The origins of property rights in the United States are rooted in racial domination. Even in the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks and Indians; rather, it was the interaction between conceptions of race and property that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination.

—Cheryl I. Harris, Whiteness as Property

Barack Obama’s election was a catalyst for a level of voter suppression activities that had not been seen so clearly or disturbingly in decades.

—Carol A. Anderson, White Rage
A year before it was real, the very idea of a President Barack Obama was ridiculous to me. I was and am southern, god bless. I am black. I come from black people who are southerners even when they were New Yorkers for a spell. We are the black American story of enslavement, rural migration, urban displacement, resistance, bootstrapping, mobility, and class fragility. In this milieu we, as a friend once described it, know our whites. To know our whites is to understand the psychology of white people and the elasticity of whiteness. It is to be intimate with some white persons but to critically withhold faith in white people categorically. It is to anticipate white people’s emotions and fears and grievances, because their issues are singularly
our problem. To know our whites is to survive without letting bitterness rot your soul.

That is what I was working with when I went to my first Obama house party in 2007—a few generations’ worth of lived and inherited expertise in knowing our whites. Our whites are southern, like me. Even if they spent some time in places north and west, to become white in the South is to absorb some large part of its particular iteration of the U.S. racial hierarchy. The house party was being held in Myers Park, a lush, wealthy in-town enclave in Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte was my home. I knew Myers Park as a place and a cultural geography of the city’s racist histories. Myers Park is gorgeous. The streets are wide. The homes are stately without being garish. The residents are mere miles from the center of the city’s banking, employment, transportation, and entertainment hubs. As neighborhoods throughout Charlotte fell victim to blight during the housing crash of the 2000s, Myers Park remained stable, thriving even, with housing values continuing upward trends year over year.³

Myers Park is also, as one with even a cursory knowl-

dge of how wealth works in the United States would know, the beneficiary of years of racist covenant restrictions and redlining. Myers Park is beautiful because it has encoded its whiteness into the mundane market transactions that we rarely see: zoning, planning, investment, homeowners associations. White people in Myers Park, no matter where they are from at any time in their lives, are of Myers Park whether they acknowledge it or not.

I grew up knowing those whites. They mostly go to private school. When they don’t, they make the public high school (Myers Park High School, naturally) function like a private school.⁴ We call this opportunity hoarding, and it looks something like this: white parents use their economic privilege to purchase homes in communities that have benefited from generations of wealth privilege. That wealth privilege generates investment in streets, sidewalks, greenspace, traffic lights, clean air, proper waste treatment, and safe drinking water. When white families purchase in these neighborhoods they are also purchasing access to the local public school. That is because we assign students in the U.S. public school system, for the most part, by their
home zip codes. Once enrolled in these schools by virtue of having the income to live in communities that are built on the stabilizing forces of generational wealth, these families generally prize “diversity.”

They are good people. They want all the children in their child’s school to thrive, but they want their child to thrive just a bit more than most. To help their child thrive, these parents use their proximity to local and civic leaders to lobby their personal preferences as politically expedient positions. They gently but insistently marshal resources like teacher time, curriculum access, and extracurricular participation for their children. They donate. They volunteer. They call. They email. They make this already well-funded public school work like a private school for their child: individualized attention, personalized resources, and cumulative advantage. The opportunities these parents hoard become zero-sum for parents who cannot do the same. The families that can hoard do, and the neighborhoods in which they live benefit.

For a spell, Myers Park was at the heart of the nation’s public relations tour for post–Civil Rights era integration.

The wealthy white families of the community had mostly supported busing their students into the historically black West Charlotte High School. They believed in diversity. Once there, a rising tide of investment in the resource-starved black high school seemed to benefit all . . . but the white students benefited most. The experiment in integration lasted but thirty years.

Myers Park is typical of a national pattern of how segregated lives and intertwined cross-racial fortunes play out. But, Myers Park performs resegregation differently than some other urban-suburban enclaves, if only for how very southern its residents are in articulating their privilege. The homes are large but not plantation-like. They are the kinds of old homes that toothy gentrifiers on HGTV remodeling shows say have “good bones.” I am almost certain “good bones” means “worth however much money this pit is about to suck from you because the neighborhood is reliably white,” but I digress. Myers Park is neighborly, even to strangers, before dark. It has manners. There are porches, even if few people sit on them, preferring, instead, the safety of the backyard. Social networks are cultivated at
The hosts asked for donations without stuttering the way that I still do when I have to do “the ask.” It was taken for granted that you had come to spend money and had money to spend. Here, a full eight years before mobile credit card payments would penetrate my black hair salon or Saturday swap meets, the hosts took mobile payments using a website. The whites in this room were all in for Obama. They talked about him like old black people talk about Martin Luther King. They loved his biography. They embraced his political mantra. They were positive he could win.

Back at home, the black people I know were positive that white people were crazy to think that he could win. My mother told me as much: “White people are crazy,” The Vivian said. She, like me, knew her whites. I went home that night of the house party and told her that I had seen, not new whites, but white people doing what people do: coalescing around shared interests. Only, their interests converged with my own. They still had more money, more power than we had. They were as young as me, but lived in million-dollar estates. They would still negotiate the daily experience of racial segregation in their neighborhoods and

the local church—it is the South, after all—and cemented through business partnerships. Myers Park people donate, their money and their time, to good causes. And these perfectly civil people live in intentionally cultivated, nominally diverse, in-town panopticons that need no guard in the central watchtower but whiteness.

Charlotte, North Carolina, is full of middle-class blacks, activist black people of all classes, organized third- and fourth-generation Latinos. I could not believe the Obama house party was happening in Myers Park, of all places in the city. Today I cannot imagine it anywhere else.

The party was in one of the homes usually only accessible to someone like me when, twice a year, you can pay $15 or so for one of those charity parades of homes. I was early. When I rang the bell a young white woman, still wet from a shower, told me to come on in, but no one was yet there. I sat for almost half an hour as they finished preparing, acutely aware of my social faux pas. As people arrived, of all ages and walks of life, I was the only black person until almost an hour into the house party. That is when a brother carrying a bicycle arrived with his white girlfriend.
schools and jobs, but they had, for countless reasons, chosen this black man as “their guy.” The question I could not parse for many years was why.

There is no need to rehash our national identity crisis at the election of the first African American (if not black American) U.S. president. Fox News scaled new heights of shrill paranoia. Then they built a stair lift to the top for their predominantly white, elderly audience. African Americans did not believe the election had happened until a month before the end of Obama’s second, and final, term. Many black Americans, of all national origins but with shared political ideologies, struggled to find a way to critique the imperialist office without disparaging the man occupying it. Hispanic voters and Asian American voters were divided in their support by national origin, generational status, and income. But in almost every ethnic community there was a strong contingent seeking their own people’s story in Obama’s.

The times were not idyllic, but they were as close to multicultural as the U.S. public sphere has ever felt. Those are the eight years that writer Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the “Good Negro Government period.” Like the eight years of Black Reconstruction some 130 years prior to his first presidential contest—one that he would win handily—Obama’s Good Negro Government period was marked by black political competence and white fear. Political analyst Jamelle Bouie once said, during a joint interview we recorded for a radio program, that in the twilight of Obama’s final term it occurred to him that if this safely competent black man was not good enough for white America, then he would never be.

It was heart-wrenching listening to Jamelle discover this fundamental truth of being black in America. And it was for me indeed a fundamental truth.

How could I explain the hope of that Myers Park house party and my core truth that whiteness necessitates black subjugation? This paradox—that is what it is, because these truths seem to occupy opposing sides but in reality are the same side of a Janus-faced coin—mirrored the national paradox: how could the same nation that elected Barack Obama immediately elect Donald Trump? The answer was not in Obama’s blackness. Blackness is not a paradox.
Blackness is. It has to be for whiteness, at any point in time or space, to enact its ultimate expression: elasticity.

Whiteness, the idea, the identity tethered to no nation of origin, no place, no gods, exists only if it can expand enough to defend its position over every group that challenges the throne. White is being European until it needs to also be Irish because of the Polish who can eventually be white if it means that Koreans cannot. For that situational dominance to reproduce itself, there must be a steady pole. That pole is blackness. And so the paradox of how we could elect Obama and Trump is not in how black Obama is or is not. It is, instead, in how white he is (or, is not). The Obama-Trump dialectic is not progress-backlash but do-si-do; one dance, the same steps, mirroring each other, and each existing only in tandem.

Like whiteness itself, Obama was because Trump is.

White voters allowed Barack Obama to become an idea and a president because he was a fundamental projection of the paradox that defines them as white. I almost forgot once. Old trees and new whites are a seduction. But my soul remembers my grandmother's memories. It is imperative that one knows one's whites.

"I've never seen anything like it, Ma," I told her. "But this black man can win."

Today, my mother has no fewer than nineteen portraits and commemorative magazine covers of Barack and Michelle Obama on her mantelpiece. She has exactly four pictures of me, for reference. She has only one of her husband, something that annoys him to no end. She hung up the phone with me any time Barack was giving a speech and she would, I am sure, trade me for Sasha and Malia in a heartbeat. But back in 2007, The Vivian could not believe that a black man with a funny name who so clearly did not know his whites stood a chance. She was finally convinced to believe that whites were different, had perhaps evolved like the far end of the paint store: ecru, pearl, eider, snow, star, toque. It was another Myers Park house party that did the trick. I dragged her there. She almost did not get out of the car. But when she did, she saw it too. It wasn't Barack
Obama knowing his whites that convinced me or my mother. It was that whites knew Obama.

In the forensic account of his final days as president, writers opined about Obama’s faith in white America as fundamentally good, humane, and, above all, capable of evolution. It is easy to believe that this mattered. We all like seeing ourselves through the eyes of those who hold us in esteem, perhaps especially so when we know that we have failed to earn it. We want to be redeemable. And a nation’s father figure is a good person to have believe in you. It is especially good when you suspect, on some level, that the father figure might have a good reason to doubt you.

The eternally future-looking American story is about a tomorrow that is disconnected from yesterday precisely because the story of the nation does not come off particularly well in that retelling. But I have come to believe that it did not matter that Obama had faith in white people. They needed only to have faith in him: in his willingness to reflect their ideal selves back at them, to change the world without changing them, to change blackness for them without being black to them.

Obama’s “hybridity” and “two-ness” and “biracial” identity may have mattered. It did not matter because of how it shaped Obama, but because of how it made white voters feel about themselves. In sociology, there are several theories about those who are born or socialized into two cultures at once. These people have been called liminal or marginal, for being suspended between two societies. The black world and white world that Ta-Nehisi described in his grand essay on Obama’s presidency “My President Was Black,” are often tossed about casually. It is important to understand them more precisely.

There is a black norm only because there is a white norm, and vice versa. Some would argue that people like Obama exist in both spaces simultaneously and thus someone like Obama has special insight into both cultures. That insight supposedly breeds empathy. That kind of empathy may be why Obama could look at years of pictures of his wife and children drawn as apes and decades of white suppression of perceived black socioeconomic gains as racial, albeit not racist: “I’m careful not to attribute any particular resistance or slight or opposition to race.” That is catnip to millions of white voters.
The other interpretation of liminality, or double-consciousness, that Obama is said to represent is more complicated. Not only does one trapped between two sets of social norms understand each better, but he is often blinded to the ways in which they are in conflict. Duality can breed insight, but it can also breed delusion. Holding two sets of social selves, two ways of being and understanding the world at one time, may soften the edges so much that for the liminal, the edges no longer exist.

Obama, in his own writings and in the voluminous writings about him, seems to think that he could only ever have really “embraced” or “chosen” blackness. He seems to truly believe that he exercised some great act of charity and agency in adopting black cool. My first black president seems to think that he could raise his daughters to believe in systemic racism without legitimizing the idea of systemic reparations. He thinks that he can be his brother’s keeper without changing the policies, laws, and investments that keep his brothers in bad jobs, in poor neighborhoods, with bad educational options, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. My first black president seems to think he can have black cool without black burden. For all his intimacies with his white mother and white grandparents, my first black president doesn’t appear to know his whites.

There’s no other way to explain Obama’s inability to imagine that this nation could elect Donald Trump. Those of us who know our whites know one thing above all else: whiteness defends itself. Against change, against progress, against hope, against black dignity, against black lives, against reason, against truth, against facts, against native claims, against its own laws and customs. Even after Donald Trump was elected, Obama told Coates that all is not lost. He is still hopeful about the soul of white America. He said nothing about the soul of black America. That is where my hope resides.

While many things change, my hope in the soul of black America remains constant. It is not an uncritical faith, but it is an invaluable heuristic for days such as ours. For instance, I was never confused about why this nation would elect Donald Trump. I was never deeply hurt when it did so. I cry and am angered by and passionate about what Trump’s
election is doing to human beings and social institutions. But I am not disappointed. If you truly know your whites, disappointment rarely darkens your door. That is because knowing your whites is to know that white voters allowed Barack Obama to become an idea and a president because he was a charming projection of the paradox that defines them as white. The charm is neither necessary nor sufficient, but it helps.

What is necessary for the paradox of whiteness to maintain the internal tension that defines it is for superiority to coexist with fragility. As the nation that bears most fully the stamp of whiteness’s authentic expression, the United States is full of such paradoxes: slaveholders building a republic from the embers of the Enlightenment; freedom of speech that must delineate acceptable speech if any speech is to be free; equal opportunity that necessitates inequality of outcomes.

These paradoxes were in full flower at a 2015 Trump rally. I decided to attend that rally because, really, how could I be surprised by any of it? I was living in the capital of Virginia, the former home of the Confederacy, in a building rumored to sit atop a mass grave for the enslaved, and no one seemed to believe Donald Trump could win. The narrative went: no nation that had progressed enough to elect Obama could turn around and elect the pleather of orange-tinged reality TV show host who sometimes played a billionaire on shock radio. I talked to sensible people, smart people, deeply knowledgeable people. I talked to working-class people and middle-class people and whatever the people are who go to boarding schools. I talked to journalists and political organizers and fundraisers and activists and students and professors. Only two people in my daily sphere believed it was not only possible, but probable: Ms. Yvette and the Guy I Talk to Behind the Building on His Smoke Break (Guy, for short).

Ms. Yvette used to clean our office. Roughly 3 percent of the nation’s 1.6 million full-time faculty members are black. I am one of them. I can be the only one all day every day. Seeing Ms. Yvette is frequently my only chance to speak in my mother tongue when I am not home. It did not take much to
get Ms. Yvette talking. It did not take much to get almost any black person at the time to talk about the election.

"Girl you see what's his name?"

"Oh yeah, I saw it. Child, child, child. It's a mess."

"It is but it ain't our mess!"

"Well, I hope it isn't anyway."

"You think he gonna win?"

We looked at each other and started laughing. Of course he would win. The idea that he could not was ridiculous. Ms. Yvette knew her whites.

Guy may work where I work. He may not. It isn't very clear. Something about our routine daily activities is aligned. We pass each other at least twice a week during a semester. Sometimes he is wearing a uniform. He is almost always smoking. Sometimes it is even just a tobacco cigarette.

Guy is serious about calling me Professor.

"Professor Ma'am, you see your boy on TV?"

"How is he my boy?"

"He ain't mine!"

"Mine either."

"You think he gonna win?"

"Man, look. I believe anything is possible."

"Yeah, you seen Katt Williams? That one about the tiger? That tiger bit your ass because he remembered he was a tiger."

Guy got it.
I would not have dreamed of going to the Trump rally alone. I also would not have dreamed of asking Ms. Yvette or Guy. I had to go with white people. There were two of them and one of me. We had strategy sessions beforehand. I would walk between them, minimizing chances for small talk with the Trump faithful. We would sit near an exit, again with me between them, close to the end of the row. My comfort level would dictate when we left, no questions asked.

I was not there to see Donald Trump. He was a known quantity. I was there to see the people who believed in Donald Trump as the leader of the free world. I scanned the parking lot at the convention center. I noticed how many nice cars there were. Big trucks, expensive trucks, but also luxury sedans and sports cars. I inventoried the bumper stickers: University of Virginia, George Mason University, Old Dominion University, churches, resort towns, and peeling mainstream party stickers from elections past.

You could not just enter the convention center. Virginia had seen its share of recent public disturbances. A good tenth of a mile before the entrance, you had to verbally declare to a uniformed guard whether you were there to attend the rally or to protest it. The two groups were separated, sent behind opposing barricades. I stood behind a group of four white women, late forties and early fifties. It was hot. They wore the short-shorts and visors of vacationers. They were also drunk like vacationers. One proclaimed loudly, as one would at a rock concert, that if she caught Donald Trump’s eye she was going to flash her “tits” because “gawd, he is so sexy.”

The audience inside was bored. These rallies are not electrifying. By the time you see them as slick media packages on TV or the internet, editing makes it look like a party. It is far more mundane than that. Babies wore onesies that said, “Lock the bitch [Hillary Clinton] up.” Mothers bought drink koozies with crass sayings about “balls” and “hags” on them for their accompanying teenage sons. From the swag to the speakers, the Trump rally rhetoric was violent. But the mood and the scene was almost as placid as that Myers Park street. People smiled and nodded at me, if a little confused about seeing me. They had manners. One man in a wheelchair hooted, “Crooked bitch” when the topic of the American Health Care Act was mentioned from the dais.
Later, he mimed moving his manual wheelchair a bit so that I could move by him easily. Asian American immigrants, mostly first and second generation according to their signs, cheered when Trump disparaged immigrants. A handful of black (maybe African American, but I cannot be certain) people throughout the crowd sat back throughout the rally, tapping feet or patting knees at the parts they liked.

Much has been made of the losers who voted for Trump. I do not mean that disparagingly, but descriptively, as the Trump voter is generally typed as one who has lost something: economic opportunities, financial security, identity, gender supremacy. Not all losers do so gracefully. People ate up the idea of Trump voters as losers. It is empathetic and, perhaps more importantly given how white and elite is the media profession, confirmation bias. Others pointed out, rightfully so, that the Trump coalition is not a historical anomaly. Viewed through the lens of historical struggle, Trump’s election could be seen as white voters reclaiming this nation as theirs. All useful ways to understand a multifaceted phenomenon. One lens struggles to explain the empirical data showing that the typical Trump voter was, in fact, middle class and educated.

The other is more helpful if we consider that historical progress and reclamation exist as one equation. But there is still something missing.

Political theorist Corey Robin understands the history of the conservative right in the United States as a search for a fight, because the act of being conservative necessitates an undesirable progress against which it can rebel. In a sort of manifestation politics, the “right” co-creates or at least abets social progress against which it can be juxtaposed. Staid conservatism is far from seeking stasis. It is provoking and reactive because without progress there is no reason to prefer the lack of progress. Similarly, what is a white republic for white citizens and in defense of white property if there is not a dark threat? To the extent that white racial identity matters at all to how white voters vote, white Obama voters and white Trump voters are not necessarily expressing different views of whiteness. They are expressing the same one, each necessary for the other and both required for white identity politics to exist at all.

In its fragility—ceding ground to Obama’s multicultural vision of a majority-minority America—whiteness expresses
its superiority. The people at the Trump rally were not losers, neither were they especially remarkable. For all its violent rhetoric, the rally was quaint. The sameness of Myers Park’s lawns and rules about arriving early exerted whiteness as surely as a multicultural, mixed-class audience at the Trump rally projected their faith in whiteness as this nation’s most redeeming attribute. I however am not sure what social progress would actually look like given that its existence relies on the paradox of whiteness. But I do believe like Guy: a tiger bites to remind you that it is a tiger.