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**Anti-Black Sexual Racism:
Linking White Police Violence, COVID-19, and Popular Culture**

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Abstract

There are many critical analyses of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, both Black people killed by American police officers in the last year, as well as explanations about the connections between these murders and the unequal, racialized and gendered mortality of the COVID-19 pandemic. Missing in many analyses is the erotics of anti-Black racism; more explicitly the anti-Black racialization of sex and the sexualization of Blackness. This commentary opines that anti-Black symbolic representation in popular culture and history – the Black man as Predator, the Black woman as Alien – meshes with White supremacist political culture to legitimate the callous indifference to Black life.

Keywords

anti-Blackness, COVID-19, erotic racism, popular culture, sexual racism, White police violence

Half a century ago, James Baldwin (1965), Frantz Fanon (1967), and Joel Kovel (1971) asserted that erotic and sexual racism is fundamental to the pleasure principle of power; quite specifically, the pleasure of sadistic sexual power in colonialist and racist regimes. At the point of existential articulations of the imperatives of White supremacist institutions and systems, racist sexual dominance remains a current running through arrests, beatings, murders, surveillance, strip searches, and stop and frisks of Black people. Equally, sadistic sexual racism is canalized by malignant neoliberal policies of racism that choke, chop, imprison, starve and sicken Black individuals, families and communities (Curry 2017; Foster 2019; Kitossa 2021; Lemelle 2010; Roberts 2011; Thomas 2007; Wynter 1994).

Consistent with sexual racism, a variety of population control mechanisms, including criminalization, mass imprisonment, segregation, sterilization and toxic exposure, express the anti-Black genocidal imperatives of capitalism and White supremacy (Dillon 2012). By means of the bureaucratic administration of Black death-making, the “necropolitical state” (Mbembe 2003) empowers manifest and latent White supremacists (conservatives and liberals alike) to seek Black submission through the enforcement of ordinary rules of social organization. But what has (White) police and vigilante violence and COVID-19 to do with the sadistic sexual racism of (White) individuals and the White racial state?

Here we turn to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police this year – but we must go beyond the incidental that George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were both African Americans. Relevantly, Floyd’s autopsy revealed he was COVID-19 positive, and Taylor was soon to be a nurse, bringing into sharp relief the realities of the pandemic, since the virus disproportionately affects Black communities and since many Black women are in caregiving positions at high risk of contracting the virus. But neither Floyd nor Taylor were understood as

human beings made vulnerable to the virus through racisms and deserving support during the pandemic. Rather, they were seen only as threats to be literally eliminated through murder, a deadly truth that speaks to the persistence of sexualized anti-Black racist tropes – him as *Predator* and her as *Alien*.

The Predator

What makes Black men killable (Van Natta 2011), rapable (Brenner 2007; England 2017), torturable (Guarino 2013), castratable (Heggs 2014; Holcombe and Moon 2020) and demonized (Campbell 2020) by White cops and vigilantes? There is Ahmaud Arbery, killed in Brunswick, Georgia by a retired cop, Gregory McMichael, and his son, Travis McMichael. There is George Floyd, killed by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. And the list goes on... As Douglas Flowe (2020), Tommy Curry (2017), Vincent Woodard (2014) and Greg Thomas (2007) all demonstrate, each of their murders form part of a pattern of search and destroy since transatlantic slavery.

Plantations, slave ships and the auction block – sites for the manufacture of exploitable labour – set the trend. While the myth that Black men (and women) did not feel pain emerged during slavery (Washington 2006), the myth that Black men are superhuman did not fully develop until the 1930s Tuskegee syphilis experiment (Randall 1996). 50 years after this medically sanctioned experiment on Black men, the 1987 Hollywood film launched the *Predator* series (Travis 2018), depicting a big, dark, “dreadlocked” and super virile male. White art converges with White medical science and White history to reconfigure anti-Black White supremacist violence as justifiable, anticipatory self-defense against violent Black men incapable of feeling pain.

So great a portent of danger were Black children believed to be that in 2005 William “Bill” Bennett, former Secretary of Education for President Ronald Reagan and a popular radio talk-show host, suggested aborting them, if crime reduction were the political objective (Faler

2005). Making this comment on his syndicated talk show, Bennett was only following through on the genocidal logic implicit in an earlier, written declaration about young Black men. Along with his co-authors John DiIulio and John Walters, he asserted in race-coded language that (African American) youth are “super predators”: “radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more pre-teenage boys, who murder, assault, rape, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious communal disorders” (Bennett et al. 1996: 27). Clearly prenatal genocide was more efficient than throttling Black babies in their cribs; Black infant deaths are routinely manufactured through racist policies that breed disease, poverty and starvation among Black families. Prenatal genocide is more efficient, as well, than the more laborious task of police murdering Black children, youths and adults in the streets.

Although considered controversial at the time, Bennett’s views are not extreme, but part of long established traditions in the highest circles of American politics. In 2006, Hillary Clinton praised her spouse President Bill Clinton’s 1994 Crime Bill for its containment of those she referred to as “super predators” with “No conscience, no empathy” (C-Span 2016), in vocabularies saturated with anti-Black connotations. Joe Biden, Democratic senator in Delaware in 1994 and now President-elect of the United States, was an enthusiastic supporter of Bill Clinton’s “get tough on crime” policies. Like the Clintons, Biden mobilized the trope of dangerous Black men to justify draconian anti-welfare and pro-criminalization policies, launching the mass incarceration of young Black men in the United States. It is ironic that in hindsight the dispute is whether Biden used the term “predator” or “super predator” (see Reuters 2020). Does it matter?

The Alien

Across the United States, the murder and physical assault of Black women by police (Crenshaw and Ritchie 2015; Williams 1987) is a pattern, similar to the violence suffered by Black men but informed by different gendered, racialized imaginaries from American popular culture. Among

the most recent deaths of Black women caused by the police is Breonna Taylor, murdered in a “no knock raid” by Louisville police officer Brett Hankison (Boynton 2020), supported by officers Myles Cosgrove and Jonathan Mattingly. There are between 50,000 and 80,000 paramilitary home invasions by the police in the United States each year (Balko 2014; Barnett and Alongi 2011) – as many invasions as there are people attending an average National Football League game. Too often, these police home invasions result in unaccountable slaughter. Citizens in the United States and around the world need to ask hard questions about the “full spectrum dominance” – to borrow a term used to justify irregular American warfare abroad (Ryan 2014) – regularly mobilized against Black people by the police in these home invasions.

The roots of such anti-Black brutality are multiple and deep. First, there is the classist and White supremacist so-called “war on drugs”, which is the prime rationale for police forces to kick down people’s doors (Bauer 2014). From Harry Anslinger (Smith 2018) through to Richard Nixon (Baum 2016), anti-Black racism has always been the prime justification for the “war on drugs”. Second, and relatedly, through the modern architecture of civil asset forfeiture pioneered in 1983 by now President-elect Joe Biden (Calton 2019), police routinely shakedown US citizens for all they are worth (Miller 1996; Nunn 2002); assets ranging from cash to property are seized from (Black) citizens who are presumed guilty of involvement in the illegal drug trade or other criminal activity. Third, the totalitarian National Defense Authorization Act (Barrett 2020; Goodman 2012; United States Congress 2020) enables the Pentagon to funnel millions of dollars of “outmoded” military hardware to police forces across the country. And finally, but not exhaustively, there is an ever complicit and pliant judiciary (what else could they be?) who enable police thugs to operate under what is euphemistically called the “rule of law” (see Klasfeld 2013; *Plakas v. Drinski* 1994). The rule of law permits secrecy in policing; secrecy in policing permits unaccountability; and unaccountability in policing is the essence of legalized lawlessness by the state against its own Black citizens.

These practices have long histories of justification at the highest levels of American politics. In 1980, when then Presidential candidate Ronald Reagan took a page from Richard Nixon's playbook and relaunched the "Southern Strategy" campaign to win the American South, he combined regressive neoliberal economic policies with White supremacist dog whistle tropes about poor African Americans and the myth of the Black welfare "queen" (Inwood 2015). But the White politics of the Reagan campaign did not stand alone. Before Reagan, there was Daniel Moynihan's (1965, 1970) grotesque rendering of Black women as a super-fecund castrating, domineering, poor and modern ghetto plantation animal – the Black woman of the neoliberal White imaginary.

Both Reagan and Moynihan's tropes of sexual racism have a metaphorical parallel in Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*: a constantly breeding and feeding Black female monster. *Alien* spoke to the anti-Black zeitgeist of White America, with its imagery of a carbon-Black, devious, roach-like resilient and unkillable *Alien* who threatened the White body (politic) with her womb, hence the need for continued sterilization (Roberts 1993; Waweru 2019). Artistic culture and political culture under White supremacy mesh and merge, belying the myth that they are separate. The fear of the *Alien*'s reproductive capacity, palpable in Moynihan's (1965, 1970) missives, is that she will continue to produce and (mis)socialize poor and socially excluded, disaffected young Black boys and men: imagined as useless eaters who, along with fecund Black women, endanger the White Republic.

We need not imagine this is a case of American exceptionalism. The anti-Black artistic and popular culture and exclusionary immigration policies of the United Kingdom and its colonial off-shoots (Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and South Africa) have not only been historically anti-Black and pro-White, there is now a palpable fear of so-called "genetic extinction", the idea that a White "race" is not reproducing as quickly as Black and racialized Americans so leading to the end of White "race" (Jacobs 2019). Where Blackness is defined as

the essence of the problem, genocide is implicit: so, why not simply kill the mother alien before she really gets going, and wage total war on the predators who “stalk” the streets?

Sexual Sadism and Anti-Black Racism

When the federal government in the United States socialized slavery with the 13th Amendment, it asserted the property status of African Americans as public rather than privately fungible. Police and prisons, thereafter, took on the status of overseers and the whole of the United States became a plantation. Lynch mobs linked the state and the White masses in an orgy of sadistic anti-Black sexual terror. Today, the diseasing of Black America through genocidal policies of benign indifference that have made COVID-19 rife among African Americans, clasps hands with the malign intent of the criminal industrial complex. As Baldwin (1965), Fanon (1967) and Kovel (1971) insisted, unless we pay attention to the psychosexual pathology of White supremacy, materialist analyses, no matter how excellent, will not explain the sexual sadism at the heart of anti-Black social determinants of police violence and manufactured Black vulnerability to the pandemic.

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