Scared Sheetless: Negrophobia, the Fear of God, and Justified Violence in the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary

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Abstract: The ideology of white supremacy is alive and well in the U.S. This paper argues that those attempting to understand how white supremacy works should delve into recent justifications of anti-black violence rather than simply waiting to spot the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. Doing so requires scholars to disabuse themselves of taking for granted the descriptions of what may be characterized as a U.S. Christian-White imaginary and to observe the dynamic, discursive shifts that Jean-François Bayart calls "operational acts of identification." Drawing on incidents from antebellum slavery to the Black Lives Matter era and beyond, it is argued that white people have long been able to justify anti-black violence by appealing to a biblicist "Negrophobia," wherein black people are rendered as frightening, even demonic creatures that must be stopped for the good of God's kingdom. This paper presents a critical history of violence in America that is representative of a devastatingly effective strategy that continues to fortify the functional primacy of whiteness despite popular rejections of racism.

Keywords: grotesque, black lives matter, whiteness, racism, biblicism, Negrophobia

Introduction

The amorphous relationship between Christianity and whiteness can effectively be described as a historical series of ongoing, grotesque acts of identification rather than a single claimed ethnic formation. As much as the notion of "supremacy" is used to describe white racial violence, biblically-inflected rhetorics of fear have been devastatingly effective in defending

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racist actions. This irony warrants an order of theorizing that looks beyond the rhetoric to the signifiers and signified, the assailant and the victimized.

This paper proposes that explanations of religion and race in America would be better served through the conception of what can be called a "U.S. Christian-White Imaginary." An imaginary is a heuristic device for framing normalization or what could be called, in Bourdieuian terms, a "matrix of perception" (Bourdieu 1977: 82–83). The U.S. Christian-White Imaginary is a worldview that justifies—if not, encourages—the liberties taken by people who identify as white, not simply based upon race, but also on the assumption of a Christian habitus. What differentiates this framing from essentialist notions of whiteness is the recognition that the latter is in fact an adaptive hegemony whose longevity is furthered by the performance of a self-critique that manages to leave its most vital expressions intact.

The aspect of this that will be examined is the way that one can cite Christian duty to defend an act of dominance when legal justifications have failed. The invention of whiteness is historicized as a modern authorizing performance that developed as Christian Europeans began working out their identity on the imperial stage. Central is the role of fear so far as piety (i.e., fear of God) becomes connected to progress (i.e., fear of primitivity). To make this point, it is highlighted how the suspicious arrest and death of Sandra Bland, Bartolomé de Las Casas, John Winthrop, and "the trial of Denmark Vesey" are all representative of the history of this imaginary. Particularly, this paper underscores a persistent but rarely acknowledged trope called "Negrophobia." This is a discursive move in which a black person is imagined as demonic. Under the guise of duty, a white person can deal with, even eliminate, a human deemed to be a monstrous threat. White supremacist ends are not needed to justify violence when a particular act is deemed an exercise in faithful Christian virtue.

The effects of Negrophobia and the U.S. Christian-White imaginary are further highlighted below in terms of contemporary anti-black police brutality, which may be construed as part of a wider legacy rather than a string of isolated events. This paper shows that just as scholars of violence have contextualized the War on Terror within U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East to great effect, our reading of Negrophobia should trace a similar history of violence. This history is hereby tracked in terms of the demonizing of "the Central Park Five," Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. From the research presented here we can fathom why those operating in the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary need not don the sheets of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to justify supremacist acts; rather, the figurative baptismal robes are always in

jeopardy of being sullied by those dark bodies that are to be kept at bay. This paper charts the classificatory transformations upon which this logic is built.

A Social Theory of Whiteness

Because of modern civil rights advances related to race, we need a methodological atheism that wakes us from the lullaby of a sanctified liberal idealism that conceals unacknowledged racism. One prominent example is that of the "know your rights" social media meme. The meme has many iterations, but it is usually an infographic with recommendations for what one might do in the course of a police action—say when U.S. Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement comes to the door. Listed are reminders that the accused have the right to remain silent, to ask for an attorney, and to refuse searches or entry in the absence of a warrant signed by a judge. Versions of this meme have been posted by well-meaning "allies."[1] While the information posted is endorsed by legal advocacy groups, the genre of meme leaves little room for a discussion of the proviso that exercising one's rights comes at the risk of one's own story being overwritten by a threatened authority. The death of Sandra Bland is a cautionary tale regarding this very point.

In 2015, this African American woman was pulled over in Waller County, Texas (the northwest outskirts of the Houston metroplex) for a traffic violation. After Bland asserted her rights, the police officer claimed that she belligerently resisted arrest and he tazed her in response. She was held in a Waller County jail and found three days later to have committed suicide via asphyxiation. The cause of death immediately elicited suspicion in news and social media. The Bland family filed a wrongful death lawsuit against local law enforcement agencies.[2] Video recordings captured by bystanders, Bland's own mobile phone, and the officer's dashcam were enough to lead defendants to reach a settlement in court. The spirit behind the "know your rights" meme did not do justice for Bland. She attempted to exercise her rights; the arresting officer questioned and violated them. All this is to say, knowledge of a cultural master text is not enough when racism is underway. Three intellectual trends inform this theorizing regarding Christianity and whiteness.

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[1]The American Civil Liberties Union has developed infographics and a website explaining the rights that people of various demographics have when encountering law enforcement. See ACLU's "Know Your Rights."

[2]Additionally, Sandra Bland recorded a video of the traffic stop on her cell phone, the footage of which continues to call into question the veracity of the arresting officer's account. Hassan (2019).

First is the idea that "religion" and "race" are modern, co-constitutive discourses (Nye 2018; Weisenfeld 2016). They emerged as answers to European questions about how to identify themselves and others in the New World.

Second is the idea that such identities are not stable concepts but rather the products of what philosopher Jean-François Bayart (2005 [1992]: 92) termed "operational acts of identification," or the social performances through which people vie for and fortify a sense of place within a shared habitus. Similarly in regard to race, sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015: 105–136) have had success in shifting scholarly discussion away from an essentialist understanding to one of "racial formation," the identificatory constellations through which people draw themselves by negotiating the various social, economic, and cultural projects we have come to abbreviate with racial schemas.

Lastly, this paper has been influenced by anthropologist James S. Bielo's (2009) discussion of "biblicism," an ideology that privileges those speech-acts threaded through the Bible, even though the same speech-acts would appear suspect were they threaded through a more mundane cultural text. Bielo's discourse analysis of evangelical Christian communities has demonstrated how chapter-and-verse citations are but an aspect of this biblicism. The ideology is better characterized as an epistemological championing of inductive applications of biblical imagery, themes, and narratives to everyday life. And as will be shown, white people have marshaled biblicist presumptions to justify violent acts of racism, especially against black people. It is understood that these three interventions are part of a broader deconstructionist enterprise that takes seriously the insufficiency of maintaining an ontology of identity. This a posteriori positioning is necessary so as to maintain a critical distance.

The difficulty with framing white agency is that it often benefits from a resistance to accountability by altering the grounds of claims and disputes. Unknowing and uncertainty are its greatest allies. White supremacy works as a science until it is pseudo-science, but white nationalism remains acceptable until the state grows more comfortable resting in an alternate American Dream (Sussman 2014). White ethnicity functions as a heritage worthy of reclamation until the legacy no longer yields precedent for a desired future. As historian Michael Frye Jacobson has documented, this has allowed whiteness to operate as the definition of "civilization," especially after the Civil War (Jacobson 2000: 143–152),

This is what is so troubling for many about the varied links between white racism and Christianity in the U.S. cultural system. It makes labeling someone more or less racist a challenge. To quote James Baldwin (1998 [1984]: 180), "those who think they are white" have an easier time calling out those they have deemed as ignorant than they do their loved ones, co-workers, and elected

officials. Instead of facing reflections of themselves, and the privileges belied by their socio-cultural provenance, they "manufacture distance" enough to continue to enjoy the benefit of the doubt (Driscoll and Miller 2019). More probing is warranted to see the dimensions of racism's influence in the U.S.'s ongoing history.

There is a Janus-eque duplicity in the way whiteness refers back to a past. While it appears to purposefully forget its indebtedness to prior abhorrent systems—as all cultural formations are wont to do—it also overwrites the terms on which the past is relayed (and for all intents and purposes, happened). Toni Morrison called this psycho-social, world-rendering coping mechanism "rememory." It is characterized as a response to trauma in which a person cultivates a memory of memory based not upon the perils of recognition but the possibility of reimagination (Morrison 2007 [1987]: 43; Spaulding 2005: 66; Clough 1998). Morrison's pen made an artful display of the context and conditions of black rememory, but a similar pathos is at play in the utility and "culturalism" of whiteness (Bayart 2005 [1992]: 109).

Thus whiteness should not be minimized to looking a certain way or talking with a certain affect or possessing a certain amount of wealth. As philosopher and social critic Victor Anderson argues, it is a performance of imagination executed not only in the development of social politics, but also aesthetics. After chronicling the development of whiteness as "commensurate with the age of Europe and the ethos of North European imperialism," Anderson observes this racial identity as emerging from a dialectic between two impulses (1995: 120). On the one hand, the European elite fancied themselves as possessing a Classical genius that pervaded the expressive culture of the times, whether in music, literature, philosophy, or theology (Anderson 1995: 121). On the other, they reserved the privilege to adapt, abrogate, and innovate beyond prior conventions so as to constitute a truly modern life-world (Anderson 1995: 61). These cultural values may appear antithetical, but Anderson says that they form the dialectic where whiteness, as the right to follow or break with tradition, is operationalized.

Anderson uses the term "grotesque" to redescribe the ethics of racial logic. He recognizes that the modern artistic motif that emphasized incongruous forms over clearly demarked standards was also prevalent in philosophical critiques of cultural ascendancy (Anderson 1995: 123–133). Whiteness is a figurative self-mutation undergone by social actors who want to imagine themselves as wholly other than those whom they want to dehumanize (Anderson 1995: 118–131). It sets up a system for both evaluating and embodying beauty which empowers those deemed worthwhile to pass judgment on others. By this rationale, racism is less about malice and has more to do with a preference for

complacency and stability disguised in the artifice of survival. The grotesquerie of whiteness is not in the slights or atrocities committed but in the manipulation of previously conceived and otherwise sacrosanct norms (Bederman 1995: 43–53). Simply put, whiteness is the convenience that comes with the authority to define the rules of culture in a social space and the ability to exempt oneself from those rules at will.

There may be no more gauche and yet telling example of this grotesquerie than the institution of the tanning salon, where white women need not think twice about darkening their skin in pursuit of beauty. Meanwhile women of color must frequently contend against the privileging of Eurocentric beauty standards. Racism is not about the assumption of fair skin being more beautiful than dark skin. Racism is about how select bodies decide on the appropriate application of otherwise arbitrary social conventions.

We would do well to heed observations from either side of modernity about the cunning of whiteness where it has been likened to a masquerade. In so many words, the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot spoke to the psychological niche that whiteness would fill within the context of the European imperial project.

> In proportion as the distance from the capital increases, this mask detaches itself; it falls off on the frontiers; and between one hemisphere and another, is totally lost. When a man crossed the line, he is neither an Englishman, a Dutchman, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, or a Portuguese. He preserves nothing of his country, except the principles and prejudices which give a sanction to his conduct, or furnish him with an excuse for it. Servile when he is weak, and oppressive when he is strong; eager to acquire wealth, and to enjoy it. And capable of all the enormities which can contribute most speedily to the completion of his designs; he is a domestic tiger again let loose in the woods, and who is again seized with the thrift of blood. Such have all the Europeans indiscriminately shown themselves in the regions of the New World, where they have been actuated with a common rage, the passion for gold. (Raynal 1798: 264)

Whiteness, thus, is a discourse that develops on the other side of the ocean, that revitalizes "vestigial" and obsolescent nationalistic competition with a new synergistic signification (Goldenberg 2013: 40). The old mask is removed, even denounced, on account of its contrived flaws, and a new mask is donned that is more befitting of the new allegiances required to carry out colonial exploits.

In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes the amnesia that colonized subjects undergo as they spend more time at imperial centers of power. Fanon highlights decreased interest in the culture of prior belonging,

a lack of intelligibility to kin, and disinterest in relinquishing the privileges that accompany any newfound status (Fanon 2008 [1952]: 185–197). These are symptoms of a pathology that leads people to seek out a new mask so that they can act on passions that would be unseemly according to the logics, conventions, and expectations that were previously understood as normal.

To speak analytically about whiteness is to highlight the identity claims that, if successful, give a person carte blanche to have one's way in spite of another. Guilt is assuaged because the masked person is no longer identifiable as doer of the violent deed. This happens even though the doer and the masked are distinguished only by the nimble psychic costume change that is racial rememory.

Fear in the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary

Racial formation can take on many shapes. We are undoubtedly familiar with the trope of supremacism, whether in the pseudo-scientific form of evolution or the blunt historical ethnocentrism of the West's mythologies of civilization (Bederman 1995: 77–120). At the crux of this matter is the idea that one group is essentially better or more advanced than another. While many of us are accustomed to what historian Nancy MacLean called "the extralegal terror" brought about by those hiding behind the white masks and hoods of chivalry (1994: 127), we must refine our lenses to account for the subtle classificatory moves behind racism's socially insidious—and legal—forms. One discursive realm where this racial project is worked out is the aforementioned U.S. Christian-White Imaginary.

The U.S Christian-White Imaginary is a psycho-social framework frequently operationalized in justifications of racism. It is a system of signification in which those who wear the mask of whiteness can don a Christian mask in scenarios where oblique racial discourse seems too gauche. On this side of modernity, where outright evocations of racial supremacy have lost their luster, Christian virtue provides a more efficacious argot for working out social difference with authority and without critical accountability.

One way to historicize this is to think about the insecurities provoked in colonialism. The canonical pursuit of God, glory, and gold helped to fuel the passions of would-be conquerors as they faced down the demons that would make their wandering from "the métropole" for naught (Fanon 2008 [1952]: esp. 20, 53).[3] The uncertainty and self-doubt brought by distant travel paral-

[3]In postcolonial thought, the métropole refers to the imperial center from which colonial efforts are dispatched. The colony is the base of those colonial efforts in a designated frontier. Fanon explains that social stratification is often mediated through claims of

leled the difficulty to reach back for the common place sources with which they once identified. Benedict Anderson has discussed how "imagined communities" built upon new media, like the newspaper, to replace the social traditions and polities they had left behind (2006: 6). This gave way to not only new perceptions of colonialism, but also new understandings of nations, states, and the values that govern them.

Take for example Bartolomé de las Casas. The sixteenth-century Dominican friar questioned the grounds on which the Spanish were subjugating the indigenous peoples of America (Berger 1991: 6–8). De las Casas had a vested interest in the larger colonial project insofar as his very livelihood was intimately tied to the rise of the nascent kingdom that was Catholic Spain. De las Casas had first gone to the Caribbean as an *encomendero*, a kingdom-backed conqueror and enslaver of indigenous peoples. After witnessing the inhumanity of the *encomienda* system, he returned to Spain as an abolitionist and later returned to missionize the Maya.

Relatively speaking, De las Casas was a progressive reformer, but his identity was constantly in flux. His abolitionist platform was a work in progress. He initially privileged Spanish lives over indigenous lives and then came to value indigenous lives over African lives (whom he initially thought would provide an apt replacement for indigenous slaves) before settling on a broader wholesale theology of abolition. The takeaway for our purposes is how De las Casas was working out his own identity on the backs of others. His reflexive journeying brings into relief "the history of the New World" as "the history of the frontier, of pushing back the wilderness, cultivating the soil, populating the land and building an industrial way of life" (Berger 1991: 158). Thomas R. Berger agrees with Fanon in highlighting how the colonial city, as an imitation of the métropole, became the mirror of progress in the imagination of empire's industrial legatees. Recounting the colonial history of the U.S. Christian-White imaginary reminds us to consider that the mirror left to colonialism's heirs was and is tempered by both race and religion.

When we consider the history of race as a Pan-European project—rather than the social work of a specific state—we begin to see the utility that the Bible afforded to those who would think themselves white. Christianity offered a great common denominator for those wandering in the New World. The transportability of the Bible lent to its convenience for establishing identity claims while being away from clerical centers. The Bible—as something to

proximity to and association with the metropole, and that this is as true for the colonized as it is the colonizer.

be brought, carried, and shared—made it a potentially useful master text for those seeking to master a new world.

This feature is most pronounced in the Protestant accent of whiteness. Whereas De las Casas and the Catholic Church baptized indigenous peoples into their paternalistic mission, John Winthrop had a different model of Christian charity that would represent and inform future U.S. the white racial project. The seventeenth-century Puritan leader understood his community to be a beacon for the world. His millenarian rendering was not limited to a push for individual holiness or even a challenge to bless one's brothers and sisters. The community itself was to be a "city on a hill" lest they become "a story and a byword" for the wicked that abound (Winthrop 1630). Beyond being a prototypical treatise on exceptionalism, Winthrop's exhortations also help to establish a geographical typography for the U.S. Christian-White imaginary.

As arguments for the Puritan experiment at Massachusetts Bay developed, the idea of the "city" as a refuge from the frontier was never distant from the concept of the "savage" that threatened what Winthrop intended to build in the name of God (Winthrop 1629). In defending the Puritans' right to take hold of New England from native occupants, Winthrop analogized his community's colonizing to Abraham living among Sodomites. He then went on to defend his right to land possession by commenting on the fortuitous way in which indigenous people had largely been devastated by a "miraculous plague." Winthrop does end his argument with the concession that there is more than enough land for both peoples. However, it is also apparent that the Puritans feared the transgression of boundaries—where the indigenous people and their ways would overtake what they believed to be the signs of God's providence. This fear is at the heart of the U.S. Christian-White imaginary.

Jeremy Schipper has detailed how this violent and racist fear was at work in the trial of Denmark Vesey (2017). Vesey was a former slave who had purchased his freedom and plotted an insurrection against white slaveholders in Charleston, South Carolina. He was also a leader in what would later be known as Emanuel Methodist Episcopal Church from which he presumably gathered allies. Ultimately, the rebellion was foiled before it began and Vesey was hung. Through the course of a trial, Vesey is recorded as having referenced a number of Bible passages in order to defend his plan to kill slaveholders and to lead an exodus to Haiti. Prosecutor Lionel H. Kennedy rebutted Vesey's exegesis, characterizing him as bearing the curse of Ham and "attempting to pervert the sacred words of God into a sanction for crimes of the blackest hue."

Schipper points out that Kennedy had no problem with the assumed objective importance of the Bible. What was at issue was how Vesey had internalized the scriptures, which by Kennedy's view "preeminently includes

divine decrees for a harmonious social order to which members of a fallen humanity must reconcile themselves" (2017: 1041). Vesey's prideful and vengeful rebellion against God's order (read here, racial order) was a corruption in the eyes of Kennedy. The court's violent judgment—hanging Vesey—was legitimate insofar as Vesey's frightful accursedness had been registered and the court could chalk up its actions to fearful reverence of God. This aspect of fear articulated in biblicist terms became a means through which white racist violence could be perpetrated, and it continues to be effective in the twenty-first century in all too familiar ways.

Fearing Black Youth, Slaying Demons in the Twenty-First Century

The key is in looking at examples of Negrophobia, where white people come to fear black people as after their lives, their liberties, and their happiness. Today we see the violent externalization of the U.S. Christian-White imaginary in the discourses that make necessary the decree "Black Lives Matter," that is, the catalog of instances of police brutality against black people. These incidents can be described as tragic, but Daniel Levine would have us recast this latest rash of deadly police-actions against black people within the genre of melodrama (2018). Each instance of police brutality that precedes social media trends like #BlackLivesMatter or #SayHerName is part of a larger history of violence. The flip side of this is that each instance builds up and reinforces the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary.

In his research on U.S. international security models, Levine demonstrates that national responses to violence can vary based upon the genre used to narrate and frame public policy. While 9/11 was a unifying event for many Americans, the tragedy prompted a moral questioning that temporarily halted social action (e.g., the dismissal of schools, the closing of businesses, the disruption of media programming). The nation was to meditate, mourn, and grieve. With such an affective catharsis underway, Americans could temporarily suspend the work necessary to develop a rememory of catastrophic foreign policy decisions that dated back to the Sykes-Picot agreement. But "rather than spurring effective action" to deal with the causes of violence, as Levine says, the catharsis that follows tragedy eventually gave way to "an agonizing, Sisyphean burden of constant labour and self-questioning" (2018: 4). Otherwise, the socio-political artifice through which the hope for security is mediated would crumble. Melodrama, however, fires the engines of social action. The thrill of the episodic back and forth raises the stakes and "can give rise . . . to a kind of eliminationist logic. Since we suffer innocently, the responsibility for our suffering must rest with villainous others" (8). Thus, after a brief moment of silence, the United States made combatting the source of

American fear a national priority. The U.S. was not simply out for vengeance against the perpetrators of 9/11. The U.S. was locked into a battle with the terrorists, a resilient and menacing foe against whom no tactic can be deemed unreasonable.

Beyond Orientalist castings of Muslim opponents, American biblicism provided the imagery to motivate and inspire those engaged in the war. The weapon sight company, Trijicon, printed Bible verses on the sides of gun sights used by U.S. servicemen in Iraq and Afghanistan (Rhee, Bradley, and Ross 2010). Verses included 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ," and John 8:12, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,'" among other verses (NIV). Also, although government officials have labored to distance the war from crusader mythology, one news report says that some military officers have said to refer to the weapons as "spiritually transformed firearm[s] of Jesus Christ" (Rhee, Bradley, and Ross 2010).

One could write this off as a single tragic incident in the story of the military-industrial complex, but it is emblematic of a biblicist legacy dramatized by the sniper character in the blockbuster WWII film, *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1998), who recites Bible verses between firing. It is also exemplary of the statistical overrepresentation of self-identified evangelical chaplains serving in the U.S. Armed Forces so far as evangelicalism signifies a proclivity for biblicism and proselytization (Townsend 2011). These are but some of the many ways Christian Americans defend their city on a hill.

Studies in critical criminology have shown that military exercises in the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary have ramifications domestically. For instance, Eliav Lieblich and Adam Shinar have traced increases in local police militarization to funding streams associated with the Reagan Administration's global "War on Drugs" (2018: 116). Furthermore, under the auspices of the War on Terror, the Department of Homeland Security spends much of its annual budget funding "local law enforcement agencies that in turn serve to procure military equipment" (Lieblich and Shinar 2018: 120). Our foreign melodramas are simulcast locally, and this is deemed acceptable so long as the police do their duty to serve and protect. During the War on Drugs, that duty manifested in the mass incarceration of black and Latino/a people for drug crimes, and the development of what Michelle Alexander has called "the rebirth of a racial caste (Alexander 2010: 48). She writes:

> Ninety percent of those admitted to prison for drug offenses in many states were black or Latino, yet the mass incarceration of communities of color was

> explained in race-neutral terms, an adaptation to the needs and demands of the current political climate. (Alexander 2011: 58)

What happens when that duty is informed by terror in the guise of Negrophobia and a fear of God?

We see hints in the 1989 case of the Central Park Five.[4] A white woman named Trisha Meili was raped and assaulted while jogging through the famed New York City park. The evening that it happened coincided with reports of random acts of disorderly conduct (including harassment and assault) by youth in the area. Roughly twenty-five Black and Latino youth were apprehended by police. After a suspect detention process, questionable admissions of guilt, and varied plea deals, five youth were imprisoned following trial. Twelve years later, the former youth's sentences were vacated after a convicted felon named Matias Reyes admitted to the crime. DNA taken from Reyes matched samples from the scene of the crime, and Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, and Anton McCray were exonerated. Negrophobia in the U.S. Christian White Imaginary factors here in at least two ways.

First, the incident in Central Park was part of New York City's larger struggle with economic stratification, high crime, and racial tensions. The youth became media specters, Yusef Salaam recalls, particularly after New York resident and real estate mogul Donald Trump had purchased full page advertisements calling for the city to "Bring Back Our Death Penalty, Bring Back Our Police." Trump wrote, "I want to hate these murderers and I always will. I am not looking to psychoanalyze or understand them, I am looking to punish them" (Ransom 2018). This sort of fear—met by demand for increased security and lethal measures—made Yusef Salaam imagine that "had this been the 1950s, that sick type of justice that they wanted—somebody from that darker place of society would have most certainly came to our homes, dragged us from our beds and hung us from trees in Central Park" (BBC News 2019). We could also connect this to claims of Denmark Vesey jeopardizing the sanctity of the law and biblical interpretation (e.g., Vesey as a criminal), as well as Winthrop's discussion of miraculous plague that was falling on Native Americans (cf. urban blight). The history of the kind of racist violence is vast to be sure.

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[4]Given that the case of the Central Park Five predated popular usage of the internet, the importance of media spectacle—particularly print, radio, and television news magazines—cannot be discussed enough. Two television programs tap into this arc: the documentary, *The Central Park Five* (dir. Sarah Burns 2012), and the miniseries dramatization, *When They See Us* (dir. Ava Duvernay 2019).

Second, although Meili's rape was first portrayed in tragic terms, the entire Central Park episode became serial fodder as news outlets and the prosecutor hearings worked to recreate the series of events. Prominent in these accounts were self-descriptions of the youth spending their evening "wildin'" (Mock 2014). The significance of this term was the subject of much speculation, and likely meant nothing more than youthful exuberance beyond normal custom. This led to characterizations in the *New York Daily News* as a "wolf pack" running wild through the park with Meili being called on the frontpage headline, "Wolf Pack's Prey."[5] In historical terms, this played into the kind of city-on-a-hill/wild frontier geography that makes the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary available for violently enforcing order in the name of duty, justice, and public safety.

As we look at contemporary intersections of religion, race, and violence, a narrative of progress is not at all self-evident. In fact, the recent killings of Travon Martin and Michael Brown overlap not only in the death of the two youth, but also in the extent to which their killers drew upon the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary to defend their Negrophobia.

Trayvon Martin was a fifteen-year-old black youth in Miami who was shot and killed in 2012 by George Zimmerman, a volunteer neighborhood watchman. Zimmerman had a history of zealously reporting what he deemed suspicious behavior—especially the presence of black people within his gated community (DeGregory 2012). Martin had been walking through the neighborhood after making a purchase at a nearby convenient store when Zimmerman called the local police department. In the transcript of the call, Zimmerman said that there had been a rash of break-ins in the area and that there was a "real suspicious guy . . . [who] looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around looking about" (*Mother Jones* 2012). According to media reports, Zimmerman spotted Martin, pursued him, and had some altercation in which he shot him under Florida's "stand your ground" gun law. The State's attorney had charged Zimmerman with second-degree murder, but he was found not guilty.

The death of Trayvon Martin was not the result of a uniformed Klansman bearing a torch. In Zimmerman's mind, it was an act of civic duty. In Zimmerman's phone call to police, he racially profiled Martin—not simply describing him as a black teen, but identifying him with a supposed criminal element with no reason for being in the area. Zimmerman grew anxious after

[5]See April 21, 1989 frontpage of the *New York Daily News* and article reprint in Don Singleton and Don Gentle, "Central Park Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack in 1989," April 9, 2013. https://www.nydailynews.com/services/central-park-five/female-jogger-death-savage-attack-roving-gang-article-1.1304433.

Martin noticed him spying. The police transcript documents Zimmerman's fright, "now he's coming towards me. . . . He's got his hand in his waistband. And he's a black male." Zimmerman continued to describe Martin's dress, age, and staring until the teen turned and ran the opposite direction. Then Zimmerman said "these assholes they always get away" and asked how long until officers would arrive on the scene. The dispatcher assured him that they were on their way. Unsatisfied with the delay, Zimmerman himself pursued Martin on foot, despite the dispatcher saying, "We don't need you to do that" (*Mother Jones* 2012). Martin was later shown to have been unarmed. But Zimmerman presumably did not know this at the time and imagined the situation as an opportunity to demonstrate his courage over his fear.

When called to defend his actions, Zimmerman shifted to Christian discourse so as to reiterate his blamelessness. For example, when a journalist asked whether he regretted the events of the evening, having his gun on him, and killing Martin, Zimmerman responded, "I feel that it was all God's plan" and in no need of being "second-guess[ed] " (Bennett 2012). Three years later, after Zimmerman had shared a tweet that included an image of Martin's slain body, he later explained on his Twitter account that he "did not click on the blocked image to preview it prior to re-tweeting it," and that he was "simply acknowledging what [he] believed to be words of encouragement." For those unconvinced, he elaborated:

> As many have learned about me throughout my trial and subsequent events, I hold my Christian values very close. I believe that me knowingly re-tweeting that image, would not be looked upon favorably by God; therefore I would not do it. (Cutway 2015)

Zimmerman's culpability in these instances is without question. But his appeals to the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary has permitted him to sidestep the burden of accountability because he had a part to play, one predicated on what God would have him do to bring order to a chaotic world.

Although the unspoken assumption that black bodies are frightful is legally insufficient for defending anti-black violence, a narrative of Christian duty can help those wanting to justify such actions. In 2014, Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri during an altercation. And while details of the incident have not been fully released, Wilson's own recollections fit the pattern we have seen in the case of Zimmerman and others (McCoy 2014).Wilson had been driving in his police vehicle and witnessed Brown and a friend walking in the middle of the street. Wilson pulled up beside them and asked the youth to move to the sidewalk. After they refused and talked back, Wilson parked his vehicle near

them. As Wilson was exiting, Brown pushed the car door back and started taunting and punching the officer, who was trapped in the car. Wilson drew his sidearm and struggled to fire. The weapon jammed, and Brown repeatedly hit Wilson in the face until a shot went off from inside the car. Brown, now bleeding, raised his hands up in the air and then resumed hitting Wilson. The officer managed to fire another shot after a second jam. This time the youth ran down the street. Wilson left the car and followed in pursuit on foot. Brown stopped running and Wilson yelled for him to lay on the ground. Brown instead turned around and charged at Wilson. The officer fired multiple shots, some hitting and some missing. According to forensic experts, Brown was hit by six bullets: the first four along the right side of his torso and inside of his right arm; the final two, his head (Chappell 2014).

The City of Ferguson settled a wrongful death suit filed by Michael Brown's family (Shapiro and Gretsky 2017), but a U.S. Department of Justice investigation concluded:

> that Darren Wilson's actions do not constitute prosecutable violations under the applicable federal criminal civil rights statute, 18 U.S.C. §242, which prohibits uses of deadly force that are "objectively unreasonable," as defined by the United States Supreme Court. The evidence, when viewed as a whole, does not support the conclusion that Wilson's uses of deadly force were "objectively unreasonable" under the Supreme Court's definition. Accordingly, under the governing federal law and relevant standards set forth in the USAM (U.S. Attorney's Manual), it is not appropriate to present this matter to a federal grand jury for indictment, and it should therefore be closed without prosecution. (U.S. Department of Justice 2015: 4)

According to the Justice Department, "Wilson did not act with the requisite criminal intent" because he feared for his life. However, this ruling does not explain why a public servant would choose to leave his vehicle, pursue an unarmed teenager, and use deadly force. His Negrophobic recount of the event suggests that he understood the police action within the context of the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary.

Of the examples discussed in this paper, Wilson's Negrophobia is the most pronounced. Despite the safety of his car, the possession of a weapon, and reinforcements at the call of his radio, the officer acted from a state of fear (Sanburn 2014). This would be unremarkable were it not for the hyperbolic terms with which Wilson registered that fear and the categorical imperative he felt to fire at Brown. He described Michael Brown as a "giant," comparing his attempt to grab ahold of Brown like that of grabbing the muscled professional wrestler Hulk Hogan. He maintained this testimony despite Wilson and Brown being both about 6'4" and sharing large builds (McCoy 2014). Wilson,

furthermore, turned to biblicist language to describe Brown's movement. "He looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked. He comes back towards me again with his hands up." At this sight, Wilson believed himself as having no other recourse than to shoot at the "grunting" person who looked like he "was almost bulking up to run through the shots." Violence, it seems, weighs differently when waged on a demon, and though Wilson could have availed himself of non-lethal options, his perception of his civic duty—in the face of an other-worldly threat—made deadly force a viable and justifiable option. Wilson's actions were not racist simply on account of his whiteness and Brown's blackness but because of the assumptions and motivations that informed his perception of the entire situation. Wilson's framing of the incident is by no means incidental. On the contrary, it is part of an American tradition.

Conclusion

While scholars have arrived at a near consensus regarding the historical co-constitution of whiteness and Christianity, the literature detailing precisely how these discourses work together is still emerging. Any social formation involves a number of complex processes, but we can analyze the relationship between Christianity, whiteness, and violence. In *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930*, Kelly J. Baker documents how "ordinary people can do what most would feel is extraordinary without realizing the magnitude or danger of their actions. Ordinary people commit physical and rhetorical acts of violence for movements that claim benevolent and righteous intentions, whether or not their intentions prove to be malicious" (2011: 238). She contends that the Klan is a reflection rather than an aberration of white Christian (especially Protestant) racism. Building on Baker's observations, scholars of religion and violence should take notice of the heinous acts that have been done under the cover of law and order.

Racism does not need an excuse when one is in a position of power, but to maintain the aura of reasonability and control requires political savvy. One strategy that has been used to great effect against black people are appeals to what I have described as Negrophobia. With critical distance, we can see the irony of this identification: that because a white person was afraid of a black person, a white person showed ultimate lethal dominance over the black person. Usually this would be too conspicuous given progressive precepts about liberty and equality. However, when racism is treated as a melodramatic power struggle, the moral weight of standing one's ground or taking the law into one's hands or defending the innocent skews measure.

As we have seen, the gravity of violence weighs differently in the U.S. Christian-White Imaginary. The rules of civility do not apply when facing the grotesqueries with which black people are identified by those uncertain about their claim to white power. Biblicist readings about demons, curses, and divine will provide much needed support for those tempted to do harm. Whatever guilt may come with carrying out these violent deeds is overshadowed by the resolution that comes with having done one's duty.

Fitting into the American narrative is a confidence game. When people are scared sheetless, they need only to take refuge in the discourses of old, the days when heroes were blessed with the charisma to face the wild. If they can leave the ruins of that mythic city with only the fear of God, then they can have their way with whomever they can show as not belonging. White supremacist violence can stem from hate, but it can also come from the desperation of trying to secure one's place among equals. Perhaps humans have no better way of showing who belongs than by coming up with ways to say why someone else does not. Violence is what we do to make our point before we lose the chance.

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