

“Privileged Looking”: The Politics of Visuality and Countervisuality within Ethical and Sustainable Fashion Movements

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Abstract • This essay critically evaluates ethical and sustainable fashion discourses, highlighting their inadvertent complicity in perpetuating the neocolonial and neoliberal frameworks they purport to challenge. Utilizing visual culture and post-colonial studies, the analysis focuses on the Western/imperial gaze within ethical fashion imagery, particularly in depicting women garment workers in Bangladesh. The essay argues that this gaze often constructs narratives of aid and rescue, akin to international development regimes, leading to a form of “privileged looking” as theorized by Shawn Michelle Smith. I compare Western-produced images within ethical fashion spaces, which often depict a superficially positive portrayal of garment workers, with self-produced visual representations by these workers that embody “countervisuality” — a concept developed by Nicholas Mirzoeff. This countervisuality resists and disrupts hegemonic narratives, positioning women workers not as passive subjects but as active agents of resistance. The study also draws upon Susan Sontag’s reflections on the context and setting of visual spectacles, illustrating how ethical fashion imagery can reinforce rather than challenge dominant social orders. The essay implores the ethical fashion sector to adopt a more introspective and genuinely transformative approach. This involves confronting and seeking to dismantle the intertwined structures of racial capitalism and white supremacy, rather than merely reproaching the conspicuous symptoms of a capitalist order while facilitating its visual facade of benevolence. The essay posits that true solidarity with garment workers requires moving beyond superficial sympathy to a genuine engagement with their struggles and narratives of resistance.

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STUDIES
FASHION

In recent years, the eruption of a global consciousness regarding issues of climate, racial, and economic injustice has led to a moral reckoning for fashion lovers, designers, retailers, and educators alike. Ethical and sustainable fashion discourses have emerged in response to the brutally exploitative and environmentally destructive impacts of fast fashion consumption on the planet and populations, particularly in the global South. While the ethical and sustainable fashion movement claims to vocally oppose, actively challenge, and meaningfully disrupt the violence of fashion, its lack of reflexivity and critical engagement has rendered it more of an accomplice than an adversary to the neocolonial and neoliberal frameworks that sustain capitalist exploitation at home and abroad.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks within visual culture and post-colonial studies, this essay seeks to critically engage in a visual analysis of how representations of women garment workers in the global South, specifically Bangladesh, are utilized to bolster the neoliberal logics of current ethical and sustainable fashion discourses.

I consider how the Western/imperial gaze, partially constituted through perceptual power, constructs narratives of rescue and care — an iconographic convention mimicked and adopted from international development regimes. Through the politics of visibility, I theorize and build upon Shawn Michelle Smith's concept of "privileged looking" (Smith 2) and posit that whiteness, coupled with a sense of social consciousness, enables a morally superior looking that is devoid and absolved of seeing how such images, and by extension, such movements, contribute to the advancement of global systems rooted in capitalism and white supremacy. I engage with self-produced visual representations of women garment workers and victims of the industry — images that stand in stark contrast to those produced by the Western liberal feminist gaze. These images firmly reject any attempt at depoliticization, asserting what Mirzoeff describes as a "countervisuality" (9) that resists and disrupts the hegemonic narratives that code women workers in the global South as passive subjects.

I explore Susan Sontag's reflections on the space and setting of visual spectacles and consider how location and context can work to subvert the dominant gaze, aligning with and extending the countervisual (Sontag 119). Finally, I consider what Cervenak describes as a politics of non-performativity (Cervenak 307) urging us to reconsider the analytics by which we deem certain public actions as authentic while labeling others as performative. What assumptions and relations of power are embedded in our assessments, and is it possible for an explicitly performative act to also be deeply political?

In 2015, I attended a public screening of a newly released film entitled *The True Cost* at Toronto Metropolitan University, formerly Ryerson University, in Toronto, Canada. The event was co-hosted by the School of Fashion and Fashion Takes Action, a local non-profit organization. The film offers an exposé style exploration into the world of fast fashion, chastising corporations, retailers, governments, and consumers for the unconscionable exploitation and devastation wrought on people and the planet caused by the West's insatiable clothing consumption. The diverse audience included industry stakeholders, fashion faculty from a number of Toronto institutions, designers, entrepreneurs, and, of course, fashion students. Following such screenings, it is customary for people to gather in groups outside the hall to network or catch-up with friends and colleagues. I was engaged in a conversation with a senior level faculty member who, like the rest of us, was clearly upset and outraged by the callous violence inflicted on women garment workers in South Asia. She was disturbed and angry, expressing deep sorrow and remorse about the daily struggles of these workers, remarking at one point, "How could their governments treat them so poorly? Don't they care about their own citizens?" Despite the film's spotlight on corporate greed and the parasitic Western-imposed trade regimes that further impoverish and paralyze developing nations in a perpetual aid-debt-repayment cycle, this woman was engaging in what Shawn Michelle Smith refers to as a form of "privileged looking" — a privileged visual politic that involves the social practice of looking but is devoid of any cultural contextual awareness (2). Smith distinguishes the act of looking from seeing, the latter being "understood as a matter of conscious perception" (2) that recognizes how hierarchies of power and cultural dominance construct visibility and its coding. A cunningly duplicitous feature of "privileged looking" enables privileged viewers to actively not see, or as Smith contends, "refuse" to see (3), yet flagrantly engage in the act of looking as though it were seeing. Goddu's article entitled, "Anti-Slavery's Panoramic Perspective" discusses how this phenomenon, in the context of the anti-slavery movements of the nineteenth century, upheld the power of white supremacy even as white populations in the North denounced and publicly reeled at the brutality of slavery (Goddu 12). Here, visuality was doubly instrumentalized through the bird's-eye panoramic view, producing and disseminating numerous images depicting the horrors of slavery, thus reproducing its spectacle, all while maintaining "perceptual power," both visually and, by extension, materially (13). Regardless of how well-intentioned or consciousness-raising the panoramic images of slavery were, their visuality was shaped by dominant power relations that were perpetually reproduced and reified rather than abolished.

In fact, "this dominance was performed not just through the anti-slavery image's subjugation of the slave but also through its appropriation of the slaveholders commanding perspective" (13). In Goddu's work, I find strong parallels between the perspectival power of nineteenth-century anti-slavery imagery and the photos employed by the ethical and sustainable fashion discourses of today. Ethical and sustainable fashion campaigns utilize a visual mode of messaging that foregrounds the pain and suffering endured by garment workers while simultaneously obscuring the role of capital and the neocolonial relations in which these workers are perpetually entangled. Much like the white anti-slavery movements, the "privileged looking" of white ethical fashion advocates enables them to publicly deride the fashion industry, express deep empathy for and "solidarity" with its victims, all while obfuscating their integral role in upholding the system they purport to fervently critique.

A key difference between the harrowing images of the past and the milder, even jovial, images of today can be traced back to a deliberate semiotic shift that has been initiated by the development sector over the past two decades. Kalpana Wilson discusses the changing representations of the distressing images that have come to characterize development iconography. Historically, the binaries constructed by modernization theory were repeatedly and explicitly articulated through visual modes: "urban/rural, modern/traditional, productive/unproductive" (Wilson 316) — all categorizations that are inextricably racialized and gendered. Although these "regimes of representation" still underlie visual depictions of life in the global South, the aesthetic portraying the "Other" has dramatically changed (319). Rather than photos of starving, destitute children in Africa, or shackled young carpet weavers in Pakistan, development photography has adopted a more good-natured, uplifting tone. These images are saturated with beaming smiles, brilliantly colourful clothing, and picturesque landscapes. Wilson attributes this shift to the vocal critiques aimed at the predominantly white "experts" within the development sector, as well as a growing body of research demonstrating how the incitement of strong emotions within viewers does not correlate with material responsiveness. As Fuyuki Kurasawa notes, the attempt to appeal to Euro-American populations through the "visual economy of humanitarian sentimentalism" (Kurasawa 201) has failed to manifest any form of radical egalitarian politics required to reconfigure economic structures towards global justice. The "sentimentalist paradox" (213) exists as a reliable Western continuum, enabling Northern populations to experience sympathy, pity, and repugnance at the suffering of distant others. This can go as far as making donations, adopting victims, and enthusiastically supporting war, yet rarely engaging in the dismantling of neocolonial systems of subjugation and exploitation. In a similar vein, ethical and sustainable fashion frameworks produce subjects that seemingly need rescuing from their cruel and corrupt governments, their misogynistic cultures, greedy corporations, and even from fickle Western teenagers obsessed with cheap clothing. However, this perspective never extends to the capitalist, white supremacist global regime that maintains the wealth of the North through aggressively and systemically impoverishing and destabilizing the South.

The eagerness to emotionally look, coupled with the "refusal" to see (Smith 2), not only safeguards ethical fashion advocates from critique but also positions them as being the good, morally superior actors within a racist and exploitative industry. Furthermore, the visual construction of this "moral" positionality (Smith 4) provides both social capital and remuneration in the form of "expert" status, academic accolades, non-profit funding, speaking engagements, and sales of premium priced "ethical" luxury products.

In essence, it reproaches the conspicuous symptoms of a capitalist order while facilitating, upholding, and benefiting from its visual facade of benevolence.

In Mirzoeff's, *The Right to Look*, he describes visibility as a "discursive practice that has material effect" (3). Visibility has always occupied a site of power and worked to mediate the relations of that power. The visual sets, maintains, and upholds the social conditions of dominance. This can be done through "Visibility 1" involving an explicit and intentional show of authority and control, as seen in the gruesome Abu Ghraib photographs (2003) that Mirzoeff describes (8). Conversely, it can also take the form of what he calls "Visibility 2," an articulation that appears neutral or even oppositional to "Visibility 1," but in reality does not seek to dismantle or even challenge the dominant social order. Instead, it continues its influence by employing a seemingly benign and dissociative aesthetic. I propose that the colourfully clad, smiling, bright-eyed brown women who dominate the images of "ethically" produced and fair trade product lines represent precisely all that "Visibility 2" is intended to convey. These images appear to move away from the hero/saviour dynamic reminiscent of the twentieth-century development sector and instead embrace narratives of independence, empowerment, and self-actualization. The current discourses surrounding girls' education, female empowerment, and women entrepreneurs enable the continued exploitation of women workers in the global South, regardless of how compassionate and uplifting the visual construction. I consider three ways in which these feel-good images maintain visibility's "imperial complex" (Mirzoeff 30), re-inscribe neoliberal logics, and facilitate "moves to innocence" (Mawhinney qtd. in Tuck & Wang 9) for both white women and economic systems that are complicit in neocolonial violence. Mirzoeff's discussion of visibility's "imperial complex" examines how the belief in a natural stratification of civilization, where the "cultured" held authority over the "primitive," necessitated domination over the colonized (30). While most people working in ethical fashion spaces would vehemently reject such a racist classification, I suggest that the current framework perpetuates this paternalistic relationship.

Similar to imperialist fantasies, the ethical and fair-trade fashion mantra positions women workers in the global South as reliant on our support and compassion for mere survival. The model relies on our position as privileged consumers to uplift and liberate through our purchasing power. The downtrodden require our financial investment, a few extra dollars per purchase, to ensure these women continue to smile, labour in colourful saris, and earn enough money to support their families. Of course, on the surface, these aspirations are not inherently negative; indeed, we want people to be happy and provided for. But like imperialist postulation, their well-being becomes tied to Western benevolence, their existence only possible through their sustained labour and ability to produce. Thus, even as the visual representations of women in the global South have taken on a warmer and inspirational approach, the saviour dynamic staunchly endures. Additionally, implicit in the photos of cheerful seamstresses is the great neoliberal myth that hard work results in income security, better social outcomes, and ultimately, emancipation. In this aspect, visuality undertakes incredible imaginative work, offering no historical evidence of its lofty claim, yet fully confident in the viewer's hegemonic acceptance. Here, work isn't ugly, dirty, or exploitative; instead, as these images proclaim, it is dignified, uplifting, and even leisurely. Rather than dispelling this myth, ethical fashion imagery tacitly adopts and advances it, building entire campaigns around the integrity of work while doing nothing to challenge the political conditions that relentlessly exploit workers and economies of the global South.

The "Trade Not Aid" campaign is an example of the uncritical proliferation of neoliberal logics by ethical fashion advocates. The campaign (and popular Instagram hashtag) asserts that workers and producers in the global South would rather engage in trade that is fair and equitable, as opposed to being recipients of Western aid. This framing situates the West as givers and the global South as perpetual receivers to diminish and erase the violence of colonial plunder, the criminality of corporate exploitation, the predatory monetary systems, and deliberate economic abandonment that continue to ensure Western dominance. Rather than amplifying the growing and justifiable calls for economic reparations, the reductionist messaging of "Trade Not Aid" serves to completely undermine it. The stigmatization of aid or seeking external support also aligns with neoliberal ways of being that romanticize individual struggle, praise toil over rest, and promote narratives of resilience over collective care. The capitalist concept of "bootstrapping" is also tied to this myth of self-sufficiency — the idea that hard work, coupled with conscientious saving, thoughtful planning, and investment, leads to income stability and sustained economic security. These photos implicitly blame the marginalized for their own subordination, invisibilizing systems and structures that have been designed to ensure indentured servitude and dependence.

In their work entitled, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," Tuck and Yang discuss six "moves to innocence" among settler populations (a term coined by Janet Mawhinney). These moves allow white settlers to absolve themselves of culpability for settler colonial violence by enacting strategic practices and policies that enable them to "deflect settler identity, while continuing to enjoy settler privilege" on occupied stolen land (Tuck & Yang 10).

They employ the term "conscientization" (19) to describe the empty process of developing a critical consciousness around systems of oppression, but taking no material action to disrupt or dismantle those systems.

Conscientization can also be used to explain the way ethical fashion movements and the images that accompany them demonstrate a clear understanding of systems of exploitation, yet offer little beyond superficially alternative models.

Herein lies the "move to innocence" — the work of employing, promoting, and selling products made by women producers in the global South, while continuing to benefit from their social and economic disenfranchisement. Thus, the amiable tone of "Visuality 2" could be mistaken for "countervisuality," or intentionally produced to perform that way. Despite the totalizing objective of visuality, Mirzoeff contends that it can never hold complete control over socio-political realities, as these conditions, both current and historic, are always discursively created. Just as any power dynamic inherently harbours forces of resistance (Foucault, 1978), countervisuality asserts itself as an anti-narrative — rupturing, rejecting, and destabilizing the totalizing authority of visual power. In the realm of ethical and sustainable fashion aesthetics, I consider two distinct ways in which visuality is disrupted through the countervisual work of women garment workers and activist photojournalists in Bangladesh. I use Mirzoeff's modes of visuality as a framework to demonstrate the clear refusal of these Bangladeshi women to fit within white supremacist, neocolonial constructs.

The following images are juxtaposed to illuminate the power and resistance at play between these visual and countervisual representations of women garment workers. The first two depictions aim to classify, categorize, and define the subject, positioning the women in Figure 1 as removed and safeguarded from the cruel conditions of capitalist brutality. As the caption describes, they are paid well, work in clean and safe conditions, and are living a content life. We are told that these women are not the exploited ones; their labour offers them a pathway to “empowerment,” in other words, financial stability and social mobility. The constructed message is that buying products made by these women is an emancipatory act, not an oppressive one. This classification serves to sever these women from their broader social context in the eyes of the viewer. Not only does this image aim to tie the wellbeing of these women to the purchasing benevolence of Western consumers, but it works to untie their inextricable connection to their broader subjectivity as workers of a servile class within the global South under the tyranny of neoliberalism.

In sharp contrast, the image of women garment workers protesting in the streets of Dhaka, Bangladesh, resists such categorization and separation. Their self-constructed representation leaves no ambiguity regarding their social and political subjectivities and their decisive utilization of collective power. There are 3.6 million garment workers in Bangladesh, approximately 85% of whom are women (Asia Foundation). The scale and scope of their struggle is clearly conveyed in Figure 2, where it is apparent that these women view engagement in widespread direct action as their path to liberation. Unlike the ethical fashion images, the countervisual is piercingly political, defying any notions of needing Western rescue.



Figure 1 Fashion Revolution [@fashionrevolution]. (2018, February 18). Instagram. [https://www.instagram.com/fash_rev/].



Figure 2 DHAKA, BANGLADESH (2015) – Hundreds of garment workers and other labor organization members take part in a rally to mark May Day, International Workers' Day in Dhaka.

Finally, visuality’s reliance on aesthetics as a mode of establishing what is good, orderly, dignified, productive, and beautiful is heavily at play within these portrayals. The smiling women on the left are aesthetically pleasing, affable, and offer a conciliatory, quick-fix response to generations and centuries of colonial deception, theft, and dehumanization. Paying this group of women what they deserve through a fair-trade model established by a Western NGO offers immediate absolution. Once again, their safety, well-being, and future existence lies in the hands of powerful stakeholders — consumers, designers, retailers, corporations — all external entities. This is a docile, non-threatening, palatable aesthetic intended to appeal to the conscience of those in power. In this context, power constructs the subject, mediates the terms of their interaction, demands diplomacy, and commends itself for its generosity and goodwill. Ethical fashion logics are rooted in soliciting and conjuring up the moral consciousness of power, rather than disrupting it. Images like these re-centre and re-affirm neo-colonial dominance, perpetually placing the fate of workers at the mercy of Western altruism. In contrast, the women with their fists in the air, with sweat, anger, and defiance on their faces, are asserting what Asma Mansoor describes as a “self-centered mode of resistance” (Mansoor 8). Their actions, as well as the visual depictions thereof, enable them to reject visuality’s categorizations, refuse being situated as the passive or marginal, and assert their domain in the agentive or center (Mansoor 4). These women will not be depoliticized; they will not smile for the camera or put their heads down and diligently work. Their purpose is to be heard and to take up space in the streets. This counter aesthetic is unconcerned with pleasantries or diplomatic dialectics; disruption, defiance, and the reclaiming of power are the primary objectives.

Beyond the content and construction of the photograph itself, I consider how countervisuality can be asserted through the context of space and place. In the book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag theorizes about the gravity and significance of settings when viewing suffering as a contemplative act. Do harrowing images of violence and death really serve as “momento mori” (119) when hung in art galleries to be viewed as entertainment by ticket purchasing patrons? In such spaces “privileged looking” is facilitated, curated, and commodified.

Even if intended for serious introspection or learning, factors like geography, location, intimacy, proximity, and socio-political relations of power are all entangled in the way the photos are presented, viewed, and internalized.

The collapse of Rana Plaza on April 24, 2013, marks what has been dubbed the largest industrial accident of modern times. In less than 90 seconds, 1,134 people were killed and approximately 2500 were injured in a garment factory in Savar, Bangladesh. The sheer disregard and willful negligence surrounding the tragic aftermath prompted trade unions to call the event "mass industrial homicide" (Rushe & Safi). Countless think pieces were written admonishing corporate greed, lax government regulations on trade agreements, and workers' safety measures. The condemnation also implicated the fashion industry for repeatedly ignoring blatant patterns of exploitation and promoting a culture of fast-paced consumption and disposability. Images of the rubble, the maimed, and the grieving made the usual media rounds, accompanied with declarations and promises to overhaul a system replete with unconscionable cruelty. The argument for ethical and sustainable fashion alternatives grew stronger, louder, and more urgent than ever. The graphic images of loss and devastation were impossible to ignore. Even as the corporate media cycle moved on to other shinier stories, the ethical fashion industry pledged to "never forget." The most jarring photo to emerge, and perhaps the most personally unsettling image I've seen in years, was taken by a Bangladeshi activist and photojournalist named Taslima Akhter. Titled "Final Embrace," Taslima's photo captured the lifeless bodies of a young man and woman holding each other, trapped by rubble and death, upright and frozen in time. The man's face is clearly visible and would likely be recognizable to those who knew him. A single tear of blood runs down his closed eye, while he tightly clutches the woman in what looks like a loving and protective embrace. This haunting photo is faithfully shared on every anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster. Ethical and sustainable fashion advocates repeatedly employ its horror on Twitter, Instagram, blogs, and online publications as an eternal reminder of fashion's crimes and the consumers' complicity in them. However, the works of Kurawana, Mirzoeff, and Sontag implore critical reflection on the implications of the rampant proliferation of such images and the relations of power they reinforce. In his analysis of the egregious images of American soldiers violating and torturing Iraqi detainees at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in 2003, Mirzoeff discusses the paradox of the banality of image (2011). Even as the heinous actions of American soldiers were exposed, and the grisly images of their victims were disseminated across global media platforms, public outrage remained perplexingly nominal. As opposed to drawing ire or introspective national debate, the horrors of the images barely registered — in short, no one cared. Rather than acting as evidentiary artifacts to hold those in power accountable, the photos worked to reaffirm American exceptionalism, maintaining its global dominance.

An image is drained of its force by the way it is used, where and how often it is seen. Images shown on television are by definition images of which, sooner or later, one tires . . . Image-glut keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content. Image-flow precludes a privileged image . . . Consumers droop. They need to be stimulated, jump-started, again and again. A more reflective engagement with content would require a certain intensity of awareness — just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes most to the deadening of feeling (Sontag 105-106).

The repeated proliferation of the "Final Embrace" on social media platforms, arguably the most fleeting and casual of all mediums, also results in a "banality" that renders the violence of Rana Plaza commonplace and monotonous. Much like the grim photos characterizing the older development genre, "Final Embrace" elicited shock and remorse, but little effective action. In fact, repeated exposure simply pathologized victimhood while re-inscribing Western hegemonic authority. Here, "privileged looking" did little to dismantle or even destabilize the violent systems and structures that were culpable.



Figure 3 A blown up image of Taslima Akhter's photo "Final Embrace" is erected near the site of the Rana Plaza collapse. (Savar, Bangladesh. 2018)

However, can the dynamics of space and setting constitute the countervisual, even while the content remains the same? Returning to Sontag's critique of the exploitative nature of galleries and museums, could the location of photographs depicting unfathomable suffering be subversive in their counter-construction? In 2019, Akhter and other Bangladeshi activists and organizers returned to the site of the devastation and erected a large, blown-up image of "Final Embrace" (Figure 3) to commemorate the victims depicted in the photo, as well as those who had died and those who continue to fight for compensation and justice. What distinguishes this public display from one hanging in New York or London as part of a Fashion Week vigil? As Sontag articulates, "there is no way to guarantee reverential conditions in which to look" (120). In this scenario, the socio-political constitution of the settings stands in stark contrast; whereas the same image displayed at Fashion Week would be transparently and offensively performative, the one erected at Rana Plaza adopts a "politics of non-performativity" (Holert 7). In the essay titled "The Problem of After," Sarah Cervenak contemplates how the analytics of performativity are deployed with Black people and communities who have endured and continue to experience the "irresolvable, unencroachable, heaviness and anguish of [an] image" (Cervenak 307).

Writing on the acts of remembering and resistance undertaken by the late Erica Garner after the police killing of her father Eric, Erica's practice of regularly staging die-ins at the site of her father's death could be viewed as a performance due to the constant presence of media cameras that invariably captured it, or it could be seen as an act of intense connection, healing, care, and survival. Ultimately, the categorization of performance or not does not matter and should be inconsequential when one is living through the aftermath of such violence. This concept of non-performativity enabled me to think through my initial discomfort at Akhter's enlarged photo being erected over the rubble of Rana Plaza. Could this act not be viewed as an exploitative form of voyeurism? Would this not re-traumatize the victims and simply re-inscribe Western dominance over a servile class? What was the point of this performance? Cervanak asks us to suspend all our usual analyses, allowing modes of grieving, whether public or private, to exist as they are. The politics of non-performativity validates both.

Countervisuality can be constructed within the image itself, through the setting and place where the image is viewed, and also by holding theoretical and analytical space for performance that is entirely unconcerned with external perception or how it engages with the gaze.

Through the theoretical work of Shawn Michelle Smith's "privileged looking," Nicholas Mirzoeff's "countervisuality," and Susan Sontag's perspectives on visual context, this essay explores how the Western/imperial gaze in ethical fashion discourse often inadvertently perpetuates the neocolonial and neoliberal structures it seeks to challenge. This examination reveals a paradox within the ethical fashion movement: while it aims to address exploitation, its visual language often reinforces systemic inequalities. Conversely, countervisual, self-produced narratives of resistance and collective power call for solidarity, not sympathy. This underscores the necessity for the ethical fashion sector to adopt a more introspective and genuinely transformative approach—one that actively confronts and seeks to dismantle the entangled structures of racial capitalism and white supremacy.

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