

## **‘The old world of words gives way to the world of code’: Literature and the Alt-Right in Hari Kunzru’s *Red Pill***

**Claire Chambers**

### **Abstract**

In an era defined by the digital escalation of right-wing xenophobia and intolerance, what political or ethical force, if any, can literature exert? My article addresses this question through a sustained analysis of Hari Kunzru’s novel *Red Pill* (2020). It examines the unnamed author-protagonist’s descent into paranoia and, eventually, psychosis. This mental health nosedive occurs when the British-Indian narrator’s liberal worldview is confronted by a charismatic alt-right media producer who normalizes nihilistic violence, dressing it up with literary references. Taking a cue from the parallels Kunzru draws between Weimar-era bigotry, the Stasi’s panoptic surveillance, and today’s digital ‘attention economy’ (Goldhaber, Crawford), I argue that *Red Pill* brings into sharp relief the failure of liberal tolerance in the face of slippery right-wing memes and apparently ironic agitprop. By staging the protagonist’s confrontation with the coded, racialized language of the alt-right, the novel interrogates new forms of political precarity and social divisions. It ultimately positions Kunzru’s brand of radical listening as a necessary, if dangerous, postcolonial intervention into the mirror worlds of contemporary society.

**Keywords:** xenophobia, bigotry, Alt-Right, mental health, precarity, paranoia, radical listening