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Disinformation, Culture Wars, and the Horns of Failure: A Rhetorical Post-Mortem of the Ottawa “Freedom Convoy”

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ON FRIDAY, 18 February 2022, Fox News contributor Sara Carter published a since deleted tweet. It addressed a viral video of a woman appearing to collide with an RCMP horse during the so-called “Freedom Convoy” occupation of Ottawa and claimed that “reports are the woman trampled by a Canadian horse patrol just died at the hospital ... #Trudeau #FreedomConvoyCanada” (Petrizzo). Carter’s post was a part of a rather surprising, if fleeting and shallow, interest in the Canadian occupation among American news outlets, especially the right-wing Fox News team. During a segment of 10 February 2022’s edition of *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, the host even went so far as to describe the Freedom Convoy as the “single most successful human rights protest in a generation,” insisting that the occupation was of immediate historical importance and that it reflected an uprising of everyday Canadians against a state which was allegedly committing egregious human rights violations by endorsing COVID-19 vaccinations and masking measures.

Certainly, bombastic and sensationalist headlines were a regular feature of Carlson’s show, if not the troubled Fox News organization more generally. Evidence released as part of Dominion Voting System’s lawsuit against the company has recently offered a look behind the curtain at

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Rupert Murdoch's directive to the Fox team's superstars to push baseless claims of election fraud after Trump's loss to Biden in 2020, even acknowledging that the evidence supporting these claims was fabricated (Folkenflik). As Caroline Orr argues in her recently published analysis of the Convoy, Fox News appeared to deploy a similarly goal-oriented and truth-be-damned strategy for their coverage of the occupation, one that was centred on "bringing a similar truck convoy to the U.S." This approach, founded on disinformation and banking on right-wing rage and confirmation bias, has played an influential role in entangling discussions about the Freedom Convoy with broader conservative culture war talking points and in canonizing the Convoy into a "growing transnational far-right movement that has seized on pandemic-related grievances to recruit new members and expand its global presence" (Orr). The what I will call "convoyers" and their professed intention of decrying vaccine mandates for border crossing truckers were assimilated into foreign disinformation campaigns and a catch-all cacophony of right-wing complaint before they could even raise the megaphone to their lips.

Although Carter's claim that the woman who was injured by an RCMP horse had died was similarly confirmed to be untrue, right-wing media capitalized on the subsequent moral outrage to amplify its now ubiquitous refrain of "F*ck Trudeau." Through the tweet, and the discussions it engendered, a crucial piece of misinformation was slipped into a dialogue already rife with overextended accusations of "fringe minori[ties]" with "unacceptable views," Neo-Nazism, and an exaggerated partisan narrative overblowing the significance of the occupation for those dispossessed by COVID-19 lockdowns and by global market slowdowns (Gilmore). The trampling death of a peaceful protestor was the piece of evidence needed to assert a broader rhetoric claiming that the federal government sought to spill the blood of its critics and to censor and discredit a constitutionally enshrined freedom of peaceful assembly. But the claim was false, and the premise of Trudeau's alleged dictatorial approach to governance is undermined by his limited power as a minority leader whose authority requires a coalition agreement with at least one other federal party.

As Carlson himself admits in the same episode, however, the occupation, itself allegedly motivated by the misuse of biopolitical power to impede employment based on international trade, ironically created barriers to free trade across the U.S.–Canada border in Coutts, Alberta, and worsened the economic situation of the metropolitan capital of Canada by closing down significant portions of the city. Residents of the city described the din of noise as unbearable and traumatic, making sleep

impossible and leading some to take matters into their own hands as law enforcement took a non-confrontational, non-interventionist, and laissez-faire approach to managing the occupation (Lord). Months later, some who called the city home during the occupation have testified that the Convoy has left them with lingering trauma from the din of truck horns and on edge as anecdotal stories circulate of pro-Convoy actors becoming aggressive and violent within proximity of those who do not share their views (Miller).

Evidently, the rhetorical work of right-wing American media was felt on the ground during the Ottawa occupation. Some occupiers infamously repeated talking points of Fox News's unrelated coverage of American politics, even going so far to claim that their "First Amendment rights" were being violated through the occupation dispersal efforts (Jackson). For convoyers whose social media engagement and communities were largely populated by sympathetic voices governed by algorithmic echo chambers, however, the occupation came to be understood as a kind of Pan-Canadian undertaking, one that was unifying and healing a country "divided" by an out of touch minority Liberal government, despite the fact that it had just secured re-election only months prior. Occupiers described their movement as one born out of "peace and love" for their fellow Canadians, and the entrenchment of disinformation snippets such as Carter's lie positioned the federal government as fundamentally at odds with the alleged will of a unified Canadian people (Ruiz). It became a melting pot of right-wing advocacies sewn together by the common fibres of disdaining COVID policies and the Canadian prime minister. The occupation took on the veneer of a neighbourhood barbecue replete with hot tubs and charcoal grills. Through this imagery, occupiers entrenched themselves rhetorically as average everyday Canadians in the capital's backyard. For roughly three weeks, this was the status quo on Wellington Street.

Zoe Trodd describes protest narratives as cultivating a "politics of connection" and as expanding solidarities based on mutual understanding and common suffering (xxii). For many of these convoyers, the presence of like-minded rhetoric and real flesh-and-blood bodies concretized a sense of group belonging that offered an illusion of national support. Carter's tweet then, posted after the Emergencies Act was invoked and force was authorized to expel the illegal occupiers, took advantage of the convoy's rhetorical framing of themselves as a Canadian neighbourhood. It was indeed "a woman" rather than a convoyer who had been trampled, and pro-Convoy rhetoric suggested that the federal government could do the same to anyone living under their nationwide jurisdiction. The lie gave

the movement a martyr and framed the federal government as declaring war on its own citizens.

As Carole McGranahan reminds us, however, “the 21st-century political lie has its own history, which consists of a new global populism and demagoguery, the Internet’s immediacy, and social media’s selection biases and ability to disseminate hate” (244). It is self-reinforcing and nearly impenetrable to out-group views. The Freedom Convoy successfully leveraged anti-vax disinformation and critical misunderstandings regarding the Canadian separation of powers—most of the vaccine mandates they claimed to oppose were enacted at the level of the provincial rather than federal government—into a call to action and a siege that left authorities concerned that the event would erupt into violence akin to the 6 January riots south of the border. But more importantly, it demonstrated a failure to persuade or diplomatically engage with the convoyers at all levels of government and set a precedent for activating “justified” emergency powers to respond to public displays of political dissent, even if the sentiments on display this time around were misfounded and misled (Tasker).

Writing from the perspective of an American studies scholar interested in protest narratives, especially those that locate labour at their centre, the Freedom Convoy is puzzling. In an era of intense neoliberalism and capitalist exploitation, why was the straw that broke the trucker’s back the relatively milquetoast issue of required COVID-19 vaccinations? Paul McLaren’s 2022 article summarizes the innumerable concerns to which the truckers could have devoted their occupation, noting that the profession is itself plagued with labour injustices and corruption. Canadian truckers are often labeled as contractors rather than employees “so that [companies] can avoid paying for overtime and benefits,” and a general culture of abuse, wage theft, profoundly long hours, and even racist “threats of deportation from corrupt employers” permeate the industry (McLaren 869). Despite the Freedom Convoy being “described as a working-class movement” (McLaren 867), it was disavowed by most Canadian unions and populated almost entirely by white truckers (869). And while the early emphasis of the federal Liberal Party on the appearance of Nazi and Confederate flags amid the protest and their sweeping attempts to label the entire movement as informed by ultra-right reactionaries was hasty and occasionally inaccurate, it is true that Convoy organizer Tamara Lich had ties to the far-right Western secessionist movement (Fung) and that convoyers at the Alberta border “were armed to the teeth and ready for violence” (Lamoureux).

The tone of failure struck by Justice Rouleau as he delivered his report on the unfortunate but justified use of the Emergencies Act to disperse the occupiers resonates with the outcomes of this movement and the response it faced by Canadian authorities. The Freedom Convoy failed to address meaningful grievances and to strike a chord with the overwhelmingly ubiquitous feelings of socioeconomic uncertainty dogging the Canadian population. It instead played into the hands of right-wing demagoguery and of neoliberal interests by taking aim at public health measures that required employers to take at least one aspect of their employee's safety somewhat seriously. Similarly, Rouleau's assessment cites "a failure of federalism" on behalf of Canadian authorities, noting that the Convoy-enabling immobilization of police and the total absence of the Doug Ford-led Government of Ontario had left the federal government with few options at their disposal for lifting the siege of the city (Tasker). Although Trudeau has since admitted that he wishes he "phrased it differently" when he offered his sweeping assessment of the convoyers, one can only wonder how a movement of this scale would have fared if it had been a #BlackLivesMatter or Indigenous rights demonstration (Tasker). As Natasha Lennard persuasively argues, it appears that all levels of enforcement and governance "ceded ground to these protestors that no left-wing, anti-racist protestors would be permitted," citing the omnipresence of police surveillance and violence faced by Indigenous land defenders of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation as they blockaded the construction of oil pipelines.

Perhaps the greatest failure, then, is what this protest movement *could have* been. As Taylor Dysart points out, the belief among convoyers that "pandemic mandates infringe upon their constitutional rights to freedom" is a contemporary manifestation of a settler-colonial conception of white entitlement. The flipside to this rhetoric is that it is "founded in the unfreedom of Indigenous people" (Dysart) and has led to individualism trumping collectivism, as "the belief in their own entitlement to freedom has caused the truckers to forfeit an awareness of how their notion of freedom affects the public health consequences of others" (McLaren 870). The presence of some Indigenous and racialized supporters among the convoyers serves as further evidence that the Freedom Convoy teetered on the threshold of something less exclusionary, but the potential energy of this unifying rhetoric faced overwhelming resistance from what subMedia identifies as "inflamed nativist sentiment" that increased the number of attacks on health care workers, visible minorities, and the queer community,

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effectively distancing the movement from the possibility of more diverse engagement with minority voices.

The refusal, then, to define “freedom” beyond a vague sense of rugged individualism, white entitlement, and as “the right to say no to any government restrictions on vaccinations, especially those impeding their ability to cross national borders” was the central rhetorical failure of the entire Freedom Convoy occupation (McLaren 867). The undefined quickly becomes the catch-all, and this was precisely what unfolded with the Freedom Convoy as conspiracy groups, white supremacy movements, and disinformation peddling fringe media capitalized on the lack of “dialectical engagement” to insert themselves into the action. As McLaren observes, “achievements of the working-classes have been profound in fighting the most destructive dimensions of capitalist exploitation since the industrial revolution” (869). But the convoyers missed the point and took aim at the wrong target. The federal government’s response to Freedom Convoy constituted a display of authoritarian coercion when it could have broken new ground in civil and democratic dialogues. As Natasha Lennard, speaking of the use of the Emergencies Act to disperse the occupation, argues, future protest action should beware of the “invocation of these repressive powers. Those same measures will be used to quash the movements we support” and will leave a lasting repressive influence on political assembly.

So where does this leave us? Tucker Carlson might have been correct in stating that the Freedom Convoy marked one of the most significant protest movements in a generation, but it was failure rather than success that defined it. The Freedom Convoy proved incapable of finding sympathy among those who found it “difficult to find common ground with their concept of freedom,” and anniversary protests have decidedly lacked the same kind of energy and turnout that the original version of the movement possessed (McLaren 867). It failed to take aim at the systems of capitalist exploitation that leave truckers and all labourers in Canada in a state of worsening precarity and powerlessness. And it failed to mobilize the principles of unity, love, and care that it claimed to espouse too late in its messaging by excluding tremendous swathes of Canada’s diverse population and tormenting the entire city of Ottawa during its entire three-week tenure.

McLaren’s solemn declaration that “we cannot practice capitalism and survive” casts the Freedom Convoy in an even more dubious light (869). In the convoy’s battle for freedom, repressive state power and capitalist exploitation claimed victory. Love and collective action were subordinated to hate and banal adversarialism. But the power of occupation-based pro-

test to mobilize and to affect change has been proven to be intact, perhaps even strengthened. Wielded differently, an occupation-based protest of this sort may yet again be deployed to provide a necessary outlet for resisting the neoliberal imperatives that continue to existentially threaten North Americans and that continually violate our rights and freedoms just to exist and survive.

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