

Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care

By voting for Donald Trump, sixty-three million Americans communicated their belief that successful people of color, especially women, had forgotten their “proper” place. Trump’s election and the hate crimes that attended it reiterated what was already painfully clear: the United States remains committed to its tradition of *know-your-place aggression*. I define know-your-place aggression as the flexible, dynamic array of forces that answer the achievements of marginalized groups such that their success brings aggression as often as praise. Any progress by those who are not straight, white, and male is answered by a backlash of violence—both literal and symbolic, both physical and discursive—that essentially says, *know your place!* It is important to identify this tradition because cultural critics should help the nation remain clear about what did and did not fuel the election of this far-less-than mediocre man. Voters were primed for Trump, but not because people of color failed to organize enough or in the right way. It was not because the Obama years emboldened people of color and made them so aggressive in their demands that their behavior sparked white resentment. After all, to rally around #BlackLivesMatter is simply to say, “we’d like to not be killed in cold blood and with impunity, please.” Targeted communities and their allies must understand that the country did not arrive at this political, social, and moral juncture because people of color and other marginalized groups did something wrong, but rather because they were succeeding at claiming space as citizens. Not as privileged citizens, but simply as people who believe they belong. For anyone other than a straight white man, success often inspires aggression, and the accomplishment need not be monumental or spectacular to inspire large-scale and extremely hostile backlash.

Understanding the country’s tendency toward know-your-place aggression is crucial for black literary theory because it will keep the field attuned to how profoundly focused on success black communities have always been. It is because they have so consistently achieved that white-authored violence has constantly emerged to check their progress. Not fully appreciating this dynamic, cultural criticism often operates according to a false dichotomy. Theorists who attend to the material conditions black communities face often identify injustices and then demonstrate how African American artists have responded, often highlighting black people’s agency and empowered resistance. At the same time, when scholars examine art that does not seem to be in response to white-authored violence, they treat it as a manifestation of sanctuary—as evidence that African Americans create space to affirm themselves, free from the violence that otherwise overdetermines outcomes.

In other words, cultural critics have approached black art as if African Americans either protest injustice or ignore the forces arrayed against them, but this is a mistake because racial self-affirmation so often takes place in the midst of acknowledging the violence perpetrated against black families and communities. Black literary theory in the time of Trump must develop methodologies that account for this fact. Specifically, I urge cultural critics to adopt reading practices that center success and recognize that marginalized groups pursue their definitions of success much more than they respond to the violence they encounter; *violence pursues them* because they accumulate achievements, and American culture is designed to remind

everyone that accomplishment is meant for straight white men. Whether applied to written texts or performance texts, reading practices attentive to this reality will not separate self-affirming art from art that acknowledges mainstream violence. I model such reading practices in the book manuscript I am currently revising, "From Slave Cabins to the White House: Homemade Citizenship in African American Culture." I hope that its examination of woman-authored slave narratives, novels, dramas, and the performance text of Michelle Obama's public persona will inspire similar readings of many other texts.

Still, rather than offer samples of the cultural criticism I want to encourage, I have decided to use this opportunity to share self-care strategies. Black literary theory in the time of Trump requires being diligent about every aspect of one's health. Being well helps one do the work.¹ The need for diligence about physical, spiritual, and emotional health is nothing new, of course. The ravaging of black bodies, black lives, and black communities did not slow under the Obama administration, nor did the attacks on black and brown families via deportation, nor did the continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Know-your-place aggression is a continuing American tradition, so I always strive to equip marginalized communities to withstand the hostility that never fails to accompany their victories. As I share some of my self-care strategies, I am also renewing my commitment to what I was doing long before Trump's rise to the office of president. Namely, I vow to continue to make a priority of 1) identifying know-your-place aggression and 2) highlighting how often white mediocrity is treated as merit. Violence is done whenever there is know-your-place aggression, no matter how subtle, and whenever whiteness is treated as if it always signifies merit. Following the example of those who came before me, I engage in self-affirmation while acknowledging mainstream violence, and I equip others to do the same.

I have long believed that it is empowering to recognize white mediocrity, and I have no problem doing so publicly. Some worry that a focus on white supremacy, white privilege, and white mediocrity can become a trap. That's basically what Cornel West asserted when he claimed that Ta-Nehisi Coates "fetishizes" racism. Whether one sees value or pettiness in his overall critique, West is not alone in the larger concern. Many fear that scholars and commentators risk centering whiteness yet again when what really deserves attention is black cultural production. Because African Americans have found ways not only to survive but also thrive despite everything white supremacy has put in their way, their efforts deserve all the time, attention, and analytical skill the community's thinkers can muster.

I certainly agree, but I also believe that noticing white mediocrity is a form of self-care. Evidence of it is everywhere, so I may as well find ways to make it serve me. And I have found that identifying it for myself and others produces a healthier perspective, which can be replenishing. And replenished energy can only fuel one's work.

To put it plainly, when I look around my campus and the profession more generally and ask myself, "Would that person even be here if they weren't white?" I most often find myself answering, "Nope!" As a result, I am less likely to run myself ragged by holding myself to higher and higher standards because I remember that I have already done more to earn my position than most members of the profession. As important, I am less likely to let others' assessments of my performance overwhelm me when I remain cognizant of how seldom they use actual criteria with each other. Surely, I am not alone in having noticed that requirements are most passionately discussed when someone who isn't white, male, and/or straight is being evaluated. As James Baldwin said, as if he were reading my mind in countless meetings, "the Negro's experience of the white world cannot possibly create in him any respect for the standards by which the white world claims to live. His own condition is overwhelming proof that white people do not live by these standards" (300).

This kind of clarity motivates me to develop my own ideals. For instance, noticing white mediocrity kept me clear that I wanted my first book, *Living with Lynching*, to do justice to the people I was writing about and to the scholarly conversations to which I wanted the study to contribute. Mentors were concerned about the timing of my revisions in relationship to tenure deadlines, but I never wavered. Someone smarter might be able to do something different and better, but I was determined to write the best book I could, and if that ran counter to my institution's tenure clock, so be it. I knew the people voting on my tenure case did not know much about African American literature and most of them did not care. Just as important, I knew that any rigidity about standards, including timing, would be more about the fact that I wasn't white and male than about anything else. So, it simply did not make sense to let local pressure determine what I would submit to the press.

Noticing white mediocrity has also fueled my work by encouraging me to give myself credit. Doing so has helped me preserve energy that I can then put where it belongs—in my research and in my fuller life. Melissa Phruksachart has characterized this strategy as flipping the script on imposter syndrome. When I refuse to ignore the evidence of white mediocrity with which I am surrounded, I can better assess the work I do. For example, I am not taking the easy route of pretending that being an intellectual means that I can float above the implications of how my body is read. I understand that unearned advantage has come with the fact that I am seen as normatively able. Likewise, because I am read as cisgender, people assume a high level of mental stability and overall reliability that has more to do with my not being trans* than anything else. Also, I realize that because I am not viewed as fat, assumptions of laziness do not cling to me as they would to others. It is not simply unfair that people with larger bodies are often viewed as lazy; it is unfair that a reputation of laziness does not follow slim people even when their professional behavior actually warrants it. So, I have some unearned advantages, but that does not mean that my being black and a woman has no effect. Students and colleagues often struggle to see me as a legitimate authority. This manifests in many ways. One of my favorites? I'm five feet, three inches and fairly small, but student evaluations have claimed that when I enter the classroom, it is as if Darth Vader walked in.²

While I have had to find ways to do my job in this context, plenty of colleagues are happy to pretend that their being white and/or male has nothing to do with the respect they are granted as a matter of course. I will routinely have to navigate situations that my colleagues cannot imagine encountering while they get to do their jobs without facing those challenges. Yet they are also encouraged to believe that we are on equal footing when the quality of our teaching is being evaluated. They can believe that all they want,, but that doesn't mean I need to believe the hype that they have teaching insights that I lack. And I certainly do not need to believe that we are doing an equivalent job if we have equal teaching scores. I know that I have jumped more hurdles to arrive at the same place.

It is important to notice how routinely exceptional success follows less-than-exceptional white performances, because doing so highlights the violence inherent in treating whiteness as neutral. Going along with the lie of white neutrality helped set the stage for Trump's ascendancy and the accompanying resurgence of white supremacy. It is not considered polite to name whiteness, and most people believe it is downright rude to notice the unearned advantages that cling to whiteness. Here's the basic agreement: "If you are polite, *maybe* we can acknowledge the disadvantages black folk face, but don't you dare suggest that white people are placed at an advantage." Because following these rules has so thoroughly shaped public discourse, I was struck throughout the Obama presidency by the many simple truths that seemed absolutely unspeakable. Indeed, President Obama modeled the tendency to leave white privilege and white mediocrity unmarked, despite how fundamentally they continued to determine outcomes for every American. Because I recognized

how profoundly they shaped outcomes, I remained vocal about white mediocrity and know-your-place aggression throughout the Obama presidency.

Just as had been the case long before Barack Obama became president, the United States kept conjuring innocence and merit for white people during the Obama years. David Leonard has demonstrated the many ways that American society “manufactures innocence” for straight white men almost no matter what they do. Indeed, whites suspected or known to be criminals are treated better than black victims of crime.³ I have extended Leonard’s insight to note how Americans and American institutions happily manufacture merit out of thin air, as long as the beneficiary is white.

Both of these tendencies—manufacturing innocence and manufacturing merit—are best appreciated when one looks at ordinary white people, not extreme examples like Trump. After all, what makes these practices so powerful is that the most egregious violators of basic standards are allowed to persist because people who would never behave so despicably nevertheless refuse to hold themselves and each other to higher standards. Consider the epidemic of sexual harassment, which shaped many work environments long before it became a national conversation involving both Trump and Harvey Weinstein. In ordinary Americans’ everyday lives, it would require holding oneself and others to higher standards to create an atmosphere in which decency means more than simply not being a pussy-grabber. For instance, nongrabbers would need to care more about the way that less-powerful people are treated than about their own comfort. They would have to consider that their discomfort in confronting a colleague is nothing compared to the discomfort to which that colleague just subjected a less powerful coworker. In academia, higher standards would require using critical-thinking skills not simply for deciphering Shakespeare, but also the scripts governing workplace culture. After all, it does not take a Ph.D. to understand how or why a person who would never behave despicably with one set of people routinely does so with another. Put another way, staying with the sexual harassment theme that Trump has made oh-so-relevant, rape culture does not require an overwhelming number of rapists. It is much more important that the environment be populated by people willing to cower before perpetrators. Powerful perpetrators do harm but they also demand that their comfort and status become everyone’s priority. Those who refuse to upset existing power dynamics are a perpetrator’s best allies; they quickly abandon anyone with less power, especially if that person has been victimized and had the nerve to say so, rather than be a good “team player” by suffering in silence. (Notice that silence is seldom required of perpetrators with power; their aggression and all the room everyone makes for it speak loudly.)

American culture must manufacture merit for white people because whites are considered good without reference to actual standards. If Americans asked whether an individual contributes to a societal good, then they would have to admit that many white people don’t measure up and don’t even try, because they are not expected to. A white person is considered to be good based on their demographic, not based on any actual criteria. Because it has such low expectations of white people, American society is full of citizens who feel no responsibility to do anything that benefits anyone beyond their inner circle. At the same time, many citizens will do anything or *go along with anything* that hurts others if they believe it will bring more opportunities and resources to the few individuals about whom they care. This is why many cities in the United States contain neighborhoods with high schools that look like college campuses while high schools down the street look and feel like prisons. White Americans are consistently taught that it is only right for them to focus solely on their own opportunities and resources. This is more of a social problem than a personal one; it’s about American society’s low expectations and how those low expectations shape behavior. The culture is constructed to ensure that white people can be mediocre (or worse) and still benefit.

Again, this is not personal but cultural and systemic, so white people can refuse to live according to the low expectations their country has of them. Will they? That's a question whose relevance will not fade as I watch the dehumanization, demonization, and murder of black and brown people on repeat. Because American culture has never encouraged white people to hold themselves and each other to higher standards, merit is manufactured for them all, and innocence is manufactured for white people who don't even have the decency to be mediocre. In order for this to change, white Americans must take some responsibility for holding themselves and each other to actual standards.

The only way to avoid noticing white mediocrity is to operate as if whiteness is neutral, and doing so both allows white mediocrity to go unmarked, even while it is handsomely rewarded, and ensures that know-your-place aggression will achieve its goals. Pretending that whiteness has nothing to do with how institutions function maintains the unjust status quo. When institutional leaders boast that they have hired five people of color, they typically fail to mention that they hired, say, twenty-three white people during that same period. In the culture created and sustained by this common way of speaking, everyone (including those five people of color) wonders if demographics had more to do with their being hired than their qualifications. Meanwhile, everyone is encouraged to assume that whiteness had nothing to do with positions being offered to more white people than anyone can count.

I would never claim that identifying white mediocrity contributes to self-care because it has kept me from being forced to “watch whiteness work.” To the contrary, as long as white people hold themselves and each other to low standards, they will continue to succeed, whether they deserve to or not. As Ta-Nehisi Coates put it, in harmony with my assertions over the years: “But that is the point of white supremacy—to ensure that that which all others achieve with maximal effort, white people (particularly white men) achieve with minimal qualification.” However, even if I have to watch whiteness work, knowing that it's the unjust magic of whiteness, and not merit, has empowered me to put white people's opinions in perspective. When I pay attention to how routinely white mediocrity is treated as merit, I worry a lot less about the judgments of people who owe much of their success to being viewed as qualified simply because they are white.⁴ For members of marginalized groups, that is very healthy.

Valuing the judgments of people whom this country insists upon holding to incredibly low standards is dangerous; one must hone the skill of avoiding that trap. Otherwise, members of marginalized groups will believe the nation's relentless assertion that they should never feel secure in claiming space. And, make no mistake: delivering that message is always the goal of violence, whether it's the violence inherent in treating whiteness as neutral, the violence of pretending that whiteness and merit always go together, or the violence of endless instances of know-your-place aggression.

Studying violence in U. S. history and culture for more than fifteen years has taught me that it is always a way of marking who belongs and who does not. Therefore, racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and ableist words and deeds are forms of violence; they remind their targets of their “proper” place. Whether physical or discursive, violence is a way of insisting that certain people have no right to occupy space. It is therefore important to notice that hostility toward certain groups emerges even when—especially when—members of those groups have done all that the nation claims to respect, such as work hard and achieve according to accepted rules and standards.

Quite consistently, U. S. culture encourages Americans to resent and punish, rather than celebrate, certain people's accomplishments. When a straight white man achieves, he receives recognition and respect, but when a Latina, for example,

achieves, her presence is treated as evidence of some unfair handout. Her qualifications are questioned more often than she is simply welcomed into the professional fold. Americans rarely acknowledge the difference in how the success of a straight white man and that of a Latina is treated, but when they do, disparities are called *microaggressions*. However, that term misses much of the point. Any theoretical concept that does not highlight how much certain people's success inspires hostility will miss the mark. The animosity that the Latina professional encounters is therefore best understood as know-your-place aggression because it sends an unmistakable message, that especially when she is achieving, she needs to remember her "proper" place. The more impressive her accomplishments, the more she is reminded that she's still "just" a Latina; therefore, she can be cast as a leeching, "illegal" immigrant at any moment.

Ultimately, recognizing know-your-place aggression allows individuals (and cultural critics) to highlight a fact that public debate conveniently ignores: U. S. culture celebrates the success of straight white men—regardless of whether they embody merit—but discourages, diminishes, and/or destroys everyone else's achievements, while insisting that evidence of their merit never existed. I began noticing this pattern while doing the research for *Living with Lynching*. One of the study's major lessons is that the mob's African American victims were most often targeted, not because they were criminals, but because they were accomplished in some way. For example, they had managed to buy land that a white person wanted to take. Lynching African Americans of achievement sent a terrorizing message to survivors in their families and the larger community: *know your place!* After sharing success-oriented findings at a public lecture, a gay black man in the audience challenged me to see the connections between lynching and violence against LGBTQ+ communities. Reading newspaper accounts of recent hate crimes, I came to agree with him, and I eventually published an article titled "Love in Action: Noting Similarities between Lynching Then and Anti-LGBT Violence Now." Soon, I shifted from arguing that *black success beckons the mob* to a more precise articulation: *in the United States, the success of marginalized groups inspires aggression as often as praise*. Although American citizenship technically extends beyond straight white men with property, the category "citizen" still refers to a particular demographic, and all others are treated like guests whose membership cards can always be revoked. When "guests" feel like they belong, that small victory will often inspire hostility.

Know-your-place aggression comes in many forms—from microaggressions to assault, to murder—but the message is the same: certain people do not belong. They should be grateful if they are tolerated but never presume decent treatment to be their birthright. The underlying sentiments are rarely stated aloud, but if they were, it might sound something like this: "You may have a degree, but you are still just a. . ." or "You may be better at your job than I am, but you are still just a. . ." or "You may have a higher g.p.a. than I do, but you are a. . ." These messages are created and conveyed with microaggressions and bullying but they are also sent and received when someone is beaten or murdered and the response of authorities is to blame the victim, as often happens with LGBT people. "You may think you have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," the nation might as well say, "but we don't even have to care about your life and limb." In these situations, anyone who identifies with the victim or simply mourns the loss cannot help but receive the message that the targeted individuals were wrong if they believed they belonged and could safely claim space.

Examples of know-your-place aggression are everywhere. As soon as a man who was not considered white became president, the office was disrespected in unprecedented ways. South Carolina representative Joe Wilson shouted "You lie!" during President Obama's 2009 State of the Union address and then-Arizona governor Jan Brewer shoved her finger in the Commander-in-Chief's face. More

tellingly, as Ronald Kessler reports in his book *In the President's Secret Service*: “Once Obama became president, the Secret Service experienced a 400 percent increase in the number of threats . . . , in comparison to President Bush” (225). Also, depictions of a lynched Barack Obama circulate on the Internet and have received “likes” on Facebook. Still, for me, the most striking example came after Clint Eastwood’s empty chair routine at the 2012 Republican National Convention. Eastwood had pretended to be speaking to President Obama as he chastised an empty chair, and the next day, a chair was prominently hanging from a noose in a middle-class neighborhood in my home state of Texas. Could the message have been any clearer? “You may be president of the United States, but you’re still a . . .” Some Americans will not only ask to see your papers (birth certificate, transcripts); some will relish the idea of seeing you in a noose.

The Obamas embody exactly what the nation says it respects—including the heteronormative nuclear family—so why did hostility characterize so much of the nation’s response to them? The answer is simple: American culture is designed to remind certain people of their “proper” place. Or, to repeat: *in the United States, the success of marginalized groups inspires aggression as often as praise*. So everything the Obamas have done right—having secured Ivy League educations, maintained a monogamous marriage, and so forth—is also what they have done wrong.

For marginalized groups, understanding know-your-place aggression is self-care. It empowers targeted communities to refuse the shame that American culture encourages them to put on as if it were an accessory that makes them more attractive. The message is: if you can’t be a straight white man, at least have the decency to adopt an apologetic demeanor. Sure, you’re watching police (and ordinary citizens) kill black and brown men, women, and children with impunity, but know your place and respect the national anthem. Sure, your land has been stolen and your communities stifled, but how dare you approach others as aggrieved equals to stop the construction of the Dakota Pipeline? How can we respect you when you don’t know your place?

When I say that success brings aggression as often as praise, I do not exaggerate. How else does one explain the very American tendency of using a person’s work ethic as proof of their undesirability? That’s exactly what mainstream conversations about nonwhite immigrants typically do. Please note: the fact that immigrants of color can be cast as threats is nothing but discursive violence. When people can call you a threat, and that characterization is accepted as legitimate no matter what you are actually doing, you are erased and the truth about you is obliterated. That is violence. When it does not matter whom you prove yourself to be because a stereotype will cling to you no matter what, that’s discursive violence. If Juanita or Fatima has a job, even one that others don’t want, she can be considered a threat. Her success at simply securing a position inspires aggression. What makes this possible? The fact that she isn’t considered white. When you’re white and employed, that’s fine; it may even be a reason for celebration. But be brown and do the same thing? That can be a reason for suspicion or worse.

Mainstream American culture doesn’t stop there. This nation loves entrepreneurs, right? Yet, when business owners are not white, there is a problem. How else does one explain the assertion that Americans should fear the appearance of “a taco truck on every corner”?⁵ Basically, if a white man starts a business, he’s a hero. When a brown person takes the initiative to do the same thing, that’s a threat to the American way. How can we stop him?⁶

Make no mistake, though, even the smallest success motivates aggression. Taking LGBTQ+ communities as an example, the violence against them has only intensified with recent victories, including the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell; the inclusion of gender and sexuality categories in federal hate-crimes legislation; and the Supreme Court decision supporting marriage equality.⁷ At the same time,

the mainstream cultural landscape now includes images of LGBT people where absolutely none—or only denigrating mentions—existed before. One of the most popular primetime comedies, ABC's *Modern Family*, features Cam and Mitchell, a gay couple lovingly parenting their adopted child. Also, besides Ellen DeGeneres, RuPaul, Anderson Cooper, and Rachel Maddow, there is the visibility of people like Filipino American writer and activist Jose Vargas (and I say that deliberately; based on his contributions to this country, he's American with or without documentation), model and actor Patricia Velásquez, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow, acclaimed novelist Ghalib Dhalla, comedian Margaret Cho, poet Staceyann Chin, and attorney and author Urvashi Vaid. This range of victories, from the legislative to the symbolic, inspired so much hostility that Donald Trump and Mike Pence proved irresistible to sixty-three million American voters.

But, of course, LBGTQ+ triumphs can be understood in much smaller increments as well. The fact that not every single non-conforming person stays in the closet represents progress that many would love to see reversed. In the midst of these victories—big and small—the violence against LGBT communities has been nonstop.⁸

Securing accommodation is another very modest success that can make one a target. Allow me to use a fairly recent example that I hope many remember. In March 2016, there was an uproar about Whole Foods selling pre-peeled oranges. The onslaught of comments revolved around how “lazy” a person had to be to want oranges that are already peeled. There was enough criticism that Whole Foods announced on Twitter that it would pull the product, citing the “wasteful” use of plastic. This very public conversation was quite aggressive toward people whose lives could be improved by this product's availability. As author Anna Mardoll explained on Twitter: “Any time you see a ‘so lazy!’ product you want to dig at, 99.9% of the time it's an accessible item for someone.” As she continued, she showed that she recognized the know-your-place aggression inherent in the discursive violence of ableism:

“It is draining, tiring, painful to continually be treated like a wrongful drain on Mother Earth because we're disabled . . . in addition to the wrongful drain we often feel we are on families, employers, etc” (Mardoll, “Disability Access”). As she continued, she resisted what another activist called the “wholesale shaming of pre-prepared foods” (Kim Sauder qtd. in Ang). Mardoll offered a list of things that people with physical challenges do that shouldn't attract so much hostility: “We exist. We take up space. We buy pre-peeled oranges and wear Snuggles and those ‘ugly’ plastic shoes and have grabbers to pull up our socks.” This list interrogates the value judgments embedded in the public conversation—a conversation dominated by people whose privilege keeps them from noticing how much society is made for their success. When obtaining something beneficial sparks criticism that dominant discourse has countless, seemingly innocuous justifications for—concerns about plastic waste, for example—then the message is that the modest beneficiary does not truly belong. Meanwhile, those placed at an advantage by a culture shaped by such discussions can ignore how much society facilitates their success and doesn't work against their every assertion of belonging.⁹

Sometimes, the accomplishment that inspires attack amounts to simply not being ashamed to be seen and recognized. In September 2016, a woman dressed in traditional Muslim garb was set on fire on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.¹⁰ This attack took place only two days after a woman named Emirjeta Xhelili assaulted two Muslim women in Brooklyn as they pushed their babies in strollers. Prosecutors charge that Xhelili punched the women in the face, tried to remove their hijabs, and tried to topple the strollers. She reportedly shouted, “get the f—k out of America b——s, you don't belong here” (“Woman Faces”). (One cannot avoid noticing that the assailant's name is not Smith or Jones. Might her investment in declaring Muslim

women to be outsiders emerge from a need to assert her own Americanness?) Also, the night before Eid Al Adha, the holiest holiday for Muslims, a mosque in Fort Pierce, Florida, was set on fire.¹¹ Note that claiming that the memory of the 9/11 tragedy caused these assaults is another example of discursive violence, making Muslim *victims* guilty by an association that has nothing to do with their own actions.

These are important examples not only because vicious attacks were inspired by a fairly modest level of success (being visible), but also because they highlight how absurd it is to insist that targeted groups should ignore the hostility of “ignorant” people. In truth, attacks are effective precisely because perpetrators understand the function of violence: to keep certain groups from enjoying the rights and privileges of citizenship, to deny certain groups a sense of belonging within the community and the country. Perpetrators are not ignorant; they use their knowledge of what is valuable to their victims to make the message hit home. Victims and their allies need to understand the purpose of violence as well as perpetrators do! Knowing that the holiest Muslim holiday was approaching made this a perfect time to reinforce the idea that Muslims should not feel safe claiming space—even if it’s just a sidewalk. They should not feel any right to be visible, to exist.

Along with dismissing hostility because it supposedly stems from ignorance, sometimes even those who are targeted will insist that aggression is rare, as if doing so will secure and increase their success. That is, they choose to “focus on the positive” and “give the benefit of the doubt.” But Americans of every background know the truth, that targeted groups are expected to give the benefit of the doubt even in the face of blatant malice. It’s part of the script: “he didn’t mean it” or “it was just a joke.” Given this expectation, it is important for members of marginalized groups to believe in their capacity for reading their surroundings accurately. One must be able to trust one’s ability to interpret what is happening, no matter how intensely everyone with any authority responds in ways that prioritize appearances and downplay reality, as with declarations like “That’s not who we are” and “We are better than that.” Individuals (and cultural critics) must know the difference between those claims and something like, “That *shouldn’t* be the American way” or “We *can* be better than that.” When faced with evidence that the environment is hostile, especially when that hostility is inadequately addressed by those in power, it is important to empower oneself and others to call it what it is—even if only in private.

Because white mediocrity and know-your-place aggression shape outcomes for all Americans—both those who are put in their “proper” place and those whose success is supported—these patterns should not remain unmarked in public conversations. Marginalized groups and their allies need to be equipped with language that helps them to resist absorbing dominant assumptions that are designed to silence and shame them. They need to know that aggression comes their way because they are successful, not because they have done something wrong. When they understand that accomplishment inspires most attacks, they can more readily adopt what I call *a critical demeanor of shamelessness* (Mitchell 143, 144, 147). Only when empowered to refuse shame can individuals maintain the energy needed to address the racism, sexism, heterosexism, trans-antagonism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and ableism that have only intensified with Trump’s political ascendancy.

Marginalization is a violent process that takes no breaks. And it has everything to do with how consistently marginalized groups *succeed* and, in fact, *epitomize* all that the nation claims to respect. Basically, because marginalized groups are constantly overcoming obstacles, they are putting the purported model citizen (the straight white man) to shame, so American culture wants these groups to believe that the shame belongs to them. It doesn’t.

Notes

1. Narrowly defined health or wellness is not required to do important work; it helps.
2. For more on this, see Koritha Mitchell, "Belief and Performance, Morrison and Me," in *The Clearing, 1970-2010: Forty Years with Toni Morrison*, Carmen Gillespie, ed. (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2012), 245-61.
3. See Nick Wing, "When the Media Treats White Suspects and Killers Better than Black Victims," *HuffPost*, 14 Aug. 2015, Web.
4. See Noel Gutierrez-Morfin, "U. S. Court Rules Dreadlock Ban During Hiring Process Is Legal," *NBC News*, 21 Sept. 2016, Web.
5. Of course, the fact that this alarm was sounded by a Latino spokesperson only underscores that oppressive ideologies are powerful because they can be internalized by the same people they denigrate. See Zach Montellaro, "Latinos for Trump founder warns of 'taco trucks on every corner,'" *Politico*, 1 Sept. 2016, Web.
6. Famous examples of African Americans experiencing violence precisely because they were economically successful include the race riots/massacres in East St. Louis in 1917 and in Tulsa in 1922, destroying "Black Wall Street." Also, Ida B. Wells became an antilynching crusader when she realized that it was not rape but entrepreneurial success that got her friend and his People's Grocery business partners lynched in 1892. That insight led her to investigate countless other cases, and she found that while mobs reliably justified their violence by claiming that it addressed the rape of white women by black men, rape was seldom proven and it wasn't even alleged in the majority of cases.
7. These victories are complicated, of course, because the military is not necessarily a site of liberation and because harsher legal penalties often end up hurting marginalized communities more than anyone else. See Koritha Mitchell, "Love in Action: Noting Similarities between Lynching Then and Anti-LGBTQ Violence Now," *Callaloo* 36.3 (2013): 689-717, especially 700-02 and the relevant footnotes.
8. For more on the link between success and violence, see Mitchell, "Love in Action." For the 2016 statistics, see National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP), "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2016," *Anti-Violence Project*, Web. Also see David Lohr, "Report Shows Massive Increase in Anti-LGBTQ Violence Since Trump Took Office," *HuffPost*, 22 Jan. 2018, Web.
9. That securing accommodation is an achievement becomes clear when one considers that the Americans with Disabilities Act has been in effect only since 1990.
10. See Yasmeen Serhan, "The Burning of a Muslim Woman on Fifth Avenue," *The Atlantic*, 13 Sept. 2016, Web.
11. See J. Weston Phippen, "The Fire at the Mosque Where the Pulse Nightclub Shooter Prayed," *The Atlantic*, 12 Sept. 2016, Web.

Works Cited

- Ang, Christopher. "This is How Pre-Peeled Oranges Moved the Disabled Community Forward . . . Sweet!" *Daily Forager*. 17 Mar. 2016. Web.
- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. 1963. *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. Ed. Toni Morrison. New York: Library of America, 1998.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. "The First White President." *The Atlantic* (October 2017). Web.
- Kessler, Ronald. *In the President's Secret Service: Behind the Scenes with Agents in the Line of Fire and the Presidents They Protect*. 2009. New York: Broadway, 2010.
- Leonard, David. "The Unbearable Invisibility of White Masculinity: Innocence in the Age of White Male Mass Shootings." *Gawker*. 12 Jan. 2013. Web.
- Mardoll, Ana. "Disability Access and Pre-Peeled Oranges." *Ana Mardoll's Ramblings*. 4 Mar. 2016. Web.
- Mitchell, Koritha. "No More Shame! Defeating the New Jim Crow with Antilynching Activism's Best Tools." *American Quarterly* 66.1 (2014): 143-52.
- Phruksachart, Melissa. "Can't 'Cure' Imposter Syndrome? Reframe it Instead." *MLA Grads @ MLA Commons*. 27 Nov. 2017. Web.
- West, Cornel. "Ta-Nehisi Coates is the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle." *The Guardian* 17 Dec. 2017. Web.
- "Woman Faces Hate Crime Charges for Attack on 2 Muslim Moms." *NBC New York*. 10 Sept. 2016. Web.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.