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White supremacist hate only fuels our movement

By Austin McCoy

On Monday, Oct. 3 I discovered Islamophobic posters on an outdoor kiosk at the University of Michigan. The imagery on the posters was so violent it turned my stomach.

It was bad enough to look at pictures of Muslims depicted as violent terrorists beheading white Americans. But on a campus with a sizeable Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian population, the insult to my fellow students and faculty was worse.

Over the last several weeks racist, Islamophobic, and misogynist posters have been posted in various locations all across campus. Fliers implored that white students be proud to be white. Others warned white women not to date black men because they were more abusive, violent, and diseased, or because offspring would not be as intelligent.

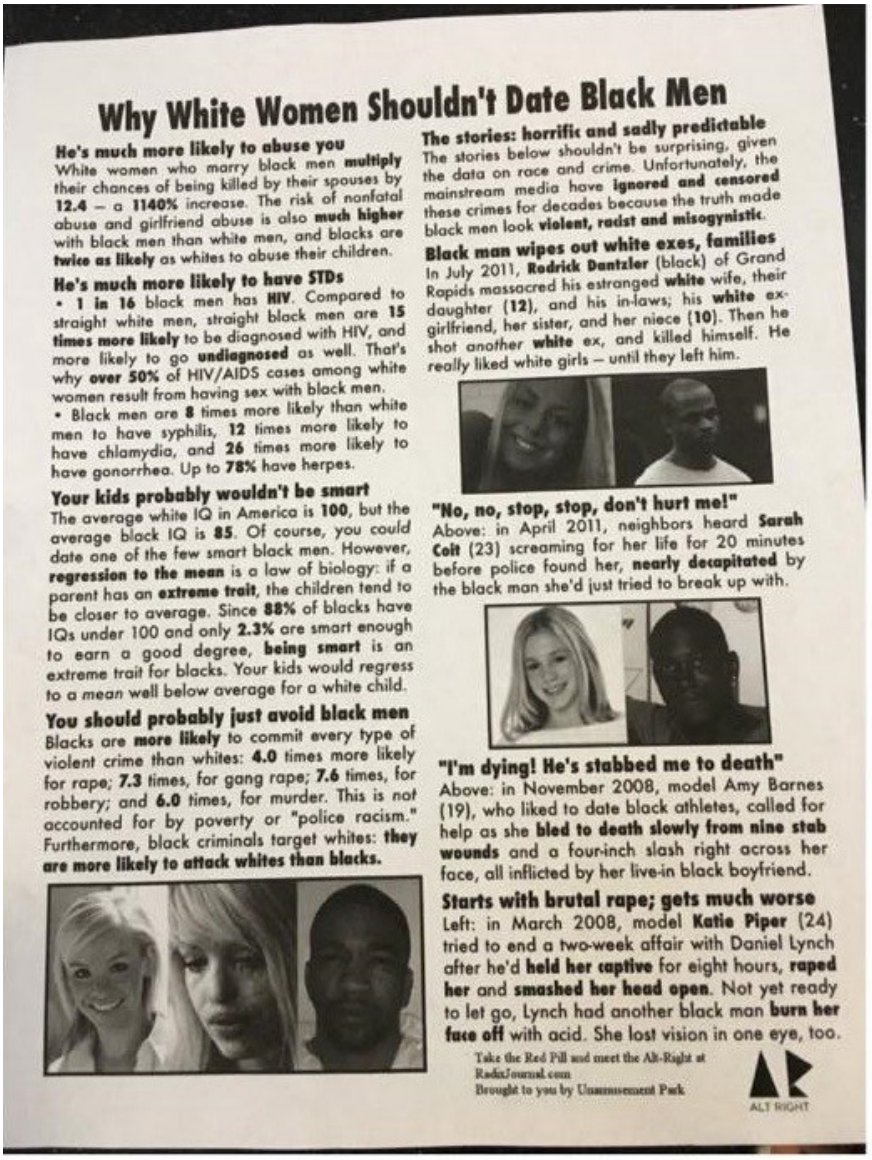
This white supremacist vitriol is not just about diminishing people of color and Muslims. It's about reassuring other white folk who feel threatened by the increasing number of people who look different from them. White supremacists want to create a safe space for white nationalism. They are riling up hate.

I'm onto them: They are coordinating their hateful postings with local and national events like election days and rallies for social justice, so they reach potential recruits when they are most uncomfortable—when people of color are speaking out. The very concept of diversity is a target. It's a stimulus for recruitment.



The first round of posters appeared on Monday, Sept. 26, the day of the first presidential debate and the week before University of Michigan President Mark Schlissel announced the administration's campus-wide strategic plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion. That set off a series of events: Black undergraduate students rallied and protested the president's slow response to the racist posters. Faculty and staff drafted and released two statements—one condemning the posters and another one putting them in historical context.

On Oct. 2, someone invaded the Google document containing the statements, erased its content and the signatures, and wrote in red capital letters, "ALL OF THE COMMUNISTS WILL HANG ON THE DAY OF THE ROPE!!!" This proclamation references a passage from *The Turner Diaries*, written by William Pierce (as Andrew MacDonald). Pierce led a neo-Nazi group, the National Alliance. This text influenced other nationalists like terrorist and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.



The posters kept coming. Some deployed data, appealing to reason and "science." On homecoming weekend a black undergraduate student discovered posters near her dormitory using charts and graphs to show that black people were more prone to disease, especially HIV and AIDS, while whites were at low risk. You have to dial back to the late 19th and early-20th century to find these sorts of ideas linking biology, behavior, and race—ideas that were discredited long ago.

The latest round of incidents were inspired by the election and the ensuing protests from a campus community largely disappointed in a Trump win. On Nov. 11, an unknown man approached a student and demanded that she remove her hijab or be set on fire with a lighter. She

removed it out of fear of physical harm. The next day, and a few hours after the campus community participated in a vigil to support the victimized student, two men approached another student, yelled at her about living in the U.S. and then pushed her down a hill.

The following Monday, more racist posters and chalkings appeared. Someone scrolled "fuck safe spaces" on the Diag, our central gathering place on campus. Fliers implored that the campus community accept Trump as "our" President, in response to protests the week before. One flier again invoked the racist stereotype of the black male rapist. Another called on students to "help enforce the law and make America great again" by reporting undocumented immigrants to ICE and other authorities. The flier listed phone numbers for those authorities.

Clearly, Trump's election emboldened the culprits.

Over the last month and a half, undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators have investigated these incidents to try to understand their strategy. Twitter trolling is a favorite weapon. I have been threatened and harassed online every time I report on the posters or speak out against them. I have been told to go back to Africa. I've been told to drop dead. Trolls will tweet the "n-word" on my timeline. They've repeatedly called undocumented immigrants "criminals" undeserving of empathy and respect, and appear annoyed that I would not call them "illegal."

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The trolls use Twitter because it provides anonymity and gives them a platform to project strength. Some have tweeted about their ubiquity, commandeering posts that feature their fliers and retweeting any reports of white nationalist posters to gloat.

White supremacists may have entered mainstream political discourse—and my twitter feed—but they are not as strong or as ubiquitous as they want us to believe. That doesn't make their posters or online trolling any less threatening, nor less hurtful.

But they are not winning. Far from it. All of the racist, Islamophobic, misogynist, violent, and hateful posters and assaults have generated strong anti-racist organizing and collective actions at the University of Michigan. Undergraduate students of color formed Students for Justice and began organizing direct actions after the first appearance of racist posters. A walkout led by black students drew hundreds of white participants as well. Faculty have offered support, and I'm working with graduate students, undergrads and alumni of all kinds to support Students for Justice and investigate and isolate the culprits.

Our goal is to thwart white supremacists as they try to expand their ranks. We're refuting their racist "data" and "science," and countering their hate with affirming messages, imagery, and organizing.

Here is OUR message: Racism, Islamophobia, sexism, and white supremacy are not welcome on our campus.



Austin McCoy is a historian and a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Michigan. His research and teaching interests include African American history, political economy, labor and social movements. Read a news account of hate incidents on campuses across the nation here. McCoy's thoughts on "Defeating Trumpism" are posted on Voices on Campus, a collection of posts about higher education, labor and social justice.