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Deployments of Multiracial Masculinity and Anti-Black Violence: The Racial Framings of Barack Obama, George Zimmerman, and Daunte Wright

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Abstract: In this article, I examine how political and media discourses of multiraciality are deployed to justify guilt and innocence. I trace the deployment of multiraciality to determine who is deserving of life or death in media coverage, political rhetoric, and court records during Obama’s presidency, in George Zimmerman’s 2013 acquittal, and in the 2021 killing of Daunte Wright. I examine the weaponization of discourses of multiracial identities as tools of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Through such weaponization, the construction of the multiracial man as an index of racial progress and post-racism evident in the Barack Obama era enabled the violence and miscarriages of justice in the killings of Trayvon Martin and Daunte Wright. I consider how transnational and U.S. narratives of multiraciality, joined with anti-Blackness and white supremacy, enabled the acquittal of George Zimmerman. Furthermore, I examine how white womanhood and fears of Black masculinity facilitated the sympathy garnered towards Kim Potter. In considering the killing of Daunte Wright, this paper shows how multiraciality and racial malleability are valuable only when utilized for preserving racial hierarchies.



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1. Introduction

In August 2021, new US Census data revealed significant growth in populations who identify with two or more races: what amounted to 9 million people in 2010 had reached 33.8 million in 2020 (Jones et al. 2021). Such multiraciality has been rearticulated and re-envisioned over and over again as evidence that anti-Blackness is waning. Mainstream media accounts frequently herald multiracial populations as a sign of racial progress despite the fact that multiracial populations have a long history in the United States (Carter 2013; Elam 2011; Joseph 2013; Sexton 2008; Squires 2007). Likewise, the 2008 US presidential election of Barack Hussein Obama marshaled multiraciality into a symbol of racial progress, and the January 2021 inauguration of Kamala Harris, a multiracial Black woman, as Vice President of the United States continued in the tradition. Summer 2020’s flurry of calls for racial reckoning after Officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd morphed into yet another empty narrative of racial progress.

Such narratives did not save the lives of Trayvon Martin, Daunte Wright, or numerous Black individuals. They did not prevent the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2013 after he killed a child for looking suspicious. The fact that Daunte Wright, a multiracial Black man, was stopped by police just ten miles from Chauvin’s ongoing trial in April 2021 did not save this young twenty-year-old father either. Neither did his multiraciality. Unpacking the lens of racial progress narratives reveals that multiracial masculinity is imbricated with multiple racialized masculinities stemming from racial hierarchies. The associations of Black masculinity with deviance and criminality combined with narratives of multiracial racial progress have rendered the co-existence of anti-Blackness and multiraciality illegible.

With the discourse of multiraciality as racial progress under Obama's presidency, the media racialization of George Zimmerman and his family also circulated around multiraciality as evidence of innocence. Nonetheless, Zimmerman's cloak of multiraciality guarded and upheld whiteness. The killing, the trial, and the acquittal of George Zimmerman ignited national debates about racism and became a catalyst for the Black Lives Matter Movement. George Zimmerman's racialization and multiraciality became key components in claims that the killing was not racially motivated, while the visual and linguistic optics of whiteness justified Zimmerman's claim of self-defense. White supremacy is supported by the proposition of multiraciality as fulfilling a prophecy of the end of racism. As diverse groups of protestors around the world called for reforms, the hope for racial progress seemed to be embodied in the existence of multiracial individuals such as Barack Obama and Daunte Wright. Even in the wake of Chauvin's conviction for murder, the normalization of anti-Black violence has been sustained.

While media reports headline the growth of the multiracial population, the reporting of this data does not acknowledge that multiracial individuals and groups have vastly differentiated experiences based upon their racial group membership and appearances. For example, the rate of interracial marriage between whites and Asians and Latinos is considerably higher than that between white and Black individuals (Lee and Bean 2010). Colorism among Latinx communities and the tendency of Latinx to identify as white more than any other minoritized group (Davenport 2016) potentially signal differentiated strategies into whiteness. Multiraciality in the United States is still largely framed in terms of white and Black, with the impact of multiraciality depending in part on where you fall on the perceived sliding scale between white and Black. Thus, Black-white multiracial individuals are less likely to be seen as white than Asian-white multiracial people, and this has life-and-death consequences (Strmic-Pawl 2016). As Tanya Hernández showed in *Multiracials and Civil Rights: Mixed-Race Stories of Discrimination* (Hernández 2018), multiracials are often discriminated against because of their association with non-whiteness. Whether by appearance or knowledge of non-white ancestry, mixed-race individuals are grouped together in a white-non-white hierarchy. Hernández acutely points out how self-identified multiracial arrestees experience racial profiling and police violence in similar ways as self-identified monoracial non-whites. Multiracial individuals are sites for the articulation of racial boundaries, reinforcing constructed categories of race. The idea of multiraciality cannot encompass how appearance and differentiated racialized experiences determine life outcomes. The rise in self-reported multiracial populations does not negate systemic racism and anti-Blackness. White supremacy is historically rooted in institutions and practices that consistently devalue Black lives.

From the idolization of Barack Obama to the prevalence of multiracial and interracial images in advertising, the pining for multiraciality seemingly absolves the desire to dismantle structural racism. The optimism that multiraciality will facilitate racial progress simultaneously neglects an explanation of why and how multiraciality will lead to future racial justice. Celebratory multiracialism is not an indicator of progress. In this article, I argue that discourses of multiraciality work in conjunction with white supremacy and anti-Blackness. In this study, I examine media framing, as informed by regional and national press, political rhetoric through speeches, and court records as evidence for how the framing of multiracial masculinities are operationalized in service of anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

Despite conjectures that racial mixing will lead to the end of racism, the differentiated use of multiraciality in the public sphere also normalizes anti-Blackness. Through an analysis of public discourse from media coverage, political rhetoric, and court records, this article demonstrates how racial difference is nonetheless manifested through phenotypical traits as associated with claims of guilt and innocence that determine the life experiences of multiracial individuals. Beginning with a synthesis of dominant narratives of multiraciality as racial progress that peaked in post-racial discourses surrounding Barack Obama's election, I outline how projects of multiraciality and anti-Blackness are gendered. After

considering how Obama became a multiracial index of racial progress, I situate the ongoing anti-Black violence that belies this symbolism. By studying constructions of multiracial masculinity, I unravel how proximity to whiteness heightens masculine power while proximity to Blackness or associations with Black masculinity lead to vulnerability. I then examine the multiracial discourses and acquittal of George Zimmerman. Positioning George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin, and Daunte Wright together allows me to unpack who secures white privilege through multiracial identities and who is subject to anti-Blackness. The discourses of multiraciality as the end of racism that enabled Obama's election also enabled anti-Black violence in the killing of Trayvon Martin and later in the killing of Daunte Wright. The following analysis synthesizes narratives of multiracial masculinities alongside perceptions of Black masculinities, white masculinities, and Latino masculinities in order to highlight ideologies of white supremacy that remain rooted in the United States. The dominant narrative of multiracials as symbols of racial progress occludes the tropes of Black male deviance and the practices that justify the policing and killing of men who are legibly viewed as Black. This research illustrates how multiracial Blackness is embedded within an ordering of white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Multiracial Blackness does not break racial boundaries; rather, it is a key site in the articulation of these racial boundaries.

2. Multiracial Masculinity and Notions of Racial Progress in the Obama Era

Projecting images of progress, multiracial images, and discourses about multiracial people obscure persistent racial violence rooted in white supremacy. From advertising featuring interracial families and racially ambiguous models (DaCosta 2007) to celebrations of the *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) Supreme Court case legitimizing interracial marriages to mainstream press accounts heralding multiracial populations as the end of race (Squires 2007), multiracial imagery and discourse often collapse multiraciality with the absolution of racism. By the early 2000s, multiraciality became a key component of post-racial discourse of the end of race or beyond race. Joseph (2018) asserted that "Postracial discourse [is] the media propagated notion that race and race-based discrimination are over, and that race and racism no longer affect the everyday lives of both Whites and people of color" (p. 197). In presenting multiraciality through futuristic, progressive, and/or post-racial narratives, these media headlines and images traffic in notions of racial purity and racial mixing as triumphing over racism. Likewise, African American understandings of Blackness encompass racial mixture due to historical experiences of enslavement and the predominance of the one-drop rule of hypodescent. The multiracial narrative expunges histories of slavery and colonization while also flattening differences in the experiences and treatment of racialized groups. It ignores evidence from Brazil, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic, where multiracial peoples have long been discursively celebrated alongside practices of white supremacy (Da Costa 2016; Hernández 2013; Mitchell 2020; Quinn 2021). Despite the numerous scholars who have challenged the notion of multiracial individuals as representing post-racial ideals (Brunsma 2006; Carter 2013; DaCosta 2007; Elam 2011; Ibrahim 2012; Joseph 2013; Masuoka 2018), the circulation of multiraciality as a model of racial harmony and the end of racism persists.

The image of a multiracial Black man as the rectifier of the nation reached its apogee in 2007 in the media discourse around President Barack Obama's campaign. The discourse around President Obama's 2008 election campaign featured projections about the end of race and shifting population demographics. In his 2008 speech "A More Perfect Union," in which he reflected upon his heritage as the product of a white Kansas-born mother and Kenyan father, Obama (2008) invoked the rhetoric of US exceptionalism and emphasized that "in no other country on earth is my story even possible." Erasing the existence of numerous other multicultural and multiracial societies, Obama used his familial origins to point to an exceptional and progressive view of the United States and his multiracial heritage as fulfilling a unique US promise. While Obama self-identified as Black, he consistently utilized the discourse of multiraciality as forms of physical and symbolic aspiration

to multiple audiences. The mainstream news media framing of “a more perfect union” illustrated the hope for multiracial exceptionalism illustrated by the “Obama phenomenon” in which Obama solves racial tensions and brings everyone together as a mythic mixed-race savior (Jolivet 2012; Dariotis and Yoo 2012).

Mass media commentators largely treated the election of Barack Obama as a signal of the advent of a post-racial United States where race is no longer significant. For example, in *The New York Times* op-ed, Juan Williams lauded, “Mr. Obama is in the vanguard of a new brand of multiracial politics. He is asking voters to move with him beyond race and beyond the civil rights movement” (Williams 2007). Later, following President Obama’s 2010 State of the Union speech, MSNBC anchor Chris Matthews noted, “He is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour.” Fleetwood (2015) articulated the connection between this narrative and neoliberal ideologies disregarding systemic racism. She noted that Obama’s iconicity is recognized as part of a legacy of Black male leaders who have contributed to making racism a component of the past. As Ibrahim (2012) observed, “Obama produced both celebrations of transcendent multiracial identity and black (masculine) advancement” (162). Obama’s imagery often flowed between multiracial exceptionalism and tropes of Black masculine deviance. Obama exemplifies what Joseph (2013) called the “the exceptional multiracial” (p. 165) who acts as a vessel that can be filled with any racialized image or de-raced. Joseph observed the circulation of explicitly racist images of Obama depicting Obama as a thug or terrorist or as post-racial images that denied his Blackness (Joseph 2013). Nonetheless, Obama’s multiracial embodiment supported the appeal of multiracial exceptionalism that goes beyond racial identity. In short, Obama declared: “[I’m] not the president of Black America. I’m the president of the United States of America” (Dingle 2012).

Media narratives, memoirs, novels, and public personas of celebrities discussing multiracial exceptionalism have little correspondence to the lives of the average multiracial person and do not reveal the operationalizing of racial hierarchies at work in these lives (Hernández 2018; Ibrahim 2012). Obama’s Black multiracial masculinity did not transform deeply rooted structures of power. Instead, these structures soaked up his Black multiracial masculinity to further legitimize anti-Black violence. The vision of Obama’s government as race-neutral maneuvered into a deracialization of Obama that fed into post-racial narratives. It resulted in an inarticulation of structural racial violence.

This image of racial harmony and multiraciality is not gender-neutral, with an underrepresentation of multiracial masculine identification and imagery in media and academia. Multiracial masculinity illustrates differentiated connections between constructions and experiences of race and gender. The feminization of multiraciality stems back to the specter of the tragic mulatta trope and how fears of racial and sexual transgression continue to be mapped onto multiracial Black women’s bodies into the twenty-first century (Joseph 2013; Mitchell 2020; Streeter 2012). Images of multiracial masculinity prominently emerged again in the late 1990s under Tiger Woods’s marketed global “Cablinasian” identity that offered race as a personal identity. Woods unsettled the Black masculinist legacies of “race men” who represent and lead the Black race, and his figure launched the multiracial identity movement into the public eye (Ibrahim 2012; Yu 2003). By 2008, President Obama embodied Black advancement, multiracial masculinity, and post-racial ideas in which his racial mixture made race obsolete. Yet, Obama’s multiracial masculinity did not transform the anti-Blackness undergirding U.S. institutions.

Multiracial masculinity aligns with judgements based on phenotype and correlated associations of masculinity with their corresponding racialized groups. For example, the scrutiny of Obama aligns with ways in which multiracial masculinity is understood and identified, particularly in terms of Black masculinity. Recent scholarship has examined multiracial male perspectives (Davenport 2018; Newman 2019; Sims and Joseph-Salisbury 2019) and the perception of multiracial Black male celebrities in media spheres as hypermasculine (Carter 2008). It has situated masculinity as a key frame for understanding the presentation of multiraciality (Ibrahim 2012; Joseph 2013). Adding to this literature, in this article, I

examine how multiracial masculinities are deployed in relationship to anti-Black violence. A key consideration in the gendering of multiraciality is determining who identifies as multiracial. [Davenport \(2018\)](#) observed that women are more likely to self-identify as multiracial. This multiracial identification becomes even more disproportionate among Black–white multiracials, with men much more probable to identify as Black. Davenport contended that men may identify less often as multiracial because they are also more likely to be perceived as Black than women are. Even those individuals who identify as Black–white multiracials typically think of themselves as comparatively more Black than white. [Davenport \(2018\)](#) argued that this positioning is due to the significance of Blackness in structuring everyday life. This stance comports with how [Sims and Joseph-Salisbury \(2019\)](#) found that Black mixed-race men connect with and acquire strategically similar identities to their Black peers in greater proportions than women in part because their mixture is perceived as congruent to heteronormative masculinities. [Newman \(2019\)](#) noted that presumed expressions of Black masculinity bind Black multiracial male adolescents, even as they are exotified and constructed as desirable. Newman observed that “when black multiracial boys did not perform black masculinity adequately, it was their authentic blackness that came into question, not necessarily their masculinity” (p. 120). These contours of Black multiracial masculinities converge into how race is made legible when discussing anti-Black violence. Considering how discourses of Black masculinity and multiracial masculinity are constructed separately, as overlapping, or as compatible together is significant when it determines who lives and dies and who is presumed innocent or guilty.

3. Anti-Black Violence

The 2021 killing of Daunte Wright during Derek Chauvin’s trial for the brutal murder of George Floyd was a fresh and stark reminder of the devaluation of Black lives. Black people are disproportionately victims of police brutality, are incarcerated at higher rates than other groups, and receive longer prison sentences ([Sexton 2017](#)). Law enforcement and anti-Black violence are connected to histories of slavery and colonization. Policing and imprisonment strategies have repeatedly targeted Black people. The theories and practices of surveillance utilized from slave ships onwards continue in the present ([Browne 2015](#)). Slavery warranted the constant surveillance and control of Black people. From slave patrols to the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law to civilian police, anti-Blackness and control are entrenched in the histories of racial violence and law enforcement ([Hadden 2003](#); [Jones 2018](#)). Lynching, Jim Crow laws, the eradication of Black communities, and the incarceration of Black individuals belie the illusion of equality constructed through the 13th and 14th amendments ([Alexander 2012](#); [Muhammad 2010](#); [Owusu-Bempah 2017](#); [Singh 2017](#))

Anti-Blackness and fears of the waning of white patriarchal power are central to racialized violence. White fears of interracial sex are embedded in the practice and spectacle of lynching ([Apel 2004](#)) in that they were often justified in defense of “white womanhood” ([Wells 1895](#)). White supremacist violence from the peak of lynchings during Reconstruction to the cases of state-sanctioned violence today illustrates how white violence against Black bodies is normalized across the United States as a practice, ritual, and spectacle. For example, lynching was justified because it conquered the threat of the potential Black brute rapist and mass incarceration and police violence control criminals, who are disproportionately Black. The national crises of racial violence and the murdering of Black individuals while under the protection of the law are other outgrowths of these legacies. With these histories, bodies coded as Black are more susceptible to policing and criminalization.

The criminal legal system after slavery targeted Black Americans and forced men, women, and children into punitive contracts with white employers and into convict-lease systems ([Blackmon 2008](#); [Hicks 2010](#)). Government officials and policymakers use the disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates of Black Americans as evidence of the inherent criminality of Black Americans ([Muhammad 2010](#)). This perception of criminality continues to structure how Black individuals are perceived today as inherently criminal

and dangerous. The majority of whites believe that Black Americans are predisposed to violence (Welch 2007). Increasing the impact of this racist belief, whites are overrepresented on juries (Gau 2016), illustrating the overrepresentation of white Americans in institutions and positions of power.

Police disproportionately focus on surveilling and managing Black bodies and Black communities (Anderson 2012; Muhammad 2010; Owusu-Bempah 2017; Welch 2007). As a result, Black communities essentially inhabit the battlefields of war (Gilmore 2007; James 2007; Singh 2017). Almost a quarter, 24%, of Black drivers are stopped by police every year (Epp et al. 2014). Black individuals are three times more likely to be killed by police than white individuals (Schwartz and Jahn 2020). Black victims of police shootings are twice as likely to be unarmed than white victims (Nix et al. 2017). Since the 1980s War on Drugs, which was incited by white moral panics erroneously attributing drug use to Black communities, police have used military equipment, training, and intelligence (Alexander 2012). It has also led to frequent stops, harassment, and intimidation by police, all of which are more likely to turn violent (Alexander 2012). The technologies and archives of surveillance are utilized to prompt white fears of Blackness (Cacho 2012).

The Black Lives Matter movements exposes not just police violence and killing but also the systemic practices and structures that facilitate Black vulnerability and death. The structural dynamics that expose Black people to over-policing and incessant and intensified interactions with police also increase the likelihood of Black death. As Davis (2016) described, U.S. history has involved “an unbroken stream of racist violence, both official and extralegal, from slave patrols and the Ku Klux Klan to contemporary profiling practices and present-day vigilantes” (p. 77).

Yet, by President Barack Obama’s election, the optics and discourse of post-racial and multiracial ideas of progress had occluded persistent anti-Black violence. The history of anti-Black violence in which Blackness itself is viewed as a crime explains the impunity in which Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin. At the same time, the coinciding ideas of multiraciality as post-racial along with the possession of white masculinity enabled Zimmerman’s acquittal. As the Black Lives Matter movements elucidate, the violence and oppression impacting Black communities stem from substantive ideologies of white supremacy and anti-Blackness (Taylor 2016). The racial progress narratives engendered by multiracial symbols imbued with post-racial hopes are congruent, not incompatible, with the persistence of racial violence and inequity. Many problems facing communities of color are transformations in the form—not content—of racial domination.

Racial embodiment and how bodies are characterized, categorized, coded, and read came to the forefront in the murder of Trayvon Martin. Under the first Black president, the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 provides evidence of how racial identification, multiraciality, anti-Blackness, the visual optics of race worked as matters of life and death. The Black self-identification and the framing of the multiraciality of Obama with appeals to race-neutrality and contrast with the claims to racial innocence from George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin’s assailant. The construction of the multiracial man as an index of post-racism, as it were, enables the violence and miscarriages of justice we saw in Martin’s murder and in Zimmerman’s trial. In the case of Daunte Wright’s killing by Kim Potter, Wright’s multiraciality was overshadowed by a focus on white womanhood and Black deviance. In the following sections, I first examine how Trayvon Martin and Kim Potter, both of whom are viewed as monoracial, are nonetheless activated within gendered discourses of innocence and guilt as related to multiraciality and racial mixing.

4. “If I Had a Son, He Would Look Like Trayvon”: Trayvon Martin, Barack Obama and Black Embodiment

The 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen-year-old African-American teenager, by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch coordinator, ignited debates over racial progress, racial identity, and anti-Black violence. In the wake of Trayvon Martin’s murder, President Barack Obama remained silent for a month even as protests arose after

the police failed to investigate and accepted Zimmerman's claims of self-defense. When a journalist asked him about it at a White House press conference, Obama described it as a tragedy while also making a unifying call, saying he hoped "that everybody pulls together—federal, state and local—to figure out exactly how this tragedy happened." He made a universalizing call by pleading, "I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this." By appealing to the national family, Obama asked non-Black parents to place themselves in the predicament of Black parents. The safety and well-being of Black children, he implied, should be the objectives of the national family—not just Black families. This attempt at universalizing the parental anguish of losing a child also functioned to initially project a race-neutral stance. With national concerns on racial violence rising, Obama presented himself as the head of the US race-neutral multiracial family while also maintaining ties to Black kinship and parentage.

However, he then said: "But my main message is the parents of Trayvon Martin. If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon. When I think about this boy, I think about my own kids" (Condon 2012). Here, he juxtaposed universalism with Black embodiment. Instead of Obama as the head of a multiracial nation that is poised as race-neutral but nonetheless privileging whiteness, Obama situated himself as a Black father figure despite never uttering the term Black or the word race. In this way, Obama, as head of the national family, integrated Blackness into the family while also redirecting the multiracial exceptionalism narrative.

Obama emphasized how the visual optics of race dictate matters of life and death. While he was lauded for his forthright attention to Trayvon's murder and his reference to the legitimacy of law and authorities, he was also critiqued by Black activists for not explicitly discussing the racism of Stand Your Ground laws or the criminal justice system, either after Trayvon's murder or after Zimmerman's acquittal (Perry 2017; West 2013). Deploying Black racialization on himself, Obama mapped this Blackness onto Martin. In contrast to the ways in which Zimmerman's multiracial heritage was later deployed to buttress whiteness, Obama placed himself first as the multiracial president of the US family and then as the Black president of the US family in order to garner identification and sympathy. In other words, he repackaged himself to audiences as Black and the embodiment of mixed and Black experiences that are visually coded as Black. As such, this Black embodiment can exist through presidential power and through not being able to occupy spaces coded as white without the threat of death. By personifying what his son would look like if he had one, Obama also evoked the notion of linked Black fates (Brooks 2012). He placed his own body between Trayvon Martin and the white supremacist society that makes Black death normative. Obama's recognition of Trayvon Martin and his parents made it clear that a person of Black descent who is the head of the nation could also face powerlessness. Gesturing towards proximity to Blackness instead of proximity to whiteness, Obama's response made racialization and racial identification not an individual choice in the vein that some multiracial identity advocates propose. This recognition disrupted the post-racial narratives of multiraciality despite the calls of multiraciality and colorblindness that Zimmerman represented.

Yet, this inability of the US nation to see and humanize Blackness became clear through Zimmerman's acquittal. The nearly all-white jury found Zimmerman not guilty. Reflecting after the initial shock, Sybrina Fulton, Martin's mother, recalled, "When I heard the verdict, I kind of understand the disconnect. And that maybe they didn't see Trayvon as their son. They didn't see Trayvon as a teenager. They didn't see Trayvon as just a human being that was minding his own business." Fulton's statements gesture to how innocence is presumed to be white and Blackness is presumed as already criminal. This statement of not seeing her son stands in relation to Obama's statement that his son would look like Trayvon.

What appears as a colorblind race-neutral stance of the jury is actually a gesture towards seeing race and how racial scripts blind the ability to conceptualize who is human, who is a child, and who is deserving of life. While Obama's statement that his son would

look like Trayvon coordinated a direct visual connection between himself and Martin, Fulton's statement articulated that this visual connection actually dehumanized Martin. The visual connection between Obama and Martin, i.e., the perception of Blackness on the part of Zimmerman and the white jurors, was the reason her son was killed and his killer acquitted.

Fears about racial mixing and multiraciality propelled the justification for Trayvon Martin's murder. The appeals to white womanhood and the threat that Black men and boys pose to the protection of white womanhood were utilized in Zimmerman's defense much as they were used to justify the brutalization and murder of Emmett Till in 1955. Zimmerman evoked Olivia Bertalana, a white woman in the gated community whose home had been robbed when her husband was away (Onwuachi-Willig 2018). This view of Martin not as a child but as a Black criminal preying on white women invoked the fears of racial mixing that have been ubiquitous throughout U.S. history. The tropes of white masculine saviors protecting fragile white womanhood from Black criminal and aggressive brutes are utilized to help both jurors and the public to identify with white male defendants such as Zimmerman (Onwuachi-Willig 2018). The fear of the Black male rapist is fundamentally a fear of interracial intimacies and the waning of white masculine authority. That such tropes continued to be used at a time when a mixed and Black president held the highest office in the United States of America showcased the power of fears of racial mixing and Black political power. While Zimmerman's multiraciality was deployed to claim colorblindness, the visual connection between Obama and Martin conveyed that multiraciality and anti-Blackness can go hand in hand.

While Obama's figure was considered a signal of racial progress, his response pointed out the inadequacies of this forward narrative of improvement. In response to Zimmerman's acquittal, Obama commented, "You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is, Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago." Speaking to the threats to Black life and well-being, Obama went on to say that there were few Black individuals, including himself, "who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store" (Obama 2013). Rather than through familial connection to a child victim, here Obama directly self-identified himself as also vulnerable to Black marginalization and death. Rather than projecting a multiracial post-racial image, Obama pointed to how multiracial exceptionality could not be operationalized with anti-Blackness. In short, multiraciality was not a shield from Black death and trauma.

5. Kim Potter and Innocent White Womanhood against Black Male Deviance

In 2021, Daunte Wright—a man described in the press as biracial, Black, and biracial Black—was murdered by Kim Potter, a white police officer. From the murder of Emmett Till to the fatal suspicion of Trayvon Martin to the killing of Daunte Wright, white women retain credibility that is deployed against Black and brown people, particularly men. Criminalization solidifies white women's identity such that white female purity is ranked through the idea of Black female impurity and Black male rapaciousness (Haley 2016). The sympathetic framing of Potter's case vis-à-vis Wright's criminality furthered the delineation of whiteness through righteous innocence to Black deviancy. Just as Trayvon Martin's murder was justified by George Zimmerman through the supposed protection of white women and white space, policing functions as a way to maintain separation between white women and Black men. When white women enter the police office, white patriarchy is nonetheless maintained through the protection of white women. For example, Black female police officers have described how white female officers seek the protection of male police officers (Martin 1994). Thus, the epitome of the "Karen"—white women who endanger Black people by calling the police without cause—finds a place in the police department itself. Combined with the historic lynchings of Black men such as Emmett Till in the name of white womanhood, the archetypes supporting this behavior, white femininity and its supposed truthfulness, are continuously weaponized to enact anti-Black state violence.

Presenting Kim Potter as the embodiment of ideologies of white womanhood, the court filings in her trial and her defense team painted her as an innocent victim of the threat Daunte Wright posed to her. They called his death her “innocent mistake.” Defense attorney Paul Engh told jurors that when Potter killed Wright, “She made a mistake. This was an accident. She’s a human being. She had to do what she had to do to prevent a death to a fellow officer.” Emphasizing that Wright did not comply with Potter’s directions, he also declared, “All he had to do was surrender. . . . All he had to do was stop, and he’d still be with us” (Bailey 2021). The defense attorneys constructed whiteness as human with Blackness as other and, hence, also arranged the conditions of who was deserving of life and death. They constructed Potter’s white womanhood as heroic and sympathetic and Wright’s Blackness as an obstacle to law and order. The rationalization of violence and death aligns with the preservation of white womanhood. This duality effectively placed Wright squarely within the representation of Black masculinity without the supposed benefits of whiteness from his multiraciality. The investment in the maintenance of white privilege relied upon the heightened focus on white innocent womanhood and Black male criminality given Daunte Wright’s racially mixed heritage. Wright was interpreted through racializing markers of Black masculine threats.

The potential of “white women’s tears” to inflict violence (Hamad 2019) acts as a form of domination. The brandishing of excessive emotion to procure innocence operationalizes white womanhood in juxtaposition to ideas of uncontrollable Blackness. In Potter’s case, her tears functioned to induce empathy and to expunge her from guilt and punishment. While Potter was not obligated to shield her emotions, it is the interpretation of those tears that deemed Potter worthy of sympathy and absolution. At Potter’s sentencing, *ABC News* described the judge, Regina Chu, as having been “choked up as she described the difficulty deciding on a sentence for Potter” and having “cited the difficult job that police face—and Potter’s remorse—as justification for giving her a light sentence.” Judge Chu stated, “To those who disagree and feel a longer prison sentence is appropriate, as difficult as it may be, please try to empathize with Ms. Potter’s situation” (Karnowski 2022). Empathy and humanity center on whiteness, whereas individuals with visible Black ancestry or associated with Blackness through familial relations are positioned as less deserving. Potter’s case and Wright’s killing serve as reminders that multiracial Black men are not seen as raceless or as close to white. For both Martin and Potter, the defense of whiteness relied upon the punishment of Blackness. The following section illustrates how Blackness was penalized and whiteness was shielded within multiraciality with the cases of George Zimmerman and Daunte Wright.

6. George Zimmerman and Transnational Discourses and Deployments of Multiraciality

The discourse of multiraciality became a salient feature in the framing of Zimmerman’s innocence. This framing of multiraciality, the collapsing of race and ethnicity, and the invocation of Latinidad all relied on the notions that racial mixture exempted anti-Blackness. Initially described as white in police reports and in US media accounts, Zimmerman has a white American father and a Peruvian mother. His father quickly wrote to news media that his son was a “Spanish-speaking minority” and from a multiracial family. In later media accounts, George Zimmerman has been described as white, a white Hispanic (Alvarez 2012a), white and Hispanic, and a biracial Latino (Hamacher 2012) raised in a mixed-race family with Black relatives (Nejame 2012). The insertion of Zimmerman’s Latinidad and his minority status from his family’s interviews and from news accounts explicitly projected that Zimmerman did not have the capacity to racially discriminate. He simultaneously benefited from his presumed whiteness and his Latino masculinity. While televisual Latina femininity is often presented through Latina female bodies in which Latinidad is presented as ambiguously brown but not breaking from racial hierarchies privileging whiteness (Báez 2018; Molina-Guzmán 2018), televisual Latino masculinity is presented as part of a marginalized group featuring victims of social inequities (Delgado 2005). Zimmerman’s family utilized such notions of Latino masculinity to position him as

marginalized while also utilizing whiteness to presume his justification for killing Martin. The signifiers of Zimmerman's German surname against the signifier of a presumed Spanish surname and phenotypical markers of skin color, hair color, and eye color completed the picture of racial innocence. Visual and linguistic codes were employed to deduce Zimmerman's belonging, privileges, and sense of shared marginalization as a minority. The belief that Zimmerman was incapable of enacting racial discrimination as a Spanish-speaking minority is tied into Latino, Latin American, and US myths of multiraciality and racial ambiguity.

Conservatives expressed outrage at the term white Hispanic (Wemple 2012) and accused CNN of political bias based on their use of the term (O'Connor 2013). Thomas Sowell from *The National Review* claimed that the term deployed the race card to make whiteness appear evil even though Zimmerman was no whiter than Obama, who also had one white parent (Sowell 2012). This claim ignored the fact that Hispanic has been treated as an ethnicity question rather than a racial category on the US Census since the 1980s and thus that Zimmerman likely had two parents who considered themselves white. It also ignored how phenotype, or what some scholars term as "street race," determines treatment (Hernández 2018; López et al. 2018; Monk 2015; Sue 2013; Telles 2014; Vargas et al. 2019). Regardless of how his mother identifies, Zimmerman benefits in the eyes of police and strangers from proximity to whiteness. In contrast, Martin was unambiguously Black in the racial hierarchy that determines life outcomes and who lives and who dies. Latinos equipped with whiteness can enact anti-Blackness.

While there are significant national differences in who is described as Black and the meaning of Blackness (Sue 2013; Paschel 2016; Telles 2014), anti-Black racism is prevalent and historically embedded in Latin America. Whiteness and proximity to whiteness with European phenotypical features and lighter skin are valued, while darker skin and phenotypical African features are vilified. As people migrate from Latin America, belief systems and anti-Black ideologies are also transferred over. The culture of anti-Blackness is passed across generations (Hernández 2016). Latin American colonial histories of dispossession, genocide, enslavement, and exploitation fuel continuing white supremacist racial projects. Calls to "mejorar la raza" ("better the race") through racial mixing and large-scale state-subsidized European immigration are part of these racial projects of whitening the nation (García-Peña 2016; Quinn 2021; Mitchell 2020). In contrast to the United States, where segregation appeased white fears of racial mixing, racial mixing (mestizaje) in Latin America has been used as proof of racial inclusion and equality (Miller 2004; Telles 2004; Telles and Sue 2009; Wade 2005).

Although the uses of mestizaje are not monolithic in Latin America, in the Latin American logics of mestizaje, Blackness and Indigeneity are generally components in the construction of a raceless or post-racial subject. The racial projects (Omi and Winant 2015) of mestizaje were constructed by governments and elites to simultaneously coerce assimilation and marginalization (Telles and Bailey 2013). They reflect transnational colonial racial logics and are imbricated in the racialization and racial formations of Latinx communities in the United States (Haney López 2003; Hernández 2016; Hooker 2014, 2017). Myths of racial equality and harmony in Latin America enable the state endorsement of anti-Blackness and forms of racial violence to continue (Alves 2018; Guridy and Hooker 2018; Paschel 2016; Smith 2016; Vargas 2018). Latinx people enter the United States with these histories and pathologies of anti-Blackness, and Latinx identities replicate these racial hierarchies of anti-Blackness and the privileging of whiteness (Dávila 2008; Flores and Román 2009). The transnational upholding of racial ambiguity and racial mixing alongside anti-Blackness transferred to US contexts and the framing of Zimmerman. Understanding this is necessary for understanding how the flow of anti-Black logics, racial mixing, and multiraciality affected the discourse surrounding his murder of Trayvon Martin.

An essentialist flattening of Latinx identities obscures the ways in which white supremacy manifests. White Latinx racism rose in the Trump era (Haywood 2017), as did anti-Blackness among white and white-passing Latinx groups (Dache et al. 2019), all

pointing to how Latinx identities must also be understood in relation to white supremacy. Some Latinx bodies and groups are empowered due to their proximity to whiteness or mixed-race status, a positioning that is entrenched in white supremacist colonial logics (Rosa 2018). Latino men can also operate as agents of white supremacy, even as they are categorized as minorities in the United States. Indeed, Martin acted as an agent of state-sanctioned violence, as did police officer Jeronimo Yanez's involvement in the killing of Philando Castile in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2016. The definitions and privileges of whiteness do not exclude Latinos. The meaning of multiraciality is derived through proximities to whiteness. Latinidad and whiteness are not exclusive; in fact, whiteness is often a key component of identity for Latino political leaders such as Marc Rubio and Ted Cruz, who denounce Black Lives Matter and other Black social movements. Accounts of Zimmerman's mixed heritage and the discourses of racial mixing and Latinidad allowed Zimmerman to operationalize whiteness.

Zimmerman's mother's self-identification as proudly Afro-Peruvian in news media adds to the transnational multiracial discourses. In a Spanish-language interview on Univision, she claimed and that her son does not look at color (Univision Noticias 2012). Her other son, Robert Zimmerman, appeared on NPR to explain that he was not a white man, given his upbringing with an Afro-Peruvian mother, and that this proved that race was not a factor in his brother's murder of Trayvon Martin (Tell Me More 2013). Both statements claimed that George's white appearance misidentified his authentic racial self.

Media outlets picked up the positioning of Zimmerman as having Black roots in an attempt to equate Latin American Blackness with US Blackness to make the case that there was a privileging of Martin's Blackness versus that of Zimmerman's for political purposes. The *New York Post* ran the headline "Zimmerman's black roots" and described the household as mixed (Francescani 2012). Conservative news websites repeated Robert Zimmerman's allegation that his brother's skin had been lightened in mugshot photos, and that this was part of an attempt by the liberal press to criminalize white people (Hing 2013). It is here that the framing of Obama and the creation of the idea of the multiracial man as an indicator of the end of racism evolved into a narrative in which multiraciality and racial fluidity were deployed in favor of Zimmerman. The Zimmerman family's translated their Blackness in a US context so that George Zimmerman's claim of Black heritage was imagined to shield him from enacting racially motivated murder. Visibly Black individuals such as Martin and Daunte Wright, whether or not they are multiracial, do not have the privilege of not thinking about race or not seeing color in the way that they do.

Zimmerman's race and discourses of Latinidad, racial mixture, and whiteness played roles in the debates over the media construction of Zimmerman's guilt. Zimmerman's Latinidad and the rhetoric of multiracial families allowed his racial identity to appear malleable to some audiences while empowering whiteness and exploiting Black familial lineages. The transnational confluences of racial identities and the visual registers of racialization do not mitigate the practices and ideologies of anti-Blackness. Multiraciality and Latinidad offered Zimmerman the power of whiteness alongside claims to non-whiteness. The benefits of a malleable racial identity are significant for people, such as Zimmerman, who are prominently perceived as proximate to whiteness.

Multiraciality, Latinidad, and Blackness do not work in the same way for individuals racialized as Black. Blackness and Latinidad are often seen as mutually exclusive (Flores and Román 2009; Jones 2018), so such individuals are seen as not Latinx and perceptions of them as Black make them vulnerable to racial violence. The April 2021 actions of state troopers in Virginia who stopped Caron Nazario, a dark-skinned army second lieutenant still in uniform, are just a recent high-profile illustration. Nazario requested an explanation for why he had been pulled over, asked officers to relax, and held his hand up through the window. They pepper-sprayed him in the face and struck him repeatedly. Media reports described Nazario as Black, Afro-Latino, and Black and Latino. Nazario asked, "I'm actively serving this country and this is how you're going to treat me?" That the answer

was yes illustrates how the option of multiraciality does not detract from anti-Blackness (Ives and Kramer 2021).

Paradigms of mestizaje and racial mixture in the Americas privilege whiteness while dismissing Black populations. These discourses of racial mixing, Latinidad, and mestizaje then function to reinforce racial boundaries that value whiteness and proximity to whiteness. While Zimmerman's family members and sympathetic media portrayals deployed his Latino identities and multiraciality as evidence of his absence of racial biases, Nazario had no access to the manifestations of Latinidad and mixture that might protect him from white supremacy. The ethnic diversity of Black populations in the United States and the multiraciality of many Black populations in the United States nonetheless point to a linked fate (Davenport 2016; Khanna 2010) despite claims of multiraciality as progress. In Zimmerman's case, Latinidad and multiraciality worked in the operation of white supremacy, whereas in Nazario's case, it worked towards vulnerability to state-sanctioned brutality. Nazario was perceived as Black and hence vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence. If multiraciality functions towards greater proximity to perceptions of Blackness, it reinforces the dominant position of white supremacy. Nazario's dark skin and phenotypical features afforded him no benefits, whereas Zimmerman's light skin, last name, and features associated with whiteness allowed him to be perceived as white and therefore move around and take violent action as white.

As much as Zimmerman's defense claimed that the murder of Trayvon Martin was not about race, the media racialization of Zimmerman means race was unavoidable. Zimmerman's media framing privileged mixture while maintaining his white privilege (and that of his family as his proxies) to speak back against accusations of racial discrimination. Zimmerman himself became a vessel to project anxieties of whiteness, multiraciality, and racial ambiguity. *The New York Times* reported that the police investigation of Zimmerman figured him as "not prone to violence or prejudice," indicating that he "moved easily between racial and ethnic groups" (Alvarez 2012b). Zimmerman's lack of prejudice was equated with social fluidity between racial groups in a similar vein to strands of discourses of multiraciality. This notion of a unique multiracial ability to move between racial groups comports with the celebratory multiracial identity discourses promoted by multiracial identity activists (Root 1996), and the collapsing of multiraciality with racial fluidity and choosing one's identity (Donnella 2016; Keller 2017) was mobilized in how Zimmerman's persona was presented as racially unbiased.

The suggestion that Zimmerman has Black roots and therefore cannot be racist fails to account for how whiteness works. Regardless of his roots, Zimmerman is able to access the privileges and properties of whiteness (Harris 1993). These include positioning himself as a vigilante who knew that Martin was "up to no good" and to use the Stand Your Ground laws that treat Blackness as out of place in a presumed white space (Onwuachi-Willig 2017). Although Zimmerman repeatedly ignored law enforcement's admonishments not to confront Martin, his defense used Florida's Stand Your Ground law that establishes a right to defend one's self against threats or perceived threats and to use lethal force. This law itself and those like it in other states are steeped in racial inequities. Zimmerman positioned himself as the victim and Martin as the criminal. His presupposed innocence depended on the killing of Black bodies (Cacho 2014). Zimmerman positioned himself as white by assuming the violability of Black bodies in the same spaces that he occupied.

As the right-leaning press and conservatives attacked Martin's character, he went from innocent Black boy to the trope of the dangerous criminal Black man in the media-enacted white racial frame (Lane et al. 2020). The effacement of Martin's character effectively also helped whiten Zimmerman. This trope of Black criminality is at the center of the ongoing pattern of murders of Black men, women, boys, girls, and nonbinary individuals. Using Martin's hoodie as a form of racial coding for Black masculinity, *Fox News* reporter Geraldo Rivera stated that Trayvon's hoodie was as much to blame for his death as Zimmerman was (Castellanos 2012). Zimmerman's multiraciality gave him an out from the consequences of his actions, whereas Trayvon Martin's Blackness was used as an excuse for his death and as

a way for the media/conservatives to contrast Zimmerman. Already presumed as criminal and guilty, Martin became part of the “adultification of Black boys” in which he was incongruent with adolescence, humanity, and boyhood in media discourses; some media sources actually claimed the year on Martin’s birth certificate was falsified (Dancy 2014). In this way, much like Emmett Till in 1955 and scores of children after him, Martin is part of a continuation of anti-Black violence and white supremacy (Harawa 2014).

Whiteness in the Americas is not about an idea of biology; rather, it about a relationship to dominance, the devaluation of Blackness, and assumptions of innocence, truth, judgment, and freedom. Zimmerman was able to enjoy this relationship to dominance, this whiteness, which is precisely what allowed him to claim Blackness to get himself out of jail, as it were, without having to live the consequences of Blackness in the United States. Through this judgment of Blackness itself as criminal when he approached Martin, Zimmerman aligned himself with whiteness. Thus, we know that Zimmerman’s Latinx and multiracial framings were not discordant with whiteness; rather, they worked in association with it. He operated through white supremacy and operationalized discourses of blurred racial lines and mixing to assume this innocence. The death of Black bodies emerges through white supremacy and its structures and institutions of white domination.

7. Daunte Wright within Multiracial and Interracial Family Frames

Multiraciality does not impede vulnerability to state-sanctioned anti-Black violence. By 2021, with Biden and Harris in political office, the image of a hopeful restoration of racial harmony took hold. By 6 January 2021, though, a violent coup steeped in white supremacy represented the reminder that Harris’s multiracial, multicultural, and blended images of her upbringing, identification, and family were nascent in comparison to the historical underpinnings of the United States. Yet, the repeated discourse of interracial relationships and multiraciality as evidence of racial progress did not stop once Obama’s presidency shattered the post-racial fantasy. President Biden himself trotted out the interracial tropes to make cases for the improvement of race relations. In a 21 February 2021 town hall, Biden was asked a direct question about police brutality and race, but he sidestepped the question: “I’m going to say something that’s going to get me in trouble . . . think about it, if you want to know where the American public is, look at the money being spent on advertising. Did you ever 5 years ago think every second or third ad out of 5 or 6 would be biracial couples?” Reverting back to the similar discourses around the election of Barack Obama, Biden touted the images of interracial families and multiraciality as a celebratory sign of progress and as an evolutionary step towards racial harmony in the United States despite the backdrop of anti-Black violence.

In April 2021, the nation waited for the verdict in the prosecution of Derek Chauvin, a Minnesota police officer who murdered George Floyd, an unarmed Black man accused of spending a counterfeit \$20 bill. The brutality of Floyd’s murder propelled attention to the ongoing dehumanization of Black life and protests across the globe. Chauvin, a white police officer who at the time of Floyd’s murder had been married to a Hmong American woman, was not immune to white supremacist practices (Osuji 2019) and the perpetuation of racial inequities and racial othering (Chong 2020).

While the trial of Derek Chauvin’s murder of George Floyd was underway, Daunte Wright was killed just a few miles away with state-sanctioned violence. As a diverse jury—composed of self-identified multiracial, Black, and white jurors—in Hennepin County, Minnesota handed out the guilty verdict for Derek Chauvin, a glimmer of hope was quickly dampened by the news of the murder of Wright. Like Floyd, Wright had been stopped for a low-level crime and met with deadly force. The killings of George Floyd, just as in the killing of Philando Castile in 2016 and the subsequent killing of Daunte Wright in April 2021, were not aberrations in Minnesota nor in the United States. While Minnesota presents itself as a beacon of liberal tolerance and progressiveness (Jacobs et al. 2021), the liberal fantasy of the North as a bastion of racial tolerance also relies on repeated patterns of violence against Black and Indigenous groups.

As Obama had alluded to in his connection with Martin, multiraciality does not trump anti-Blackness and the threat of Black death. Like Trayvon Martin's, Wright's character was subject to numerous attacks after his death. Like Martin, although he was the victim, similar to Michael Brown and George Floyd and so many others, he stood trial in the court of public opinion where Black guilt is presumed and Black death is justifiable. Like so many before him, he was seen as suspect, as deviant, and thereby as deserving of violence. Degler (1986) proposed that people such as Wright might have what he terms a "mulatto escape hatch," referencing a Brazilian intermediary social mobility mechanism reliant on whitening and dodging Blackness, but this overlooked the full spectrum of anti-Blackness and white supremacy. As Tanya Hernandez asserted (Hernández 2021), "There is no 'mulatto escape hatch' out of racialized police violence when African ancestry is in any way visible" (p. 71).

The narratives of interracial harmony through multiracial individuals and the persistence of violence were sustained through the positioning of interracial families. The killing of Daunte Wright was associated with the disrupting of U.S. progress epitomized through interracial families. At Wright's funeral, Black civil rights leader Reverend Al Sharpton suggested in his eulogy that he had been the product of interracial compassion and harmony. Such rhetoric reinforced the idea of interracial families and multiracial individuals as sites of racial harmony and proof of racial tenderness rather than tension. Media outlets such as the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* emphasized Sharpton's words that "Wright was raised in an interracial family full of 'harmony and love,' and a police officer stole that from them" (Hyatt et al. 2021). *USA Today* used the headline "Family remembers Daunte Wright as an adoring dad who enjoyed playing sports and celebrating the 4th of July." The *Star Tribune* article about his murder also mentioned his affection for celebrating the 4th of July and spending time with his family and son. It recounted the months Wright spent by his son's side when he was in intensive care after his birth. This emphasis on Daunte as an Independence-Day-loving father and beloved community figure placed him within a vision of U.S. patriotism, interracial harmony, and fatherhood. In contrast to suggestions that racialized others can never belong, it framed him as belonging to the U.S. nation and his murder as disrupting the prospect of interracial harmony symbolized by his family.

Born 34 years after *Loving v. Virginia*, Wright was hailed as the legitimate child of the fruits of civil rights movements. Thus, he was positioned as a further victim of the United States' failure to purge its institutions of racism. Yet, he also reflected wide agreement that interracial unions offer hope. The *Los Angeles Times* featured images of Wright's white mother Katie Bryant and Black father Aubrey Wright while positioning their murdered son within Black community struggle (Hennessy-Fiske 2021). The accompanying article opened with a description of the church being guarded by the "Minnesota Freedom fighters, a Black militia armed with AR-15-style rifles." It also described Daunte as a "Black father" and related it to the conviction of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd and the family's lawyer's statement that Wright had "bec[o]me the child of America." Using the language of family and interracial love, the media figured Wright as a symbol of the United States' project of multiracial harmony rooted in Black communities, rather than one assimilated into whiteness. Naming the deceased as "the prince of Brooklyn Center," Sharpton also invoked interracial families and Wright as the embodiment of civil rights hopes of interracial reconciliation. The gesture of Daunte as a prince also alluded to Minnesota musician, Prince, who, while Black-identified, also had a reputation for crossing boundaries of race. Instead of as a post-racial image of youthful multiracial masculinity, Wright emerged as a symbol of contemporary Black suffering.

Like Barack Obama, Daunte Wright has a white mother. Like Trayvon Martin's mother, Katie Bryant was called upon to personify suffering and grief. Like George Floyd, Daunte Wright called for his mother just before he died. The public nature of Black maternal grief at the deaths of Black children from white police violence and the complicity of white authorities are utilized as stark reminders of Black humanity, maternal advocacy, and racial

injustice (Feldstein 2000). The embodiment of Black maternal suffering is palpable, from Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley, to the repeated pleading of Trayvon Martin's mother, Sybrina Fulton, for justice. The role of Black maternal grief in the U.S. imagination renders Black motherhood itself as perilous (Carter and Willoughby-Herard 2018), while white motherhood is idealized as the pinnacle of femininity and acts as counterpoint to Black maternal deviance. While the majority of interracial relationships between Blacks and whites are between white women and Black men, the mass media framing inverses this dynamic (McRae 2018). White women were also at the forefront of multiracial identity movements. In the 1990s, organizations such as Project RACE (headed by white mothers) insisted on a separate multiracial category and worked with conservatives in hopes of a colorblind society (Ibrahim 2012).

This framing of white motherhood stands in sharp contrast to Daunte Wright's mother. The media's focus on Wright's mother as the embodiment of grief also established a commonality with white mothers so that her embodiment as the idealized white maternal figure was also shaken by anti-Black violence. This spotlighting of white womanhood juxtaposed with the presentation of Daunte Wright's killer, Kim Potter, challenges the normalization of white womanhood and white motherhood as in opposition to Blackness. White women are presented as indelibly innocent, a framing that enables the denial of racism. Countering this white innocence that denies racism, Katie Bryant presented a new face of the interracial family as the mother of a man whose multiracial Blackness resulted in racial violence. Yet Katie Bryant's tears did not render the same deployment of sympathy once she had been associated with Blackness. "This is the problem with our justice system today," she told reporters after the Kim Potter trial. "White women tears trump justice" (Karnowski 2022). Bryant rejected the rhetoric of colorblindness that her interracial family supposedly represents. As her tears cannot bring justice, her tears, along with her collective solidarity with Black communities, also reject interracial families as forms of white assimilation. Wright's framing as part of an interracial family served to humanize him and present Black suffering in a sympathetic light. Conversely, his associations with Black masculinity largely functioned to criminalize him and justify his killing.

8. Daunte Wright within Media Framing of Black Masculinities

Wright's representation wavered between Black fatherhood and respectability against Black male deviance and criminality. The *Star Tribune* article headlined "Forced to Grieve in the Spotlight," opened with a recounting of the relationship between Daunte Wright and his father, Aubrey Wright. This humanization of Black fatherhood continued through subsequent articles describing Daunte Wright's own role as a father to a baby boy. This framing of Black fatherhood disrupted imagery of Black fatherhood as absent, deviant, and/or an obstacle to national progress. Moving away from Black fatherhood as a source of problems, it presented Daunte as within the panorama of Black identification and socialization. In contrast to an emphasis on white mothers in interracial families prevalent in multiracial memories and stemming from white mother activism in multiracial movements (Ibrahim 2012), the prominence of Aubrey's remembrances of his son and parenting strategies served to reconfigure Daunte's racial framing. It also emphasized Aubrey Wright's recognition of the danger of anti-Black violence before it took his son from him. Like many Black parents, Aubrey taught his son about Black vulnerability to state violence and taught his son about when and how to interact with police officers as a means of protecting him (Sewell et al. 2016), and he sought to live in a neighborhood that he felt would be safer from the threat. Aubrey's description of his teaching reveals how, rather than the racial biases that undergird law enforcement, mechanisms to avoid police violence require Black individuals to take on the responsibility. His remarks presented Aubrey as holding agency in his parenting practices but also as shouldering the burden of preparing Daunte to survive. He described discussing George Floyd and the police with Daunte. Yet his wife Katie reflected that "we never would have thought [such a loss] would happen to us."

The *Star Tribune* reporter explained: Aubrey Wright replayed in his mind the talks they had, the ones every Black parent has with their child about how to act if a police officer pulls you over. “The ‘Yes, sir,’ ‘No, sir,’” Aubrey Wright said, his voice growing thick with emotion. The illustration of emotional, not just physical, vulnerability expands visions of Black masculinity. These efforts were not enough to save Aubrey Wright’s son from the realities of state violence. Aubrey’s recounting of his parenting places Daunte within Black masculinity.

While much of the press coverage and photos of Daunte’s parents focused on Katie, Aubrey’s presence deflected from a racial framing of Daunte as sympathetic only because of his linkages to white motherhood. In the same article, Katie was tentative in saying that her Black husband and son were unwelcome in white-dominated spaces such as in the town of Hudson, Minneapolis, where they had previously lived, and of Aubrey needing to prompt her: “As she struggled to put her thoughts into words, Aubrey Wright urged her on: ‘Go ahead and say it!’ he said. ‘We realized it wasn’t the best community for being a biracial family,’ Katie Wright said.” (Wright is an error here: Katie’s last name is Bryant.) Katie’s hesitation about naming the impacts of racism align with white-dominant values of the denial of racism while leaving multiracial children to navigate racialized landscapes. These patterns of segregation and white-only spaces determine who belongs, who is safe, and who seems recognizable. In the space of Minnesota, which prides itself as a site of liberal tolerance, Daunte nonetheless stood out as a potential danger based on the associations of Black masculinity with criminality.

Conservative media weaponized the association with Black masculinity and criminality in an attempt to ensure the acquittal of Wright’s killer. Picturing his son with a gun, multiple news media sites and *Fox News* detracted from Aubrey’s “spark of life” testimony in which he described working with his son at a footwear store. An article published on 21 December 2021 on the *Fox News* site used the headline “Kim Potter trial: Daunte Wright, repeat offender killed by ex-cop, appears in yet another felony complaint.” Thus, it juxtaposed a construction of Daunte’s criminality with Potter’s innocence. The article countered Aubrey’s accounts of Daunte as a young working father with, “But court documents from multiple cases paint a portrait of Daunte Wright as a career criminal, not a gainfully employed family man” (Ruiz 2021). Thus, it reified binary paradigms of Black guilt and white innocence. It put Wright in a category of either/or, as deserving of life or as deserving of death, based on perceptions of his racialized masculine criminality.

A *New York Post* article headlined “Daunte Wright carjacked man weeks before he was killed by cop” described a lawsuit against Wright’s estate demanding damages and alleging he had participated in a carjacking the preceding month even though Wright had not been charged with the crime. The lawsuit also appeared to address how Wright’s death at the hands of a police officer had become a rallying cry for Black Lives Matter activists, calling into question whether he was a good poster boy for the movement. “This was classic ‘black on black crime,’” the lawsuit says. “As noted herein, [Wright] had a penchant for not only victimizing people of color, but also, people he knew and who knew him who could therefore identify him to authorities.” (Degregory and O’Neill 2021).

The expression “Black on Black crime” constructs Black men as innately predatory criminals who destroy their communities and has often been used as an avoidance tactic in the face of claims of systemic racism. In this narrative, Daunte is not positioned as sympathetic biracial man but squarely within the tropes of violent Black masculinity. It repeats images of Black men as violent and unruly normalizes experiences of state violence and a disregard for Black life. It implies, then, that state violence is not so much about racial discrimination and anti-Blackness but about the means of regulating potential killers and criminals. The racial hierarchies in which whiteness is valued counteract the narratives of multiracial harmony.

The statement that Wright should not be the poster boy for Black Lives Matter appealed to notions of orderliness and politics of respectability. While the politics of respectability is a response to white supremacy, the *New York Post*—which is owned by conservative Rupert

Murdoch and has been critiqued for its sensationalist conservative bias—suggests that Black social movements will not be taken seriously by white Americans unless they embrace respectability politics. This media framing asks readers to participate in the condemnation and disavowal of Daunte Wright as a deviant Black citizen who is underserving of attention and worthy of death. A June 2021 *Fox News* article headlined “New allegations paint Daunte Wright as violent offender as top Democrats who attended his funeral silent” cued readers to question political support for racial justice and Wright’s tragedy. The author of the article stated “Despite Wright’s history of violence, leading Democrats in Minnesota attended his funeral and sat onstage” and then recounted Minnesota Governor Walz’s remarks about the systemic racism that Black people face (Ruiz 2021). Wright did not benefit from the whitening associated with multiraciality and was instead positioned within depictions of Black dangerous criminality. By linking Blackness with inherent criminality, the news media tapped into dominant narratives of Black masculinity as a threat to be subdued. The focus on his Blackness here served to place Black identities at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

9. Conclusions

The fantasy of multiraciality as an absence of racism and of multiraciality as exceptional fails to account for the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness. While the election of Barack Obama heralded hopes for a new post-racial era, the framing of multiracial Blackness and the realities of anti-Black violence accentuate the workings of white supremacy. This focus on racial mixing detracts from addressing why groups racialized as Black are viewed and treated as problematic and as undeserving of humanity. Multiracials, who are often imagined as part white, are also supposed to benefit from this whiteness. However, this proximity does not comport with how phenotype and the perception of Blackness dictate life and death. Racial mixing has not caused the blurring of racial boundaries so much as multiraciality has heightened attention to who is given access to whiteness.

The murders of Trayvon Martin and Daunte Wright illuminate pervasive anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Racialized tropes of Black criminal masculinity permeated the understandings of justified death. George Zimmerman’s acquittal, and the ways in which whiteness and multiraciality were utilized in his justified violence and his racial innocence, points to the conditions of racism that deny racism’s existence. Zimmerman’s selective deployment of multiraciality and Blackness imbued his stated innocence with political significance while absolving him of being an agent of white supremacy. Yet, the differential deployment of multiraciality works to uphold whiteness through the harbinger of multiraciality as racial progress or the absolution of racism. Conversely, the visual optics of Blackness preclude multiracial Blacks who are not perceived as white from benefitting from white privilege. In both cases, representations of multiracial men were largely narrowed to singular race designations in order to justify anti-Black violence. In Wright’s and Martin’s cases, the tropes of Black masculinity as inherently violent justified their killings. The associations of Wright with deviant Black masculinity overshadowed the symbolism of multiraciality. When linked with inherent Black criminality in media narratives, Wright’s multiraciality became erased. The erasure of Wright’s multiraciality and a focus on Black masculinity served to pathologize Blackness. The overdetermined image of Black masculinity centered on aggressiveness and criminality outweighed the imagery of Wright’s multiracial masculinity. In contrast, Zimmerman’s multiracial masculinity was valued for its alignment with patriarchal white supremacy. Both Wright and Zimmerman largely became associated with singular racial designations of Black masculinity as dangerous and white masculinity as the protector of order. Looking at the cases of Wright and Zimmerman reveals that multiracial masculinity is only valued when it affirms justification for anti-Blackness. The disjuncture between the realities of anti-Blackness, structural racism, violence, and discourses of multiraciality render the murders of Wright and Martin as part of the normal operations of the racial state. The symbolism and discourses of multiraciality offer the illusion of progress without the substantive work of disassembling anti-Black structures and transforming the ideologies of anti-Blackness.

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