



# Great Replacement or Slow White Suicide?

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**ABSTRACT:** The belief that White people are targeted victims of dispossession, displacement, and genocide has spread with shocking intensity since Donald Trump’s 2016 electoral college victory. Although this Great Replacement myth may seem absurd and irrational, its destructive real-world consequences force the question: what explains its efficacy and appeal? Drawing on White nationalists Greg Johnson and Tucker Carlson, I argue that the Great Replacement myth functions as an explanation for the real socioeconomic decline that has culminated in deaths of despair. I then explore this decline’s sociohistorical context to argue that deaths of despair are consequences of political-economic domination reinforced by White supremacy. Put otherwise, these deaths result from socioeconomic violence that White people have inflicted on each other. I conclude that the real problem “the White race” faces today is not a Great Replacement but a Slow White Suicide.

**KEY WORDS:** Great Replacement, White supremacy, January 6th Capitol riot, deaths of despair, deindustrialization, domination, slow violence, slow death, racial capitalism

## THE GREAT REPLACEMENT MYTH

This was a whitelash against a changing country,” lamented CNN correspondent Van Jones as Donald Trump approached his 2016 electoral college victory (Blake 2016). Evidence accumulated over subsequent years has thoroughly confirmed Jones’s evaluation. Social scientists have definitively shown that anti-Black racism, fears of demographic change, and negative attitudes towards non-White immigrants were central to Trump’s election victory (Major, Blodorn, and Blascovich 2018; Huber 2016).<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, communities across the country have suffered the “whitelash” first-hand, with White supremacists committing terror attacks in Charlottesville, Pittsburgh,

Poway, El Paso, and Buffalo—not to mention the many hate crimes Trump’s tweets and rallies incited (Grewal 2018; Chokshi 2018). These attacks were so egregious that the FBI director and prominent Republican politicians—including former President Trump—felt compelled to publicly condemn White supremacy on several occasions (Budryk 2019; Thomsen 2017; Levin 2019).

Public condemnations of White supremacy mark an important advancement for a nation constructed through the systematic murder, oppression, and super-exploitation of non-White peoples. The problem, of course, is that they reduce White supremacy to exceptional individual pathology. Paul Ryan’s Twitter condemnation of White supremacist “bigotry,” for example, reinforced the popular assumption that only overt and intentional expressions of hatred towards non-White peoples count as White supremacy (Levin 2019). Trump committed a similar error when he attributed White supremacist extremism to “a small group of people that have very, very serious problems” (*ibid.*). With no mention of White supremacy’s more diffuse and covert features, such condemnations only obfuscate matters. For one, they deflect critical attention from ostensibly color-neutral but effectively White supremacist policies that suppress non-White votes, feed the bloated prison-industrial complex, and criminalize non-White immigrant populations (Feingold 2017). They also conceal White supremacy’s function as a worldview that continues to shape US society and culture.

As historian Katherine Belew has shown, White supremacist terror attacks are politically motivated tactical strikes carried out by proponents of a “White power” worldview. Belew explains that White power extremists see themselves as freedom fighters struggling against “Jews and other malevolent international forces [who have] conspired to control the federal government, the United Nations, the banks, and more” (Belew 2018). For decades now, they believe, Jewish people and their “self-hating” White accomplices have encouraged crimes against White people, orchestrated the mass migration of non-White peoples into majority-White nations, and indoctrinated White populations with the “anti-Western” and “anti-White” values of racial justice, feminism, and LGBTQ rights, among others. Slowly but surely, the story goes, anti-White racists are displacing and dispossessing White people, thereby destroying the moral fabric of “Western civilization” and threatening “the White race” with total annihilation.

White power extremists believe that terrorism is the only rational response to this so-called Great Replacement. In their minds, mass murder will incite a global race war, at which point the entire White population will unify to “secure the existence of [their] people and a future for white children” (Belew 2019). In this regard, apparent White power lone wolves are extremist organizer-activists who share a comprehensive worldview and precise political aims. They consciously work to strengthen and expand their networks—for example, by “organizing secretive paramilitary training[s] across America” (Makuch and Lamoureux

2018)—and incite further terrorism. In doing so, they appeal to the more diffuse White supremacist worldview that still pervades the nation. Regardless of their avowed political affiliations, many White US Americans continue to believe that non-White peoples are undeserving parasites, sexual predators, violent criminals, sociopathic manipulators, etc., without the capacity for self-government, basic impulse control, a sense of the common good, and so on. From their perspective, the uncontrolled presence and growth of non-White populations inevitably threatens White life, liberty, and property (Hume 2022).

This contemporary White supremacist worldview is best encapsulated by the Great Replacement myth, which right-wing politicians and pundits have amplified and legitimated for years.<sup>2</sup> During his pre-riot tirade on January 6th, for example, Trump told attendees that “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore” (Wade 2021). Republicans have been making similar remarks for years (Goldmacher and Broadwater 2022; Luscombe 2022). Foremost among them has been Tucker Carlson, whose show on Fox is the most trusted news source among Trump voters and the most highly rated “news” show in cable TV history (Gottfried, Barthel, and Mitchell 2017; Joyella 2020). Central to his popularity as White nationalist spokesperson is an obsession with the so-called Great Replacement. Indeed, a *New York Times* investigation found that Carlson has appealed to the myth in more than four hundred episodes of his show (Yourish et al. 2022).

Unsurprisingly, these public appeals have influenced Republican voters. University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape found that the 193 individuals arrested for breaking into the Capitol grounds on January 6, 2021, have no connections to existing far right militias or groups and—along with 23 million other Americans—believe that force was justified to restore Trump to the presidency (Rosen 2022). Most importantly, they share a core belief in the Great Replacement myth. A more recent Associated Press poll corroborates this research, showing that “nearly half of Republicans agree to at least some extent with the idea that there’s a deliberate intent to ‘replace’ native-born Americans with immigrants” (Bump 2022). In short, tens of millions of White US Americans endorse the Great Replacement myth and believe that violence is justified to achieve their political aims.

### MISDIAGNOSING DESPAIR

Reflecting on his research, Pape (Pape and Ruby 2021: 4) warns that we face “a broader mass movement with violence at its core” and calls for “de-escalation approaches for anger among large swaths of mainstream society.” So, what might such de-escalation approaches look like? We know what so many White people are angry about: they believe that they are targeted victims of dispossession, displacement, and genocide. De-escalation, then, requires an understanding of *how and why* they hold that belief. In other words, how could anyone find the

Great Replacement myth plausible, much less hold it with such conviction that they become willing to gun down complete strangers or hunt down politicians in lynch mobs? What explains the myth's efficacy and appeal? After all, the growing presence of non-White peoples in the United States in no way entails "anti-White" dispossession, displacement, and genocide. So how and why do so many people make the cognitive leap from an observation about demographic change to morbid fantasies of White genocide? Without some actionable answer to this question, we stand little chance of stemming the tide of White supremacist terrorism, much less abolishing the system in its entirety.

This section sketches a partial answer to this question. Specifically, I propose that the Great Replacement myth functions as an explanation for the real decline in quality of life that many White US Americans have experienced in recent decades.<sup>3</sup> As I discuss below, their living conditions have deteriorated so significantly that unprecedented numbers have succumbed to "deaths of despair." Understandably, many seek action-guiding explanations for such rampant suffering. In response, White nationalists such as Greg Johnson and Tucker Carlson offer the view that non-White peoples are displacing, dispossessing, and killing off "the White race."

Johnson is an obscure White nationalist author who argues for the construction of a White ethnostate. In doing so, he consistently points to real social problems as reasons to embrace the White nationalist political project. Here is how he begins *The White Nationalist Manifesto*, for example:

In the present system, we have no future, and we are acting accordingly. Loss of hope for the future is what ties together a whole array of social pathologies afflicting white Americans. After rising steadily for centuries, white life expectancies are declining, something that we would only expect in times of war, famine, plague, or social collapse. . . . If whites have no future in the current system, then we will simply have to set up a new one. (Johnson 2018: 3)

Johnson's mention of declining White life expectancies is, of course, an implicit reference to the worsening mortality rates caused by deaths of despair. His concerns regarding loss of hope for the future point to the real despair that pushes many White people (especially those without college degrees) towards drugs, alcohol, and suicide. Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton make the same observation, lamenting that many "do not see a promising economic future, or a promising future in any aspect of their lives" (Case and Deaton 2020: 69). In short, self-avowed White nationalist Greg Johnson rightly identifies deaths of despair as a real social problem demanding solution.

The issue, of course, is that he explains that problem in White nationalist terms. This is clear from a later passage where he appeals directly to the Great Replacement myth. Discussing what can be done to strengthen and spread White nationalist ideas, Johnson explains that

we can simply show our people the lawlessness, corruption, anti-white discrimination, alienation, collapsing public services, hellish commutes, blighted cityscapes, shrinking opportunities, and pervasive hopelessness that come with white demographic replacement. (Johnson 2018: 31)

Once again, Johnson points to several real social problems (apart from anti-white discrimination) demanding solution. Although one could certainly question his use of the terms “lawlessness” and “blighted,” many can agree that corruption, alienation, and so on, are serious issues. The questions, of course, are, what causes these issues, and how should they be resolved? Here Johnson turns to the Great Replacement myth. In his imagination, non-White peoples are fundamentally incapable of self-government, basic impulse control, a sense of the common good, and so on. As their numbers grow through “white demographic replacement” they thus destroy morality and law, local infrastructures, job opportunities, etc. Since there is no way to co-exist with inferior peoples, the solution is to create a White ethnostate. Johnson reiterates these claims in a more recent book—this time referring explicitly to deaths of despair:

The American state should be committed to making sure that every year, white Americans enjoy a better quality of life. This requires social and political programs tailored to the well-being of white Americans and not other groups. A country that cared about its founding stock would not, for instance, let social problems like the mass “deaths of despair” and the opioid epidemic affecting white Americans to go unnoticed and unaddressed. (Johnson 2020: 167–68)

Pointing to real suffering among the White US population, he reiterates the longstanding Republican talking point that the US government panders to undeserving people of color at the expense of the White population. Johnson then goes further to claim that the issue is not simply one of passive neglect. The declining quality of life that many White people are suffering, the story goes, is the intentional result of self-hating White elites and their Jewish backers’ efforts to dispossess, displace, and annihilate “the White race.”

Although much more could be said about Greg Johnson, it’s clear that he presents the Great Replacement myth as an explanation for social decline and deaths of despair. But, one might ask, how widespread is this framing? After all, Johnson is far from a household name. Chances are that relatively few Republican voters have ever heard of him, much less read his work. Unfortunately, as we have already seen, Johnson is not the only purveyor of the Great Replacement myth. Among his fellow propagandists, few reach such a wide audience as Tucker Carlson. As I noted above, he regularly appeals to the myth on his show—which, it is worth repeating, is the most highly rated “news” show in cable TV history and is on Fox, the most trusted news source among Trump voters. In recent years Carlson has followed a broader Republican trend of presenting the Republican party as

the party of so-called ordinary, working-class Americans. In doing so, he offers the Great Replacement myth as a diagnosis of real social problems. Consider the following excerpts from a January 2019 monologue: “Does anyone still believe that cheaper iPhones, or more Amazon deliveries of plastic garbage from China are going to make us happy? They haven’t so far. A lot of Americans are drowning in stuff. And yet drug addiction and suicide are depopulating large parts of the country” (Carlson 2019). Here he points to the real problems of widespread and worsening unhappiness, the emptiness of mass consumerism, and the overabundance of unnecessary waste. Without using the phrase, he also rightly cites “deaths of despair” as a serious issue. Carlson then turns his attention to market domination: “We do not exist to serve markets. Just the opposite. Any economic system that weakens and destroys families is not worth having. A system like that is the enemy of a healthy society” (Carlson 2019). Again, Carlson touches on a real problem. Markets—or, more precisely, major market actors such as the heads of large financial institutions—make destructive one-sided decisions without regard for the concerns or needs of the people affected. The outcome is pervasive market domination, where the vast majority is forced to serve markets to the detriment of their own well-being.

Tucker Carlson’s monologue clearly touches on some real aspects of the declining quality of life that has affected the US population, especially since the 1970s. But, of course, he embeds his critique within a broader White supremacist worldview that relies on the Great Replacement myth. This becomes clear by the end of the monologue, when Carlson tells his viewers that they want to live in

a country whose leaders don’t accelerate the forces of change purely for their own profit and amusement. A country you might recognize when you’re old. . . . A country that listens to young people who don’t live in Brooklyn. . . . A country where Lewiston, Maine seems almost as important as the west side of Los Angeles. . . . A clean, orderly, stable country that respects itself. (Carlson 2019)

Carlson’s initial observations about real socioeconomic decline thus culminate in an appeal to the Great Replacement myth. The real cause of increasing drug addictions, suicides, poverty, and death among the White US population, Carlson implies, is elitist Democrats who intentionally pander to underserving people of color and promote mass immigration to “dilute the political power” of American citizens, as he puts it elsewhere (Halon 2021).

White nationalist ideologues like Johnson and Carlson clearly present the Great Replacement myth as an explanation for the real declining quality of life that has culminated in “deaths of despair.” That, I propose, is what (partially) explains the myth’s efficacy and appeal. If this is right, then one potential strategy for heeding Robert Pape’s call to de-escalate anger among the White US popula-

tion is to articulate alternative narratives that address that socioeconomic decline. After all, Ian Haney-Lopez (2019) has shown that most White US Americans in fact endorse a wide range of inconsistent views about politics, racism, and social justice, which means that many remain open to political mobilization from multiple directions. As Stuart Hall (1988) argued decades ago, the right's success depends in part on the left's inability to articulate compelling action-guiding diagnoses of contemporary social problems. In the present context, that means articulating a compelling alternative explanation for the declining quality of life that has affected many White US Americans. To that end, I now turn directly to "deaths of despair."

### **DEATHS OF DESPAIR, DOMINATION, AND VIOLENCE**

"Deaths of despair" is the phrase that Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton use to refer to deaths from suicides, drug and alcohol overdoses, alcoholic liver disease, and cirrhosis, which are disproportionately affecting non-Hispanic White US Americans without college degrees. As Case and Deaton have shown, these deaths have become so pervasive that they have caused a mortality rate reversal for this population. Whereas mortality rates for Black and Hispanic US Americans continue to decline (though they remain higher than White mortality rates), deaths of despair resulted in an additional 500,000 deaths within the White working-class population from 1999–2013, comparable to the number of lives lost during the US AIDS epidemic through mid-2015 (Case and Deaton 2015: 15078). Perhaps even more striking than the sheer numbers, however, is the fact that these deaths are largely self-inflicted, resulting, as mentioned, from suicide and drug and alcohol abuse. These White people are not merely dying; they are killing themselves. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, the ones who survive are not exactly flourishing. They report declining physical and mental health, increasing pain and mental distress, and greater difficulties with daily living (*ibid.*). White working-class people are resorting to drugs, alcohol, and suicide as means of coping with real suffering.

What, then, is causing this worsening quality of life among the White US population? As I've shown, White nationalists point to the supposed Great Replacement. Case and Deaton, in contrast, turn to the history and consequences of deindustrialization induced by globalization (via free trade agreements) and automation. According to official U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, almost 17 million manufacturing jobs were lost from 1979 to 2019 (Harris 2020), leaving people across the country without real economic prospects. Case and Deaton detail the many negative consequences this has had: declining wages and labor participation (Case and Deaton 2020: 159); fewer benefits and job protections (161, 164); a loss of structure, meaning, and status (148); less social interaction and community participation (161, 164); and the effective dissolution of the White patriarchal

nuclear family in the most affected regions, with fewer people marrying (169) and increasing rates of single White motherhood (171). Further aggravating the situation is the fact the United States has an incredibly weak social safety net and an expensive and inefficient healthcare system (214). Without alternative systems in place to secure their well-being, many White working-class people have been subjected to “social disintegration” (15) and “a long, bleak process of economic, social, and community destruction” (219). It is no surprise, then, that many “do not see a promising economic future, or a promising future in any aspect of their lives,” and so turn to drugs, alcohol, and suicide (69).

Case and Deaton effectively show that deindustrialization significantly undermined the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of White working-class people, especially in the absence of a strong safety net and affordable, accessible healthcare. Considering their primary task of explaining deaths of despair, however, they do not explore the broader sociohistorical context surrounding deindustrialization. More specifically, they do not spend much time investigating the indirect roles that political-economic domination and White supremacy played in causing deaths of despair. Doing so is important, however, for further developing their alternative explanation for deaths of despair.

Beginning with the issue of political and economic domination, it is important to be explicit about the fact that deindustrialization in the absence of a strong safety net and decent, affordable healthcare was not a natural disaster or economic inevitability. Powerful political and economic actors made and enforced decisions to automate and move factories overseas, slash social services, monopolize the health insurance industry, reduce wages, cut benefits, tie healthcare access to employment status, and so on. In most cases, the people affected had little, if any, power to prevent decisions made without their consent or participation. This lack of participatory power left them at the mercy of self-interested, profit-oriented CEOs and politicians. While these primary decision-makers may not have foreseen such morbid outcomes, there is no evading the fact that actions often have unintended consequences. In this case, deindustrialization and deaths of despair resulted from active decision-making processes enabled by systematic political and economic domination (High 2013: 996; Russo and Linkon, n.d.).

A focus on political and economic domination in the context of deindustrialization and deaths of despair reveals that powerful political and economic actors committed an injustice in subjecting White working-class people to deteriorating social conditions (even as White working-class standards of living in this country were created and sustained in part through injustices committed against non-White peoples). As labor scholars John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon explain, the corporate and government actors who facilitated deindustrialization did “major harm to American communities. These injuries to our cities create social and economic costs that everyone pays” (Russo and Linkon, n.d.). Labor historian Steven High



(2019) similarly describes the “emotional fallout of deindustrialization” as a form of “violence regularly inflicted on industrial workers in a capitalist economy.”

It is important to speak of “violence” in this context because the term captures the fact that political-economic domination and deindustrialization quite literally inflicted physiological damage on White working-class bodies. They caused (and continue to cause) anxiety, depression, despair, loneliness, physical pain, and death. They undermined individuals’ and communities’ well-being. And these harmful consequences resulted from intentional actions on the part of powerful individuals and groups. To be sure, this is not the direct, interpersonal violence that often comes to mind when one hears the term. This is violence as the World Health Organization has defined it:

[T]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Dahlberg and Krug 2002: 5)

As the authors of a report on the subject explain, intentionality in this context pertains to the action itself, irrespective of outcome: “[t]here may be a considerable disparity between intended behavior and intended consequence” (Dahlberg and Krug 2002: 5). This is precisely what we see in the case of deindustrialization. Major corporate and government actors intentionally used their power to make and enforce political and economic decisions which inflicted injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, and deprivation on many White working-class people. They may not have intended these wider social consequences, but they intended actions which led to these consequences, and so are perpetrators of violence in the WHO’s sense of the term.

Furthermore, these consequences did not follow immediately from decisions to lay off workers, shut down factories, etc. They unfolded gradually over time. In this regard, deindustrialization amounted to a form of *slow violence*, as Rob Nixon defines the term. In contrast with direct physical violence, Nixon explains, slow violence is not a discrete, traumatic event with immediate consequences. Rather, it is dispersed and drawn-out, involving a temporal and perceptual gap between action and consequence, the latter being deferred, largely invisible to responsible agents (Nixon 2011: 11). In Nixon’s words, slow violence is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2). This is precisely how deaths of despair unfolded as consequences of deindustrialization.

Case and Deaton show that deaths of despair are in part consequences of deindustrialization, not some concerted effort to dispossess, displace, and annihilate “the White race.” Further analysis reveals that deindustrialization was enabled by social domination, wherein powerful political and economic agents inflicted

socioeconomic violence on White working-class people. This perspective reveals that the Great Replacement myth fails as an explanation for socioeconomic decline and deaths of despair. It also enhances my partial explanation of why the myth appeals. The non-White US population has grown and become increasingly visible during the same six decades or so that many White people have been experiencing various forms of dispossession (e.g., foreclosures), displacement (e.g., moving to find jobs), and death (Frey 2020). A growing immigrant population has intensified labor competition, especially in the “low-skill” occupations held and pursued by most White US Americans without college degrees (Camarota 1998). Meanwhile, the politicians who facilitated deindustrialization and eviscerated the social safety net publicly espoused “compassionate” immigration policies and made manufacturing deals with Mexico and China (Gonyea 2018).<sup>4</sup> It is not difficult to see how those who suffer from White ignorance—and therefore fail to recognize the fact that non-White peoples generally suffer first and worst from negative socioeconomic changes—could draw the conclusion that “the establishment” no longer cares about White people (Mills 2017). The tacit White supremacist ideology that still pervades the culture then completes the narrative. Enduring stereotypes of non-White peoples as undeserving parasites, sexual predators, violent criminals, sociopathic manipulators, and so on, anchor an imaginary causal connection between the rising/more visible non-White population and White suffering and death. Thus, White supremacist ideology transmutes a real demographic shift into the Great Replacement.

### **WHITE SUPREMACY’S POLITICAL-ECONOMIC COST**

As shown, the Great Replacement myth functions as an explanation for deaths of despair but ultimately fails to grasp the root causes of late twentieth and early twenty-first century socioeconomic decline. Insofar as White people have an interest in addressing their declining quality of life, social isolation, worsening health, psychological suffering, and so on, they have good reason to reject the Great Replacement myth, as well as its undergirding White supremacist ideology. However, it is not enough to withdraw support for White supremacy. We must also mobilize against it—working not only to stem the tide of White supremacist terrorism but to turn it back, ultimately abolishing White supremacy itself. That requires, among other things, mobilizing a critical mass of White people. Here, too, a focus on deaths of despair and the Great Replacement myth harbors important resources. More precisely, a closer look at this country’s history reveals that the White supremacist ideology which undergirds the Great Replacement myth has in fact enabled and intensified the broad social decline that has driven so many White people to drugs, alcohol, and suicide.

Case and Deaton briefly touch on this idea throughout their book. For example, they note that deindustrialization through globalization and automation has had such negative consequences in the US because White supremacy has long undermined support for universal social welfare policies that could have protected industrial workers (Case and Deaton 2020: 214, 225). The authors also touch on the decline of overt White privilege, explaining that “as Jim Crow weakened, along with other forms of discrimination, working-class whites lost whatever benefits they got from it” (6). They also suggest that racist interpretations of the crack epidemic that affected mostly African American people in the 1980s rendered the nation incapable of addressing the social conditions that ultimately cause such problems. Thus, those social conditions persisted, worsened, and spread, ultimately affecting White working-class people in the 1990s and 2000s (67–70).

Overall, however, Case and Deaton only “cursorily discuss race,” as Keri Leigh Merritt (2020) observes. Rightly adding that “a more rigorous evaluation of racism would only strengthen their arguments,” Merritt proceeds to elaborate on Case and Deaton’s suggestion regarding the decline of overt White privilege (*ibid.*). Citing W.E.B. Du Bois, the independent historian reminds readers that White identity has long functioned as a public and psychological wage, compensating poor and working-class White people for their subjection to domination and exploitation. The civil rights movement, however, undermined the public viability of overt White privilege, thereby challenging the psychological wage and threatening poor and working-class Whites’ relative social status. In Merritt’s words,

once white supremacy began crumbling and white privilege began to wane, poor and working-class whites were left with a question of where, precisely, they fit into American society. All too often, unfortunately, they do the same thing they have done for a century and a half: they retreat into apathy, withdrawing from society altogether, or they lash out in a livid anger that is nearly always directed at other ethnic groups. (Merritt 2020)

Thus, Merritt argues, the decline of overt White privilege has contributed to the social and psychological suffering that has culminated in deaths of despair.

While overt White privilege offered poor and working-class White people a means of coping with poverty, exploitation, and lower social status, this coping mechanism was fundamentally unjust, unhealthy, and unsustainable. For one, it depended on the domination, denigration, and super-exploitation of other human beings. This, in turn, required the targeted cultivation of negative affects such as fear, hatred, anger, and disgust, which served essential practical roles in defending the system. Of course, the human beings racialized as “colored” never tolerated White supremacy; they resisted from the beginning, and when their resistance abolished formal apartheid, they rightfully delegitimated overt White privilege. Without alternative coping mechanisms, however, poor and working-class White

people became more vulnerable to the psychological consequences of poverty and exploitation. In other words, White supremacy prevented many White people from cultivating more just, healthy, and sustainable means of responding to their social conditions. Furthermore, White supremacy has helped sustain and reinforce the social conditions which drove so many White people to rely on overt White privilege as a coping mechanism in the first place. To see how, consider my argument that deaths of despair resulted in part from socioeconomic violence, violence that is itself enabled by political-economic domination. Now we might ask, what explains this political-economic domination? Why has it been so pervasive and resilient as to have had such negative consequences? The answer is surely complex, but White supremacy plays an important role here. One of its central functions throughout US history has been to reinforce political and economic power, undermine union and labor organizing efforts, and impede the formation of an independent labor party in the United States. Consequently, it has intensified political and economic domination and enabled systematic socioeconomic violence.

Regarding the reinforcement of political and economic power, we can look to Ian Haney-Lopez's (2015) *Dog Whistle Politics*, where he examines the Republican Party's mid-twentieth century Southern Strategy to break up the multiracial New Deal coalition by appealing to White voters. Deploying coded White supremacist appeals, Republican politicians effectively demonized progressive taxation, economic regulation, and federal spending on public services (92). In so doing, they mobilized White voters to support tax cuts, economic deregulation, and the evisceration of public services. Such policies, however, ultimately entailed a massive upward distribution of wealth and, consequently, the erosion of White middle-class living conditions. Since wealthy individuals often leverage their financial resources to influence politics, this also entailed a concentration of political power (160). Thus, White supremacist ideology contributed to the extreme concentration of political and economic power that enabled deindustrialization.

This process was further enabled by the fact that White supremacist ideology has long hampered efforts to construct an effective labor movement in the United States. As Michael Goldfield's (2020) *The Southern Key* demonstrates, militant, interracial unionism was quite possible in the South from the 1930s to the 1950s. Where successful, interracial unions enabled improved working conditions and more progressive politicians. The dominant tendency, however, was for White supremacist ideology to undermine organizing efforts. White labor organizers often refused to associate with African American workers, thereby isolating themselves from the emerging civil rights movement, restricting their potential base of support, and limiting their understanding of their own industries. The result was smaller, weaker, less educated unions, and many White workers in turn effectively rendered themselves less capable of challenging the concentration of political power and wealth. In the longer-term, these failures dragged down work-

ing conditions throughout the country, thereby reinforcing political and economic domination (McGhee 2018; Hild and Merritt 2018).

White supremacy exerted similarly deleterious effects in the realm of party politics. The mid-twentieth century labor organizer and working-class intellectual James Boggs (2020) identifies this problem in his prescient *Racism and the Class Struggle*. Explaining “the human price paid by the entire country for advancing capitalism by all means necessary,” Boggs writes that,

in the course of making America a unique land of opportunity in which whites climb up the social and economic ladder on the backs of blacks, the American people have become the most materialistic, the most opportunistic, the most individualistic—in sum, the most politically and socially irresponsible people in the world. Step by step, choice by choice, year after year, decade after decade, they have become the political victims of the system they themselves created, unable to make political decisions on the basis of principle no matter how crucial the issue. (Boggs 2020: 156–57)

As Boggs argues, White US Americans have historically relied on White supremacy as a means of securing a relative competitive advantage in the labor market and attaining some degree of relative social mobility and security at the expense of Black people (and, of course, other non-White peoples). In doing so, they failed to develop their political capabilities, instead supporting a cynical and opportunistic system predicated on individual upward mobility and private profit. Boggs goes on to highlight the corrosive effect this tendency has had on politics:

The American political system, based upon two barely distinguishable political parties, is a structural manifestation of this backwardness. . . . All efforts to create a political party of the working classes, particularly in the late nineteenth century and in the 1930’s, have come to naught because white workers have focused on the individual’s opportunity to climb into the middle class. (Boggs 2020: 157)

The consequence, as this passage suggests, was the cultural devaluation of labor issues. Rather than see labor competition, working conditions, wages, benefits, etc. as potential reasons for solidarity-based social action, White workers generally sought to maximize their individual competitive advantage in pursuit of private social mobility. White supremacy thus diverted attention from labor issues and undermined efforts to create a real labor party, rendering working people—including most White people—more vulnerable to political-economic domination.

## SLOW WHITE SUICIDE

Much more could be said about this history. The important point here is simply that White supremacy reinforced the broader context of political and economic domination that enabled deaths of despair. If the Great Replacement myth functions in part as an action-guiding explanation for the broad social decline that has culminated in deaths of despair, as I have argued, the account I have developed affords the opportunity to construct an alternative narrative to address the real problem of deaths of despair. To conclude, I propose the trope of Slow White Suicide as such an alternative.

Slow White Suicide is an amalgam of Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's "slow death." As I discussed above, Nixon (2011) uses the term "slow violence" in reference to the dispersed and drawn-out destruction of people and environments resulting from human actions. Berlant (2011: 95) similarly defined "slow death" as "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence." Slow White Suicide, as I define it, is a form of slow violence and death which is self-inflicted and caused in part by White supremacy. Deaths of despair are paradigmatic of Slow White Suicide.

I have already discussed the fact that deaths of despair result from a form of slow violence enabled by systematic political-economic domination. Case and Deaton highlight this temporal dimension of deaths of despair throughout their book, lamenting "the slowly evolving and large-scale disintegration" of White working-class lives (Case and Deaton 2020: 190, 192). Simply put, deaths of despair result from a long, drawn-out process of social decline. Furthermore, they do not result from sudden injuries and accidents. Drugs and alcohol, for example, quite literally deteriorate the organism, slowly inflicting damage over extended periods of time. Although drug overdoses and suicides may appear sudden, they often follow from prolonged periods of worsening physical and psychological pain. In this regard, deaths of despair amount to a form of slow violence and death.

The second important aspect of deaths of despair in this context is the fact that they did not result from natural causes, accidents, or direct interpersonal violence. They are self-inflicted in at least two ways. First, as Case and Deaton (2020: 38) put it, "people are doing this to themselves. They are drinking themselves to death, or poisoning themselves with drugs, or shooting or hanging themselves." Deaths of despair result from self-destructive actions. The speed of self-destruction varies, depending on whether the individual drinks themselves to death or shoots themselves, but the outcome is the same. In this sense, all deaths of despair are self-inflicted in a relatively straightforward sense of the term. However, there is a second and less literal sense in which deaths of despair are self-inflicted. As I argued above, White supremacy reinforced the broader context of political-economic domination that gradually eroded White working-class well-being and culminated in deaths of despair. In supporting White

supremacy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, many White people have ultimately supported policies and practices that hurt White people (whether themselves, their peers, or their descendants). If White nationalists insist on talking about “the white race” as a discrete biological entity, then the truth is that deaths of despair result from self-inflicted “racial” violence. Rather than some supposed “Great Replacement,” then, White nationalists should worry more about Slow White Suicide.

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## NOTES

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1. Following Anthony Appiah (2020), I capitalize “White” as a reminder that the term denotes a historically created racialized identity and social position, not a color. I also use the White/non-White distinction for the purposes of this paper, because my focus is on White supremacy, which relies on a basic distinction between “the White race” and everyone else (Knowles, Tropp, and Mogami 2021). This is in no way to suggest that there are no important differences between, say, anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism. Those differences are simply not my focus here.
2. Although the Great Replacement narrative is often referred to as a theory, the term “myth” better captures the fact that it is composed of outright falsehoods and is in no way analogous to, say, feminist theory or the theory of gravity.
3. This is not to suggest that *only* White US Americans have suffered in recent decades. Non-White peoples have generally suffered first and most from regressive social policies and resulting socioeconomic changes throughout US history. They are simply not my focus in this paper.
4. Tones have changed since Trump, of course. I’m referring here to a general trend from roughly the 1970s through the early 2000s.

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