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Blindspotting and COVID: The Gentrification of Racism

Ashley Starr-Morris

Claremont Graduate University, ashley.starrmorris@gmail.com

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Blindspotting and COVID: The Gentrification of Racism

Abstract

The novel Coronavirus is not only exposing old patterns of racism and systemic inequalities, but deepening them as well. The notion of blindspotting, as described in the film by the same name, is used to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacts the “spiritual emergency” or crisis of racism in America. “Blindspotting” is an image or situation that can be interpreted in two ways but is understood by some in only one way, thereby producing a blind spot. In 2020 and 2021, we see segments of American society, from politics to white Christian nationalism, upholding a sacred canopy of exceptionalism by blindspotting, equivocating, or denying two uniquely collocated issues disproportionately impacting communities of color: firstly, racism and police brutality, emblemized in 2020 by George Floyd and Breonna Taylor; and secondly, COVID-19 - not only the very nature of the virus but also its effects on people of color. Just as *Blindspotting* depicts the oppressive architectures of police violence and gentrification’s effects on a community, the denial of these two separate yet related crises can be seen as a type of sacrifice and “gentrification” of both the reality and the narrative of communities of color.

Keywords

Black Lives Matter (BLM), Christian nationalism, COVID-19, discursive gentrification, epistemic oppression, film, gentrification, heterotopia, pandemic, race, racism, sacrifice

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Author Notes

Ashley Starr-Morris is an American scholar, writer, activist, and PhD candidate in Women's & Gender Studies in Religion at Claremont Graduate University. Her research includes contemporary American evangelicalism, critical theory, women’s lived religion, and unchurched millennials. Her background includes training in religious studies and archaeology, and she also holds a master’s degree in Higher Education. Acknowledgments: I wish to thank the reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article, as well as Dr. Nicola Denzey Lewis and Dr. Lillian Larsen for their steadfast encouragement and support.

“Realism and absurdity are so similar in the lives of American blacks one cannot tell the difference.”

- Chester B. Himes¹

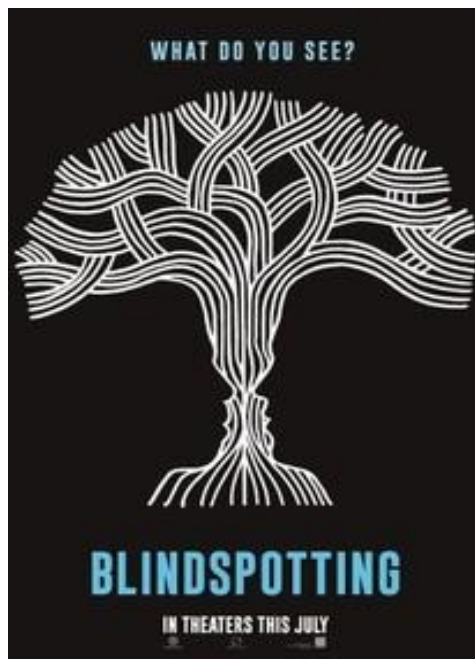
Introduction

Which picture do you see? In the well-known depiction of Rubin’s Vase, one either sees the outline of a vase or two human profiles facing each other - but never both at the same time. It is an effective portraiture of a blind spot, or something that one is not fully seeing, and thus not fully aware of. This notion is given the moniker “blindspotting” in a 2018 film by the same name (Figure 1). The film uses this schematic to comment on race, gentrification, police brutality, and how the blind spots inherent in these concepts can result in death.

Figure 1 - Film Poster

Source: *courtesy IMDb,*

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7242142/mediaviewer/rm1759988224/>



In 2020, the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19, Covid, pandemic) is not only exposing age-old patterns of racism and systemic inequalities but deepening them as well. Segments of American society from politics to the church have been observed upholding a sacred canopy of exceptionalism by blindspotting, equivocating, or denying two uniquely collocated issues disproportionately impacting communities of color: firstly, racism and its progeny police violence, emblemized in 2020 by Breonna Taylor and George Floyd; and secondly, COVID-19's effects on people of color.

At the center of these debates are not only politics but religion. Christian nationalism in particular proffers ideas that negate the realities of racism, state-sanctioned violence, and the deeply inequitable sociopolitical contexts of Covid. Through filmic expressions of sacrifice, this article uses *Blindspotting* and its themes of seeing/not seeing, racism, police brutality, and gentrification as a lens through which to see how Christian nationalism's intransigence around anti-Black police violence and the pandemic's disproportionate ramifications for communities of color - both rooted in systemic racism - not only perpetuate the oppressive architectures through which racism functions, but can also be seen as a type of "gentrification" of both the reality and the narrative of communities of color.

Film is a unique repository of "the testimony of existence and struggle," especially of the subaltern, and can act as a "visual historiographer codifying subversive memories."² As such, it is an apt medium through which to contemplate

pre-existing challenges (racism and police violence) as well as novel challenges (the pandemic) facing the country. David Chidester cleverly shares that “religion is not an object of analysis but an occasion for analysis.”³ Melanie Wright supports this tête-à-tête between religion and film, saying that “religious film” cannot be reduced to religiously-themed narrative or style, but is closer to a “dynamic exchange” between film and audience, ultimately understanding film as “not simply a descriptor of, or vehicle for, religious experience, but religion itself.”⁴ M. Gail Hamner describes this as the “evental” character of religion and sees religion as “fungible constellations of specific discursive and practical events, happenings, and habits that work on us and through us to make powerful claims about norms or values (i.e., what is right or good or true or best).”⁵ This article conceptualizes the relationship between religion and film in the same way and, in so doing, identifies religion through two layers: the overt religiosity of Christian nationalism, and the more covert religiosity of the film itself.

The film is approached through both formal film analysis, or the ways in which the “formal techniques of film production construct and constrain the range of their interpretations,”⁶ and cultural film analysis, or the “familiar discussion of what a film means, not only at the level of its plot but also in terms of its significance for the lives and cultures of its viewers.”⁷ To accomplish this, a concise synopsis of the film will first be provided. Following is a brief discussion of the conventions of filmic sacrifice, of which there are many examples to draw from in

Blindspotting. For the scope of this article, only two are highlighted: sacrifice in the form of racist state-sanctioned violence against the Black community, particularly Black men, and sacrifice as spatial, through gentrification. Within the first section on sacrifice, scenes typifying the sacrifice of Black men are analyzed, which subsequently helps elucidate the Black Lives Matter and police violence demonstrations, and the societally structured imbalanced impact of Covid-19 on communities of color. The second section on sacrifice utilizes the film's depictions of gentrification and heterotopia to shed light on why attacks against minorities surge during a crisis, and specifically how Christian nationalism is a notable producer of those attacks in ways that epistemically oppress the realities and experiences of Americans of color.

Film Synopsis (Spoiler Alert)

Set in a rapidly gentrifying Oakland, CA, *Blindspotting* is a buddy dramedy (drama-comedy) exploring the issues of race, gentrification, and police violence. The plot follows a Black Collin Hoskins (Daveed Diggs) attempting to stay out of trouble during the final three days of his one-year parole, while his well-meaning but trouble-making white⁸ best friend, Miles Turner (Rafael Casal), cannot seem to stay out of it. The two friends work together for a moving company when Collin witnesses an officer-involved (Ethan Embry) shooting of an unarmed Black man (Travis Parker). A flashpoint of trauma—but certainly not the totality of it—Collin

experiences nightmares and hallucinations as a result, cascading through the rest of the film.

Miles purchases an illegal gun he claims is for protection, although even Collin is dubious about this stated motivation, which eventually ends up in the tiny hands of Miles' young son. A justifiably angry Ashley (Jasmine Cephas Jones), mother to the young boy, forces Miles and Collin out of the house, after which the pair end up at a mostly white, mostly "hipster" house party. At the party, Miles' identity-aesthetic is mistaken for a "transplant" and accused of cultural appropriation, leading a furious Miles to physical and gun violence. Following, Collin and Miles find themselves in an explosive argument about Miles' recklessness, identity, and the infrastructure of their friendship in which shared class connects and race cleaves.

Upon completion of his probation, Collin and Miles are called to a moving job, revealed to be the house of the very officer who Collin saw kill the Black man just days earlier. In a dramatic and stinging scene, Collin confronts the officer at gunpoint, limning the racism and violence suffered by the Black community at the hands of law enforcement, but ultimately leaves the officer untouched: physically, that is.

Sacrifice I

Sacrifice is a notable theme in the history of not only America, but American cinema as well, and typically follows a paradigm consisting of two distinct and contrasting categories: films that critique sacrifice as a form of violence, and films that recommend it as a necessary mechanism to maintain the status quo or to encourage progress.⁹ Since sacrifice is endemic in American history and culture, Americans are primed to consume it in film as a form of semiotics that seeks to reinforce ideas of dominance, purity, and shared national identity.¹⁰

According to Jon Pahl, *The Birth of a Nation* formed the archetype of filmic sacrifice through its depiction of three models of sacrifice: senseless sacrifice represented through the death of two white childhood friends turned into Civil War soldiers fighting for opposing sides; priceless sacrifice in the form of Flora, a white Southern woman who kills herself in order to evade the nefarious romantic pursuits of Gus, a Black Civil War veteran, notably played in blackface; and sacrifice as justice, established through the gruesome murder of Gus for his pursuit of Flora. Arising out of these models are key delineations of sacrifice in terms of race, gender, and economic status.¹¹ It is no mistake that *The Birth of a Nation* intersects with notions of nationalism, Christianity, and racism, especially through the scenes depicting the death of Gus at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, as a means of (re)constructing a white, Christian America. These precepts are imbued into the soul of America, and capitulation is required to maintain them and the centers of

power they create. These conventions have endured through the decades of cinema, and we see *Blindspotting* play with sacrifice in ways that both support and resist these paradigms, all while maintaining an understanding of sacrifice as a form of violence.

The first and most obvious instance of sacrifice is the shooting and killing of a Black man by police, a murder that Collin witnesses and one that haunts him. In the scene, Collin is out past his parole-mandated curfew and anxiously awaiting an extended red stoplight to turn green. The streets around Collin, silent and colored crimson by the light, are jarred awake as a distraught Black man suddenly runs into Collin's work truck, looking him squarely in the eyes before rushing past him. Following quickly on his heels is white Oakland Police Officer Molina, shouting, "Stop!" The officer stops directly in front of Collin's driver-side door, draws down on the fleeing Black man and shoots him, even as the man yells, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"¹²

This horrifying scene is depicted with an ingeniously creative mise-en-scène (Figure 2), which is analyzed through Hamner's trio of relations. Hamner reinterprets and combines Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite semiotic theory and Gilles Deleuze's prelinguistic signaletic material to create a pedagogical paradigm for her film and religion courses, one that is most useful for this article.¹³ Peirce's theory divides a symbol into a set of three and is highly dependent on perspective,

while Deleuze's theory seeks to convey the process by which signs generate significance through their relations within a particular social landscape.¹⁴ Hamner

Figure 2 - *Murder Scene* (Source: *Blindspotting*)



distills these complex semiotic theories into three basic types of sign relations: relations of gaze, which refers to how the camera depicts the characters' gazes; relations of situation, or how the camera transmits action or how the characters reveal intention; and relations of reflection which depend on the occurrences of the film up to that point as well as the audience's response to it.¹⁵ Hamner's approach makes complicated film theory accessible and puts it in conversation with the "evental" understanding of religion. It also facilitates a natural combination of film and cultural analysis.¹⁶

Leading up to the scene, it is carefully shown that the murder occurs on Martin Luther King, Jr. street, under the watchful eye, as it were, of the late civil rights leader. The camera looks at the back of Collin's head while he watches the officer just outside his window, and the pursued Black man is viewed through the driver-side mirror. How the film shows us "perception of perception," or what Hamner deems "relations of gaze," is such that the gaze of the audience member is one of a passenger in Collin's truck.¹⁷ The passenger would have the same vantage point of seeing all three characters, as well as hearing what the audience members hear: the diegetic sounds (sounds heard by the characters) of the truck's engine humming, the metallic thump of the man's hands slamming on Collin's truck, the rapid pounding of footsteps, the clicking of the gun being unholstered, the pop of the bullets, and the screams - putting the viewer *in* the scene as a witness, just like Collin. In this shot, the person at the center of the frame and most in focus is Officer Molina, suggesting a focus on his actions and producing a feeling of culpability.

The relations of situation, or how the camera evokes the space and what may happen in it,¹⁸ is a connected line from audience member to the man who is shot: the audience looks at Collin, looking at the officer, looking at the man he aims to, and does, kill. However, there is double vision provided by the driver-side mirror, which acts as a shortcut to the visual plane of the murdered man that is off-camera. This double vision evokes both a distance from and proximity to the man killed. During this scene there is no music, which heightens attention to the diegetic

sounds, and the red stoplight casts a pall over the whole scene, mirroring the sanguine of the man's blood spilling onto the street.

The relations of reflections, or when a character or camera generates a concept with more than one narrative or meaning,¹⁹ then, are clear: this scene, and subsequent theme of the movie, unequivocally represents an epidemic within American society, that is, the pervasive and racialized brutalizing and killing of the Black community, particularly of Black men. Police end the lives of nearly three people every day, which not only surpasses America's peer countries but is also highly racialized.²⁰ This was emblemized in the summer of 2020 by the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Breonna Taylor was 26 years old living in Kentucky when she was fatally shot by three plainclothes police officers in a raid on her home.²¹ None of the officers have been charged with her death, and only one officer has been indicted for endangering the surrounding apartments; in other words, indicted in connection with—but not for—her death.²² George Floyd was 46 years old living in Minnesota when a police officer knelt on his neck for almost nine and a half minutes, ultimately killing him, while three other officers refused to intervene.²³

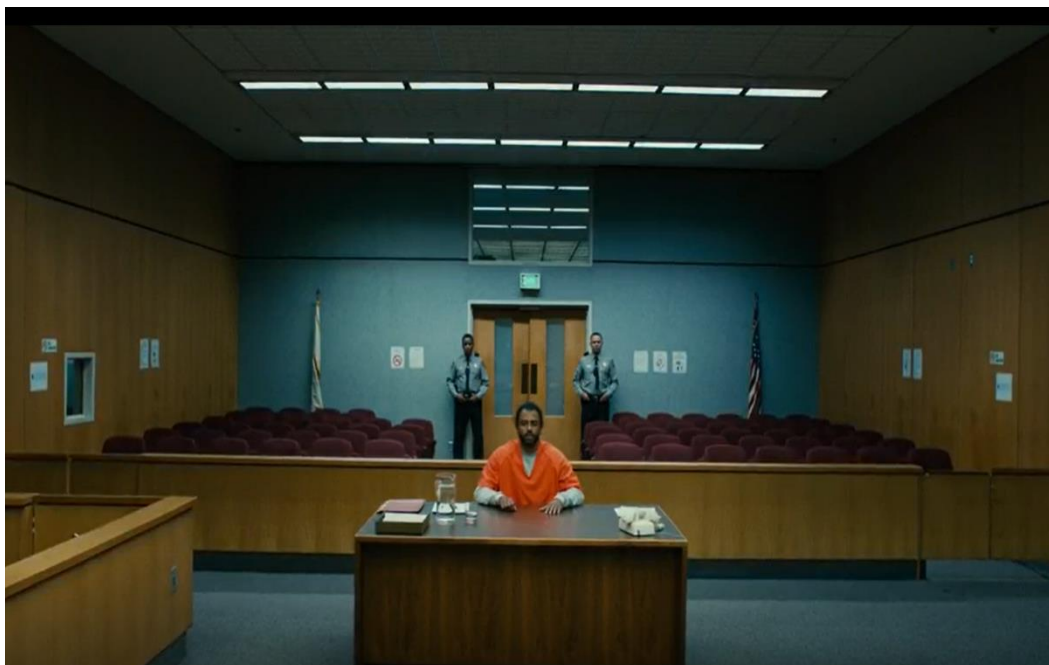
Spurred on by these tragic deaths and injustices, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ensuing escalation in economic inequalities, a groundswell of protests gained momentum across the country during the summer of 2020.²⁴ According to some measures, between fifteen and twenty-six million participated in more than

4,700 demonstrations across the country against police brutality and/or in support of Black Lives Matter.²⁵ Thirty states and an increasing number of counties and cities across the United States are deeming racism a social determinant of health, declaring it a public health crisis.²⁶ Policing practices, in their capacity as machinations of racism, produce unwieldy negative health consequences, plaguing an oftentimes already beleaguered community. Adverse police interactions, including both personal and secondary experiences, have been found to cause higher levels of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and stress, which are subsequently correlated with obesity and its concomitant health issues.²⁷ Black people residing in communities with larger incarceration rates are also found to have increased cardiometabolic disease, even when accounting for poverty and crime.²⁸ Policing structures, especially their ability to contain and exclude, are crafted in ways that literally police who is allowed to be where, doing what, and with whom; in effect, enforcing the social boundaries that privilege certain bodies while disadvantaging others. This demarcation is almost Douglasian,²⁹ in which the purity of the people, at least within populist-nationalist frames, is polluted by racialized others.

PTSD and the other health consequences of negative police interactions are clearly embodied in Collin's affective milieu when he encounters law enforcement throughout the film, and is intensely felt in his nightmares around his experience with the criminal justice system. In many of these scenes, the diegetic soundscape

becomes distorted, echoey, and is often accompanied by a high-pitched whine. The camera begins to tilt off-level at a Dutch angle (Figure 3), and the shots alternate between long and choke shots in quick zoom cuts. These cinematic techniques produce a disorienting effect for the audience, one that heightens and reinforces the precarity of Collin's psychological state. They elicit a sense of confusion while simultaneously putting into focus the important object or subject: at times it is Collin, evoking empathy and intimacy with Collin's emotions, and at others, it is the source of threat, such as a police vehicle.

Figure 3 - *Example of Dutch tilt to produce disorientation*
Source: *Blindspotting*



This sense of threat, and running from it, is implicit in a scene that features Collin running through a cemetery while exercising. The scene cuts in and out of him running with flashbacks to his traumatic encounters with law enforcement and his visceral courtroom nightmare. The nightmare features Officer Molina as judge, Black men in black hoodies (reminiscent of Trayvon Martin) and chains as jury, and Collin in his orange jumpsuit and chains as defendant. The scene is filled with an eerie, high-pitched siren-like non-diegetic sound (sounds not heard by the characters), and the dissonant song he is listening to through his earbuds while running—a song from Fantastic Negrito’s album “The Last Days of Oakland”—transitions from his earbuds to fill the scene. This aural transition not only ambiguously occupies a diegetic/non-diegetic soundscape but, in essence, yanks the audience out of their reality *into* Collin’s morbid reality (Figure 4).

This is the first scene that the audience sees him off probation, where he is legally free from the confines of the justice system but cannot seem to free himself from the psychological trauma he has sustained. The scene ends with Collin looking back over his shoulder, relieved to have outrun his nightmarish flashes, only for the music to fade and an eerie whistling take over as the camera pans to what Collin’s horrified face is staring at: the Black men in black hoodies transported out of his nightmare into the graveyard, standing atop their own graves as far as the eye can see (Figure 5). This wide shot of death hangs there, its magnitude and gravity weighing heavily on the audience.

Figure 4 - *Collin running through the cemetery filled with dead Black men above their graves* (Source: *Blindspotting*)



Figure 5 - *Graveyard filled with dead Black men* (Source: *Blindspotting*)



The scene's more obvious relations of reflection symbolize the crisis of anti-Black police violence. However, the scene may yet hold another layer of commentary relevant to the country's current circumstances and, tragically, it too involves an epidemic: Covid-19. Alarming, a scene portraying a graveyard bursting with Black bodies lifts right out of the film to fall squarely into the deadly realities of a worldwide pandemic, and for largely the same reasons delineated in the film.

Covid-19

At the time of writing, the Coronavirus pandemic has claimed the lives of over 600,000 Americans and over four million lives the world over.³⁰ Although viruses attack bodies without judgment or partiality, the systems and societies that enclose those bodies unevenly and unjustly bear down on the movement and impact of the virus. Touted as the "great equalizer," COVID-19 is no respecter of persons, color, age, or class, leaving all at equal risk. Or does it? Although it may stress our common humanity, pandemics expose and entrench already existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting socially disadvantaged groups typified by racial/ethnic minorities and low-income populations.³¹

People of color are infected and die from this virus at rates much higher than whites and much greater than their proportion of the population. Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans are hospitalized at rates almost four times higher than whites,³² and for much of the pandemic the highest mortality rate has been

amongst Black Americans.³³ Economic consequences due to the pandemic also disproportionately affect low-income and Black Americans, exacerbating already-existing income and housing inequalities.³⁴ Additionally, infectious diseases are shown to be associated with “othering” practices, with racism and xenophobia magnetically charged by fear aimed at marginalized groups.³⁵ Black Americans have also understandably shown higher levels of vaccine hesitancy, complicating an already perilous situation.³⁶

There are many reasons posited for these disparities. Not the least of which are four centuries of racial oppression creating the infrastructure upon which systemic racism in America sits, thrives, and reproduces, from historical chattel slavery and settler-colonialism to modern predatory policing practices and mass incarceration. Gravlee argues for the use of syndemic theory in understanding the multiplicative effects of the pandemic on communities of color. Originally proposed by a medical anthropologist, this framework describes how overlapping epidemics do not simply co-emerge and coexist, but that the synergy among and between them makes the other worse; in other words, they are more than the sum of their parts.³⁷ The interplay between the biologics of epidemics (transmission, physical symptoms, etc.), and the biosocial conditions (job loss, access to and quality of health care, high-density housing, etc.) produce modalities that modulate disease concentration and interaction in devastating and incommensurate ways.

Returning to the film, *Blindspotting* decisively demonstrates the multiplicative mechanics underlying syndemic theory in an accessible fashion. By playing cinematically with disparate traumas—the murder, Collin’s nightmares, the terrifying interaction with the cop car, and the Black men in the graveyard—the filmmakers are able to join them together in one gripping scene, obscuring the markers (such as time) that distinguish them. What this accomplishes is a synergizing effect of the various traumas at play, revealing, in a sense, the multiplied augmentation of race-based trauma. In this way, the audience viscerally comprehends how they become “more than the sum of their parts.”³⁸ The ways that trauma is portrayed in these separate yet related scenes is significant, and can inform our understanding of the syndemic nature of the pandemic in the lives of those most affected.

The audience meets Collin with three days left on his year-long probation. After this initial period, each subsequent day begins with Collin running through the same cemetery, with an expository intertitle counting down the days he has left on probation, culminating with his first day of freedom. There are three graveyard scenes, the last of which has already been briefly introduced, but the relations between these scenes are the important component for this analysis. Collin is haunted by past trauma in each of the scenes; however, a direct relationship is formed between the length of the scene and the trauma Collin has sustained up to that point in the film.

The first cemetery scene informs the audience that Collin has two days left on probation. It is less than thirty seconds long and features Collin running as he gets hit with one quick flashback from the night of the murder: the man's terrified face when he stopped and looked at Collin before continuing to run away. The second graveyard scene comes later in the film and begins Collin's last day on probation. Although it starts the same as the previous one, the flashbacks are multiple, and this time the subject is Officer Molina. Notably, this set of flashbacks alternate rapidly between shots from the night of the murder, and the haunting courtroom nightmare described previously. The sense that the trauma is building is evident in the inverse relationship between the quantity of flashbacks, and Collin's (in)ability to throw off the weight of them.

Finally, the audience sees Collin reach the dawn of his first day off probation, having narrowly escaped a night full of close calls. After the disastrous house party and the painfully honest argument with Miles, Collin encounters yet another devastating moment on his walk home that night. A police vehicle driving past Collin conspicuously turns around and slows to a crawl, following him. Almost perceptibly, Collin's stomach drops as he realizes that he is still carrying the gun he took away from Miles after the party. The anxiety heightens as the police car points its spotlight directly on Collin, and the *whoop* of the quick siren tells Collin he should stop walking. He slowly turns to face the car, holding his breath. The

moment fills an eternity until, at last, the car drives away to another call that came in. Collin weeps.³⁹

Shortly following, we see the last—and longest—of the graveyard scenes of the film. The audience exhales the breath they were holding from the last scene; however, the relief is ephemeral. As in the first two graveyard scenes, Collin is running as the flashbacks start. This set of flashbacks begins with the police car from the night prior, and rapidly cuts to other inflection points of trauma: Officer Molina's face from the night of the murder, the jury of Black men from his nightmare, "Judge" Molina from the nightmare, and the man's body falling to the pavement upon being shot. The flashbacks are interrupted when Collin is stopped in his tracks by the endless sea of Black men in black hoodies standing over the graves around him.

As the men are pulled out of Collin's dreams into his reality, the audience is pulled out of their reality into the surrealism of the scene. The overlapping editing of the flashbacks brings the trauma—both real and dreamt—into the narrative space of the film. Each cemetery scene builds on the prior cemetery scene not simply in an additive way, but in a multiplicative way. The cinematography and storyline capture the torture endured by Collin in ways that form a tightly woven intricate tapestry where the synergy among and between the totality of wounds produces an overwhelming affective experience in a single scene, reflecting that which is described in the syndemic framework. It is one in which a relationship between

input and output exists, but one in which there are so many variables that are all so interdependent, they cannot possibly be calculated through simple addition.⁴⁰

In the way that film can, an image is reflected back to the audience that surpasses the strict borders of the story being told. The potentiality of race-based death and the multiplicative nature of the effects of injustices is ripped out of the film and into the here and now. The race-based trauma weathered by a singular character is refracted out into the numberless standing before him, with the lines of “realism and absurdity”⁴¹ blurring for the audience as much as for Collin: a poignant representation of Himes’ assertion in the epigraph of the article. However, through the “dynamic exchange”⁴² between film and audience, the deathscape in front of Collin stretches off the screen to blend with the deathscape of Covid. Race and death go hand-in-hand in the film; so too, in the pandemic. The liminal features of this scene act as a portal into the (sur)realism of our Covid-inflected times, exposing how the incommensurate sacrifice of Black lives and livelihoods is condoned, or at the very least tolerated.

Sacrifice II

Physical Gentrification

The second sacrifice highlighted in this analysis is sacrifice through gentrification. The most commonly understood gentrification is physical, whereby an urban area is changed through an influx of wealthier people and businesses, typically resulting

in the forced exodus of the original occupants. These shifting and conflicting landscapes can be conceptualized as heterotopias, which contain within themselves a multitude of often incompatible meanings.⁴³ This notion is valuable for understanding the dynamic and unstable complexities involved in a gentrifying area—or a gentrifying discourse, the second form of gentrification evident in the film. This is an equally dynamic and complex process, one in which particular accounts or ideas are minimized or converted through a discursive process that seeks to reframe or replace undesirable narratives. The discursive gentrification delineated in the film can be deployed in thinking critically about Christian nationalism’s response to Covid and state-sanctioned violence.

In the film, spatial gentrification is accentuated and provides a through-line in the story. Images of “old” and “new” Oakland are frequently contrasted in split-screen, acting as a way to differentiate the two types of spaces while also doubling the audience’s vision, exposing the viewer simultaneously to landscapes and cultures that are commonly segregated (Figure 6). The traditional spaces of Oakland are being overrun with whiter, wealthier, and more elite newcomers or “transplants” as they are called in the film. The landscape, culture, and food are all remade under the sprawl of gentrification and, perhaps most importantly, so are housing prices. Even Collin and Miles’ livelihood working for a moving company depends in a twisted way on the forced exodus of the community they are embedded in, as the film intentionally only shows them moving residents out of the

neighborhoods they have occupied for decades - never in. Just as the old oak trees, from whence Oakland is named, were razed as urban neighborhoods were raised, the original inhabitants of the city are slowly cut out and forced aside through these economic structures.

Figure 6 - *Opening montage split screens depicting gentrification*

Source: *Blindspotting*





The film portrays this phenomenon with the gravity it deserves, but also contains moments of comedic relief. One scene reveals Collin and Miles attempting to eat some burgers from a familiar neighborhood fast-food restaurant that is now under new and “improved” management. Through a regrettable ordering experience, the two characters learn they must now specify “meat” to receive a beef patty, rather than the automatic vegan one. Even Collin’s mom, expressing both a resistance to and an amusing acceptance of the impending forces of gentrification around her, says, “I’ll be damned if I move out of this neighborhood...now that they got good food and shit.”⁴⁴

In keeping with the importance of sight and seeing in *Blindspotting*, the incongruity of the two Oaklands may be considered a type of heterotopia, or a space

that has superimposed meanings or relationships to other spaces than initially meets the eye.⁴⁵ This idea proves useful for understanding the complex interconnections amongst both spaces and discourses in the film, and societal issues around racism and Covid. A philosophical idea about space proffered by Michel Foucault, heterotopias are capable of "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible."⁴⁶ In other words, Foucault uses this concept as a hermeneutic to understand physical, social, and discursive "spaces" that are different, spaces that are taken for granted but also are in conceptual tension with one another. While Foucault did not develop this concept to the same extent as some of his other work, heterotopias are nevertheless intriguing and advantageous for understanding the coexistent yet incompatible worlds of a gentrifying Oakland.

The heterotopic spaces featured throughout the film are highly effective at affectively transferring to the audience the residents' lived feelings of anxiety, oddity, and dysmorphia. For example, as Oakland changes, the lives within it are thrown into a state of flux, of transition, of contestation—much like a "crisis heterotopia."⁴⁷ Foucault uses examples such as the hiding of menstruating women in the ancient world and boarding schools, which remove the adolescent's coming-of-age journey from society, to illustrate the "crisis" that is presented when one's relation to society changes. As the area gentrifies, the original occupants' relation to the city—its spaces, culture, and people—begins to change in disorienting ways.

Collin and Miles are tasked with a “clean-up” job removing all the contents of a dilapidated house to make way for the new owners’ renovation. Looking at an old photo album belonging to the previous Black tenants, Collin rhythmically responds to the effects of gentrification as he raps, “Hung up in the hood / till I’m discarded / Don’t know who I’m spookin’ / I’m the one who’s spookin’ hardest / Probably ‘cause I know that I’m / just here to help the harvest / after that I’m a target / A mover helping up the market.”⁴⁸ Several themes collide in his music, drawing connections to America’s slave-labor history, the power capitalism has to override the value of Black lives both past and present, gentrification and its bewildering force, fear of Black men, and anti-Black police violence.

Another type of heterotopia, “heterotopias of deviation,”⁴⁹ are sundry in *Blindspotting*. The prison, which is never shown in the film but is presumed, is an apt example of a parallel space which is designed to contain undesirable bodies to make way for a utopia.⁵⁰ Collin’s time on probation, however, *is* shown in the film and meets this definition, as it simultaneously permits greater freedom than the prison yet also restricts his movement and freedom to Alameda County. He is freer than in prison, but still geographically jailed by the criminal justice system. This heterotopia of deviation is also seen with the gentrification process: the older, Blacker, poorer, and otherwise “undesirable” bodies and spaces of conventional Oakland are segregated from the newer, whiter, and wealthier bodies and spaces of gentrified Oakland.

However, the most distinctive heterotopia in the film is the cemetery, which hosts the three separate yet connected scenes analyzed in the first section on sacrifice. Cemeteries, like other heterotopias, are exceptional and common all at the same time. Foucault sees cemeteries as “indeed highly heterotopic [places],” and the most compelling example of his enigmatic concept. Foucault categorizes graveyards specifically as “heterotopias of time.”⁵¹ This temporal connection alludes to both their function and their category of heterotopia. Their function has changed over time from the “sacred and immortal heart of the city” next to the church until the late eighteenth century, to the “other city” residing at the periphery of society.⁵² Their category is also temporally located as cemeteries are considered “heterochronies,” and their capacity as such is only fully realized once a complete break with traditional time occurs (i.e., death).⁵³

Returning to Collin’s rattling experience in the final cemetery scene, a kind of poly-heterotopia appears before the audience. The cemetery itself is an unmistakable example of heterotopia. Furthermore, the men that Collin sees in front of him figuratively live in his dream world yet represent the undeniably extant lives torn asunder outside the film. The heterotopic space of the cemetery provides the ideal geography for joining and complicating the figurative and literal, the invisible and the embodied, cinema and reality. The men’s presence in the shot melds the “real and imaginary, bounded space and abstraction,”⁵⁴ which Peter Johnson argues is a key element of heterotopias. This description of heterotopia also handily

portrays the second type of gentrification underscored in the film, that of discursive gentrification.

Discursive Gentrification

Gentrification not only happens on a physical level in the form of land, food, and housing, but also on a metaphysical level in the form of community, identity, and history. In the film, this tension is felt most acutely in Miles' character, a reversal of the traditional "buddy" narrative wherein Miles would be the white lead character and Collin the "Robin-esque" trusty sidekick. Instead, Miles is the secondary character and the one who is imbued with the worry of being perceived as a negative stereotype, a worry that is typically reserved for people of color. In this case, Miles is overcome with feelings of displacement over the perception that he is a white hipster "culture vulture" who is simply appropriating a "native" Oakland identity. His race betrays him and his cultural identity. Collin bemoans Miles' strivings to prove his identity and the trouble it brings to Collin's life, saying, "Man, you got something to prove to everybody!" Miles indignantly shouts back, "Yeah?! That's cuz I'm living somewhere where now everybody got me fucked up! You ain't gotta do shit [to prove who you are]." The inversion of this conventional dynamic disrupts the genre, which in turn calls even greater attention to Miles' dislocation, contrasting Collin's belonging.

The kind of metaphysical gentrification illustrated in the film sheds light on a particular Covid-inflected gentrification in America today. It is a powerful kind

of discursive gentrification in which the realities acutely felt by the Black community and people of color around Covid-19 are rejected and a new, nicer narrative superimposed over it. Despite the devastating consequences of the pandemic, particularly on communities of color, there is resistance amongst some groups towards following Center for Disease Control safety guidelines, such as not gathering in crowds, wearing masks in public, and maintaining proper social distance. Among some of the most visible sectors of this group are Christian nationalists. Christian nationalism is defined by some as “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture,” and is the leading predictor of not only incautious behavior but also avoidance of positive precautionary measures regarding Covid.^{55, 56} While many churches, mosques, synagogues, and other houses of worship have taken seriously the stay-at-home orders and other restrictions on large, indoor gatherings, some fundamentalist evangelical churches remain defiant and, as a result, contribute to Coronavirus outbreaks in their communities.⁵⁷

Christian nationalism shapes Covid-related behaviors especially through apparatus specifically identifiable with Christian nationalism: belief in divine protection for an America that is divinely chosen and supported by God (as long as America upholds conservative values and policies, that is), distrust of the scientific community and mainstream news media, and devotion to Trump.⁵⁸ John MacArthur, a pastor of a fundamentalist evangelical megachurch in Los Angeles,

is reported as saying, ““There is no pandemic.””⁵⁹ The church meets indoors without a mask mandate as MacArthur speaks about a virus—not the Coronavirus—but a “virus of deception” taking hold in America.⁶⁰ Despite the critical mass of the protest movement, and suggestions that churches are one of five primary sites of Covid transmission,⁶¹ the church believes their services are a “Jesus Life Matters protest” and should be protected in the same manner as the Black Lives Matter protests.⁶² Another church in Tennessee encourages people to remove their masks and hug, and the pastor is reported as stating, “Black Lives Matter isn’t powered by the Holy Spirit. They can’t save this land...[only] the church of Jesus Christ [can].”⁶³

These are just two examples of a much larger and more pervasive network challenging efforts to combat systemic racism and the pandemic’s ravaging repercussions. It is painfully clear that the moods and motivations⁶⁴ of an increasingly louder Christian nationalism demonstrate that Black and Brown lives are an unfortunate, if not perhaps necessary, sacrifice to exercise their right to religious freedoms and maintain their power, reinforcing that the United States is one [Christian] nation under God.

Considering the hermeneutic of heterotopia may open another field of view for understanding the incongruity of these differing pandemic “stories.” They exist simultaneously in the same geographic location (i.e., America), yet are conceptually incompatible: a pandemic that does not exist cannot ravage a

community, and race-based violence need not be addressed when it is not a problem in the first place. If heterotopias “somehow mirror and at the same time distort, unsettle, or invert,”⁶⁵ then the expression of counternarratives regarding the impacts of Covid on people of color and Christian nationalists are, in essence, discursive heterotopias of each other. Collin addresses this dissonance at the climax of the film while pointing a gun at Officer Molina in Molina’s home. During this highly charged and emotional scene, Collin passionately expresses what is at the root of incompatible stories as he raps, “You might think you know / what’s happening / But you don’t feel it / like we do! / To feel it, it has to be you.”⁶⁶

The film offers a powerful and even unexpected illustration of discursive gentrification between the best friend duo at the heart of the storyline. During the agonizing fight between them, Miles shouts, “You’re a big black dude with fucking braids—in Oakland! *Nobody* is misreading *you*, Collin!”⁶⁷ grieving the fact that Collin’s identity aesthetic guarantees a particular perceptibility as a “true” resident of Oakland. Collin, pain-stricken, retorts, “Yeah. Yeah, *I know!*”⁶⁸ signaling the precarity and danger accompanying that unmistakability. Without understanding the traumatic and at times dangerous encounters ancillary to being a “big black dude with fucking braids,” Miles negates Collin’s very real and very destabilizing experiences with racism and police violence, replacing Collin’s reality with a new, nicer narrative. Collin responds by inverting the positive and desired attributes

assigned to his appearance by Miles, thereby exposing the chasm of race-based differences in experience between them.

Miles realizes what he has done and recoils a bit. Collin pushes the uncomfortable conversation further, emphasizing this chasm, by asking Miles why it is tolerable for him to call Miles the n-word, but not the reverse. After Miles refuses to say the word to Collin, he yells:

You're a fucking n***a, Miles! You out here acting an ass, like there ain't no fucking consequences for that shit. And every n***a who sees me thinks I do the same dumb, fuckin' ignorant, gun-carrying shit that you do! But I've been taking care of my shit!... And then, what do you do? You go out and buy a fucking gun, for what?... *You* are the n****r that they are out here looking for!⁶⁹

The cinematography utilizes shaking handheld camera movement, which signals for the viewer action and urgency within the scene, elevating the intensity and the chaos of this explosive argument. It imbues the shot with energy and holds the audience captive. The *mise-en-scène* is under the cover of darkness in a shadowy back alley covered in graffiti, it's only light source a bright spotlight shining down from a streetlamp. The lights and shadows play up the subject of the scene and also act as a natural spotlight on the character in focus. The scene contains no music nor any non-diegetic sounds. The camera alternates between Collin as the subject and Miles, rarely showing both, and most of the shots are medium-close up or close-up views of the characters, with quite a few over-the-shoulder shots. This cumulatively produces the effect that the audience is an intimate partner in this

confrontation and, through the close-up shots especially, potentially the other conversation partner.

This piercing scene illustrates the violence that can be perpetrated through the instrument of discursive gentrification. It is clear that Miles commits this offense through ignorance and privilege rather than through malicious intent. While this may also be the case for some Christian nationalists—no matter how surprising this fact may be in the current milieu—it certainly cannot be said for all Christian nationalists who engage in this form of assault.

In the film, the articulation of counternarratives around the impacts of racism, gentrification, and police violence—add to this a pandemic in present-day America—makes it clear that these accounts are co-opted through discursive gentrification, which minimizes and/or denies their existence. But how exactly is this accomplished? I propose that one of the methods is through epistemic oppression, and *Blindspotting* again provides a cinematic framework through which to understand the complexities involved.

Conceived by Kristie Dotson and building on Miranda Fricker's ideas around epistemic injustice, epistemic oppression refers to "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production."⁷⁰ With epistemic oppression, one can expect major forms of resistance when an attempt is made to talk about or attend to the issues behind that particular oppression.⁷¹ It undermines one's ability to provide evidence or share knowledge because the

epistemological system in which they are functioning is insufficient to do so. Dotson explains that one way in which this is enacted is through the retelling of an experience that produces incredulity in the listener, one that directly minimizes or dismisses the experience of the teller. This is importantly applicable to the discursive gentrification of Christian nationalists because it is the mechanism through which they can invalidate the experiences of those who are different from them.

For another excellent example of this specific type of oppression, let us return to the film. As Collin is talking to Miles about the murder he witnessed, Miles asks, “You're not gonna leave like a statement or some shit?” Collin responds by comedically acting out the hypothetical conversation with the police: “Oh, yeah. ‘Hello, police? I'd like to report a murder you did. -- I was out after curfew. -- Yeah, I'm a convicted felon. -- Back to jail? -- Yeah, tomorrow works for me. What time?’”⁷² This example elucidates several layers of epistemic oppression. Firstly, it highlights the absurdity of a framework that forces one to report a crime to the very people who committed it. Secondly, it accentuates the fact that as a convicted felon on parole, Collin’s knowledge and experience are delegitimized in the eyes of those whom the epistemological structure privileges (i.e., the police). Lastly, Collin is a convicted Black man whose knowledge will be pitted against a white police officer, which all but ensures he will not be believed.

If we take seriously both the cinematography and the dialogue discussed in this section, we are compelled to be a conversation partner in these matters. In our current atmosphere, there is a deadly intersection between racism, discursive gentrification, and Covid. It is one that tells those bearing the highest burden to “trust God with your health”⁷³ and “there is no pandemic”⁷⁴ when loved ones have perished from the virus, some of which may have been prevented with greater precautionary measures from others. It is also one which asserts that attending church services in person is at all the same as a demonstration of people fighting against the oppressive and deadly structures of racism and the criminal justice system.⁷⁵ Lastly, it is one that bucks Covid safety precautions because they are less likely to be negatively affected by the virus, unwilling to admit that their actions directly contribute to the infection and death of Americans of color. The same urgency and intensity intelligently featured in the argument scene is also present in America’s current state of affairs, and it is going to require the same difficult and intimate conversations.

Conclusion

As a white woman scholar operating within and benefiting from the “sacred” canopy of white supremacy in America, I am able to critique systems of oppression emanating from spaces within which I reside but realize that I am unable to do so from a position of experience with historical or contemporary iterations of racism.

Although this undoubtedly restricts my comprehension of such things, Hamner enjoins white scholars in the American Academy of Religion guild to engage the historical ground of American racism, xenophobia, and white male supremacy, understanding the limits of our knowledge of such things as the imperative for “ongoing self and institutional critique.”⁷⁶ I only wish to take up this call to action, and underscore through this examination how American culture and institutions, including the manifestations of a supposed “great equalizing” virus, arise ineluctably from a history rife with settler-colonialism, chattel slavery, and white male supremacy.

Racial blind spots result in death vis-à-vis racism and its calamitous expressions regarding state-sanctioned violence and the Covid-19 pandemic. *Blindspotting* comments on and also rebuffs the sacrifices associated with racism, anti-Black police brutality, and gentrification; in so doing, it is an accessible medium through which to contemplate and understand the surge of resistance movements in 2020. In this way, the film’s makers are able to creatively and convincingly present the “problems of destruction and possibilities of creation inherent in the manifold meanings of sacrifice.”⁷⁷ Even more, it acts as a generative lens through which to contemplate and understand the multiplicative, and not just additive, impacts of racism on the patterns of the pandemic. Christian nationalism’s ability to uphold conceptions of white supremacy—unintentionally or otherwise—is seen very clearly in their response to the epidemic of racism and police violence,

and in their incautious response to the pandemic; responses that epitomize blindspotting since “it’s all about how you can look at something, and there can be another thing there that you aren’t seeing.”⁷⁸ While Rubin’s vase presents blindspotting in a value-neutral image, the film does not: illuminating the myriad ways in which blind spots can be sites of violence, and even violent sacrifice. So too in real life, the values are never neutral and to miss the other picture can have grave consequences.

Although art may imitate life, it also is imbued with a unique power to help shape it. Foucault presents a provocative way to understand film’s ability to shape life through his description of the heterotopia of a mirror:

[The mirror] is a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.⁷⁹

Film is a type of heterotopia in its capacity as a mirror: the film exists in reality yet exerts a kind of counteraction on the reality the audience occupies. The world that the film creates is at once absolutely real, reflective of the known world, and absolutely unreal, since to be perceived it has to pass through the ground of

virtual space that is the screen. However, through this virtual gaze directed at society from the film, society can come back to themselves and reconstitute from these virtual ingredients what is necessary for reality. *Blindspotting* reflects back to us our image in which sacrifice—corporal or discursive—is permissible, and calls into question this very permissibility. Ultimately, it has the capacity to reveal the blind spot.

How might one feel experiences one has not had? How might one see the “other” picture? A provocative yet uncomplicated answer is offered by feminist religion scholar Emily Culpepper: ““We tell each other our stories.””⁸⁰ What is film if not a powerful medium of storytelling? Film is distinctively situated to speak to these phenomena because it combines the cognitive (cerebral) with the affective (emotional), allowing audiences to not only see but *feel* the “other” image to which they may have been blind. To end, I leave you with Collin’s painful yet imperative exhortation: “Make a fuss / I am both pictures! / See both pictures!”⁸¹

¹ Chester B. Himes, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes: My Life of Absurdity* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

² Antonio D. Sison, “Postcolonial Religious Syncretism: Focus on the Philippines, Peru, and Mexico,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2011), 192, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203874752>.

³ Hamner draws attention to Chidester’s understanding of religion and applies it to religion and film. She understands Chidester as saying that “the distinction between object and occasion affirms that no single object, person, text, or institution can embody ‘religion’ in any essential

manner” in her work “Theorizing Religion and the Public Sphere: Affect, Technology, Valuation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87, no. 4 (December 12, 2019): 1008–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfz065>; David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Studies in Religion and Culture (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 260.

⁴ J. Melanie Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, Introduction to Religion Studies (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), 173, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755698806?locatt=label:secondary_bloomsburyCollections.

⁵ M. Gail Hamner, “Religion and Film: A Pedagogical Rubric,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 1140, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lft058>.

⁶ Hamner, 1141.

⁷ Hamner, 1143–44.

⁸ The capitalization of “Black” and “Brown” but not of “white” throughout the paper is intentional. I see it as a form of linguistic and discursive activism aimed at emphasizing the traditionally marginalized, while de-centering the traditionally privileged.

⁹ Jon Pahl, “Sacrifice,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. John Lyden (London: Routledge, 2011), 466, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203874752>.

¹⁰ Pahl, 466–67.

¹¹ Pahl, 471.

¹² Carlos López Estrada, *Blindspotting* (Lionsgate, 2018). I specifically do not use the character’s name, Randall, in describing this scene because at this point in the movie he is unnamed and unfamiliar, in so far as specificity, to the audience. He is universally familiar, however, as a gunned-down Black man and in this sense, the nameless embodies all men like him.

¹³ Hamner, “Religion and Film,” 1145–49.

¹⁴ Hamner, 1147.

¹⁵ Hamner, 1147–48.

¹⁶ Hamner, 1140.

¹⁷ Hamner, 1148–49.

¹⁸ Hamner, 1148–49.

¹⁹ Hamner, 1148–49.

²⁰ American Public Health Association, “Addressing Law Enforcement Violence as a Public Health Issue” (Washington, D.C.: American Public Health Association, November 13, 2018), <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/29/law-enforcement-violence>; Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (London; New York: Verso, 2017).

²¹ Rukmini Callimachi, “Breonna Taylor’s Life Was Changing. Then the Police Came to Her Door,” *The New York Times*, August 30, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/30/us/breonna-taylor-police-killing.html>.

²² Mark Berman et al., “Officer Brett Hankison Charged with Wanton Endangerment; Two Officers Shot during Protests - The Washington Post,” accessed December 18, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/09/23/breonna-taylor-charging-decision/>; “Breonna Taylor: Police Officer Charged but Not over Death,” *BBC News*, September 23, 2020, sec. US & Canada, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54273317>.

²³ On April 20th, 2021, after just ten hours of deliberation, the jury found Derek Chauvin guilty on all three counts against him. On June 25th, Chauvin was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison for the most severe charge, second-degree murder. The other two charges are awaiting adjudication. Evan Hill et al., “How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>; Tim Arango, “Derek Chauvin Is Sentenced to 22 and a Half Years for Murder of George Floyd,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/25/us/derek-chauvin-22-and-a-half-years-george-floyd.html>.

²⁴ Claire Galofaro, “Voices of Protest, Crying for Change, Ring across US, Beyond,” AP NEWS, June 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/54e9e9117e2903e3ec99ee15c76e74a6>.

²⁵ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>; Liz Hamel et al., “KFF Health Tracking Poll – June 2020,” *KFF* (blog), June 26, 2020, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-june-2020/>; Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Monica Anderson, “Majorities Across Racial, Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project* (blog), June 12, 2020, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/06/12/amid-protests-majorities-across-racial-and-ethnic-groups-express-support-for-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>.

²⁶ “Racism as a Public Health Crisis | Cornell Health,” accessed December 18, 2020, <https://health.cornell.edu/initiatives/skorton-center/racism-public-health-crisis>; American Public Health Association, “Declarations of Racism as a Public Health Issue,” American Public Health Association, accessed December 18, 2020, <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health/racism-declarations>.

²⁷ Jacob Bor et al., “Police Killings and Their Spillover Effects on the Mental Health of Black Americans: A Population-Based, Quasi-Experimental Study,” *The Lancet* 392, no. 10144 (July 28, 2018): 302–10, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31130-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31130-9); Rhea W Boyd, “Police Violence and the Built Harm of Structural Racism,” *The Lancet* 392, no. 10144 (July 28, 2018): 258–59,

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31374-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31374-6); Cato T. Laurencin and Joanne M. Walker, “A Pandemic on a Pandemic: Racism and COVID-19 in Blacks,” *Cell Systems* 11, no. 1 (July 2020): 9–10, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cels.2020.07.002>.

²⁸ Matthew L. Topel et al., “High Neighborhood Incarceration Rate Is Associated with Cardiometabolic Disease in Non-Incarcerated Black Individuals,” *Annals of Epidemiology* 28, no. 7 (July 2018): 489–92, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2018.01.011>.

²⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2005).

³⁰ “COVID-19 Map,” Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, accessed August 13, 2021, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

³¹ Clarence C. Gravlee, “Systemic Racism, Chronic Health Inequities, and COVID-19: A Syndemic in the Making?,” *American Journal of Human Biology* 32, no. 5 (September 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.23482>.

³² CDC, “Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, February 11, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>.

³³ Data as of December 14, 2020. Indigenous Americans’ rates surpassed that of Black Americans on November 24th. “Infection and Mortality by Race and Ethnicity,” The COVID Tracking Project, accessed December 14, 2020, <https://covidtracking.com/race/infection-and-mortality-data>. Black Americans comprise 18.5 percent of all deaths but represent only 12.4 percent of the population, and they are 2.7 times more likely to die from Coronavirus than their white counterparts when age is taken into account. For Indigenous Americans, this number increases to 3.3 times their white counterparts when accounting for age. Data as of December 8th, and with all known race deaths totaling about 94 percent of deaths. “COVID-19 Deaths Analyzed by Race and Ethnicity,” APM Research Lab, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>. These are fluctuating numbers, reflecting a rapidly changing situation and a dearth of race-based data becoming more available. For example, in July, Gravlee reported the mortality rate for Black people was more than double that for all other racial groups and, when adjusted for age, a risk of death nine times that of whites. Gravlee, “Systemic Racism, Chronic Health Inequities, and COVID-19.” Additionally, in May, NPR found Hispanics and Latinos dying from Covid at rates disproportionate to their share of the population in seven states; however, in September, those numbers increased to nineteen states and the District of Columbia. Daniel Wood, “As Pandemic Deaths Add Up, Racial Disparities Persist — And In Some Cases Worsen,” NPR.org, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/23/914427907/as-pandemic-deaths-add-up-racial-disparities-persist-and-in-some-cases-worsen>.

³⁴ During the summer of 2020, Black and Latino homeowners expressed concerns over paying their mortgages at rates over 2.5 times their white counterparts, and a disturbing 44 percent of Black and Latino renters had slight to no confidence in their ability to pay rent, compared with 20 percent for white households. Solomon Greene and Alanna McCargo, “New Data Suggest COVID-19 Is Widening Housing Disparities by Race and Income,” Urban Institute, May 29,

2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/new-data-suggest-covid-19-widening-housing-disparities-race-and-income>.

³⁵ Delan Devakumar et al., “Racism and Discrimination in COVID-19 Responses,” *The Lancet* 395, no. 10231 (April 2020): 1194, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30792-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30792-3). Some scholars predict that “the COVID-19 era will help reinforce White supremacist extremists’ sense of White victimhood and concomitant emotional appeals to protect, defend and take heroic action to restore sacred national space, territory and homelands.” Eric Taylor Woods et al., “COVID-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange,” *Nations and Nationalism*, July 19, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12644>. It is no mistake that the designator “sacred” is used, as this elicits the existing connections between “Christian” (i.e., white, politically and culturally conservative, and documented) and the political desire to see these beliefs institutionalized into the country’s civic life and policies, which in turn - unintentionally or otherwise - upholds notions of nationalistic white supremacy.

³⁶ Oppressive police practices, racism, and their negative consequences in communities of color have also been shown to affect that community’s trust in physicians and the medical field, which can most recently be seen through the hesitation expressed by Black Americans regarding a Covid vaccine. Sirry Alang, Donna D. McAlpine, and Rachel Hardeman, “Police Brutality and Mistrust in Medical Institutions,” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 7, no. 4 (August 1, 2020): 760–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-020-00706-w>. With the FDA approval of the Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson vaccines, the decision of whether to get a vaccine or not is impacted along racial lines. “KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: December 2020 | KFF,” accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-december-2020/>. It would be reasonable to assume that those most negatively affected by Covid would overwhelmingly support the dissemination of a vaccine, but this is not the case - and for good reason. Past predatory practices of the research and medical community regarding Black bodies casts a long shadow. The trauma and legacies of the painful experiments conducted on Black enslaved women by Dr. J. Marion Sims, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the experience of Henrietta Lacks, and racial-genetic determinism in the medical field all hang heavy over the Covid vaccine question. Extra physical and emotional labor is now required to ensure the vaccine’s safety and is being courageously undertaken by organizations such as the Black Coalition Against Covid-19 and the Institute for Antiracism in Medicine. “Black Coalition Against Covid – Fight COVID-19,” accessed December 15, 2020, <https://blackcoalitionagainstcovid.org/>, see also “Home,” The Institute for Antiracism in Medicine, accessed December 16, 2020, <http://antiracistnow.org/>. This work is succeeding, and has produced notable effects. For example, a December Kaiser Family Foundation survey found confidence in the safety and effectiveness of a vaccine had risen since September, particularly among Black adults, from 39 percent to 67 percent. “KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: December 2020 | KFF,” see also Quinnipiac University, “QU Poll Release Detail,” QU Poll, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=3684>.

³⁷ Gravlee, “Systemic Racism, Chronic Health Inequities, and COVID-19,” 2.

³⁸ Gravlee, 2.

³⁹ I am purposefully alluding to what is commonly known as the shortest verse in Christian scriptures: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35), referencing another epic involving sacrifice, trauma, and oppression.

⁴⁰ This phrasing is inspired by Gaddis' understanding of mathematician Henri Poincaré's "dynamical systems" of independent and dependent variables within linear and non-linear relationships. Gaddis draws attention to Poincaré's conclusion that linear and non-linear relationships can indeed coexist at the same time. Gaddis applies this to historiography, but these same principals are also useful for analyzing syndemic theory and the complexities of race-based trauma exhibited in this scene. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, First issued as an Oxford Univ. Press paperback (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 76.

⁴¹ Himes, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes: My Life of Absurdity*.

⁴² Wright, *Religion and Film*, 173.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>.

⁴⁴ López Estrada, *Blindspotting*.

⁴⁵ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces."

⁴⁶ Foucault.

⁴⁷ Foucault, 24.

⁴⁸ López Estrada, *Blindspotting*.

⁴⁹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

⁵⁰ Foucault, 25.

⁵¹ Foucault, 26.

⁵² Foucault, 25.

⁵³ Foucault, 25.

⁵⁴ Peter Johnson, "The Geographies of Heterotopia," *Geography Compass* 7 (2013): 790–803, as quoted in, Paul Clements, "Highgate Cemetery Heterotopia: A Creative Counterpublic Space," *Space and Culture* 20, no. 4 (2017): 471, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331217724976>.

⁵⁵ Christian nationalism was the leading predictor of incautious behavior, and the second-leading predictor of avoiding taking prescribed precautions behind religiosity, but became the leading predictor of the latter once Christian nationalism was accounted for. It is important to note, however, that disregard for Covid precautionary measures is not correlated with religious commitment, but it is correlated for Christian nationalism. The authors found in their study of religiosity and (non)cautionary behavior during the pandemic that political theologies or ideas around public religion, especially those classified as ultra-conservative, bore far more influence on

unsafe Covid behaviors. Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs, “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans’ Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 3 (September 2020): 413–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12677>.

⁵⁶ While 72 percent of white Americans who regularly attend religious services report feeling very or somewhat confident they could do so in person without spreading or catching the virus (despite evangelical doctors pleading with fellow Christians to worship at home), only 49 percent and 51 percent of Black and Hispanic Americans, respectively, report the same. Sarah McCammon, “Evangelical Doctors’ Group Pleads With Churches To Stay Home,” NPR.org, accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/11/19/936857525/evangelical-doctors-group-pleads-with-churches-to-stay-home>, see also Pew Research Center, “Amid Pandemic, Black and Hispanic Worshipers More Concerned about Safety of in-Person Religious Services,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/07/amid-pandemic-black-and-hispanic-worshippers-more-concerned-about-safety-of-in-person-religious-services/>. While this is what the polling suggests, there is another study that shows that while Republicans are more open to in-person worship services, a majority of them say it should not be without Covid restrictions. Pew Research Center, “Republicans More Open to In-Person Worship, but Most Oppose Religious Exemptions from COVID Restrictions,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/11/republicans-more-open-to-in-person-worship-but-most-oppose-religious-exemptions-from-covid-restrictions/>.

⁵⁷ Kate Conger, Jack Healy, and Lucy Tompkins, “Churches Were Eager to Reopen. Now They Are Confronting Coronavirus Cases,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/us/coronavirus-churches-outbreaks.html>; Lea Hamner, “High SARS-CoV-2 Attack Rate Following Exposure at a Choir Practice — Skagit County, Washington, March 2020,” *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6919e6>; Allison James, “High COVID-19 Attack Rate Among Attendees at Events at a Church — Arkansas, March 2020,” *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 69 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6920e2>; Jaweed Kaleem, “Megachurch Pastors Defy Coronavirus Pandemic, Insisting on Right to Worship,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-31/coronavirus-megachurches-meeting-pastors>; Jakob Rodgers, “Where Mask-Wearing Isn’t Gospel: Colorado Churches Grapple With Reopening,” *Kaiser Health News* (blog), July 29, 2020, <https://khn.org/news/churches-mask-wearing-colorado-springs-congregations-flour-mask-orders/>.

⁵⁸ Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs, “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct.” Precautions like frequent hand-washing, wearing masks, and social distancing are not considered “solutions” to the pandemic for Christian nationalists; rather, increasing America’s devotion to God, especially through religious service attendance, and turning from “sinful” national policies around abortion and the LGBTQ+ community are preferred.

⁵⁹ Jaclyn Cosgrove, “L.A. Megachurch Pastor Mocks Pandemic Health Orders, Even as Church Members Fall Ill,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-11-08/la-pastor-mocks-covid-19-rules-church-members-ill>.

⁶⁰ Grace Community Church, “Grace Community Church Live | Facebook,” Grace Community Church Facebook, August 30, 2020,

https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=321217592449927&ref=watch_permalink.

⁶¹ CNN’s New Day and Dr. Sanjay Gupta, “New Day on Twitter,” Twitter, December 3, 2020,

<https://twitter.com/NewDay/status/1334483585236168707>.

⁶² Jaclyn Cosgrove, “County of Los Angeles v. Grace Community Church,” Los Angeles Times, November 9, 2020,

<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/20399011/county-worker-declaration.pdf>.

⁶³ Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Seeking Power in Jesus’ Name: Trump Sparks a Rise of Patriot Churches,” *Washington Post*, accessed December 16, 2020,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/10/26/trump-christian-nationalism-patriot-church/>.

⁶⁴ This phrasing is, of course, from Geertz’s definition of religion. Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1969), 1–46.

⁶⁵ Clements, “Highgate Cemetery Heterotopia: A Creative Counterpublic Space,” 470.

⁶⁶ López Estrada, *Blindspotting*.

⁶⁷ López Estrada.

⁶⁸ López Estrada.

⁶⁹ López Estrada.

⁷⁰ Kristie Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,” *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 115, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>.

⁷¹ Dotson, 116.

⁷² López Estrada, *Blindspotting*.

⁷³ Bailey, “Seeking Power in Jesus’ Name.” According to a study by University of Chicago Divinity School and The APNORC Center for Public Affairs Research, white evangelical Christians are more likely than other Americans who believe in God to feel that God will protect them from being infected (67 percent vs. 53 percent). The University of Chicago Divinity School and The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, “How Faith Shapes Feelings About the Coronavirus Outbreak,” (Chicago, May 2020), <https://apnorc.org/projects/how-faith-shapes-feelings-about-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>.

⁷⁴ Cosgrove, “L.A. Megachurch Pastor Mocks Pandemic Health Orders, Even as Church Members Fall Ill.”

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- ⁷⁵ Cosgrove, “County of Los Angeles v. Grace Community Church.”
- ⁷⁶ Hamner, “Theorizing Religion and the Public Sphere,” 1012.
- ⁷⁷ Pahl, “Sacrifice,” 478.
- ⁷⁸ López Estrada, *Blindspotting*.
- ⁷⁹ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.
- ⁸⁰ Margaret Miles, “Violence against Women in the Historical Christian West and in North American Secular Culture: The Visual and Textual Evidence,” in *Women’s Studies in Religion: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Kate Bagley and Kathleen McIntosh (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007), 125.
- ⁸¹ López Estrada, *Blindspotting*.

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