The Religion of White Rage
White Workers, Religious Fervor, and the Myth of Black Racial Progress

Edited by Stephen C. Finley, Biko Mandela Gray and Lori Latrice Martin
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INTRODUCTION

“The Souls of White Folk”: Race, Affect, and Religion in the Religion of White Rage

*Biko Mandela Gray, Stephen C. Finley, and Lori Latrice Martin*

Racism is a faith. It is a form of idolatry. It is an abortive search for meaning.¹

–George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*

“But what on earth is whiteness that one should desire it?” Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! . . . Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time.²

–W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*

A Courtroom, a Lynching

The room was packed, filled with suits and professional dresses, many adorned with American flag pins. Microphones were abundant, accompanied by news cameras, all of which were focused on the desk in the middle. And then he walked in, face already flushed with anger and frustration. And his words served to match the anger he’d cultivated over the past few weeks:

Less than two weeks ago, Dr. Ford publicly accused me of committing wrongdoing at an event more than thirty-six years ago, when we were both in high school. I denied the allegation immediately, categorically, and unequivocally . . . This confirmation process has become a national disgrace . . . [the committee has replaced] advice and consent with search and destroy. Since my nomination in July, there has been a frenzy on the left to come up with something—*anything*—to block my confirmation.³
For just over forty-four minutes, Brett Kavanaugh laid out a case for himself—not simply for his nomination to the Supreme Court, but also for his personal character; his statement was an apologetic, a defense of his goodness, his innocence, in the face of accusations of sexual violence. Kavanaugh, in short, was pissed. He was maligned, he told the committee; and it was largely the Democrats’ fault. Choked up, almost screaming at times, Kavanaugh vigorously and, some might claim, violently, defended himself. And, as we know now, it worked. A few days later, Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court, kicking and screaming his way to the highest judicial appointment in the country.

This, of course, wasn’t the first time a white man had manipulated political processes to gain power. From the Watergate scandal to Willie Horton ads, white men—the sharpest embodiment of the violence, and innocence, of whiteness—have pulled racialized strings of benefit and privilege in order to gain and maintain political office. In this regard, Kavanaugh’s confirmation wasn’t surprising.

But Kavanaugh’s performance of rage was striking. His screaming, ranting, and raving had everything to do with the myth of the hardworking American male whose success is his own and no one else’s—and as such, Kavanaugh laid out an affective case for himself as the victim. He was clear that it was he, not Dr. Ford, who was maligned; he, Kavanaugh, the man whose hard work had placed him just a short distance away from sitting in one of the highest seats of power in the United States: “Senator, I was at the top of my class academically, busted my butt in school. Captain of the varsity basketball team. Got into Yale College. When I got into Yale College, got into Yale Law School. Worked my tail off.”

Claims such as these—claims used multiple times during Kavanaugh’s statement—do not simply serve to legitimate Kavanaugh as qualified for a SCOTUS seat; they also invoke a myth, a religious origin story, a narrative of symbols and tropes which are central to the sociocultural and sociopolitical formation and maintenance of the United States. This myth is the story of the bootstrapper, the one who works hard in order to achieve success. Woven into Kavanaugh’s affective circulation of anger and (performative) despair was a religious conviction, a conviction steeped in what historian of religions Charles H. Long might call an “ultimate orientation” toward the primacy and normativity of individual grit-turned-success.

We, of course, know that Kavanaugh’s claim to hard work isn’t quite as straightforward as it seems; he was a prep school graduate, and such high school training provided him with the networks and connections that made such an “elite” education possible. But such is the nature of myth; it need not be true—or false—to have a real impact, to ground one’s sense of
orientation toward the world. Whether it is the story of Adam and Eve in the second creation account in Genesis, or the story of a hardworking person who—all on their own—creates a successful life for themselves, myths offer ways of giving a person the possibility of situating themselves within a complex and constantly changing world. In short, myths ground being.

Kavanaugh, however, is not alone. It is difficult not to see a connection between Kavanaugh’s affectively charged mythical invocations and the president who nominated him in the first place. As Kavanaugh used rage for political advancement, so did the president. In an article for Snopes online magazine, Dan MacGuill “fact-checked” whether or not then-candidate Donald Trump stoked violence at his rallies and in his speech. The article, still available on the magazine’s website, features a cartoon in which a fiery and caricaturized Donald Trump is surrounded by speech bubbles featuring some of his most virulent and violent claims during his rallies. The “fact-checking,” of course, found it “true”; Donald Trump did, indeed, say these things at his rallies, using anger and rage to amplify his message and continue to garner support. And the crowds loved it. Raucous cheering can be heard within each video, as the crowd literally falls into a frenzied and frantic appreciation of their chosen leader. These crowds—largely white, and largely figured as “working class”—were also stoking the myth of the hardworking bootstrapper. Having been failed by this myth, Trump’s claims to violence, situated within false promises of better lives and an America made “great again” through virulently xenophobic and anti-black policies and practices, were nothing less than the stoking of pro-white rage.

In fact, Trump’s continued assault against anything that isn’t white—his perpetual lambasting of Colin Kaepernick is just one example—articulates and continues to fan the flames of white resentment, which easily collapses into what cannot be called anything else other than white rage. From the expression of enraged offense to the impassioned call to violence, both Kavanaugh and Trump operate as heuristic figures who reveal and channel the white rage that shows up as white violence.

Within Kavanaugh’s defense and Trump’s rhetoric, then, we are confronted—or forced to wrestle—with the intertwining of three apparently disparate realities: race, affect, and religion. Kavanaugh’s racial identity doesn’t rise to the fore for many people, but to ignore his racial identity is tantamount to ignoring the fact that his nomination would not have been possible outside of Donald Trump’s election to the presidency—an election that had everything to do with white resentment framed in terms of middle- and working-class neglect. (As we show in the conclusion to this book, the myth has little to do with class and everything to do with neglected categories of race, affect, and religion in labor studies).
Resentment is key here; Kavanaugh’s racial identity may not have been on display, but his anger was—and it was precisely this anger that motivated and inspired his Republican colleagues to push his nomination through. Kavanaugh performed his whiteness, not through displays of anti-black sentiment (though his treatment of Senators Cory Booker and Kamala Harris did raise eyebrows, as he called Booker by his first name and continually challenged Harris’s credibility), but instead by expressing an explosive rage, and a vicious circular logic forms: Kavanaugh performs whiteness as anger, but he would not have been able to be so angry if he weren’t white.

This dynamic isn’t simply limited to white conservatives, however. Though Dr. Ford herself did not express rage, the political discourse, her advocates did. Kavanaugh directed his rage toward Ford and the DNC, but Ford’s supporters and the Democratic Party writ large directed their rage toward Kavanaugh. Rage worked both ways in this hearing. The logic isn’t simply cyclical or circular; it’s insular. Only whiteness can be mad, which means that only whiteness gets to legitimately express anger.

When one thinks about the gendered nature of the Kavanaugh hearings, what one sees are two distinct manifestations of white rage—both of which center white normativity and black erasure. The first trajectory might be understood as the rage that supported and supports critiques and criticisms of claims of sexist discrimination and sexual violence; the second trajectory might be understood as that which supports the very white men who perpetuate such violence. On the one hand, the #MeToo movement—which, despite the fact that it was started by a black woman, has found its most vocal and visible expression through white women—articulates the righteous and justified rage against explicit structural and interpersonal forms of sexual violence; on the other hand, the majority of white women voted for Donald Trump, which, as Kavanaugh has pointed out in his testimony, apparently stems from the discrepancy between “working one’s butt off” and reaping the benefits therein. Kavanaugh was enraged not simply because his character had been maligned; he was angry because those years at Yale and on the bench were not enough simply to push him through, because the myth of hard work paying off had not taken to his own life.

These two expressions—one in which white women push for issues of sexual justice, and the other in which white women push for reaping what they understand as their entitlements to the benefits of the United States—are indeed oppositional. But they nevertheless share one critical similarity: neither of them are interested in the lives of non-white people. Despite the fact that black women statistically suffer sexual violence at higher rates than their counterparts, and despite the fact that #MeToo was started by Tarauna Burke, an African American woman, who has been almost wholly erased
in the “me too” narratives, the movement for sexual justice and against institutional and interpersonal forms of sexist violence has consistently centered white women at the expense of non-white women, particularly black women. In this regard, what reigns supreme is neither sexual violence, sexual justice, nor even the benefits of hard work; what reigns supreme is whiteness. It is whiteness that is centered in both affective trajectories, and it is whiteness—articulated in and through rage, belief, and “hard work,” which is to say, the quintessential white American religious mythology—that maintains its centrality as the focal point of and for “social justice” reform as well as the resistance to such reforms.

Whiteness is not limited to white people, though they are its most palpable expression. In this regard, whiteness extends far beyond Kavanaugh’s (and, for that matter, Ford’s) physical characteristics. Whiteness names itself as that which is centered, magnified, and rendered normative through various forms of public discourse. As a matter of fact—and this is the argument of this book—whiteness is precisely a racialized, social, affective, and religious norm that allows for manifold expressions of (out)rage at the perception that such a norm would be challenged or dislodged.

“Perception” is key here; the actual displacement of white normativity is questionable at best and highly doubtful at worst, as virtually all of the public institutions remain oriented around epistemological, ontological, social, and religious efforts at maintaining whiteness’s significance as a norm. To make this clear, we turn to another story, a bit older but no less palpable, that religion scholar Christopher Driscoll recounts in his text White Lies:

On October 13, 1938, 19-year-old W. C. Williams hung from a tree near Ruston, Louisiana . . . Williams was sought for questioning about another murder, of a white man, and the beating of the white man’s mistress. After hiding out for four days, Williams finally surrendered to a small, gun-toting, emotionally charged group of young white men. Soon a brief confrontation ensued between Lincoln Parish Sheriff Bryan Thigpin . . . and the ever-growing mob of white captors [emphasis added].

This confrontation did not end well—or at least it didn’t for Williams:

With the mob threatening to shoot Williams on the spot, Thigpin struck a deal with the mob for them to “walk Williams through the woods to a side road, where they promised to meet the sheriff and surrender their prisoner.” Soon after the mob left with their “prisoner,” Thigpin heard shots. Knowing what had happened, the capitulating sheriff drove back into town believing there was nothing further [he] could do” [emphasis added].
Upon further and closer consideration and examination, it is clear that Thigpin’s perceived helplessness at the moment when the shots rang out names whiteness as a point of ultimate orientation. It is only in the face of something ultimate—whether we choose to call that ultimate something “God” or not—that one can feel such helplessness. This helplessness becomes religious by way of it becoming legitimate; it becomes what Lewis Gordon might call the enactment of “taking oneself too seriously,” which means that the norms of the world no longer show themselves as mutable but instead transcendent, metaphysical. Thigpin was helpless because he mistook the fabrication of whiteness as a metaphysical fact.

In this regard, Thigpin’s helplessness is not simply religious; it is also theodicean. This lynching case exemplifies what Lewis Gordon, drawing from Sylvia Wynter, might call a “biodicy.” As Gordon claims, “Among its many consequences, race is about in one sense who lives and who dies. In another sense, its normative significance leads to a rephrasing of who is supposed to live and who to die [original emphasis].” Thigpin’s perceived helplessness, then, has everything to do with his having internalized the ultimate significance of (his and the lynch mob’s) whiteness; their rage was uncontested because it could not be contested, because the possibility of contesting such rage would call into question the very legitimacy of the white claims to injury and offense that had occasioned such rage—and therefore such violence—in the first place.

Gordon is not alone. In fact, as early as 1973, philosopher William R. Jones raised a pointed yet continually relevant question to black theologians: could God be a white racist? Jones, like Gordon, wondered aloud about the relationship between race and theodicy: theodicy is not simply the questioning of the problem of evil, but the act of justifying it. It is precisely this justification that lends itself to various schemes of legitimation and substantiation that prevent the obvious enactment of various forms of moral evil.

Turning again to Gordon, “Human beings are not omniscient and therefore cannot possibly understand the full significance of what appears to be evil and unjust. That familiar response boils down to the old adage, ‘G-d knows.’” We can hear in Thigpin’s “negotiations,” as well as in his feeling of helplessness, this very adage. “G-d”—which, in this case, is the white mob—knew, which means that there was nothing to be done because nothing could have been done. The mob was already angry; Thigpin had no choice but to respect or even revere such rage. And this helplessness operated as a form of affective legitimation that mitigated any attempt to render culpable a group of angry white people in their explicit act of moral evil.

But the reverse could also be true. Is it possible that Thigpin’s perceived helplessness was also because he, too, experienced rage? If, as Sara Ahmed
writes, emotions serve to form the surfaces of subjects and objects, then it
is possible that Thigpin’s own engagement “gave him away” in similar ways
to Kavanaugh and his Republican supporters. In this regard, the feeling of
helplessness was not constituted by the act of violence, but instead condi-
tioned it, exposing Thigpin’s “capitulation” as already present in an inch-
ocate form at the very moment he “negotiated” with the lynch mob.

We must remind you, reader, that our attention to the specificity of par-
ticular cases should not be understood as merely a close reading of these
case studies. We turn to these studies to show a connection between white
rage and the maintenance of white supremacy. Thigpin and Kavanaugh are
connected through their roles as affective conductors whose enactments
served to both legitimate and be legitimated by the unshakeable norm of
whiteness itself. Whiteness, then, exceeds the white people who embody it
and perform it, as it invokes affective and religious sensibilities that pro-
duce a fidelity to mythical, political, and social frameworks that can only be
made fully available to those who are white. The whiteness that Kavanaugh
embodied and performed, and the whiteness that Thigpin embodied and
enabled, was an affective and religious reality; in those hearings, and at that
lynching, the religion of white rage expressed itself.

White Rage as a Religious Disposition

Exploring the various affective and religious vectors of whiteness in the
United States, the authors in this volume—each in their own way and
through various methodological, theoretical, and disciplinary approaches—
rise considerable questions, concerns, and thoughts about the inextricable
and normative relationship between whiteness, affect, and religion in the
United States. Drawing from religious studies, philosophy, sociology, and
other approaches, the authors in this text claim that white rage is a religious
disposition, one organized around and toward the normativity of whiteness
and the benefits such whiteness conveys. What the coeditors seek to do
in this introduction, then, is lay out a conceptual mapping of the three
constitutive terms—religion, whiteness, and rage—that form the theoretical
nucleus out of which the following essays emerge. We begin with white-
ness as religious, moving toward rage, and then articulating the relation-
ship between the two and the white worker as the mythological site for the
articulation of the religion of white rage.

As we noted above, Charles Long defined religion as “orientation in the
ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate signifi-
cance of one’s place in the world.” Religion is about orientation, but not
simply any orientation; it is about how one comes to understand oneself
and one’s community in relation to the manifold and dynamic world within which one finds oneself. This notion of religion is useful, in large part because it allows one to understand the relations that constitute one’s movement through the world, and more specifically, those social norms that hold one’s *lebenswelt* together.

It is precisely normativity that invokes religion. To be “oriented in the ultimate sense” is to already have organized one’s life around a norm or series of norms whose significance cannot be overstated. By suggesting that Thigpin’s capitulation, as well as Kavanaugh’s enraged performance, are enactments of the normativity of whiteness is to already suggest that both of them were oriented around the idea that whiteness could not be shaken. Kavanaugh’s confirmation and Thigpin’s failure both speak to a theodicean framework in which the veracity of whiteness was not, would not, and could not be contested. As many of the essays in this volume will articulate, the notion of ultimate orientation grounds the very possibility of white rage’s presence and legitimation. Whiteness may not be a “G-d,” but it sure acts like one.

**Whiteness as the Religious and the Visible**

Much has been written about whiteness. Indeed, the burgeoning and increasingly growing field of critical whiteness studies has become part of the larger field of critical race theory, with a host of books and articles devoted to the critical analysis—and possible dismantling—of whiteness as a pernicious (even if unspoken) norm of knowledge, culture, politics, and religion. Such analyses move beyond the (mere) articulation of white supremacist resentment. In other words, the violence of whiteness includes, but extends beyond, xenophobic or anti-black rhetoric or physical violence. Philosopher George Yancy offers one of the better definitions of whiteness. In *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, he defines whiteness as “a synergistic system of transversal relationships of privileges, norms, rights, modes of self-perception and the perception of others, unquestioned presumptions, deceptions, beliefs, ‘truths,’ behaviors, advantages, modes of comportment, and sites of power and hegemony that benefit whites individually and institutionally.”\(^{14}\) In other words, whiteness is that which interfaces with the world. It structures relations and generates power. Which means that it is more than sentiment, more than a mere construct, which is too simplistic a frame to account for its impactful and near-totalizing social ontology. The best way to understand whiteness, its endurance, and its power is as religious.
Whiteness is a mythical posture that colonizes individual, institutional, discursive, and affective margins, bringing them under the power of its unacknowledged center.\(^\text{15}\) It is this “unacknowledged center” that is one of the hallmarks of whiteness for Yancy.\(^\text{16}\) But there is more, much more. Long, a historian of religions and the preeminent theorist of religion and race, contends that this mythic center, the posture out of which whiteness operates often invisibly, is the epistemological and religious center of white supremacy, what he calls “western ideology.”\(^\text{17}\) Drawing largely from Mircea Eliade’s seminal text in the history of religions, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*,\(^\text{18}\) Long contends that cultures operated out of a center historically, and for our purposes, then, whiteness is an enactment of an archaic ontology in which “the center defines the locus of reality,”\(^\text{19}\) which is only properly understood as religious. Long explains:

Again, the prestige of the beginnings in Eliade’s thought is predicated on his conception of the center as symbolizing the beginnings . . . Around the center, other dimensions of life are organized; the center gives coherence to the common life, and through the center, the common life participates in reality. The center holds together in symbolic forms, human, natural, and supernatural realities.\(^\text{20}\)

This was a ceremonial and ritual center. The sacred was apprehended most profoundly in this ceremonial center. In the modern era (read: Western), however, the prestige of the center was transferred to the civilizational or citied center. Cited traditions, then, “express centrifugal and centripetal dynamic forces; they tend to bring power into their centers and redistribute the power from the center.”\(^\text{21}\) In other words, there tends to be an “imperialistic principle inherent in the earliest cited traditions.”\(^\text{22}\) For Long, this pattern is clear in the military, political, and economic structures of cited traditions. Social relations in such a configuration are always hierarchical as opposed to the egalitarianism of earlier archaic cultures.

This way of understanding whiteness as religious coheres nicely with what Du Bois, as early as 1910, named “The religion of whiteness.”\(^\text{23}\) In an essay called “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois rails against Europe and America for its pillaging and raping of the world’s resources and people, sanctioned particularly against the global majority of people of color.\(^\text{24}\) Reminiscent of Long’s theorizing of religion, Du Bois sees whiteness as imperialistic. It seeks to devour the world, to own its people and resources, which it views as its birthright to plunder and consume. Time and time again, in the context of the essay, Du Bois, while remaining vigilant of the fact that the religion of whiteness and its attendant violence is global in
How many of us today fully realize the current theory of colonial expansion, of the relation of Europe which is white, to the world which is black and brown and yellow? Bluntly put, that theory is this: It is the duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe’s good. . . . The European world is using black and brown men for all the uses which men know. Slowly but surely white culture is evolving the theory that only “darkies” are born beasts of burden for white folk. . . . The supporting arguments grow and twist themselves in the mouths of merchant, scientist, soldier, traveler, writer, and missionary: Darker peoples are dark in mind as well as in body; of dark, uncertain, and imperfect descent; of frailer, cheaper stuff; . . . “half-devil and half-child.” Such as they are civilization must, naturally, raise them, but soberly and in limited ways. They are not simply dark white men. They are not “men” in the sense that Europeans are men.25

Du Bois is no doubt careful in his language, particularly in his use of the terms “dark” and “darkies,” for the quintessential darkie in the white imaginary has always been the “black.” In this sense, darkies were not “men”; they were not human, not people, and as such, they were not gendered. They were simply black, black bodies, data, “who raise cotton, gather rubber, fetch ivory, and dig diamonds.”26 What Du Bois argues is also consistent with Long’s notion of civilization and citied traditions.

While one tends to think of “civilization” or “civilized” as a virtue, this is not the case for Du Bois and Long. Civilization, a term and symbol that signified Europe and white culture, is barbaric; it operates out of its center, which it fails to acknowledge, even through violent expansion.27 It is a religious notion that ostensibly sets apart the white world from the rest of the world, highlighting its special and technological character in a vein similar to being “chosen.”28 Yet, civilization needs the “primitive,” the other, for its existence and identity, and so it signifies on people who then become the raw material out of which it builds its world, thus justifying its activities through linguistic duplicity. Indeed, “the term ‘civilization’—a term that embodies the notion of the primitive—became a part of Western languages in the eighteenth century.”29 “The emergence of civilization was conterminous with appearance of whiteness, which, Du Bois rightly concludes, “is a very modern thing.”30

What of this “great [white] religion” for Du Bois?31 To begin with, the sine qua non of the religion of whiteness is rage, and rage gives way to various forms of violence. As the description of whiteness in “The Souls of White Folk” illustrates, Du Bois has neither time nor patience for it. None. He is
especially harsh in his criticism of America, which he views as exceptionally hypocritical. America’s religion of white rage is, undeniably, more egregious than that of Europe, for it claims chosenness, specialness, freedom, and equality. Its “chiefest industry” being war, it has been anything but that for African Americans, who are the central object of its rage and violence. America “trains her immigrants to this despising of ‘niggers’ from the day of their landing, and they carry and send the news back to the submerged classes in their fatherlands.” Du Bois continues:

It is curious to see America, the United States, looking on herself, first, as a sort of natural peacemaker, then as a moral protagonist in this terrible time. No nation is less fitted for this rôle. For two or more centuries America has marched proudly in the van of human hatred,—making bonfires of human flesh and laughing at them hideously, and making the insulting of millions more than a matter of dislike,—rather a great religion, a world war-cry: Up white, down black; to your tents O white folk and world war with black and parti-colored mongrel beasts!

America evinces a hypocrisy that social theorists E. Franklin Frazer and Bobby E. Wright have characterized as “pathological.” America criticizes the world for its absence of democracy and for human rights violations, but it treats black people with the utmost contempt and exploitation. Du Bois retorts, “But say to a people: ‘The one virtue is to be white,’ and the people rush to the inevitable conclusion, ‘Kill the “nigger”’!”

One final note about the religion of white rage and the place of the white worker in it. For Du Bois, there is no black composite of the white worker, the white laborer. Never has been, never will be. The white worker has always been part of the religion of whiteness. As such, black-white labor relations are irreducible to class, for the white worker would likely benefit from “the exploitation of darker peoples.” In addition, white workers, says Du Bois, may find their way into the ranks of “men,” by which he means “humans,” through electoral politics, self-assertion, and education; but not the black laborer, for whom “the whites shall rule forever and forever and everywhere.” Likewise, the black worker—the black world—in the present configuration of the worlds, will never benefit from their own labor to the extent of the white. They will only get the “pittance that the white world throws [them] disdainfully.” Thus, it is not economics that ultimately motivates white people to act violently and exploitatively; these are religious acts which are constitutive of the very notion of whiteness. Violence and rage are the ideological facts of whiteness, they issue from the very data of white supremacy, the hierarchicalizing of people and the notion that whiteness
has a primary relation with and to the Divine. Du Bois is clear that “this assumption that of all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan leads to curious acts.”

As such, not all acts are invisible, and Du Bois endeavors to lay whiteness bare. He is explicit that he sees whiteness with the incisive intuition and insight of a black clairvoyant, a conjure man, and this makes white people angry. “This is not Europe gone mad; this is not aberration nor insanity; this is Europe; this seeming Terrible is the real soul of white culture—, stripped and visible today.” Though it is true that the dangers of whiteness are made visible when one uses a racial slur or when Donald Trump, the forty-fifth president of the United States, calls African and Afro-Caribbean countries “shitholes”—and there are essays in this volume devoted to unpacking and critically analyzing such explicit forms of violence—it is also true that the source of such explicit violence rests in the often unspoken, unthought, and uncritically adopted normativity of whiteness as an innocent—or at least neutral—and generative source of goodness.

**Whiteness as the Invisible, Unthought, and Therefore, the Norm**

Whiteness, then, must endeavor to remain invisible, to punish those who mark its appearance, to make its critics the problem. Yancy, for example, highlights the reality that “a key feature of the social ontology of whiteness is that whites attempt to avoid discussing their own social, political, economic, and cultural investments in whiteness. Many whites fail to see their complicity with the systemic workings of white supremacy.” This blindness to one’s own complicity in whiteness is precisely the source of the violence of white normativity. Not to see what one is—to take on only the identity of the one who sees and not the one who is seen—is a critical characteristic of whiteness, of people who see themselves as white, of those who cannot help but utter “all lives matter” or “not all white people” in response to passionate and truthful claims about the violence of white supremacy and white normativity. Not to see oneself is to already have announced one’s investiture in whiteness.

Such a lack of awareness speaks to what we might call the phenomenology of whiteness, a phrase that may have been popularized by feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed. For Ahmed, the phenomenology of whiteness is organized around the fact that “whiteness is lived as a background to experience.” Living as “background” is precisely what is meant when we say that whiteness does not see itself. Put philosophically, the phenomenology of whiteness is precisely the lived experience of whiteness as the condition of
possibility of and for any other modality of life, of lived engagement. To be white is to live as the condition and not the conditioned; it is, drawing from Husserl, to operate not as the terminus of one’s perception, but to be that which perceives. It is, in other words, to be the gaze upon the world.

To be the gaze has significant power. Above and beyond being merely the “one who sees,” a gaze is normative; to gaze is to constitute the other, to give meanings to others in such a way as to make such meanings “stick.” Moreover, the responsibility for such constitution is displaced onto that upon which one gazes; to see a “tree” is to disallow that which has been understood as a tree to have a say. Operating as a “background to experience,” whiteness affords the possibility of engaging with the world without having to take responsibility for one’s own legacy in shaping that world. Whiteness names others without having to be named; it acts without having to take responsibility for its actions. Whiteness allows people to enact racist activities without acknowledging that they are racist; it conditions, as one of the chapters in this volume argues, the possibility of calling the police for the most basic of human activities—golfing, swimming, fundraising, barbecuing, and even sleeping—while maintaining one’s own innocence against the charge of white supremacist violence. Disguised through legal, social, and political norms, whiteness affords the possibility of surprise and shock at the reality of racism while distancing oneself from the guilt of “actually” being racist. Whiteness is, therefore, the existential disposition of seeing without having to be seen, of looking at and therefore constituting the world without having to take responsibility for the implications of such constitution.

To embody this disposition—and whiteness is both embodied and discursive—certainly has its benefits. To be able to act without taking responsibility, to see and treat others without having to worry about repercussions, allows for white communities to enact violence without owning up to such violence, to “throw rocks and hide your hands,” as the saying goes. But these benefits extend far beyond enacting protected forms of violence. Because whiteness operates as “an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies ‘can do,’” white is an existential inheritance, an ontological entitlement, whose benefits are conferred without merit and maintained without question. To be white, then, is to be gifted the possibility of not only shaping the world, but also being entitled to whatever benefits the world offers.

That is, of course, until those not deemed as white start making and laying claim to the same benefits. Having been given the ontological entitlement to the benefits of this world, having been bestowed the metaphysical guarantee of unlimited and unfettered access to whatever one might desire,
whiteness throws temper tantrums when such benefits are even deemed accessible to and by non-white others.

This “white–non-white” distinction is crucial. Inasmuch as there are, indeed, other racialized identities in the United States, the racial schema in the U.S. nevertheless still operates along a binary logic. One is either white or one isn’t—which is tantamount to being (understood as) black. In Duboisian thought, all non-white others are constituted as “niggers.” In other words, non-white people become “black” through a series of legal, political, social, and even religious norms that treat such communities as if they were black. Although such a binary can indeed be read as collapsing distinctions between what we now call “people of color,” there is a very real way in which blackness unfortunately becomes an umbrella term for those who cannot (or can no longer) present themselves as the “background” itself. Unable to “be” normative, non-white communities collapse into the abnormality of blackness—and are therefore, for better or worse, treated as such. It is no accident, then, that immigrant Muslims or Mexicans have been referred to as “the new niggers” or as “sand niggers.” Anti-blackness is the default position; it is the unthought reference to non-white, who is not black but who is the object of rage within the contemporary and temporal gaze of whiteness. One only has to do a simple internet search to see the myriad of examples of this. Associating someone with blackness, even if he or she is a European immigrant, is an apparent affront to their status; to demean their status is to “blacken” or “niggerize” them. In a recent illustration, New York governor Andrew Cuomo, referring to a derogatory term for southern Italians (note that they are degraded because of an alleged trace of black heritage), said that “nigger wops, n-word wops” is a term that some use. Likewise, CNN correspondent Chris Cuomo, the governor’s brother, recently said that the word “Fredo,” the name of a fictional character from The Godfather: Part II, was like “the n-word for us.” Notice a pattern?

Our point here, however, is not so much about this binary as it is about the whiteness that governs such binary logics. Kavanaugh was not concerned about those who weren’t white during his tirade about his own self-making; that was about him, and about the people like him who worked hard only to be slighted by a “liberal” politics of identity. Such a move speaks more to the frustration, anger, and outrage at no longer being able to be the norm. No longer entitled to the benefits that a normative status may offer, the white who lives in the face of perceived non-white—which, again, is tantamount to black—progress is the white who remains concerned about the loss of his or her normative identity. And the apparent dissolution of one’s normative benefits lends itself to a host of affective responses, all of which are organized around anger, ire, and—yes—rage.
**Whiteness as an Affective Economy of Rage**

To think with rage is to already think with and about affects and their possibilities. Affect studies scholarship has often articulated affect in its Spinozan form—as the “capacity to affect and be affected,” articulating not simply the relata (the entities of relation) but also the relation itself. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth put it in *The Affect Theory Reader*:

Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belong to comportments of matter of virtually any and every sort.⁴⁹

Although affects are about entities in relation, they are also about how relations are constituted. The “ever-modulating force-relations” that move “not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter” have everything to do with the construction, maintenance, and meaning of relationality itself. In other words, affect explores the dynamics of relation, exposing and exploring the conditions of possibility of (the meaning of) our various encounters with others, human, non-human, and otherwise.

The word “relation” is key here. “Relation” should not be understood as simply interpersonal. In fact, as affect theorists such as Brian Massumi point out, affect is often articulated as pre- and transpersonal “intensities” that both govern and are governed by the movement of people, bodies, non-human animals, and environments. We bring this up because, far and above describing interpersonal and individual modes of encounter, affect can and will name how publics are structured.

The pre- and transpersonal nature of affect, however, should not be taken—as Massumi often does—as a dismissal of the particular. In fact, the particularity of a body’s movement and expression can, will, and must raise questions about our affective possibilities. Ben Highmore expounds:

Affect gives you away: the telltale heart; my clammy hands; the note of anger in your voice; the sparkle of glee in their eyes. You may protest your innocence, but we both know, don’t we, that who you really are, or what you really are, is going to be found in the pumping of your blood, the quantity and quality of your perspiration, the breathless anticipation in your throat, the way you can’t stop yourself from grinning, the glassy sheen in your eyes.⁵⁰
Kavanaugh’s tears, flushed face, and raised voice, for example, “gave him away,” as someone who was enraged. Such embodiments of rage can and will be manifested through bodies: a Charlottesville rally gone wrong (or right, depending on one’s perspective); a Women’s March; a March for Our Lives. In fact, as Debra Thompson points out, much of black political and social organizing has had rage as its affective engine; rage moves the individual and social body to express itself as enraged.51

There is a sticking point, however: while Kavanaugh’s rage was expressed in and through his particular body, it found its legitimacy in and through vocal forms of support for his performance. In a nationally televised job interview, the United States public watched a man throw a temper tantrum. However, instead of being publicly (and maybe even privately) sanctioned for his performance, Kavanaugh was offered the job because he threw the tantrum, ranting, raving, and crying his way to the Supreme Court of the United States. As a Saturday Night Live sketch parodied, the Republican leadership was excited and emboldened by Kavanaugh’s performance, not concerned or embarrassed; and we would be mistaken to assume that their responses were limited to them.

White rage, therefore, is a publicly legitimated emotion. It might even be said, as we are saying here, that white rage is best understood as a scheme of racial legitimation. You would be wrong, dear reader, to assume that our analysis of Kavanaugh is limited, or even primarily focused upon, Kavanaugh in his particularity. Kavanaugh himself is not important in this analysis; what is important is the legitimacy of his particular performance, the various ways in which his rage was supported, justified, sanctioned, and encouraged by the United States legislative and sociopolitical institutions.

The question before us, then, is a question about the affective context, the emotional horizon and landscape, out of which such legitimation is made possible.

After all, generalized rage—rage that can and will be expressed by anyone—does not always carry the professional, legal, political, and social legitimacy that Kavanaugh’s did. Kavanaugh’s rage was legitimated in and through the normative racial order of the United States—a racial order that is, always has been, and maybe always will be, normatively coded as white. As Debra Thompson points out:

The privileges associated with whiteness constitute every facet of social and political life, including the determination of which racial groups can express what kinds of emotions in the polis. The very expression of anger in democratic politics is governed by what Arlie Russell Hothschild calls “feeling rules,” that is, the social norms that establish the conceptions of entitlement,
obligation, or appropriateness that regulate emotional exchanges . . . these “feeling rules” are highly racialized, used in the service of the American racial order to sanction certain emotions as legitimate or . . . illegitimate, depending on the status of the racial group proclaiming the emotion.52

Governed by a set of racialized “feeling rules,” U.S. public life regulates and is regulated by the il/legitimacy of particular emotional and affective expressions and performances based upon the particularity of the body expressing or performing said emotion. Rage, therefore, is racialized within the context of the United States, gaining or losing credibility based upon who is expressing it.

Our move away from Kavanaugh and to white rage more generally is important. After all, Kavanaugh’s rage is not the only performance of white rage that has gained legitimation in the U.S. public. As we noted above, white rage carries no political allegiances; it is not simply the conservative expression of white rage that gains legitimacy in public. If we consider, for example, the disparate responses between the Black Lives Matter movement and the #NeverAgain movement for gun control, we see the same machinations of de/legitimation operative. Multiple tweets, donations, and even massive media coverage accompanied the demonstration, all of whom laid claim to the “inspirational” nature of a group of majority white students whose primary chant was “We call BS.” Again, flushed faces, watery eyes, and raised voices abounded; but, unlike the Black Lives Matter movement’s marches, protests, speakouts, and direct actions, these angry young white kids were not criticized, condemned, dismissed, or even targeted by large swaths of the public. (Righteously) ranting, raving, and crying their way to the nation’s capital, this group of young and largely white organizers found support, not condescension and controversy, for their rage.

Our point here is not to condemn the student-organizers. To read us in this way would be to misread us, and—yet again—focus on the particular at the expense of the public dynamics that the particular announces and exposes. What we are highlighting here—as we just did with Kavanaugh—is white rage as the legitimation of white normativity. Our focus here is not on the Parkland students, but instead on the racial order that legitimates and is legitimated by white rage. Affectively understood, white rage—as a modality of relation—needs no political allegiance; its primary expression, goal, and sustenance is the formation and maintenance of white normativity.

Understanding white rage in affect-theoretical terms displaces necessarily the centrality of individual actors and allows for us to ask more expansive questions about how such rage came to be legitimated as a mode of expression and relation. Such a line of questioning entails nothing less than an
interrogation of the intensity and trajectory of such affective realities. In this regard, white rage can and will find its expression in and through explicit actions of emotional expression, but, as Carol Anderson points out in *White Rage*, it can also work its way in a more diffuse fashion, operating along lines of subtle intensity that are so slight as to almost seem imperceptible.

White rage is not about visible violence, but rather works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly. Too imperceptibly, certainly, for a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular—to what it can see. It’s not the Klan. White rage doesn’t have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working in the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively.53

White rage need not emerge or manifest itself as the explicit and extremist white supremacist violence that characterized the Charlottesville attacks. In fact, if we follow Anderson’s logic and historical analysis, it is precisely from the diffuse character of institutionalized discrimination that white rage finds its legitimacy.

In other words, white rage, as we noted before, is manifold in its trajectories, manifestations, and emphases. Though many of these will be covered in the book, for heuristic purposes it might be best to understand white rage as flowing and manifesting in (at least) two different ways. The first we might call aggressive white rage. This form of rage is best understood as the public and visceral expressions of consternation, ire, and outright anger that maintain white normativity (think Charlottesville, Brett Kavanaugh, the March for Our Lives, etc.). The second form of white rage might be called diffuse white rage, in that the very possibility of legitimation only occurs through what Sara Ahmed calls “affective economies,” that is, the accumulated value of certain affects over time. This latter form, present in and through legal, social, and cultural institutions that maintain the normativity of white rage, finds little explicit expression, but—again returning to Anderson—is all the more pernicious because of its diffuse character.

It is important to continue to point out that we are focused on the legitimation, and not necessarily the acts themselves. To align the March for Our Lives with the Charlottesville rally is to suggest not that both acts were similar in content, but that they were similar in the legitimation of their content. Public consternation at Heather Heyer’s tragic death might have followed Charlottesville, but the forty-fifth president himself refused to castigate the white supremacists who enacted such lethal violence.
For “a nation consistently drawn to the spectacular,” the most identifiable form of white rage was the aggressive form, embodied in the mob who eventually shot, killed, and hung W. C. Williams. But this isn’t the only form of rage flowing in and through this story. In fact, Sheriff Thigpin himself was an affective conductor, for it is through both the “deal” he struck with the mob, and his “capitulation” to the murder that eventually ensued, that such violence was enabled and tacitly encouraged.

Thigpin also embodied a certain form of rage, although it is far more removed—and therefore less apparent—than the rage of the mob. In this story, both aggressive and diffuse forms of white rage legitimate the normativity of whiteness through the flow and accumulation of affect. The “feeling rules” are put in place; the only thing that matters once the rules are instituted is the continued support and maintenance of such prescribed affective parameters. Whether the rage is articulated as the “progressive” attempt to pacify “white workers” or an outright refusal to condemn what was clearly an act of anti-black hatred in Charlottesville; whether it is a capitulation to a lynch mob or the lynching itself; whether it is the expression of indignation at accusations of sexual assault or the ire that erupts from such an enactment, what remains the case is that the manifold expressions of white rage both legitimate and are legitimated by a significant historical and social predilection toward the normativity of whiteness itself. The reasoning for this, as we have shown and will show throughout the text, has everything to do with religion, race, and the idea of the white worker.

The emergence of the white worker and whiteness that produced the white rage described throughout the book developed hundreds of years ago. Just as sociologist Jordanna Matlon argues that masculinity and the feminization of work emerged as a project of colonialism, we argue that the same may be said for the white worker, especially white men workers. In “Racial Capitalism and the Crisis of Black Masculinity,” Matlon argues, “Reflecting the ethos of European industrialization, the colonial quest established gendered work regimes among native populations in cities predicated on wage labor; through this process, the categories of ‘man’ and ‘worker’ were collapsed.” Given that colonialism was a project of racial capitalism, it could also be argued, as we do here, that the racial hierarchy was the catalyst of colonialism and one consequence was that the categories of man and white and worker were collapsed. Wages, Matlon also argues, came to validate a man’s identity of himself as a provider, which was a condition of masculinity. We extend Matlon’s argument and contend that wages came to validate white men’s identity as a condition of masculinity and also as a condition of American identity.
The Significance and Organization of The Religion of White Rage

The Religion of White Rage is the first book to theorize, describe, and quantify the relationship between white workers and American religion from a variety of disciplinary locations. We argue throughout the book that the white laborer and various modes of American religion, including—and especially—what we are calling the “religion of white rage” are always constituted in and by causal and correlative relationships, which are, first and foremost, responses to the activities or perceived meanings, desires, politics, and life-ways of African Americans.

As we reflect on the nature of contemporary times, we find ourselves continually exploring the relationship between white religious fervor, the perceived “loss” of certain kinds of economic and material privileges, and what many might perceive as African American uplift. While the contemporary context might bring this into sharp relief, our contention is that the rise of white religious fervor is correlative to the twin notions of perceived white loss and perceived black progress. This correlation results in an affective context of white rage, wherein white people—quintessentially categorized under the heading of “white laborers” or “white workers”—uncritically and wholeheartedly draw from often-racialized religious sensibilities to justify simultaneously white supremacy and black inferiority. From Charlottesville to the uncritical support for the current president from the evangelical community, what we see is that it is not economics but race and religion that stand as the primary motivating factors for the rise of both explicit and implicit forms of white supremacy and white normativity, and we understand this rise as religious in nature.

The religion of white rage is not limited to neo-Nazis or belligerent SCOTUS candidates, but also shows up in and as unintentional forms of white normativity. This is both historical and contemporary: we reflect on the current sociopolitical and religious landscape in the United States and show ways in which it is filled with contradictions, tensions, outright hypocrisy if we are to be honest, and racism. We articulate the relationship between white rage, religious fervor, “American” identity, and perceived black racial progress throughout American history. Our chief argument throughout the book is that the category of the “white laborer” and white religious fervor are more pronounced and more sharply identified in moments of perceived black uplift.

Several key concepts that have different meanings are clarified. We elaborate on how the understanding of terms like “religion” and “labor” is often fraught and possibly differs from one discipline to the next. We have already discussed the term “religion” at length in this introduction,
but with regard to “laborer,” we have a twofold approach: 1) “laborer” and ‘worker’ are metonymic terms for whiteness, speaking to the normativity of whiteness through certain claims about white entitlement to the material benefits of the country (“Joe the plumber” is a popular way of capturing the metonymic white laborer); 2) “laborer” can also be broadly conceived in more social-scientific terms as a person or group of people who often are working- or lower-middle-class people. We further make the case that the religion of white rage can be (and is) expressed when resentful white laborers take center stage not simply as the reason for political shifts, but also as the primary group to which the country should devote its attention.

Given this twofold approach, the chapters in this volume fluctuate between metonymic and class-based approaches to white workers. Some chapters will be explicit about the white worker, while others implicitly make connections between white workers and whiteness through the continued antagonism toward, fear of, and rage against non-white peoples—particularly black people. In this regard, the “white worker” flows in, through, and between the chapters as both metaphor and empirical class identifier. Both are present throughout, but—as we show in the conclusion—the “white worker” was, is, and remains a metaphor, a mythic construct that stands in for whiteness more generally.

The book chapters are organized in two sections. The first section, named “White Religious Fervor and Contemporary American Politics,” explores the relationship between ultimate orientation, whiteness, white workers, and contemporary U.S. politics, ultimately showing how whiteness presents itself as a center or norm around which U.S. political and social life is organized. This organization is also a foil, however: to be organized around whiteness is to be organized against blackness. These essays, therefore, draw from various methodological and disciplinary formations to explore how whiteness develops itself against blackness.

Stephen C. Finley’s chapter, “Make America Great Again,” shows how white religious fervor is always a response to the perceived African American progress or desire for progress in America. Drawing from various modes of psychoanalysis, Finley makes it clear that whiteness is, at base, a psychoanalytic attachment to blackness as a religious and phobogenic object. Whiteness therefore consolidates itself around the fear of blackness—a fear that, as Finley concludes, has implications for the study of religion.

In “You Will Not Replace Us!” Darrius Hills describes how the 2017 protests and riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, yielded strong scholarly interest in the interplay between right-wing politics, racial demagoguery, and racialized violence but failed to offer an interrogation of the religious undertones that so often accompany expressions of white nationalism in contemporary
American discourses. Drawing from discourses of paranoia, Hills delineates how the white supremacists at Charlottesville expose a paranoia about their perceived victimhood in relation to non-whites, and are legitimated by a president who stands as their white spokesperson. Hills concludes by asking about the constructive responses to such paranoia, suggesting that a reconfiguration of humanity might offer resources for responding to this problem.

In “I AM That I AM,” Terri Laws and Kimberly Enard argue that the religion of whiteness is held together through ideology and ritual: an ideology that worships white supremacy and periodic rituals of threatened or actual violence or rage which emerge when threatened by black presence and progress, in this instance during the Great Migration era in Detroit. Drawing from sociological and history-of-religions analysis, Laws and Enard articulate the Great Migration as imbricated in the problematic power dynamics of white supremacy. Providing a social-historical analysis of the Ford Motor Company, Laws and Enard alert us to the relationship between whiteness, rage, white supremacy, and labor within the context of the United States, showing us that the religion of white rage “still matters” to and for the material outlook of people of color—particularly African Americans.

In “American (Un)Civil Religion, the Defense of the White Worker, and Responses to NFL Protests,” Lori Latrice Martin responds to athlete activists by largely white workers. Specifically, she stresses the need to understand the linkages between three important concepts: “American civil religion,” perceived black progress by white workers, and what she calls “white religious shock,” or the disorientation white workers experience when they encounter challenges to the white social order, manifested in what is best described as white fervor. The linkages between white laborers, religion, and perceived black progress become more salient than in the responses to protests by players in the National Football League by President Donald Trump and the league’s (and President Trump’s) largely white worker fan base. Martin details how American civil religion is defined and how it functions.

In “The Color of Belief: Black Social Christianity, White Evangelicalism, and Redbaiting the Religious Culture of the CIO in the Postwar South,” Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf describe how white workers interpreted the problems and possibilities facing the South at the end of World War II through their largely religious culture, evangelical Protestantism. They outline how white workers typically imagined the upheaval in their worlds through the end-times theology of dispensational premillennialism. Their grim visions of the imminent struggle with the Antichrist caused them to fear and despise those most interested in transforming the South, especially the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The chapter investigates the simultaneous
growth of black aspirations and white anxieties that emerged with the CIO’s Operation Dixie, perhaps the most ambitious effort to transform the South prior to the civil rights movement. In particular, by exploring the conflicting doctrines of both white and black Protestant evangelicals, the authors analyze the sources of white resistance to labor’s campaign to create a South that strove for economic and social justice. The failure to sanctify Operation Dixie ultimately set the stage for massive resistance and the long decline of organized labor in the United States.

In “Constitutional Whiteness,” Jason Jefferies comments on the United States Constitution as a sacred document, however exclusive, which outlines the religious rights, freedoms, morals, and ethics of citizens of the United States of America. He reveals how from its foundation, the Constitution is exclusive in terms of race and racialized bodies, especially in regards to participation in political life and sociopolitical action. Because the Constitution is designed for protection and inclusion of white bodies, it establishes what Jefferies calls “white-being”—namely, the establishment of “true whiteness” as connected to property rights and ownership. White workers seek to achieve this white-being, but, unfortunately, they cannot. As such, they displace their failures onto non-white people, particularly black people. Drawing from object-relations theory, Jefferies concludes that working-class whites experience narcissistic white rage in response to black uplift, political progress, or social activism.

Part two, “White Religious Fervor, Religious Ideology, and White Identity,” explores the relationship between religious ideologies—whether they be theological, affective, or institutional in nature—and white identity. Exploring everything from group identification to gender, these essays sketch how white identity forms itself in relation to the presence of blackness, as well as the invocation of certain social, cultural, political, and religious logics.

In “KKK Christology: A Brief on White Class Insecurity,” Paul Easterling develops a character sketch of the KKK Christ. Arguing that the Klan is an organization of primarily working-class individuals and families, Easterling highlights concerns focused around class insecurity, but also demonstrates that this class insecurity cannot be disconnected from the historical fact that the KKK is in fact a Christian organization with a unique Christology that must be studied in order to better understand the root of its hate. The KKK makes use of Christian symbols and biblical texts, and argues that its mission is a holy charge bestowed upon it by the Christian God; as such, Easterling draws from discourses in theodicy in order to have us to consider whether or not God can be understood as solely—or even primarily—benevolent.

In “Black People and White Mormon Rage: Examining Race, Religion and Politics in Zion,” Darron Smith, Brenda Harris, and Melissa Flores theorize
that the apparent contradictions of injustices realized from white Mormon beliefs involve complex entanglements between the white racial frame, conservative political ideology, and white European religious thought, as they apply to people of African heritage. These socially constructed frames of race, religion, and politics influence the understandings and actions of individuals and groups sometimes to the detriment and violent harm of innocent others. This nexus of race, religion, and politics applied to contemporary race relations is readily seen within the microcosm of the LDS Church, which has a long and troubling racist history itself.

In “Anatomizing White Rage: ‘Race Is My Religion!’ and ‘White Genocide,’” Kate E. Temoney unpacks the religious aspects of claims of efforts to wipe out the white race as an approach to analyzing the white rage shared by an increasing number of antagonistic and loosely affiliated movements of American white nationalists. Contemporary white supremacists claims that “their race is their religion,” downplaying the divide between the collectively racialized theologies of pro-Christian white supremacists and non-Christian religious movements and the atheistic bend of anti-religion white nationalists, Temoney argues. Despite the irreligiosity of the latter, white nationalists are united in their defense of white privilege with devotion akin to religious zealotry in its functionality and intensity. This characterization rests on the parochial association of “religion” with a historical, cumulative tradition (e.g. Christianity). The constructs of “white” and “religion” and their elision, then, functionally allow “whiteness” to stand as a single and singular identity for negotiating the world. This creates an imagined community whose fragility and ideological heterogeneity is subsumed under the pressing imperative to collectively combat “white genocide.” “Racial” and “religious” groups are protected under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Therefore, styling whites as a race, whites as religious, or even race as a religion are tactics for legitimizing white victimhood and inviting the excesses of religious fervor as indispensable to the superseding focus on protecting whites not merely as a perceived group but as an actual group.

Gender must be an important part of any conversations about the religion of white rage. Biko Gray’s chapter, “Exorcising Blackness: Calling the Cops as an Affective Performance of Gender,” claims that white women solidify their normative gender identities through acts of “affective exorcism.” By calling the cops on black people for various things, white women embody and reify a historical identity of white womanhood that is formed against the encroaching threat of blackness. In so doing, these white women establish themselves as innocent, invoking a
theodicean logic that makes black people the embodiment of an evil threat when read against these women’s perceived innocence.

Similarly, Danae Faulk’s work addresses the religion of white rage and the importance of considering gender. Specifically, in “White Power Barbie and Other Figures of the Angry White Woman,” Faulk considers the role white women play in the production of anti-black, religious fervor through an affective analysis of the rise to fame of Tomi Lahren—a cis-gendered woman who performs an aggressive, affective style normatively coded as masculine whiteness. Placing Lahren into the context of a longer U.S. religious history of angry white women who are often more vitriolic and outspoken than their white male counterparts, Faulk shows that such articulations of feminized white rage offer white women an avenue to tap into the entanglement of power and white pleasure afforded to white, masculine subjects through anti-black sentiments invoking the sacrality of white America. Lahren’s performances of outrage, often couched as responses to the moral injury of perceived black success and “reverse racism,” stand on the ideology of white women as protectors of the religious and moral spheres of American life. In comparing her to the public spectacles of liberal white women’s rage, Faulk argues that Lahren is emblematic of a long tradition of white women across all political lines defining and negotiating their gendered experiences as white women affectively through, rather than against, white patriarchy and anti-black sentiments.

For E. Anthony Muhammad, the use of religion in the dehumanization of black bodies spans religions. In his chapter, “Weaponizing Religion: A Document Analysis of the Religious Indoctrination of Slaves in Service of White Labor Elites,” Muhammad explores the product of this subjugation by engaging in a document analysis of official catechisms produced by the Protestant Episcopal church for both whites and enslaved blacks during the antebellum period. In contextualizing these documents, this study analyzes the fluctuating milieu of white religious fervor in the colonial South. Particular attention is paid to the economic and social justifications of the religious indoctrination of slaves; justifications that ensured the ascendency of the white labor class at the expense of the anxiously perceived humanization of the black enslaved. A thematic analysis of the respective catechisms elucidates the particularly pernicious way in which religious indoctrination was weaponized against the psychological functioning of the enslaved.

“The Religions of Black Resistance and White Rage: Interpenetrative Religious Practice in the 1963 Civil Rights Struggle in Danville, Virginia,” by Tobin Miller Shearer, explores the violent response to the 1963 civil rights protests in Danville, Virginia. Shearer turns to this event as an opportunity for examining the interpenetrative nature of white religion in the South. By
analyzing challenges to the city’s white supremacist leadership structures and segregationist practices, white reactivity to the public display of black religious piety becomes evident. Shearer’s chapter contends that the inter-penetrative nature of black and white religion in the South in the early 1960s simultaneously undermined and strengthened white hegemony even as it fostered a religion of white rage. The prayer forms, pious injunctions, and faith-based organizing by African American activists enlivened and empowered the black community to challenge segregationists while also intensifying white backlash and weakening, at least temporarily, black resistance to Jim Crow. This particular religious expression of white rage, bolstered by formal, sanctioned civil religious prayers and dedications, helped create the conditions in which a large group of black religious activists peacefully engaged in a prayer vigil at City Hall on June 10, 1963, came under attack from firefighters, police, and deputized garbage men armed with fire hoses and night sticks. The rage of the white assailants emerged from the religious practices they shared with the black community, not those that were unfamiliar to them. Shearer challenges the existing historiography offered by scholars like Mark Chapman, David Garrow, and Charles Payne and builds on the new narratives crafted by historians like Carolyn René Dupont, Paul Harvey, and Kerry Pimblott.

Taken together, the collection of chapters allows us to map out the disciplines, methodologies, themes, and conceptual framework for understanding the significance of the emerging field of Race, Religion, and Labor Studies.