



Only One Nation Under God: How White Christian Nationalism and Racial Threat Can Drive Sustained Extremist Belief

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Abstract

Throughout American history, racial status threat has materialized into White Christian nationalism. From the historical tie between support for the Ku Klux Klan and fear of the US unbecoming a Christian nation, to the Obama years, fear of future racial diversification has been deeply connected with White Christian nationalist sense of identity. Today, concern over race-mixing and diversification has burgeoned into support for Donald Trump and the Republican Party. The purpose of this research is to discuss how racial status threat is materializing and motivating extreme views across the country, and to empirically validate how White Christian nationalism can drive extremism and increased democratic erosion. The findings of this paper split into two groups: among the most expressively Christian nationalists, concerns about the changing country drive up support for use of political violence to protect their sense of a White Christian Nation. Among White Christians, it becomes apparent that the idea of future racial diversification leads to more polarized, racially threatened, Republican-oriented, anti-democratic views. The analysis reveals a jarring shifting of democratic norms that are increasingly susceptible to inflammatory mis/disinformation on social media that is likely to have an even stronger and sustained effect.

Keywords: White Christian Nationalism, Donald Trump, Racial Diversification, Racial Politics, Democratic Norms

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Christian nationalism has long had resonance with White identity in the U.S., especially following the reaction to the Civil Rights movement and emergence of Reaganism in the 1980s.¹ Scholars have drawn even stronger connections between whiteness and Christian nationalism functionally in recent work. Ideas of “blind patriotism,” enforcing White racial boundaries and xenophobia are all strongly connected to White Christian nationalism.² Racial threat, as the perception of minority encroachment on White supremacy, is a foundational motivator of White Christian nationalist (WCN) views; such that expressions of racial threat have been associated with upticks in support for WCN.³ An early historical iteration of this dynamic is how Black political enfranchisement in Reconstruction led to White Christian support for the Ku Klux Klan. Many a time, White Americans expressively would couch their support of the Klan within concern of the United States’ unbecoming a “Christian nation.”⁴

Political elites have often identified the changes in the racial dynamics of the U.S. as existential threats to whiteness, or to the U.S. being a White Christian nation.⁵ Prominent eugenicist Josiah Clark Nott wrote, “The superior races ought to be kept free from all adulterations, otherwise the world will retrograde, instead of advancing, in civilization.”⁶ Encroachment and threat in these earlier iterations of the United States took more localized and cultural forms of concern, often related to Black Americans increasing in number on the local level or becoming more politically enfranchised.⁷

These previous expressions of concern now take a different form in modern U.S. racial politics. Emergent initially in the Obama years of American politics, White Christian nationalists have articulated fears about the future changes to the country as deeply connected to their own sense of identity. This has driven support for groups like the Tea Party, positioned in direct opposition to the Democratic Party and Obama, which

1 Dobratz, Betty A., and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile. *The White Separatist Movement in the United States: “White Power, White Pride!”* Illustrated edition. (Baltimore London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Berlet, Chip, and Stanislav Vysotsky. “Overview of U.S. White Supremacist Groups.” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 34 (1) (Summer 2006): 11–48; Belew, Kathleen. *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*. First Edition. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018).

2 Perry, Samuel L., and Cyrus Schleifer. “My Country, White or Wrong: Christian Nationalism, Race, and Blind Patriotism.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46 (7) (2023a): 1249–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2113420>; Perry, Samuel L., and Andrew L. Whitehead. “Christian Nationalism and White Racial Boundaries: Examining Whites’ Opposition to Interracial Marriage.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 (10) (2015): 1671–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1015584>; Perry, Samuel L., Cyrus Schleifer, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Kenneth E. Prantz. “Our Kind of American: Christian Nationalism, Race, and Contingent Views of Cultural Membership.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 65 (1) (2024): 126–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2023.2229385>.

3 Blumer, Herbert. 1958. “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position.” *Pacific Sociological Review* 1 (1) (1958): 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388607>.

4 Epperly, Brad, Christopher Witko, Ryan Strickler, and Paul White. “Rule by Violence, Rule by Law: Lynching, Jim Crow, and the Continuing Evolution of Voter Suppression in the U.S.” *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (3) (2020): 756–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718003584>.

5 Berry, Damon T. *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017); Gorski, Philip S., and Samuel L. Perry. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

6 Zanden, James W. Vander. “The Ideology of White Supremacy.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20 (3) (1959): 385–402. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2708116>.

7 Bostdorff, Denise M. 2004. “The Internet Rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan: A Case Study in Web Site Community Building Run Amok.” *Communication Studies* 55 (2) (May 22, 2009): 340–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970409388623>; Neal, Lynn S. “Christianizing the Klan: Alma White, Branford Clarke, and the Art of Religious Intolerance.” *Church History* 78 (2) (May 28, 2009): 350–78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640709000523>; Selepak, Andrew, and John Sutherland. 2012. “The Ku Klux Klan, Conservative Politics and Religion: Taking Extremism to the Political Mainstream.” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13 (1) (March 26, 2012): 75–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.659498>.

eventually morphed into a burgeoning base of support for Donald Trump in 2016.⁸ To these many White Christians, President Obama as a political moment served as harbinger as the country diversified further. Over time, deep, expressed concern about the diversification of the U.S. took root, and strong radicalization emerged from these concerns.⁹ Threat from the changing demography of the U.S., at base, is concern over race-mixing, or the usurping of a White Christian nation through diversification, or both.

In this project, I describe next how White Christian nationalism motivates functionally distinct reactions to racial status threat that can drive extremism and increased democratic erosion, which is crucial to understand how it is materializing and motivating extreme views across the country today. I go beyond this to validate the idea empirically with a nationally representative sample of White Christian Americans (N = 741). Through this experiment, I causally demonstrate how activating threat drives violent support and restrictive voting attitudes by White Americans who are more expressively Christian nationalist.

For the most expressively Christian nationalist, I find that concerns about the changing country increase their support particularly for the use of political violence to protect their sense of a White Christian nation. Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum of White Christians, I find that activating ideas of racial diversification among them leads to expressively more polarized, racially threatened, Republican-oriented, and antidemocratic views. The two-pronged set of findings in this case demonstrates a directional effect: Concern over diversification drives up support for Republicans, while also making the most nationalist White Christians expressively more violent.

Essentialized White Christian Nationalist Identity

The key component to the operation of threat in WCN is the essentialization of White and Christian identities, as well as their connection to ideas of Americanness. That is, the treatment of both categories as fixed and inherited, leading to assumptions that as the country changes, the United States will fundamentally be altered.

Race essentialism is the belief that race is a biological, fixed property.¹⁰ Strongly held belief in this essentialism has driven eugenics, discrimination, and genocide.¹¹ In WCN, race essentialism is linked to ideas of a Christian nation.

8 Jones, Robert P. *The End of White Christian America*. Reprint edition. (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2017); Blum, Rachel M. *How the Tea Party Captured the GOP: Insurgent Factions in American Politics*. First Edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

9 Jardina, Ashley. *White Identity Politics*. First Edition. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jardina, Ashley. "In-Group Love and Out-Group Hate: White Racial Attitudes in Contemporary U.S. Elections." *Political Behavior* 43 (4) (2021): 1535–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09600-x>; Jardina, Ashley, and Robert Mickey. "White Racial Solidarity and Opposition to American Democracy." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 699 (1) (March 16, 2022): 79–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211069730>.

10 Zeng, Ginger Qinghong, Xue-Zhen Xiao, Yang Wang, and Chun-Yu Tse. "Belief in Biological Origin of Race (Racial Essentialism) Increases Sensitivities to Cultural Category Changes Measured by ERP Mismatch Negativity (MMN)." *Scientific Reports* 12 (1) (March 15, 2022): 4400. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-08399-3>; Roth, Wendy D., Elena G. van Stee, and Alejandra Regla-Vargas. "Conceptualizations of Race: Essentialism and Constructivism." *Annual Review of Sociology* 49 (Volume 49, 2023): 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-031021-034017>.

11 Chao, Melody Manchi, Ying-yi Hong, and Chi-yue Chiu. "Essentializing Race: Its Implications on Racial Categorization." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104 (4) (2013): 619–34. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031332>; Phelan, Jo C., Bruce G. Link, and Naomi M. Feldman. "The Genomic Revolution and Beliefs about Essential Racial Differences: A Backdoor to Eugenics?" *American Sociological Review* 78 (2) (February 22, 2013): 167–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122413476034>.

Whiteness and Christianity are connected across WCN wherein the Christian tradition is viewed as fixed unto White Americans *only*.¹² In other words, Christianity is heritable by way of whiteness. Racial demographic change thereby threatens both. A diversifying U.S. is perceived to be becoming *less* of a White Christian nation, as God had intended it to be. As diversification occurs, and *if* White Americans shrink in number and Americans of color increase, the shifting racial demography implies that the White Christian nation is under existential threat. Regardless of whether non-White Americans *identify* as Christians, WCN contains the idea that Whites are the only true Christians.¹³

This belief extends into the “great replacement” conspiracy theory. It is foundationally about the threat posed by the diversifying country to White Christians and often fingers Jewish Americans as the group that is intentionally carrying out the “replacement.” In the mass American public, the conspiracy is a widely held belief among White Christians. Beyond simple belief, it is highly correlated with Christian nationalism.¹⁴

I expect the essentialization of whiteness and Christianity to accentuate racial threat among WCN Americans on a national level. In particular, White Christians who are more supportive of Christian nationalism will, in my view, be more susceptible to racial threat motivating extreme political belief (H1). Threat will causally drive their 1) support for political violence (H1a), 2) contestation of results of democratic elections (H1b), 3) support for Republican candidates (H1c). I describe my research design next.

Design

This study is a simple priming experiment. I randomly assign the following question, which has been validated in a series of other studies, to activate simple ideas about racial demographic change.¹⁵

You may have heard about the diversification of the United States. In at least two sentences, tell us what immediately comes to mind when you think about racial demographic change within the U.S.

Importantly, I am not explicitly suggesting that religion or race is being altered in any normative way. I am asking for respondents to provide their immediate ideas about racial demographic change. The control group does not receive this question; instead, it moves on to a series of closed-ended measures of their political attitudes that test my hypotheses. To analyze the results, I use a linear regression wherein I interact the treated group of respondents with a single-item measure of Christian Nationalist sentiment, which has also been consistently validated through a series

12 Perry, Samuel L., and Cyrus Schleifer. “My Country, White or Wrong: Christian Nationalism, Race, and Blind Patriotism.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46 (7) (2023a): 1249–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2113420>

13 Alba, Richard. 2018. “What Majority-Minority Society? A Critical Analysis of the Census Bureau’s Projections of America’s Demographic Future.” *Socius* 4 (January, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023118796932>.

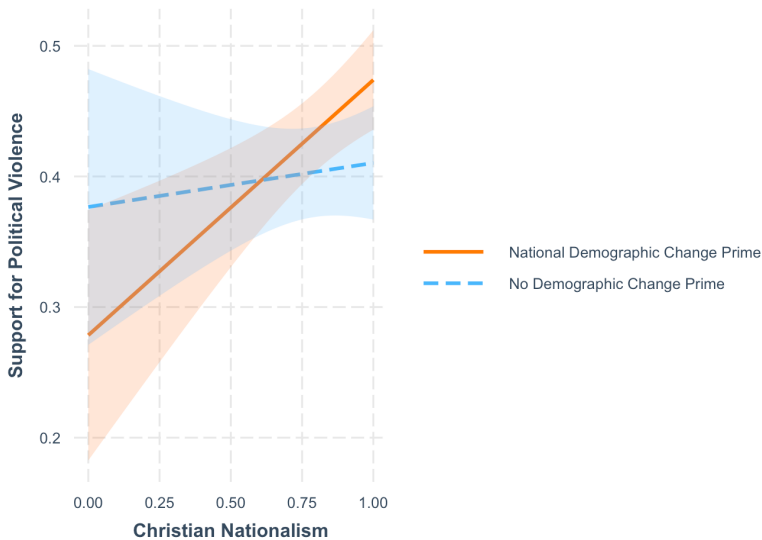
14 “Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election | PRRI.” *PRRI | At the Intersection of Religion, Values, and Public Life*. October 25, 2023. <https://www.prrri.org/research/threats-to-american-democracy-ahead-of-an-unprecedented-presidential-election/>.

15 Thompson, Andrew Ifedapo, Maxwell Beveridge, Stefan McCabe, Molly Ahern, Fryda Cortes, Noah Axford, and Jacqueline Martinez Franks. “Anti-Black Political Violence and the Historical Legacy of the Great Replacement Conspiracy.” *Perspectives on Politics*, (April, 2024): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000045>.

of other studies.¹⁶ Within each model, I also include demographic controls for more precision in my causal claims. Within each model, I also include demographic controls for more precision in my causal claims. In each of the following analyses, I give details on the interactions conducted. That is, I provide granular analyses of how Christian Nationalist ideas interact with priming racial threat, because in each interaction model there is an assumption of linearity.

I begin by testing how priming racial threat among White Christians influences their support for the use of political violence. My main expectation here is that it will drive up violent support among those with the strongest nationalist sentiment. This is exactly what I find (estimate = 0.161, SE = 0.085, $p = 0.059$). I display the interaction modeled below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Interaction Plot for Effect of Diversification Treatment on Support for Political Violence Moderated by Christian Nationalist Sentiment



I find a strong positive relationship between the diversification prime and Christian nationalism, recoded from 1–4 to 0–1 with 0 being low nationalism and 1 as high nationalism (estimate = 0.161, SE = 0.085, $p = 0.059$). However, as mentioned above, this could be misinterpreted due to the linearity assumption in the interaction. To account for this, I visualize this same model with a linearity check, which shows a sizable increase for White Americans. Those who express higher levels of Christianity become markedly more violent when they consider the changing demographics of the county (Figure 2).

16 Importance of Christian identity (1–4 Likert scale, “not important at all” to “very important”); Sherkat, Darren E., and Derek Lehman. “Bad Samaritans: Religion and Anti-Immigrant and Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the United States.” *Social Science Quarterly* 99 (5) (2018): 1791–1804. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12535>; McDaniel, Eric L., Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle. “Proud to Be an American?: The Changing Relationship of National Pride and Identity.” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 1 (1) (2016): 145–76. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2015.7>; Perry, Samuel L., Ruth Braunstein, Philip S. Gorski, and Joshua B. Grubbs. “Historical Fundamentalism? Christian Nationalism and Ignorance About Religion in American Political History.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61 (1) (2022): 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12760>; Perry, Samuel L., and Cyrus Schleifer. “My Country, White or Wrong: Christian Nationalism, Race, and Blind Patriotism.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46 (7) (2023b): 1249–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2113420>.

Figure 2. Linearity Test Effect of Diversification Treatment on Support for Political Violence Moderated by Christian Nationalist Sentiment

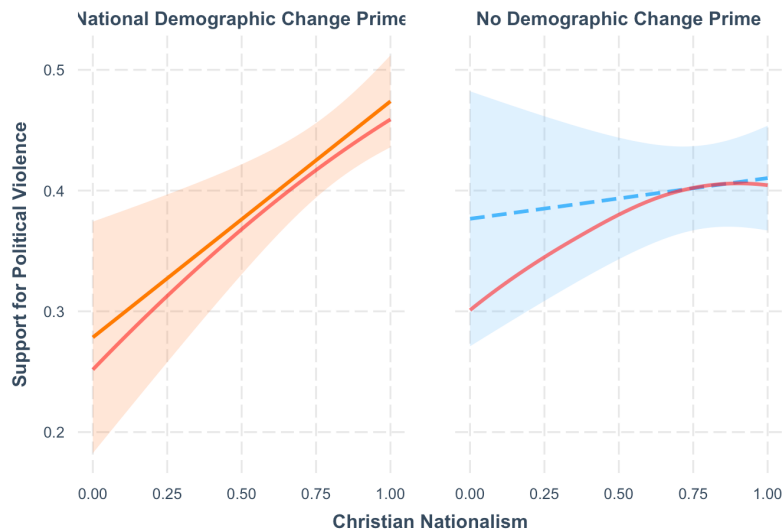
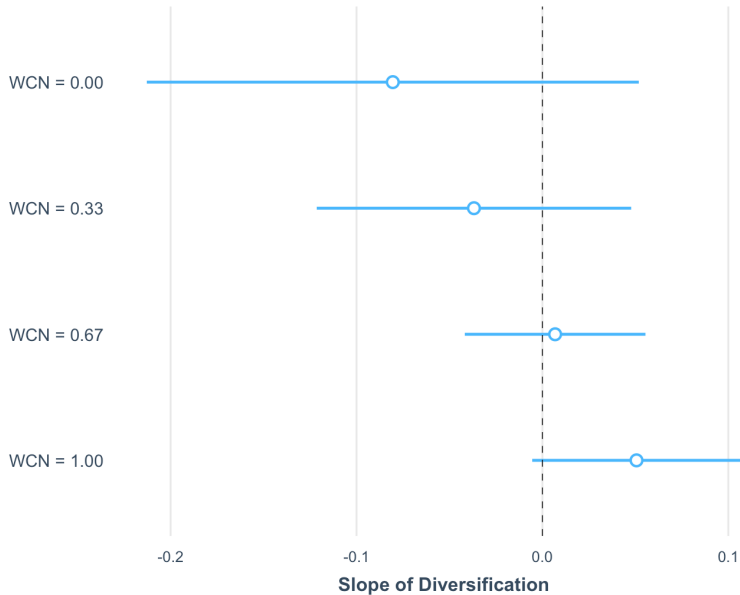


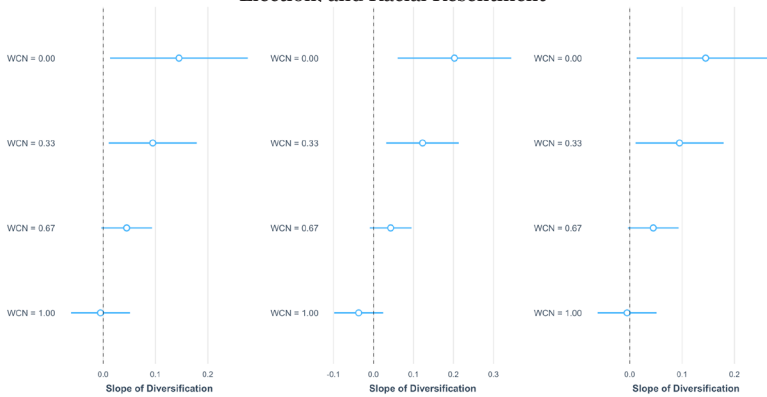
Figure 3. Simple Slope Analysis for Diversification Treatment on WCN Moderator on Support for Political Violence



I supplement this with a simple slope analysis that bins each level of the moderator in the model in direct comparison to those with the same level in the control group. For lower levels of Christianity, I find insignificant effects of the treatment (Figure 3)—only the most expressively Christian become more violent.

For people exhibiting high levels of nationalism, I find a nearly 5 percentage point increase in support for violence ($p = 0.08$), which is additively important because White Christians with higher levels of this sentiment demonstrate a higher baseline of support for political violence. These results contrast with my additional tests of other sub-hypotheses, differing strongly from my other measures of political attitudes. Across measures of 1) distrust in democratic elections, 2) intention to vote for a Republican presidential candidate in the 2024 presidential election, 3) and racial resentment, I find unidirectional effects across primed White Christians with lower levels of Christian nationalist sentiment.

Figure 4. Simple Slope Analysis for Diversification Treatment on WCN Moderator for Distrust in Democratic Elections, Intention to Vote Republican in 2024 Election, and Racial Resentment



Importantly, the unidirectional effects I find are ceiling effects for people with the highest levels of WCN. Plots of each of these interactions reveal that White Christians with lower levels of Christian nationalist sentiment rise to roughly the same level of electoral skepticism, intention to vote Republican and racial resentment. In effect, these attitudes are all nearly identical in the magnitude of their shift (Appendix 1).

The two-pronged effect that I identify seemingly works as radicalization in the same way, but it operates with different intentions on how to protect the White Christian nation. White Christians with higher levels of WCN are *already* feeling acute racial threat from the diversifying country. As such, they are already deeply supportive of the Republican Party, skeptical about the efficacy of democratic elections, and feel strong levels of racial resentment. So, when they are primed to think about the changing country, the only place for their radicalizing attitudes to go is in the direction of violence for the sake of protecting their identity. This is a crucial component to thinking about susceptibility to extreme behavior. While support for political violence on an attitudinal level does not necessarily translate into violent behavior, it does represent a shifting set of democratic norms. Changing support for violence is, in and of itself, a concern for the efficacy of democracy, because it can

help to facilitate or simply explain away violent actions of others, especially in the name of the same political ideology.¹⁷

Beyond this, there are extant ideas of religious conflict that a radicalized, threatened person could attach their concerns to. One historical case that often emerges in WCN iconography is the Crusades; another, more recent one is *The Turner Diaries*. These serve as examples of resources that could motivate threatened, more violent White Christians to engage in political violence or support an increased use of political violence.¹⁸

Meanwhile, White Christians with lower levels of WCN are significantly more prone to being driven toward further radicalization—simply by being activated to think about the changing country. This approach is open-ended and light, meaning that top-of-mind sets of ideas about the diversification of the country are in and of themselves radicalizing for White Christians generally. Elite rhetoric and mis-/disinformation on social media that is targeted and more inflammatory are likely to have an even stronger and sustained effect. Top-of-mind sets of ideas about these changes might generate negative reactions, but these other forms of information can provide threatened White Christians with targets upon which to direct their fears.

17 Epperly, Brad, Christopher Witko, Ryan Strickler, and Paul White. "Rule by Violence, Rule by Law: Lynching, Jim Crow, and the Continuing Evolution of Voter Suppression in the U.S." *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (3) (2020): 756–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592718003584>; Thompson, Andrew Ifedapo, Maxwell Beveridge, Stefan McCabe, Molly Ahern, Fryda Cortes, Noah Axford, and Jacqueline Martinez Franks. "Anti-Black Political Violence and the Historical Legacy of the Great Replacement Conspiracy." *Perspectives on Politics*, (April, 2024), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000045>.

18 Gorski, Philip S., and Samuel L. Perry. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Brodie, Renee. "The Aryan New Era: Apocalyptic Realizations in The Turner Diaries." *Journal of American Culture* 21 (3) (1998): 13–22.