrimination spiked (Chen, 2020) and disproportionately people of color suffered and died (Struthers Montford and Wotherspoon, 2021). People mobilized against these vast injustices, as animal activists and scholars petitioned the public to divest from commodity chains that cause animal suffering, and its associated kin, zoonotic disease (Reddy and Saier, 2020). Some even brought these intertwined dynamics into critical dialogue (Lunstrum et al., 2021), offering the diagnostic that similar logics devalue nonhuman life and those rendered as human non-subjects, animalized, and disposable.

Conversely, denying the very existence of said havoc, while peddling a new origin story, the far-right Trump-supporting QAnon conspiracy theory served as both an incubator and bullhorn for COVID—denialism, while positioning health mandates and their associated group of malevolent puppet-masters as the true global threat:

One of the most visible ways that participants in the QAnon movement transformed the world around them was in how they interpreted the pandemic lockdowns, which began in the United States around 19 March 2020. Almost immediately, QAnon influencers and others took to the Internet, calling the Corona Virus pandemic a ‘Plandemic’, arguing that lockdowns, mask mandates, and other public health guidelines were ‘proof’ of the United States globalist agenda to enslave humanity (Conner and MacMurray, 2022, pp. 1057–1,058).

Jacob Chansley’s posturing, which helped define the visual iconography of QAnon, reaching a heightened pitch during the pandemic, suggests a crisis of liberal humanism, indivisible from its white supremacist and colonial machinations. This crisis plays out through discourses of animality and their attendant iterations of the human Subject, and materially through the degradation of human and nonhuman animal relations, which accelerate pandemics.

It is worth remembering, Chansley—easily mocked, memed, and dismissed for his buffoonery—gained prominence while embedded in an insurrection. His cosplaying that day was directly facilitated and protected by physical force. The insurrectionists’ actions, at their basic level, were a ploy to reestablish a faltering power and to reclaim a white, male America they believed was under threat, a nation-state birthed through trauma, bloodshed, and ongoing dispossession. Rather than disparate phenomena, QAnon and zoonotic disease, are cojoined by an animalized speciesist, sexist, and racist violence that marks the heart of the colonial-capitalist project. By clearly identifying such enmeshments, we may be more equipped to unravel and cauterize them.

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