



Defensive racism and Christian righteousness in the time of Trump

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Race
Religion
Reproduction
Ethnography
Evangelicals
Christian nationalism

ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the relationship between Christianity, race and politics in the US through what I call 'defensive racism' — a multi-modal form of anti-Black racism that *displaces* racism, denies its existence toward Black Americans, and deflects racism away from white people. Drawing on ethnographic data, including qualitative interviews and participant observation data, collected in the US with white conservative Evangelicals from October 2020 to November 2022, I show how white evangelicals reproduce a racial, moral order through expressions of defensive racism. By focusing on the meanings and enactment of righteousness, this paper also deepens and refines the concept of Christian nationalism, which seeks to uphold the idea of a righteous Christian nation. By situating conservative white Evangelicals' anti-Black racism in relation to Trump's presidency, the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the rise of racial consciousness around anti-Blackness in the US, I examine how white evangelicals reposition themselves racially and religiously in response to socio-political changes.

1. Introduction

On June 7, 2020, less than two weeks after George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officers, then Republican Congressional candidate Sean Feucht hosted an interview on his YouTube channel with the anti-abortion¹ activist Ryan Bomberger. The interview, called "White, Woke but Spiritually Broke," covered a range of topics related to Evangelicalism and conservative politics. At one point Feucht, a white man with long blond curly hair who also worked as a worship leader at Bethel Church in California, asks Bomberger, who is a biracial Black man, about Trump. "I get asked about this all the time," Feucht begins, "Sean, how can you fight racism but still support a racist candidate?"

Bomberger responds by reciting many of the commonly heard reasons behind Evangelical support for Trump, including the "lesser than two evils" argument. But then he changes tack.

"Let's look at a quick brief history of America. Who was the party of slavery, the party of Jim Crow, the party of separate and *definitely* not equal? The party that refused to vote for a woman's right to vote, the 19th amendment – who was that particular party? Who was the party that enabled the enslavement of those of my complexion? And *fought for it!*"

Feucht murmurs in the background as Bomberger continues his impassioned speech: "The Democratic party now is the party of limitless abortion. Which demographic is hardest hit by abortion? The black community. In New York City more black babies are aborted than born alive ... you want to talk about systemic racism? Let me define it for you: Systemic racism is a government-funded entity that disproportionately kills black lives."

The last three words of this sentence, uttered just a few months earlier, would have meant something far less charged. But, uttered when they were, during Trump's presidency, as media channels played video footage of Floyd's murder, reported on the killing of Breonna Taylor, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests erupted across the country, Bomberger's words took on a different meaning. They discursively displaced the relationship between governmental authority, systemic racism and anti-Blackness from the police, and then-President Trump, to the Democrat party. This displacement is part of what I call *defensive racism*, an expression of anti-Black racism comprised of displacement, denial and deflection, that has gathered force since the election of Trump in 2016. To exemplify these processes, I draw on qualitative data with conservative white Evangelicals² in the US from 2020 to 2022. As I shall argue, defensive racism seeks to reproduce a racial moral order in the country,

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¹ "Pro-life" is a term the interlocutors in my research used to describe themselves and when relaying direct quotes from interlocutors I use it. In other instances, I have chosen to put it in quotes to acknowledge that it is a political charged term that, as my analysis lays bare, undermines the very premise of supporting the flourishing of all lives.

² The focus of this research and paper is on white Evangelicals, though it is written with an acknowledgement of how Evangelicalism varies greatly along racial groups in the US; Black Evangelicals and other Evangelicals of color (such as Latinx) have very different histories and maintain distinctive political preferences.

which in turn reproduces white Evangelical power and supremacy (Bjork-James, 2020). Thus, by developing an understanding of defensive racism, this paper sheds light on how religion and race deeply inform one another in the US, how white Evangelicals are engaging with race since the election of Donald Trump, and the logics and strategies of the Right (Bjork-James & Schneider, 2020).

2. Background

The last forty years have revealed that white Evangelicals are a politically significant group in the United States, comprising nearly 20 % of the US voting population (Igielnik, Keeter, & Hartig, 2021). As with other Republican candidates in the past twenty years, white Evangelicals served as a key political base for Trump. In the 2016 US presidential election, 77 % of white Evangelicals voted for Trump which expanded to 84 % in the 2020 election (Martinez & Smith, 2020; Nortey, 2021). Not only were white Evangelicals important to Trump's success in numerical terms, but white Evangelicals are more likely to align with Christian Nationalism (CN) an ideology correlated with voting for Trump (Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Christian nationalism is the belief that the US was, is, and should be a Christian nation. It is the conflation of a US nationalist identity with a white identity and Christianized identity such that to be a true American is to be white and Christian (Devos & Mohamed, 2014; Perry & Schleifer, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Christian nationalists maintain that the US is defined by Christianity and the government should take active steps to enforce Christianity in the public sphere (Gorski & Perry, 2022; Du Mez, 2020; Whitehead & Perry, 2020). Although CN thrived under Trump, he is an exemplar of the notion, not the originator, which dates to the founding of the nation (Gorski, 2021). Also, not all Trump supporters are Christian nationalists, nor can all white Evangelicals be defined as Christian nationalists (or Trump supporters, for that matter). In my study, although all research participants are white Evangelicals who support Trump, not all conform to Whitehead and Perry's (2020) seminal typology of Christian nationalism, notably as most participants did *not* agree that the US is or should be a Christian nation. Further, many rejected this label outright, especially as it has gained negative attention in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, even when denouncing Christian nationalism, many of the participants' beliefs and political activities uphold the Christian nationalist project. Such divergences between individual identifications and researcher classifications invite further scrutiny around how the concept of Christian nationalism can be applied in ethnographic research.

Existing research shows that Christian nationalists often hold negative views toward Black US Americans and other racial minorities (Butler, 2021; Marti, 2020; Perry & Whitehead, 2015; Whitehead & Perry, 2020; Perry, Whitehead, & Davis, 2019). Not only that, but in quantitative studies CN is positively associated with tolerance for overt and covert expressions of racism (Davis & Perry, 2021). CN and Trumpism more broadly have also fostered the escalation of racial tensions and civic unrest in the US since 2016, creating what Edwards and Rushin (2018) call the "Trump effect." Trumpism is a style of governance, cluster of conservative, anti-establishment ideologies and discourses, which were animated by and exceed Trump's administration (Mollan & Geesin, 2020; Thompson, 2020). Even though Trump is no longer in office as of 2023, Trumpism and movements emboldened by Trumpism such as CN continue and are carried forward by politicians such as Marjorie Taylor Green, Lindsey Graham, and Ron DeSantis (Gorski & Perry, 2022).

Despite the popularity of CN in social science research, and important findings revealing the links between CN and racism, there remains a dearth of studies showing how CN operates through a lived relationality. What forms does CN take in everyday discourse? How exactly do adherents to CN enact borders (figuratively and literally) and seek to protect the moral righteousness of the country? The lack of qualitative, and ethnographic data on CN makes it difficult to understand not only

what CN is but what it *does* (Smith & Adler, 2022). This paper works toward addressing this gap by providing an empirically grounded account of how CN fuels anti-Black racism.

Another way that this paper refines CN theoretically is by teasing out how righteousness is instrumental to the concept (Perry and Schleifer, 2023; Gorski & Perry, 2022). It asks: how do white Evangelicals draw upon the righteousness element of CN to reproduce a racial ordering in the US? Christian nationalism espouses a belief that the white Christian nation is under attack, under siege, and in moral decline; adherents seek to preserve the country's inherent goodness or righteousness, by protecting the "moral fabric" of the nation (Butler, 2021; Perry and Schleifer, 2023: 1250; Perry, Cobb, Whitehead, & Grubbs, 2022; Perry & Whitehead, 2015; see also: Smith, 1998; Stewart, 2020). Notions of righteousness also have a long history in Evangelicalism. Indeed, it is a core Evangelicals believe that through Jesus Christ "the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19, NIV). Biblical stories abound in which a person is saved from depravity and restored to righteousness, literally meaning *right-ness*. Thus, conservative white Evangelical politics and CN converge around a quest for righteousness, which I define in this paper as an inherent, God-given goodness, correctness, and *right-ness*.

Righteousness also entails protecting the nation from outsiders, including racial outsiders (Cromer and Taragin-Zeller). Protecting and saving necessitate a protector/savior figure, which was fulfilled by the strongman politics of Trump, and other Trumpist political figures (Franklin and Ginsburg, 2019). As I shall argue in what follows, conservative white Evangelicals enact defensive racism in order to protect/save the country's right-ness, to uphold a vision of the US (Kozma and Schroer, 2015) as "god's chosen land" and, ultimately, to reproduce the dominant racial hierarchy in the country in which whites are on top (Bjork-James, 2023; Cromer, 2023).

CN is also powerfully predictive of anti-abortion attitudes, as the section on deflection will demonstrate. White Evangelicals make up a prominent portion of the "pro-life" movement, though not all of it. In fact, they joined the pro-life movement nearly a decade *after* the US Supreme Court legalized abortion at a federal level via the *Roe v. Wade* ruling, and only embraced pro-life politics in the early 1980s as a politically strategic move after organizing around the opposition to desegregated schools in the 1970s (Ginsburg, 1989; Ginsburg, 1998; Cromer, 2019; Rohlinger, 2014; Stewart, 2020). Prior to that, anti-abortion efforts were led by Catholics and abortion was deemed a Catholic issue by many Evangelicals (see: Cromer, 2023; Du Mez, 2020). However, the leaders of anti-abortion politics have certainly changed since the eighties. A study in 2020 examining religious affiliation and views on abortion found that white Evangelicals were the group most strongly in support of making abortion illegal, even compared to Catholics (Schor & Swanson, 2020). This finding corroborates other research that reports that white Evangelicals' opposition to abortion remains a central issue driving their political decisions (see: Balmer, 2021; Evans, 2002). The 2022 Supreme Court ruling to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion nationally in 1973, is also an outcome of Trump's presidency, ongoing Trumpism, and the three anti-abortion judges he appointed to the court during his tenure. This background informs and contextualizes white Evangelicals' opposition to abortion in the present, and how reproductive politics also intertwines with racial politics, claims of righteousness and the protection of moral borders.

I read my findings through two theoretical framings. Firstly, to analyze how white Evangelicals link race with righteousness, I look to Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. Hall's careful attention to culture, discourse, and politics combines a Marxist concern about economic realities with an ideological concern for the emergence of new discursive formations in times of political change. Writing under Thatcherism, another politically transformative period, Hall (2016) defines articulation as "the form of connection or link that can make a unity of two different elements under certain conditions" (p. 121). The word 'link' operates in at least two senses. Firstly, articulation is the contingent relationship of contradictory discourses, which form the appearance of

newly unified discourse (Hall, 1988; Slack, 1996). Secondly, articulation links discourse to practice, to meaning, and to politics (Hall, 1992).

In the case of my research, conservative white Evangelicals link whiteness with a Christianized understanding of righteousness. This linkage, which draws on and re-assembles historical antecedents, imbuing them with present-day political connotations, develops out of a particular political moment, where anti-Black racism and a so-called “racial reckoning” have gained prominence in the US (Grossberg, 1986: 143; Hammonds, 2021; Gregg, 2006). Placing this linkage within what Hartman (2007: 6) calls the “long afterlife of slavery” is crucial to examine ongoing and emerging forms of racial domination, and to illuminate how the historical imbrication of Christianity, white supremacy, and politics is reconfigured in the present (Fea, 2018; Gin Lum & Harvey, 2018; Tisby, 2019).

The second theoretical framework I use is defensive racism, which arises directly from my data and is useful for capturing a multi-modal form of racism that operates outside binaries such as explicit v. implicit racism, the good v. bad racist (Ahmed, 2000; Ang, 1996).³ The concept of defensive racism Moreover, it is precisely the construction of such binary categories that allows many white Evangelicals to enact defensive racism in the first place by detaching themselves (and the nation) from a racist category and placing themselves (and the nation) firmly in a “righteous” one. The forms of racism described in this paper – including ‘reverse racism’ and ‘colorblind racism’ – have been well-documented by previous scholars (Bax, 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2013, 2018; Lipsitz, 1998; Winant, 1997). This paper leans on this important theoretical work and builds on it by interrogating how white Evangelicals position themselves through racial logics within the current socio-political moment.

The findings presented here show how Black Americans arose as the foremost racialized outsiders for conservative white Evangelicals in the 2020–2022 period. By contrast, research I conducted in summer 2016 with conservative white Evangelicals in California found that the main reason they planned to vote for Trump was their opposition to immigration, which served as a heuristic for opposing the racialized Other, namely Latinx people and Muslims (Gaddini, 2022). In 2020, opposing pro-Black initiatives such as BLM, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the 1619 project⁴ were key issues fortifying white Evangelicals support for Trump. This shift suggests that the way white Evangelicals seek to maintain their dominant position within the racial hierarchy vis-à-vis political engagement and the foremost racialized Other may have changed since 2016.

3. Materials and methods

Long-term ethnographic research with white Evangelicals allows me to observe how they express racism in relation to socio-political changes. The findings in this paper rely mostly on interview and participant observation data, which arise from a larger, multi-strand, multi-phase qualitative study involving interviews, participant observation, and social media analysis from October 2020 to November 2022. Phase One ran from October 2020 to June 2022 and entailed 52 semi-structured interviews on the phone and in person with white Evangelicals across the country. Written and verbal consent was obtained prior to all interviews, as well as consent to audio record. Using purposive snowball sampling, I interviewed men and women aged 20–75 who identified as white (or identified with “whiteness”), Evangelical Christian, and voted for Trump in the 2020 Presidential election. The sample comprised a range of social classes, educational levels, styles of political participation

(e.g. voting, working for political organizations, engaging in political rallies), regional locations and political party identification.

Using the same research participant criteria, Phases Two and Three began in November 2021, and involved multi-sited ethnographic research and a social media analysis of key religious-political figures (e.g. Charlie Kirk and Franklin Graham), respectively. By taking an ethnographic approach, my research considers the complex and contradictory political desires of white Evangelicals, which expands existing studies drawing from survey data (Jones, 2020), historical analysis (Butler, 2021; Gorski, 2017, 2020), and quantitative or mixed method approaches (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). The two sites for my ethnographic research include a cluster of majority-white Evangelical churches in the Sacramento, California area and a large Evangelical charity and church in North Carolina. Participation activities included attending church services, Bible study groups, political rallies and politically themed events. I also participated in less formal activities such as sporting events, dinners, and walks in the park with interlocutors at the two field sites. In California, I attended a Religion and Politics class held at a large charismatic majority-white Evangelical church and received written approval from the leader of the class to attend for research purposes. As with the research participants from Phase One, those I met in Phase Two come from a variety of Protestant denominations (including Methodist, Baptist, non-denominational, and Assemblies of God), align with different political parties, and belong to different social classes. Their religious practice can be classified as Evangelical, according to Bebbington's (1989, p. 2) definition which comprises conversionism, activism, crucicentrism, and biblicalism.

Through a mix of in-depth interviews and participant observation data, ethnography reveals contextually situated knowledge of what political issues are important to white Evangelicals and how their faith impacts their politics. The analysis is also influenced by my own positionality as a white, heterosexual woman from the US. Although I am no longer a practicing Evangelical, my positionality, as well as my familiarity with the research sites, insider knowledge of Evangelicalism, and long-standing connections to Evangelical communities across the US, undoubtedly provided me access to the field. In addition, as a white woman, I was undoubtedly granted easier access to majority-white Evangelical spaces, and permitted to ask questions around race, as I racially aligned with the research participants. Even so, I still faced some barriers to access, mostly because of my gender identity. This was brought into relief when I encountered difficulty recruiting male interview participants in North Carolina, as many of the men working for the Evangelical charity refused to meet with a woman alone without one or both spouses present. As a result, I relied on mixed-gender events (e.g. a church-sponsored soccer team) to gain participant observation data, and most of the interviews I conducted in North Carolina are with women. This experience highlights how negotiating access to ethnographic field sites can often operate beyond insider/outsider positions and involve a complex interplay of the researcher's identities.

4. Defensive racism

4.1. Displace

The next three sections demonstrate how the conservative white Evangelicals I met during my research express defensive racism. The first mode of defensive racism is to *displace* racism from white Evangelicals onto another racial group. In 2020, Trump figured as a righteous protector who protected whiteness and fended off “woke” culture and white guilt. Following the end of Trump's presidency, other Trumpist political figures, such as Florida governor Ron DeSantis stand in as the protector of white supremacy and the white Christian nation (Gorski & Perry, 2022). On January 18, 2022, Florida Senator Diaz introduced Senate Bill 148 called the “Individual Freedom” bill, backed by Governor DeSantis. The bill states: “An individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, does not bear responsibility for actions committed in the past

³ I purposely use the word ‘racism’ instead of a related concept such as ‘racial prejudice’ in keeping with the tradition of Black feminist scholars such as Dorothy Roberts (1993, 1997, 1999) and Audre Lorde (1981).

⁴ Produced by the New York Times (NYT), the 1619 project podcast examines the history and present-day ramifications of slavery in the US.

by other members of the same race or sex ... An individual should not be made to feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race." Bill 148 and other such pieces of legislation are presented by Republican politicians as an attempt to curb CRT, a scholarly tradition that examines how systemic and institutional racism operate in the US, and which Christian nationalists, and many white Evangelicals, have pointed to as proof that the (white, Christian) nation's history is under attack. They are attempts to promote "white victimhood" or what some white Evangelicals I met call "reverse racism," wherein they consider themselves to be the *true* victims of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2018; Ioanide, 2015; Perry, McElroy, Schnabel, & Grubbs, 2022). Within this logic, racism is displaced from the systemic onto the individual, and from white people onto Black people.

Such displacement arose in my interview with Erin, a 40-year-old stay-at-home mom, who is married to a pastor, and lives in Washington state. She stated:

Typically, you think of racism as whites keeping Blacks down but, in a sense, this whole Black Lives Matter thing, I feel like it's flipping that narrative on its head. Now, you know, we are the racist ones for saying, "Well, actually, all lives matter."

"All Lives Matter" is a phrase popularized by those on the Right to challenge the statement and movement of Black Lives Matter. Using this phrase also illustrates how displacement operates under defensive racism. The statement "Black lives matter" is seen as threatening to many white Evangelicals, and rather than reckoning with the implications of this statement – and the evidence showing how Black lives have *not* mattered in the US – white Evangelicals displace a well-documented history of systemic racism by arguing that all lives matter and that whites are actually the true victims.

Robert, aged 74, who lives outside of Sacramento and is a retired manager of a successful commercial business felt similarly. He also displaced racism using a "reverse racism" logic. He told me:

If the Black community is being honest ask them how they feel about whites – *that's* systemic racism – they absolutely dislike and distrust whites as a class of people.

Just as when Erin espouses the statement that "All Lives Matter," Robert similarly displaces the reality of systemic anti-Black racism by putting forth the "reverse racism" argument, which has a long history in the US. Displacement is more complex than a simple reversal of racist accusations, however, and white Evangelicals used it to displace racism from one white group to another.

As mentioned earlier, during my fieldwork in California, I attended a three-month class called 'Religion and Politics' held at a local charismatic Evangelical church. The class, focused on US history and contemporary politics, was led by two congregants – a husband and wife team – who were leaders in the church and associated with a conservative lobby group at the state capitol of Sacramento. At one of the gatherings, in mid-February, the teacher Suzanne, introduced the topic of slavery. She began defensively by explaining that the transatlantic slave trade began – not with the British, as is commonly misunderstood – but with the Portuguese. "Britain was way late," she continued, "[There was] no intentionality for Britain to have slaves in the new colonies ... not to dismiss it but to put it in perspective." Suzanne's defensiveness around the United States' involvement in slavery, via Britain's involvement, arises in reaction to the socio-political climate in February 2022, in which Trumpism is associated with anti-Black racism, and educational initiatives such as the 1619 project and CRT are gaining popularity. She exemplifies what Perry and Schliefer (2023) call "blind patriotism" in which US Americans protect the country's image of goodness by whitewashing or revising accounts of slavery. And Suzanne seeks to preserve this righteousness, not through outright denial, but through displacement, which protects a particular version of history

which in turn protects a particular understanding of the nation itself as right and good.

White Evangelicals also displaced anti-Black racism by arguing that other racial groups (besides whites) were victims of racism. In April 2021, during a church service at another charismatic, majority-white Evangelical church in the Sacramento, California area, the pastor asked the congregation to pray for the family of Dante Wright, a 20-year-old Black man who had just been shot and killed by a white police officer in Minnesota. Janet, a 56-year-old white woman who had spent her life working for Conservative politicians in the state of California, told me about the service when I interviewed her in March 2022. She explained that she was upset with the pastor mentioning the shooting "from the Black perspective," and emailed him after the service to complain. When asked what about praying for Wright's family upset her, Janet said that it was biased and one-sided: "Let's pray for the Asians killed in San Francisco by Black people [instead]," she told me. Janet doesn't outright dispute that racism factored into Wright's shooting (a belief that many white Evangelicals and conservatives espouse); instead, she takes an event that many see as emblematic of anti-Black racism and re-assembles the racial dynamics by displacing racially-motivated violence from white people to Black people, and positioning Asians as the true victims of racialized killings. Janet's re-assemblage reflects the racial hierarchy in the United States, whereby some (middle-class, light-skinned) Asians are deracialized, while Black Americans remain at the bottom of the hierarchy, despite the rise in anti-Asian hatred during the Covid-19 pandemic (Gans, 2002: 270; Li & Nicholson, 2021).

Through a racialized relationality, just as Asians are positioned as the true victims, Black people are figured as the true racists, according to Janet. They are seen as threatening – not only literally (by "shooting") but figuratively (as a menacing form of Blackness). In all the examples above, as with Senate Bill 148, displacement expresses the aspiration to defend and maintain a white Christian nation, a key feature of CN.

4.2. Denial

The second mode of defensive racism involves *denial*, similar to "color-blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). In July 2019, in response to being called racist after telling three Congresswomen, who are women of color, to "go home," Trump tweeted: "Those Tweets were NOT Racist. I don't have a Racist bone in my body!" Similarly, the Evangelicals I spoke with also denied being racist. Harold, aged 70, lives in Texas and is a truck driver. He described the hate he receives on social media, especially around his posts on race:

Oh, yes, yes, yes, I get called [a racist]. But I think that is probably one of the greatest fears most of my conservative Christian friends have. If they're called a racist, you just see them wilt right there. And I won't because I'm not [a racist], and if you know who you are ... It's like you could say, "You're a 14-foot green giant!" Well, calling me a racist has the same impact on me. I'm not a 14-foot green giant and I'm not a racist.

Rather than displace racism onto other racial groups, Harold, like Trump, flatly denied being racist. He compares the idea of him being a racist with him being a "14-foot green giant," which serves to illustrate the absurdity or fictitious nature of such an accusation. If recognizing systemic racism and placing oneself within that system threatens to dismantle it, then denial functions to uphold it. Thus, Harold denies accusations of racism, just like the president he supports in order to protect the white Christian nation, and the established racial hierarchy therein.

During fieldwork in North Carolina, I joined a church-sponsored soccer team, comprised of mostly men in their twenties and thirties. The church is Baptist, majority-white, theologically traditional, and one of the biggest in a town with many Protestant churches. One day, during a break from practice, I mentioned to three men on my team that I'd seen

several trucks and houses in the area with confederate flags. The confederate flag was first used in the 1860s by 11 southern states defending slavery against northern states during the US civil war. It has since then become a powerful emblem of white supremacy and is defined as a “hate symbol” by the Anti-Defamation League. When I raised the topic, two white men gave different explanations as to why people in the area had confederate flags. Ryan, in his early thirties who worked in the communications department for the church, explained: “It’s a symbol of southern pride.” Jack, aged 28, a software engineer told me: “It symbolizes the south.” Carl, the only Black man on our team and a recent transplant from Seattle, muttered: “Can’t they pick anything else [to symbolize the south]?” Carl’s discomfortability reveals the racism associated with the confederate flag, and how it threatens him personally, as a Black man in a pre-dominantly white town and church. Meanwhile, the white men on the team deny the racist implications of the flag, both its past meaning and present associations, by instead pointing toward innocent explanations and, in so doing, they deny its relationship with anti-Black racism.

When white Evangelicals refute that they are racist, or that racism against Black people in the US exists, whether through outright denials or obfuscations, they reproduce borders between right and wrong, racist and non-racist, innocent and malevolent. Establishing these binaristic moral classifications de-limits the myriad ways racism continues to flourish in the US. To take the example above, by denying that the confederate flag is a symbol of slavery and anti-Black racism and arguing that it is a cultural/regional symbol instead, white Evangelicals obscure America’s history of slavery in order to retain a righteous perception of the country. And if people such as Harold and Trump are not racist, then racism occurs *somewhere else*, or not at all (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, 2022). In both instances, denial allows white Evangelicals to place themselves firmly in categories associated with right-ness/righteousness through the logics of race.

4.3. Deflection

A third mode of defensive racism is *deflection*, whereby white Evangelicals proclaim the positive things they have done for Black Americans, which resembles “reverse racism” (see: [Bax, 2018](#)). For example, when describing how Trump has lowered unemployment, participants were quick to point out that this especially helped Black people. Others mentioned Trump’s policies to reduce social welfare provisions, which they said helped Black Americans by encouraging them to seek full-time employment and thus stabilize the nuclear family. As one participant, a bank manager living in Pennsylvania put it: “Welfare is the new form of slavery for Black people.” Consequently, politicians like Trump are figured as doing the right/righteous thing by curtailing social welfare provisions and saving Black people.

Returning to the Religion and Politics class I attended in February 2022, when Suzanne teaches about the transatlantic slave trade, she also deflects away from the US involvement in slavery by enumerating the positive things US Americans did for slaves. She told the class that evening:

To be clear, the first Christian sect, the Quakers spoke vehemently against slavery [...] Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison set up anti-slavery organization. Washington freed them in his will. Robert Carter converted to Christianity and freed all 500 of his slaves. People of faith have affected the most change [in regard to slavery].

Suzanne moves seamlessly from *displacing* racism, by stressing how the Portuguese initiated slavery, to *deflecting* racism by proclaiming how many of the nation’s founders actually helped slaves. This example shows how different modes of defensive racism operate together at the same time in an imbricated relationality.

Nowhere was deflection more charged than around the issue of abortion. Natalie, a 43-year-old pastor’s wife living outside of Washington, D.C. demonstrated how white Evangelicals rely on abortion

politics to reproduce a racial moral order. During our interview she told me that her friend suggested she listen to the 1619 podcast:

I wouldn’t listen to that [podcast] because it’s produced by a very liberal group who also supports the continual, what I would call *genocide* of the Black race ...[liberals] won’t view the other side which is continuing to keep Black people in an under-represented state because if those 600 Black babies a day were alive, let me tell you, we’d have a very different society.

In a cultural moment where racial injustice is nationally spotlighted and the president has been called racist, Natalie is aware that her resistance to a podcast about slavery could also be construed as racist. Natalie does not displace racism onto Black people or even deny that she is racist. Instead, she deflects racism away from herself by claiming she wants to liberate Black Americans from an “under-represented state” and save “Black babies,” casting herself in the role of savior, just like Trump. By calling abortion a “genocide of the Black race,” Natalie follows a well-worn discursive practice of associating abortion with a racially loaded term - genocide - which began during the 1960s and is repurposed in the Trumpian era to make defensive racism legible ([Bjork-James, 2023](#); [Bridges, 2011](#); [Cromer, 2019, 2023](#); [Davis, 2019](#); [Denbow, 2016](#); [Dobbins-Harris, 2017](#); [Holland, 2020](#); [Moultrie, 2017](#)).

Deflection also arose in my social media analysis. In March 2018 Candace Owens, a Black conservative pundit who supported Trump at the time, and opposed BLM and abortion tweeted:

Planned Parenthood has been tremendously successful in the path they set out. They have successfully trained us blacks to exterminate ourselves.

Again, this framing draws on emotive historical antecedents. Language of exterminating Black Americans harkens to the country’s history of forced sterilizations, eugenics, slavery, medical racism and myriad controls on Black women’s bodies ([Ramey Berry, 2017](#); [Davis, 2019](#); [Dobbins-Harris, 2017](#); [Roberts, 1997](#)). In their articulation of abortion as an extermination or genocide, white Evangelicals draw on America’s history of racial injustice and discursively mobilize this history within the current “racial reckoning” in the US by positioning themselves as the true anti-racists ([Hammonds, 2021](#); [Perez, 2011](#)). The fact that prominent Black conservatives, such as Candace Owens and Ryan Bomberger would also link abortion with anti-Blackness fortifies white Evangelicals’ claims by providing further “proof” they are not racist.

5. Conclusions

The social, political and discursive terrain in the United States shifted in summer 2020 after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. During this transformation, anti-Black racism entered public consciousness at a heightened level. For white Evangelical Trump supporters, this moment spurred them to express anti-Black racism, which developed in response to a complex social-political climate, especially as their candidate and party were accused of racism. This paper has shown how defensive racism works to distance white Evangelicals away from accusations of racism and bring them in closer proximity to righteousness/right-ness. Moreover, it shows how racism interacts intimately with religion.

Christian nationalism, which is predicated on a fused white-Christian-American identity, drives white Evangelicals’ use of defensive racism as it endeavors to erect moral and racial boundaries and establish a righteousness white Christian nation ([Butler, 2021](#); [Perry & Whitehead, 2015](#)). Responding to [Smith and Adler’s \(2022\)](#) charge for more specificity around the “core and peripheral elements” of CN, this paper has elucidated how righteousness – both the righteousness of the nation and of individuals – is integral to Christian nationalism. Moreover, I have shown how white Evangelicals seek to reproduce a racial moral order, whether through restoring a particular version of history, repurposing symbols such as the confederate flag, or relying on anti-

abortion politics.

Careful attention to white Evangelicals' political discourse opens an investigation into what political and racial subjects are created through speech (Hall, 2016). These subjectivities are consequential insofar as they inform political practices and effect everyday acts of violence. My analysis suggests that white Evangelicals use defensive racism to uphold their racial identities and re-entrench their position as defenders of a righteousness white, Christian nation. Such discourse also re-entrenches white supremacy on a systemic level, as that which needs to be sustained and whose presence assembles the chain of racial signification (Hall, 2016: 147). The protection of white supremacy, which also underpins CN, ushers in the ongoing need and legitimization for strongman politicians like Trump. Investigating how defensive racism operates in other contexts where Christian nationalism exists – such as Brazil and Hungary – could shed light on how the righteousness project extends across various locations and sites (see: Burke, Juzwik, & Prins, 2023). Indeed, examining how religion, race, and righteousness intersect at various junctions, and what political ends that entwinement concedes, requires new theorization and fresh attention in this political moment.

Declaration of competing interest

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the members of NYLUM London, colleagues at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (UCL), the Reproductive Righteousness group, and especially Dr. Risa Cromer, Dr. Lea Taragin-Zeller, and Prof. Sarah Franklin for helpful feedback on previous drafts of this paper. Funding provided by the British Academy, Leverhulme Trust and the Social Science Research Council.

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