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## **'I'm not a racist . . . but': Conservative media and the plasticities of color-blind racism**

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### **Abstract**

This essay examines the role of color-blind racism and rumors in contemporary political media, especially as racial rumors circulate in right-wing political discourse and on the conservative cable news network Fox News. Analysing a variety of examples in which rumors proliferate and contribute to the policing of communities of color, the article surveys Catherine Malabou's deconstruction of self-sovereignty, treating Malabou's work as a useful theoretical supplement to relevant critiques of systemic racism as developed by scholars working in Black studies and critical race theory. Ultimately, the article argues that the emphasis on representation alone in media studies is inadequate to the study of race, rumor, and political media.

**Keywords:** colorblind racism, plasticity, Fox News, sovereignty

This article considers the phenomenology of the rumor (its seemingly authorless origin and involuntary circulation), the cognitive dissonance of colorblind racism ('I'm not a racist... but'), and the rhetorical techniques employed by right-wing media in the US to displace, discredit, or otherwise invalidate (inter)national demands for racial justice following from the routine murder of unarmed Black citizens by the police or by white vigilantes who claim the right to kill others in the name of self-defense. Even when confronted with seemingly incontrovertible evidence of racial bias or discrimination, white subjects have often dismissed such acts of quotidian prejudice as mere hearsay, a phenomenon akin to rumor, as if to claim that one's action or language, even if caught on video, entails no evidentiary value concerning one's identity. Such rhetorical incoherencies imply a self or self-identity irreducible to behavior: my racist actions should by no means qualify me as a racist. Following from Mladen

Dolar's recent work, in which the philosopher has argued in favor of taking rumor seriously – even to the point of developing an ontology of rumor – this article similarly pursues a methodology appropriate to the plastic nature by which political rumors about race emerge, circulate, and often gain political traction, to the extent that even the most nonsensical cases of ideological gossip may nevertheless give rise to swift legislative or executive action on behalf of those hysterical claims.[1]

The timing of this essay responds to recent racial controversies in the American media and political landscape, including conservative hysteria concerning the teaching of critical race theory in public schools; but my case studies span a broader set of examples drawn from the late 20th and early 21st century, through which I suggest that rumors and color-blind racism function as categories central to the aesthetic and affective 'resonance machine' operating across right-wing political media and conservative political populism.[2] Rather than offering a study of rumors that treats their proliferation as an intentional strategy concocted by savvy media figures or political operatives, however, I propose to treat rumors as something more akin to memes – that is, ideas that circulate throughout a society with relative autonomy, without any clear point of origin or authorship, and whose material effects may arise through a relatively mindless process of rote repetition in the absence of self-conscious reflection.[3] An appreciation for the relatively independent or unintentional circulation of rumors, to my mind, is a necessary component in order to study the perpetuation of racist social structures and systems in societies that otherwise condemn explicit expressions of racial prejudice. Thus, I attempt here to depart from the more conventional emphasis in media studies on matters of representation, and instead tease out potential points of connection across seemingly disparate areas of study, including sociology (Patricia Hill Collins, Edward Bonilla-Silva), philosophy (Catherine Malabou), and histories of conservative politics (Ian Haney López).

### **Rumors and the defense of self**

In 1985, in the State of Colorado, legislators passed a self-defense law allowing homeowners to use deadly force against intruders. In a confrontation with an intruder, a homeowner need not fear for their life in order to resort to mortal violence; the mere concern that any physical harm might befall them, attributable to the presence of an other, could justify swift and decisive violence – by crossing a threshold separating public from private space, the trespasser forfeits their right to life. In debates over the statute's passage, in subsequent coverage by the press, and in the law's eventual canonisation, the legislation was described regularly as the 'Make My Day' law, a reference to the phrase made famous by Clint Eastwood in his portrayal of the fictional, hard-nosed, casually racist detective Harry Calahan in *Sudden Impact*

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(Clint Eastwood, 1983). *Make my day* was also popularised around the same time by Ronald Reagan, when he dared a Democratic majority in Congress to pass new taxes and thus face the repercussions of a presidential veto; Reagan's use of the phrase seemed intent to invite his opponent to cross a line and thereby incur his swift and decisive reaction in 'self-defense'.<sup>[4]</sup> Why might a cinematic fictionalisation of policing in a film become a point of reference for a self-defense law and a case of presidential bombast? Returning to the scene (of the crime) from which *make my day* originates in *Sudden Impact*, we likewise find an example of aggression that masquerades as self-defense, though perhaps not exactly as intended by those politicians who would cite the film for the purpose of rhetorical flourish. More pertinently, the mimetic circulation of the phrase, whose original cinematic context involves a white detective threatening a Black man's life in the name of self-defense, speaks directly to this essay's concern with rumor, racism, and right-wing political media in the United States.

In the original scene from *Sudden Impact*, Harry dines in a restaurant where an all-Black group of men attempt to rob the establishment. When the detective catches the robbers by surprise, he methodically fires his 45 Magnum pistol at the assailants and with deadly accuracy connects with each of his intended targets, until he finally takes aim at the one remaining 'crook'. The unnamed Black man responds desperately by grabbing a woman to use as a hostage and human shield (Figure 1). With a bevy of police cars surrounding the location, and with Harry's oversized firearm pointed directly at his head, the last living member of the robbers has no viable option at this moment other than to surrender. Yet, with the situation effectively under control, Harry utters the phrase, 'Go ahead, make my day', as if begging the man to make one additional move and thereby induce his own swift execution by Harry's hand (Figure 2). When Harry addresses the Black man, the detective no longer inhabits a defensive position and yet he nevertheless implores the other to provide him with a reason to shoot.



Fig. 1: The robber has no option but to surrender in *Sudden Impact*.

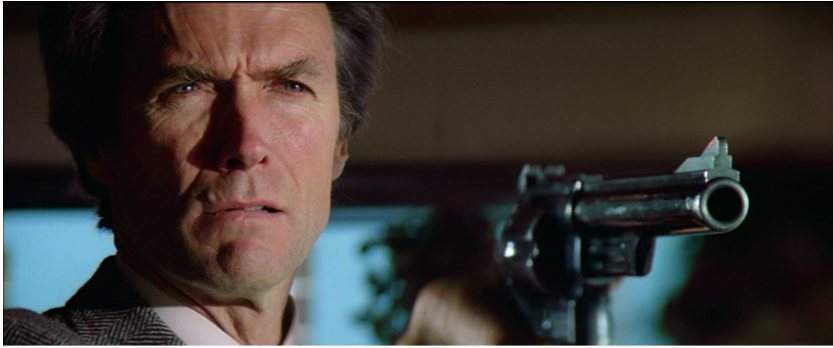


Fig. 2: Harry utters his iconic phrase, 'Go ahead, make my day', in *Sudden Impact*.

The man eventually surrenders. Had he done otherwise, he would have initiated his own immediate death and in so doing he would also absolve the detective of any responsibility for violent retribution. I suggest that we read this cinematic moment as something more theoretically serious than merely a case of spectacular Hollywood violence. The Black man, at his moment of address by a representative of State power, has already been sentenced to social and physical death and is further baited not just to give the white detective a reason to kill, but to provide the detective with reason as such.[5]

In *Sudden Impact*, there is no evidence to suggest that the detective turns his pistol on the Black man because of the other's skin color. Similarly, the Colorado law that would cite *Sudden Impact* as a point of inspiration includes no explicit racial language when it affirms the absolute right of homeowners to defend their property from trespassers. In practice, however, the proliferation of similar 'stand your ground' laws passed in the United States over the past two decades has proven to be an exculpatory mechanism, benefiting primarily white citizens and at mortal cost to people of color, a harsh reality made most prominent in George Zimmerman's reliance on a 'stand your ground' law in the state of Florida, leading to his exoneration for the murder of Trayvon Martin. As Caroline E. Light notes in *Stand Your Ground: A History of America's Love Affair with Lethal Self-Defense* (2017), 'In spite of the race- and gender-neutral terms of [the] self-defense paradigm, the perception of threat on which it is based is rooted in ideological blind spots that have haunted [the US] for centuries, particularly [the] historical suspicion of nonwhite strangers.'[6]

Here we may recall how, in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality* (2012), Karen E. Fields and Barbara Fields clarify that racism 'is not an emotion or a state of mind, such as intolerance, bigotry, or malevolence... Racism is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an action and a rationale for action, or both at once.'[7] In the case of make my day, the cinematic precursor involves 'an action and rationale for action' in which the stereotyped

Black 'criminal' is compelled to provide the police officer with a reason for his own execution; the scenario is arranged so that so-called 'self-defense' becomes an alibi in advance for extra-judicial violence. Both the film and the eventual legislation that cites it rely on the so-called neutral language of 'self-defense' while, in practice, glorifying or justifying violence against people of color in a troubling intersection of media, politics, rumor, and color-blind racism.

## Rumor's plasticities

Rumors tend to proliferate, social psychologists tell us, when individuals or groups feel threatened, especially if the threat is amorphous or ambiguous. When people face an unpredictable future or an antagonistic force beyond their capacity to control, the spreading of rumors may provide a minimal sense of agency to those involved. Understood as a kind of coping mechanism, rumors thereby 'defend against harm to one's sense of individual self'.<sup>[8]</sup> What begins as a form of psychological defense, however, may produce new realities as a result. No mere 'medium of communication', Veena Das writes, rumors possess a perlocutionary force, such that 'language becomes communicable, infectious, causing things to happen almost as if they had happened in nature'.<sup>[9]</sup> Rumors, we might say, do not simply defend against threats to the status quo or the reproduction of the self; rumors are productive, circulating in unpredictable ways and often making new worlds in the process, without a necessary sense of plan, purpose, or intention. In what follows, I emphasise the latent tension between these two modalities of the rumor, that is, between the rumor as a defense of the self, which attempts to sustain a semblance of continuity between past and present, and the rumor as an emergent circulation whose forms are unpredictable in advance, and whose origin cannot be easily identified let alone attributable to a discrete author.

Cultural histories of reactionary rhetoric and conservative media in the US have often emphasised the strategic deployment of rumors for concrete political ends. The spreading of rumors, from this perspective, seeks to move its intended audiences toward a particular goal, often the voting booth. For instance, in *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (2014), Ian Haney López traces the heavy reliance on racially coded messages or 'dog whistles' in contemporary political rhetoric and media. López argues that 'over the last half-century conservatives have used racial pandering to win support from white voters for policies that principally favor the extremely wealthy'.<sup>[10]</sup> The racist 'dog whistle' – such as Ronald Reagan's frequent attack on so-called 'welfare queens' living in Chicago, using public assistance to purchase luxury vehicles; or Donald Trump suggesting that Barack Obama may have been born in Kenya – differs from the explicit forms of racism more generally enacted and systemitised prior to the historical

gains of the Civil Rights movement. The 'new way of talking about race', in the era of color-blind racism, 'constantly emphasizes racial divisions, heatedly denies that it does any such thing, and then presents itself as a target of self-serving charges of racism' should anyone go so far as to allege the presence of racist content beneath its color-blind form.[11] The political purpose of dog whistles, according to López, is to disguise the Republican party's attachment to plutocracy, an affiliation with the capitalist class that might otherwise enrage working- and middle-class voters – that is, absent the distractions of the racist rumor mill.

Certainly, political figures have relied on racist appeals – whether implicit or explicit – for determinate political ends, as López and others have documented. However, there may be instances in which the circulation of racist rumors does not demonstrate such a clear or coherent strategy; some rumors seem to take on a life of their own, and they thereby demonstrate the persistence of both structural racism and interpersonal prejudice, but without a definitive point of origin or clearly definable goal.

On this front, the Rupert Murdoch-owned cable network Fox News is an outsized player in the spread of innuendo, half-baked reporting, and opinion presented as journalism, often with racial overtones. For example, in the aftermath of Obama's election to the presidency, several hosts and commentators on Fox News promoted a series of undercover videos produced by an independent conservative journalist, James O'Keefe. The target of the videos included employees of the Association of Community Organizers Now (ACORN), a community-based organisation known for registering new voters, among other services provided to low-income communities. In the videos, recorded without the knowledge or permission of the participants, O'Keefe and his partner, Hannah Giles, appear to request and receive assistance from the ACORN employees in methods to launder income derived from sex work. Later investigations showed the videos to be highly edited and taken out of context. Nevertheless, the controversy, stoked by right-wing voices online and on Fox News, gained so much political traction as to prompt a bipartisan cohort of legislators in Congress to express their outrage. Eventually, what began as rumors spread by conservative media resulted in the loss of federal funding to ACORN in a bill signed by President Obama himself.

Prior to Obama's election, ACORN was a relatively uncontroversial organisation working with low-income families to assist with health care, neighborhood safety, and voter registration. After Obama's election, ACORN had become a target of right-wing political commentators – including Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh – who blamed the group, nonsensically, for the 2008 financial crisis due to ACORN's advocacy for mortgage loans on behalf of low-income families.[12] Before these rumors emerged, political advertisements during the 2008 campaign alleged that ACORN had engaged in voter fraud to support Obama. Yet when

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O'Keefe appeared on Fox News to detail the findings of his 'undercover' operation, he made no references to these earlier 'offenses' and offered no clear explanation for why he had selected this organisation, rather than others, as a target for investigation. Speaking in generic terms, O'Keefe declared he was 'concerned about his country' and frustrated with the mainstream media for failing to investigate corrupt organisations composed of such 'soulless people'. At no point does O'Keefe mention that 'these people' are predominately people of color or that ACORN was particularly adept at registering voters from historically marginalised communities and who tended to vote for Democratic candidates.

As a manufactured controversy, the attack leveled against ACORN might be understood as a proxy war against an organisation staffed by and serving communities of color, while the color-blind rhetoric deployed by O'Keefe and his Fox News enablers avoided explicitly racist language. In effect, the defunding of the organisation had a detrimental impact on voter registration in the communities where ACORN worked. Though not as brazen as the racist mechanisms deployed in the Jim Crow south to deny voting rights to African Americans, this small but not insignificant case illustrates the perpetuation of white supremacy by color-blind means. Here I have in mind the historical distinction between color-conscious racism and the more contemporary example of color-blind racism, as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins. 'Under color-conscious racisms', Collins remarks, 'social institutions simply passed laws and rules that openly discriminated against African Americans and other historically oppressed groups.'<sup>[13]</sup> However, the legal end to segregation and the gains of the Civil Rights movement failed to usher in an era of racial equality. Instead, many of the same legal, social, and cultural barriers persist:

Certainly the visible 'whites only' signs that upheld Jim Crow racism are a thing of the past. Yet the invisible effects of past racial segregation, as well as the workings of new forms of racial segregation, continue to shape American social institutions.<sup>[14]</sup>

The persistence of racist hierarchies, structures, and systems, as Collins and other scholars of critical race theory have recognised, does not require the active presence of self-conscious bigots in positions of power who explicitly seek to oppress marginalised communities. More perniciously, color-blind racism perpetuates a discriminatory social order even while claiming to promote equality, equity, and justice. As Collins laments, 'many Americans mouth Martin Luther King Jr.'s words that people should be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin, yet these same citizens would refuse to pay for the schools, roads, housing, health care, Social Security, and other public institutions that would enable



children of color to be judged by the content of their character.’[15] Such contradictory positions promote an image of equality while upholding systems of rampant inequality, to be sure.

In contrast to Collins' emphasis on domains of power irreducible to specific, racist individuals, however, historians of right-wing media and politics in the US often point to specific historical actors who have magnified racial tensions for political gain – Lee Atwater as the puppet master behind Reagan's coded racist appeals, Roger Ailes as the media mastermind behind the rise of Fox News, Steve Bannon as the ethno-nationalist force behind Donald Trump's appeal to white, working-class, populist grievances, and so on. Without disregarding entirely the impact of these and other historical figures, my references to the 'Make My Day' law in Colorado and the defunding of ACORN aim to identify forms of color-blind racism that circulate as mediated rumors without a clear sense of purpose, authorship, intention, or goal. The mimetic repetition of the phrase make my day may demonstrate no conscious awareness of the anti-Black spectacle of violence from which the phrase derives, just as the outrage expressed at the misrepresentation of ACORN employees, even by nominally progressive politicians, may fail to recognise the color-blind racism driving the denigration of ACORN in conservative media before and after O'Keefe's brief foray into their organisation's office fronts.

## Rumor's representations

Arguably, the study of rumors and their political effects was central to the very emergence of cultural studies, or at least to one of the discipline's foundational texts: *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). There, Stuart Hall and his collaborators at the Birmingham School examine how 'moral panic' about street crime in the UK led to swift action on the part of conservative politicians in positions of authority eager to use the cultural spectacle to maximum political gain. For Hall, of course, culture emerges through collective acts of mediation: 'We give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them.' Moreover, it is through such acts of mediation that cultural formations emerge contingently rather than as something

genetically programmed... Culture, in this sense ... is what distinguishes the 'human' element in social life from what is simply biologically driven. Its study underlines the crucial role of the symbolic domain at the very heart of social life.[16]

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By emphasising the hegemonic role of representation in social and political domains, Hall rightly attends to the various ways in which cultural phenomena are mediated, reproduced, and contested; such complex forms of encoding and decoding are constitutive, not epiphenomenal, in relation to whatever subject matter is up for debate. Still, when Hall describes the political significance of cultural representations, he does so by presuming a distinction between that which is 'genetically programmed' or 'simply biologically driven', on the one hand, and those symbolic elements by which society is hegemonically, unevenly, antagonistically constructed, on the other.

While I affirm Hall's intention to emphasise the contingent manner by which culture is discursively reproduced, the distinction he maintains between the biological and the social is perhaps an unnecessary one. Catherine Malabou has noticed a similar tendency in continental philosophers who presume the biological to be a domain distinct from the social. For Malabou, this distinction carries an unintended consequence: by presuming a minimal difference in the human between the epigenetic and the symbolic, philosophers and cultural theorists presume an ephemeral but internal space that is neither one (biological) nor the other (social).[17] Consequently, this space of indeterminacy functions as the invisible, atomised location onto which we regularly project the existence of a will, an intentional self somehow irreducible to genetic inheritance and likewise untouched by external social influences. So long as we fail to recognise that there is no demonstrable difference between the biological and the social, we risk perpetuating an unfounded belief in an intentional self presumed to inhabit some indeterminate space within the body.

The elusive but nevertheless pervasive belief in a sovereign or intentional self, I claim, regularly arises in the domain of race and rumor, often leading to all manners of contradiction and confusion. For the moment, I mean to survey recent examples concerning claims of racialised intentionality offered by speakers on both sides of the political spectrum. Like a rumor that circulates among a community in fits and starts, expressing partial truths embedded in baseless speculations, the assumption of an intentional will haunts contemporary discourse about race and racism.

Recall the example of the viral video that would come to be described as 'Central Park Karen', a video recording on a cellphone camera that found its way into the US national news cycle. The Karen in this instance was Amy Cooper, who called the police on Christopher Cooper (no relation) when the latter asked the former to leash her dog in a section of Central Park in New York City where dogs are not allowed to roam freely. In the heated exchange between the two Coopers, Amy is seen and heard calling 911, exclaiming in a hysterical tone, "There

is an African American man – I am in Central Park – he is recording me and threatening myself and my dog.’ That Amy referred explicitly to Christopher’s racial identity was no benign act, no casual or offhand point of reference; before making the emergency phone call, Amy tells Christopher of her intention to cite his Blackness in advance, a pointed threat against Christopher’s life given the disproportional violence enacted by police in the US against people of color and Black men in particular. Amy’s performance at this scene thereby invokes a more insidious and longstanding generic form: a white woman threatened by a Black man.

Though both Coopers walked away from the scene physically unscathed, the media backlash was swift. Predictably, Amy Cooper would eventually declare to news outlets, despite evidence to the contrary, ‘I’m not a racist. I did not mean to harm that man in any way.’[18] Cooper thereby makes a claim to an unassailable self-identity, a not-racist part of herself, a virtuous interiority invisible to the camera’s gaze that negates any negative behavior or action of hers played out on the surface. Despite Amy Cooper’s familiarity with and reliance upon racist tropes, in which she cites the racial identity of her antagonist to prime the responding police officers in her favor, at the potential cost of Christopher Cooper’s very life, no representation can go so far as to impugn the pure self she claims to maintain or possess at odds with any visible evidence to contrary. By dismissing the significance of prejudiced, interpersonal behavior, individuals like Amy Cooper presume to maintain a distinction between performance and identity, as if demonstrably racist action has no relevance, and certainly no evidentiary value, as to the quality of one’s character – what a person does should by no means be understood as a reflection of who a person is. As far as Cooper is concerned, the video capturing her mistreatment of a Black man upon their random meeting in Central Park barely rises to the level of an unsubstantiated rumor; not the revelation of her true self so much as her self’s subjection to gossip – a darkly ironic scene, all too typical, in which a perpetrator instigates a violent encounter only to claim the status of ‘victim’ in the aftermath.[19] The citation of the other’s race, in this instance, arises during a scene in which the aggressor, like Clint Eastwood’s detective in *Sudden Impact*, may claim to have acted in self-defense.

The case of the Central Park Karen demonstrates just one example of the persistent ‘practices of racial inequality’, as Imani Perry terms it, even as ‘we proclaim a national ethos [in the US] of racial egalitarianism’.[20] Amy Cooper’s act of quotidian racial profiling, in which she cites her alleged assailant’s Blackness in order to coordinate violence against him even before the police arrive on the scene, only to disclaim any racial intentionality after the fact, may be understood as a local example of a more general, societal problem of white cognitive dissonance in a color-blind era. In *Racism without Racists* (2006), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva describes color-blind racism as an ideological framework that organises an individual’s sense

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of the racial world, but also as a 'style' that tends to take a paradoxical form when it appears in the interpersonal domain. Faced with the persistence of racial inequality, whether in acts of quotidian prejudice in Central Park or in more systemic problems, say, of mass incarceration or police violence, Bonilla-Silva refers to the racial incoherence into which white individuals may fall when faced with evidence of inequality, or when caught on camera perpetuating the very forms of racism presumed to be relics of the past. Since the 'racial climate in America forbids the open expression of racially based feelings, views, and positions', Bonilla-Silva offers, 'when whites discuss issues that make them feel uncomfortable, they become almost incomprehensible'.[21]

Such incoherence concerning the state of racial relations in the US was prominently on display in Fall 2021, as cameras captured and often livestreamed predominantly white parents assailing school boards across the country for teaching critical race theory (CRT) to their children. As commentators familiar with CRT would regularly note, the parents seemed entirely ignorant of the body of scholarship that they nevertheless raged against. The 'controversy' over CRT was a flame sparked and fanned by prominent celebrities and pundits in the conservative media echo chamber, but unlike other manufactured crises spurred by the right-wing rumor mill, this one resulted in both executive and legislative action. In Fall 2020, no doubt contributing to the outrage that would arise at school board meetings the following year, President Trump signed an executive order banning federal contractors from engaging in diversity training. Then, following the momentum of the apparent grassroots outrage in 2021, Republican-dominated state legislatures across the US acted swiftly to ban the teaching of CRT or virtually any subject matter addressing the nation's history of white supremacy.[22]

In this context, the belief in an intentional will persists, this time in the well-meaning criticisms offered against the seemingly irrational and ignorant displays performed by parents seeking to ban scholarship they have neither read nor understood. Critical coverage of excessive outrage expressed at the school board meetings faces an implicit challenge: how to defend CRT against detractors who appear to have no idea what they are talking about? Especially in the domain of public-school education, when parents, pundits, and legislatures on the Right are attempting to prevent the teaching of basic historical facts and principles concerning the country's systemically racist past (and present), how may we adequately account for ignorance (on the part of the adults) who act in favor of perpetuating ignorance (on behalf of their children)? Reporting and commentary on these hysterical scenes often attribute to the participants a cynical intentionality, as if the ignorant parents also, somehow, know very well what they are doing. In an article published for the Brookings Institute, Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons describe CRT as the 'new boogiemer for people unwilling to acknowledge our country's racist history and how it impacts the present'.[23] Even if some

conservatives will admit the existence of slavery or Jim Crow in the past, the authors claim, they treat CRT as a false or unnecessary proliferation of race consciousness after the US has already atoned for its sins. Such people 'are simply unwilling to remove the blind spot obscuring the fact that America is still not great for everyone'.<sup>[24]</sup> Similarly, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, arguing that Martin Luther King was a critical race theorist before there was a name for it, laments the perversity by which critics of CRT on the Right eagerly celebrate the MLK national holiday or share quotes from King on social media, only to demonstrate a 'willful and persistent ignorance of King's legacy' by seeking to ban the teaching of CRT.

To be sure, the banning of CRT threatens to promote ignorance among future generations, as parents blame the teaching of racism's historical past for racism's perpetuation in the present. Yet if the critiques of CRT demonstrate the persistent and widespread ignorance concerning racism's ongoing legacy, then what sense does it make to describe such ignorance as 'willful' or 'intentional'? The criticisms of the right-wing rumor mill attribute to those involved an inner core of sovereign intentionality deserving of moral approbation – not ignorance as such but rather an unconscious decision to remain ignorant. Both the claim of colorblind innocence (on the Right) and the allegation of willful ignorance (by the Left) perpetuate, much like a rumor, the specter of a sovereign self.

Though Malabou has not addressed the subject of racism, her attempt to dismantle the persistent belief in the sovereign self is apposite. For Malabou, the self is not a site of intentional agency locatable within a core of a person's being, let alone a discrete cognitive agency that we can isolate in a particular place within the brain. Rather, 'the "self" is a synthesis of all the plastic processes at work in the brain', more an after-effect than an agent.<sup>[25]</sup> From this vantage point, representation not only describes the hegemonic contestations by which culture is formed, reproduced, or contested, as Hall would have it; for Malabou, representation is central to the very biological domain that Hall distinguishes from the social or 'human element'. What we conventionally refer to as the 'I' arises from the brain's perpetual activity of internal mapping, an aesthetic after-effect responding to the various phase states of the body's internal regulation and reactions to external stimuli. 'Even when I have a feeling of self-existence', Malabou notes, 'the I that feels and the existence that is felt are not exactly the same; they differ.'<sup>[26]</sup>

Drawing from the field of epigenetics to bolster her deconstruction of the self, Malabou does not see in the self's erasure the loss of political agency or ethical responsibility but rather an opportunity to recognise our individual and collective capacity for change. 'The anatomy of the brain is genetically determined', Malabou affirms.

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But the innumerable synaptic connecting possibilities are not. Synapsis formation escapes genetic determinism and is indebted to contacts that the organism has established with its environment. The brain's connective development depends, throughout its long lifetime, upon experience and learning.[27]

The brain's evolution or becoming, as Malabou puts it elsewhere, demonstrates a plastic capacity to give and receive form.[28] Here we may notice some resonance between Bonilla-Silva's conception of color-blind incoherence and Malabou's account of epigenetic becoming. The incoherent defense 'I'm not a racist' should not be read as a statement by someone who knows very well they possess a racist self-identity and then attempts to defend or cover up this internal truth about themselves. Instead, the very incoherence of color-blind racism might demonstrate, at an individual level, the reproduction of a social structure built on color-blind racism. An individual like Amy Cooper may very well not know what she is doing or saying but nevertheless, through her enactment of the very incoherence of color-blindness, provides pointed evidence of society's plastic or uneven becoming, in which claims of clear and certain 'progress' belie a more complicated, if not contradictory, trajectory.

Still, Malabou cites the brain's plasticity as reason for hope: we have an opportunity to craft better versions of ourselves and our societies because the brain's neural makeup is never fully given in advance. In fact, the most fundamental quality of the brain is its capacity for change. Yet it is here that I depart from Malabou's optimism even while finding value in her ontology. The cultural attachment to the sovereign and intentional self, as Malabou repeatedly suggests, may dampen both our individual and collective capacity for change. However, 'change' should not be treated as an unqualified social good. The brain's capacity for change also includes, by necessity, a neuro-biological potential for re-entrenchment, to dig even deeper into the hole of inequality rather than rise from it. For instance, the white rage expressed at school board meetings over the teaching of CRT may be understood as the further perpetuation of racist social structures in the guise of color-blind rhetoric that, even if incoherent to outsiders, proves even more impenetrable to moral criticism than the color-conscious racism of the Jim Crow era.[29] Indeed, the theory of plasticity aptly describes the ability of forces on the political Right to resist calls for change, effectively refashioning their political agendas to produce consistent historical results in their ideological favor.

In the concluding section of this essay, I return to the topic of police violence. Conservative political media, Fox News in particular, rely on an aesthetic of incoherence, unreason, and uncertainty to affirm police who claim to act in 'self-defense' against Black citizens and thereby avoid accountability. In these instances, the only truth we can know for certain, conservative speakers claim, is the existence of Blackness as an amorphous but threatening

agency, one that provides for the police a minimal reason for their otherwise unreasonable violence.

### **Policing representation**

As I have argued, we might qualify Stuart Hall's emphasis on social representation in light of Malabou's claims for genetic inheritance. Indeed, I have also suggested that such an epigenetic opening may afford media studies a greater capacity to examine mediated instantiations of color-blind racism, understanding such racial incoherencies as nevertheless (re)productive of systems of inequality for which no single individual, or group of individuals, is directly or intentionally responsible. Here we may recall the conventional response in media studies to the video evidence of the Los Angeles police officers who beat Rodney King within inches of his life, only to be acquitted by a predominately white jury in Simi Valley, California. Media scholars have often placed blame for the acquittal on the defense attorneys, who deftly remediated the original video footage by slowing it down, showing the video frame by frame, offering analysis by 'expert witnesses' to narrate the images differently. 'The King video changed meaning when it became a series of still images. The defense attorneys deconstructed the sequence and effectively neutralised its violence by presenting it frame by frame', Marita Sturken writes.[30] John Fiske employs the binary high/low to explain how the defense attorneys transformed the visceral impact of the King video, using freeze-frames and frame-enhancements to transform the 'low' authenticity attributable to the grainy, low-definition nighttime video into a 'new high truth ... of what [Roland] Barthes called "bourgeois clarity"'. By altering the video's speed the defense attorneys could likewise distract from the video's documentation of violent force enacted on King's body. Accordingly, in the 'social conditions of the courtroom' the video was transformed 'into another truth' of King as aggressor rather than victim.[31] Even the Society for Cinema Studies (now Society for Cinema and Media Studies) released a public statement after the defendants' acquittal, emphasising how the defense strategy manipulated the video's capacity for accurate representation:

How did the [jury] 'see' this video? They saw it repeatedly, repeatedly – desensitized to its power and effect. They saw it in slow motion, analytically – as the defense supplied a 'reading' of the appropriateness of each officer's reaction. This demonstrates how close readings can incur mis-readings.[32]

The claims of misrepresentation on the part of the defense attorneys, as surveyed above, attribute to the video archive a false sense of historical veracity, as if the 'truth' of the video could be ensured in advance so long as the recording was reproduced without manipulation.

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The emphasis on the so-called manipulation of the video evidence, moreover, overlooks how the 'defense' made on behalf of the police amounts to something more than a convenient legal strategy – this discourse has a much longer history. The allegation that Blackness poses an excessive threat to (white) civil society is central to the very history of policing itself, as found in the slave codes of the antebellum south and the Black codes of Reconstruction era.[33] Thus, when defense attorneys showed the video 'frame by frame', or when talk-radio host Rush Limbaugh described King's behavior in the video as 'erratic and unpredictable', such interventions demonstrate discrete and historically persistent examples of anti-Black violence in color-blind form. The fantasy of the self is tied irrevocably to invocations of self-defense, which masquerade as violent offense against those 'others' who do not so easily or obviously qualify as sovereign beings under a system of white supremacy.[34]

To turn to one final and more contemporary example, in July 2016, D.L. Hughley, a comedian, prominent podcast host, and cultural commentator appeared on Fox News to discuss with Megyn Kelly, the conservative host, the killing of Philando Castile by a Minnesota police officer, Jeronimo Yanez. Castile had been driving with his girlfriend and four-year-old daughter when stopped by Yanez and his partner who were on the lookout for suspects in a recent robbery similar in 'appearance' to Castile, or so the officers would claim. Within minutes of their first interaction, and after Castile informed the officer that he possessed a firearm in the vehicle, for which he had a permit, Yanez shot and mortally wounded Castile; the officer would claim that Castile had been reaching for his gun. The exchange between Hughley and Kelly on her primetime program, *The Kelly File*, took place in the early days following Castile's death, and during their heated conversation Kelly takes the position that we should not 'rush to judgment' by labeling the police officer a 'murderer' or in claiming that the shooting had anything to do with race. 'We don't know what happened', Kelly repeats as the debate turns into a heated argument. To bolster her claim, Kelly refers to the Justice Department's report on the killing of Michael Brown, which she cites as evidence of misplaced public outrage:

KELLY: The Justice Department found that the police [in Ferguson, MO] had endemic racism. They found that...

HUGHLEY: Let me tell you something...

KELLY: But they also exonerated officer Darren Wilson and they found that 'Hands up, Don't Shoot' was a lie and Michael Brown was the aggressor.

HUGHLEY: Wow. Wow.

KELLY: Don't 'wow' me.

HUGHLEY: Don't tell me not to 'wow' you. I can say 'wow' if I want to... The only place that racism doesn't exist [or is claimed not to exist] is Fox News and the police department.



Through her defense of the police in this sequence, Kelly likewise polices what she judges to be the proper aesthetic boundaries of political expression on the cable news program. While she consistently interrupts and talks over Hughley, his voiced exasperation ('Wow') is likewise deemed excessive by Kelly's standards. In Kelly's estimation, at least as it concerns judgment concerning the shooting of Castile, we cannot know anything for certain and thus we await some undetermined point for justice in the future. Yet Kelly does not extend this judicious sense of caution as it concerns Hughley's attempt to represent his position. On this matter, Kelly is quite definitive, condescendingly lecturing Hughley when he voices his exasperation, claiming that he's 'dodging' the real issue, labeling his critique of Fox News as 'out of bounds'. Even when Kelly ends the discussion abruptly to cut to a commercial break, she offers one final gesture of dismissal, raising her eyebrows as she looks into the camera and at her audience, with Hughley expeditiously excised from the scene (Figure 3).



Fig. 3: Megyn Kelly raises a dismissive eyebrow to conclude her debate with D.L. Hughley on *The Kelly File*.

Despite Kelly's condescension, Hughley 'makes her day', we might say, by inhabiting a position that provides the white host with an absolute claim to color-blind certainty: while she withholds judgment on the killing of another innocent Black man by the police, she actively 'defends' the reactionary network on which her program is hosted and the viewers who regularly tune in for the 'fair and balanced' reporting that Fox News claims to provide. Merely by voicing his exasperation, Kelly's interlocutor has gone too far, has crossed a line, and must therefore be relegated off stage.

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One should not rush to judgment (of the police), Kelly affirms, even as she rushes to judgment (of her guest). Such incoherent 'reasoning' is a tell-tale sign of racecraft, that is, of the ideological gap that barely separates color-blind common sense from its more color-conscious legacy.[35] Still, in this example – like the 'Make My Day' law and its affirmation of self-defense, or the ACORN controversy and its effective policing of the voting booth – I see Kelly's dismissal of her Black antagonist not so much as an indictment of this particular cable news host, and not even of Fox News in general, but rather as one more discrete instance of racism's plastic capacity to persist through systems of oppression only rumored to be a thing of the past.

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## Notes

- [1] For a sustained examination of hysterical discourse in right-wing political media, see Krzych 2021.
- [2] See Connolly 2008.
- [3] See Dawkins 1989 and Blackmore 1999.
- [4] See Rogin 1993. See also Hoberman 2019.
- [5] Prominent thinkers in philosophy, postcolonial studies, and Black studies have identified roots of coloniality and anti-Blackness throughout the canon of modern Western philosophy, resulting in a racialised conception of 'reason'. See Mills 1997, Spivak 1999, and Moten 2018.

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- [6] Light 2017, p. 9. See also Ahmed 2000.
- [7] Fields & Fields 2012, p. 17.
- [8] DiFonzo & Bordia 2007, p. 22.
- [9] Das 2007, p. 119.
- [10] López 2014, p. 2.
- [11] *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
- [12] See Deggans 2012.
- [13] Collins 2009, p. 66.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- [15] *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.
- [16] Hall 1997, p. 3.
- [17] See Malabou 2015, pp. 35-46.
- [18] <https://time.com/5842442/amy-cooper-dog-central-park/>
- [19] The amorphous quality of rumors provides fertile ground for aggressors to re-present a violent situation as one in which they are the victims rather than the perpetrators. See Das 2007, p. 111.
- [20] Perry 2011, p. 1.
- [21] Bonilla-Silva 2006, p. 6.
- [22] Cineas 2020.
- [23] Ray & Gibbons 2021.
- [24] *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- [25] Malabou 2008, p. 58.
- [26] Johnston & Malabou 2013, p. 20.
- [27] Malabou 2015, p. 43.
- [28] Malabou 2008, p. 5.
- [29] See Anderson 2016.
- [30] Sturken 1997, p. 39.
- [31] Fiske 2016, p. 140.
- [32] Cited in Tomasulo 1996, p. 79.
- [33] See Dubber 2005, Dubois 2017, Hadden 2003, and Wagner 2009.
- [34] See Crenshaw & Peller 1993.
- [35] Fields & Fields 2012, p. 41.