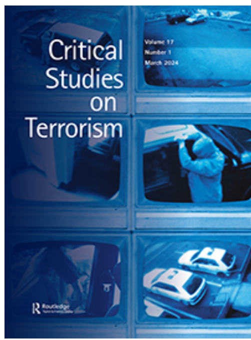

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Whiteness as expertise in studies of the far right

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses backlash from white academic gatekeepers to research on the white far right and white supremacist violence. Centrally, I interrogate how whiteness shapes the field's response to a seeming shift in patterns of political violence towards white supremacist activity. Taking white supremacy in the study of white supremacist violence seriously, I contend, would shift our attention to larger social patterns of oppression and opportunities for liberation. However, this does not happen due to a concept I call "whiteness as expertise." Building on Charles W. Mills' white epistemologies of ignorance, I argue that the attributes of *transferability* and *disconnection* both obscure and perpetuate how scholarship on white supremacist violence can further whiteness. First, I review the backlash experienced by the academic and policy turn towards white supremacist violence, even if scholars and practitioners may not call it "white supremacist." I then introduce the concept of whiteness as expertise in more detail, highlighting how insistence on "terrorism" as a unitary and unifying category leads to backlash against research on white supremacist violence. I conclude with examples of academic backlash to open discussion into the complexities of studying whiteness within a white-majority academy.

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> I think that one fantasy of whiteness is that the threatening Other is always a terrorist. . . . there is no representation of whiteness as terror, as terrorizing. –*bell hooks*

In 2023, political scientist Aurelien Mondon searched academic articles in English for mentions of the far right. He was interested in discussions of race, whiteness, and white supremacy – ideological linchpins for far-right movements in the Global North yet topics not always discussed in academic circles. Across 2,543 titles and abstracts about the far right published between 2016 and 2021, Mondon found only 135 mentioning the stem *white**. Of these, only 10 were published in journals dedicated or adjacent to political science or international relations (Mondon 2023).

Mondon's findings do not exist in isolation – and, moreover, indicate the persistence of epistemologies of ignorance surrounding whiteness and white supremacy in the academy (Mills 1997). In a survey of work on race in the United States, Twine and Gallagher observed that mainstream white social science in the 20th century did not focus on the institutional reproduction of white

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supremacy, echoing W. E. B. Du Bois' declaration of the 20th century as the problématique of the "color line" (Du Bois [1903] 2018; Twine and Gallagher 2008, 7). Though a widespread oversight, the problem has been particularly pronounced in the disciplines of Political Science and International Relations, perhaps paradoxically given politics as a key site of power relations (Blatt 2018; Vitalis 2015). An increased prevalence of critical scholarship on race and whiteness indicates some promising changes (e.g. Freeman, Kim, and Lake 2022; Hunter and van der Westhuizen 2022), yet Mondon's findings serve as a cautionary note that 20th-century tendencies have continued into the 21st.

How might we consider such disciplinary reluctance to grapple with whiteness amidst a surge of interest in what some call "far-right extremism and terrorism" – in other words, white supremacist violence? Recent work has demonstrated, via interviews with counter-terrorism practitioners, a difficulty among policymakers with considering the role of whiteness in structuring the policy category of "terrorism," even when well-intentioned bureaucrats and staffers wish to do so (Abu-Bakare 2022; Meier 2020; Wright this issue). In this article, I extend this logic to terrorism and counterterrorism *researchers*, examining in what ways whiteness shapes the field's response to white supremacist violence. The variegated acts of interpretation and sense-making surrounding white supremacist violence evince what I call *whiteness as expertise*. This whiteness encompasses two primary attributes, *transferability* and *disconnection*. By assuming a singular, unitary category of violence called "terrorism" and transferability of knowledge across actors and ideologies within that category, scholars who have never studied white supremacist violence assume they know something about it by virtue of expertise on other violence. At the same time, scholars of all stripes, including critical scholars, construct a disconnect between the violence they are studying and the role of white supremacy in both that violence and the act of studying it in the first place. Altogether, whiteness as expertise produces vitriolic responses to critiques of what we might call "far-right studies" by overwhelmingly white scholars accustomed to boundary-policing the discipline.

To make this argument, I draw on Charles Mills' concept of white epistemologies of ignorance (Mills 1997, 2017). White ignorance, for Mills, references the naturalisation of white supremacy, such that white domination appears benign and banal. Crucially, white ignorance is "propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge" – a manifestation of white supremacy's naturalisation particularly relevant to academia (Mills 2017, 49). The effects of white ignorance, and this ignorance's status as epistemological – that is, fundamental to how individuals see the world and who gets to make claims about it – are woven throughout and reinforced by research on white supremacist violence. When named as non-ordinary, white ignorance reveals itself as "militant and aggressive" (49), producing backlash as its taken-for-granted status is unsettled.

My aim in this article is not to assess to what degree knowledge *does* transfer across different ideologies motivating violence. Rather, I suggest that the assumption of transferability tells us something more generally about who is allowed to gatekeep and boundary-police the study of terrorism, directing our attention towards the malleability of the "terrorism" category in the first place. Likewise, the assumption of disconnection keeps white scholars from focusing on larger social patterns of oppression and opportunities for liberation, in favour of studying specific organisations and reactive policies. The

possibilities for tackling white supremacist violence, to say nothing of structural white supremacy, remain severely constrained within such an episteme.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I review the state of backlash in both academia and the policy world whenever attention is paid to white supremacist violence (even if scholars and practitioners may not call it "white supremacist"). I then introduce the concept of whiteness as expertise in more detail, using Mills' work as an entry point. I highlight how the need by some scholars to see "terrorism" as a unitary and unifying category leads those scholars to lash out when expertise about violence constructed as exceptional encounters the everyday character of white supremacy. I conclude with two examples of academic backlash, one from a critically-minded source and one not, to open discussion into the complexities of studying whiteness within a white-majority academy.

A few definitional clarifications are necessary before moving on. By "whiteness" I refer to a positioning that normalises the power not only of people racialised as white, but also behaviours and practices believed to derive from such people, to the exclusion and abnormalisation of alternative behaviours and practices (Gabay 2018). Thus, whiteness is not (only) skin colour, but as Sabaratnam (2020) notes, a *standpoint* based on tropes, assumptions, and commitments that elevate and make desirable a racialised hierarchy. It is an organising principle adopted by institutions and organisations as well as by individuals, often unconsciously: whiteness persists by "seeming not to be anything in particular" (Ahmed 2007, 154; Dyer 1988, 44). I use the terms "white supremacist violence" or "white far right" where other scholars might use "far-right extremism" or "far-right terrorism" to identify reactionary violence perpetrated in the Global North by white people, to avoid making claims about other kinds of violence that are also far-right.[1]

Backlash: an overview

There was a time when white supremacist violence fit more comfortably within the constructed bounds of what scholars consider "terrorism." In the 1980s and early 1990s, established academics within Terrorism Studies included white supremacist organisations within the "terrorism" canon (Bjørgo 1995; Laqueur 1987). References to such groups as "extreme right" or "far right" would foreshadow terminological debates 20 years later (e.g. Ravndal 2018), and attention to these organisations by terrorism scholars began to pale in comparison to interest in Palestinian groups forcefully positioned under the "terrorism" umbrella (Stampnitzky 2013). Nevertheless, white supremacist activity in Italy, South Africa, the US, and elsewhere did once come to mind as part of the "terrorism" story.

What enabled the labelling of these organisations as "terrorist" to ring true? Certainly, their perceived exceptionality played a role. The US Ku Klux Klan, for example, was both visually striking, with white robes and flaming crosses, and tactically brutal. The organisation's public profile allowed law enforcement agencies to paint white supremacy and the Klan as synonymous, containing racism and its inherent violence within a singular group. The Klan was the standard: anything short of their violence, even if perpetrated in the same spirit and in the name of the same racist principles, could be ignored due to the need to stamp out the more outrageous threat. This constructed exceptionality, in turn, means that any list of terrorist organisations (and review of scholarship on terrorism) that excludes the Klan can be accused of bias – never mind the fact that attention to white supremacist violence within

mainstream academic work has always been marginal due to the "terrorism" frame's deep-seated coloniality and exclusionary politics (Erlenbusch-Anderson 2018; Newell 2020; Khan this issue; Schotten this issue).

The reality of political violence in the 2010s, and particularly after the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president, meant mainstream scholarship could no longer reasonably exclude attention to white supremacist violence. The so-called "defeat" of the Islamic State in 2017 created further openings for terrorism scholars seeking a new bogeyman. Thus, the field of Terrorism Studies reasserted the exceptionalising politics of the 1980s and 90s, before the September 11 attacks and subsequent War on Terror provided cover for ignoring white supremacist violence entirely. Singular organisations, such as the Proud Boys, National Action, and Atomwaffen Division (AWD), could once again capture attention and stand in for the entirety of white supremacy. In doing so, Terrorism Studies could continue to downplay structural white supremacy as a phenomenon in contemporary society – and, moreover, one linked inextricably to the most extreme manifestations of racist violence.

By using the term *structural white supremacy*, I differentiate deliberately between the militancy adopted by organisations such as the Klan and AWD (which I call, imperfectly, white supremacist violence) and the system of institutions, practices, and norms that reinforce peoples racialised as non-white as lesser-than (Rana 2011). Both types of violence constitute white supremacy, but the term "white supremacy" is often used interchangeably only with extreme nonstate violence, especially by terrorism scholars. While there may seem to be considerable distance between arguing for the enslavement or elimination of Black people and believing Black communities are a more likely and natural source of criminal activity, both positions stem from the same root belief: that Black people are inferior to whites. That this belief can produce eliminationist behaviour through outright physical violence or through the state-sanctioned "premature death" of Black people in the carceral system (Gilmore 2007) demonstrates its indelibly harmful nature. The widespread banality of structural white supremacy, in turn, means that practices that perpetuate it may be neither obvious nor purposeful since they appear, instead, natural and routine.

Such practices are part and parcel of counterterrorism and counter-extremism practices in North America and Europe, as they serve to preserve white supremacy by marginalising or downplaying it. A familiar example to UK readers lies in the 2023 government review of the Prevent counter-extremism strategy, which aims to keep UK residents from being drawn into activity legally classified as "terrorist" or "violent extremist." The strategy has been roundly criticised for its open Islamophobia and blatant criminalisation of British Muslim communities (Abbas 2018; Winter et al. 2022; Mogbolu this issue). Following the first year in which the number of "extreme right wing" referrals to Prevent exceeded those of Muslims, the review, dubbed the Shawcross Review after its author, insisted that Prevent was not paying nearly enough attention to "Islamist extremism." In a context where counter-extremism funding is allocated based on the proportion of Muslims living in an area (Murray, Mueller-Johnson, and Sherman 2015), the review declared that the boundaries around "extremist Islamist ideology are drawn too narrowly," whereas those defining the extreme right are "too broad" due to their alleged implication of mainstream right-wing views (Shawcross 2023, 3). The Shawcross Review therefore illustrated in one brushstroke a re-assertion of Islamophobia within state counterterrorism while

underlining the connection between white supremacist violence and the "mainstream" nature of structural white supremacy (see also Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2023).

Backlash also exists vis-à-vis academic research, and this is my main focus in this article. Here I am interested less in criticisms from non-academics than in the policing of academia by academics themselves. A prominent example comes from France, where in 2021 a group of scholars belonging to the "Observatory of Decolonialism" attacked Dr. Nonna Mayer, an expert on the French far right, after she was announced as a candidate for the presidency of the National Foundation of Political Sciences (Houard-Vil 2021). What the Observatory found objectionable was not Mayer's focus on the far right per se, but her analysis of the far right through the framework of racism. Mayer's treatment replicates larger patterns in French academia of delegitimising work on racism and Islamophobia, reaching its peak with government demands for an inquiry into so-called "Islamo-leftism" at French universities (Hajjat 2021; Le Nevé 2021). The role of prominent French scholars of the far right in this backlash, such as Pierre-André Taguieff, underscores that political views and academic expertise cannot be bastions against perpetuating white supremacy when the individuals in question continue to benefit from racist structures.

Indeed, epistemological ignorance of white supremacy is a feature, not a bug, of work within the neoliberal white academy. Scholars who work on white supremacy and related topics – who have, historically, been mostly people of colour – are routinely marginalised and siloed within fields like Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (REP). Academics working outside REP rarely engage with REP scholarship; REP scholars who attempt to traverse subfield boundaries are, in turn, gaslit if not outright driven out of the ivory tower (Davis and Ernst 2019). This pattern repeats itself in terrorism scholarship, including Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS), which despite its stated commitment to engaging with power continues to sidestep the constitutive role of race in the "terrorism" category (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Gentry 2020). Recent manoeuvres to bring white supremacist violence into larger conversations in the field have largely overlooked rich REP literatures on elections and parties within political science, alongside vast corpuses across critical sociology and geography, some of which have rich decades-long histories yet are not frequently engaged by terrorism studies scholars (e.g. Berlet 1995; Blee 1991; Gallaher 1997). This is to say nothing of longstanding work in Black political thought (which I draw on below), de- and anticolonial writings, and queer theory.

This exclusion, reflecting as it does assumptions about what belongs in the canon of "terrorism" research, is telling. Marginalised in the mainstream is work pointing to socio-economic and state assemblages as entangled with ideologies and actions labelled "terrorist": once the term is applied, its distancing from more sociological or material critiques is almost required to keep the "terrorist" classifier reserved for exceptional and abhorrent violence understood as "out of place" (Stampnitzky 2017, 15). The increasingly common positioning of white supremacist violence under the "terrorism" label therefore kills two antiracist critiques with one stone. On the one hand, the debate over whether white supremacist violence *should* be classified as "terrorism," rehashed from both conventional liberal and abolitionist-oriented perspectives, is so salient in part because the exceptionality that the "terrorism" label assigns and the raft of consequences accompanying it are obvious (Ackerman 2020; Gentry 2020; Husain 2020b; Jarvis 2022; Martini 2023). Such exceptionality may be threatening to academics embedded within the multibillion-

dollar "terrorism industry," which was not designed to address the white far right but may be increasingly called upon to do so. Thus, there are financial and professional interests alike in either maintaining existing scripts of "terrorism" (by delegitimising work on white supremacist violence) or, if possible, pivoting one's existing authority and funding to the white far right (Li 2020; Mohammed 2022; Raphael 2009). Obsessing over this debate both preserves a white supremacist status quo and creates a distraction from mundane structural violence (on distraction, see Tudor 2020).

At the same time, classifying white supremacist views as "terrorism" positions them as aberrant when they are, in fact, quite mainstream (Mondon and Winter 2020; Tetrault 2021). In so doing, responsibility for any violence remains with those actors classified as "terrorists," rather than with everyday institutions and practices, which are banalised via their positioning outside the terrorism-white supremacy nexus. In contrast, tackling white supremacy as a manifestation of structural white supremacy – which is to bring discussions of racism and coloniality into the "terrorism" space – leads to uncomfortable questions for terrorism scholars of not only what "terrorism" is, but how "terrorism" research of many stripes creates vectors of harm in which researchers become complicit (see also Sjoberg this issue; Chukwuma in this issue). It is to this phenomenon that I now turn.

Whiteness as expertise

To further make sense of backlash, especially from self-identified critical scholars, I twin the expressions of whiteness discussed above with the jostling for authority among terrorism scholars in order to develop the concept of *whiteness as expertise*. Not solely the provenance of people racialised as white, "whiteness" here references a system of epistemic and material hierarchy privileging logics of white superiority rooted in imperialism and settler colonialism. These logics, as part and parcel of their perpetuation, require ignoring how these same imperial and colonial roots have constructed the category of terrorism expertise, and delimited the idea of terror, in the first place.

By "expertise" I refer to the granted or asserted authority to make claims about a topic which are then taken seriously by one's peers and interested observers. Expertise is relationally constructed: the threshold for what counts as "enough" knowledge or experience, as well as what kinds of knowledge and experience are considered to count in the first place, is a moving target contested by both knowledge producers and consumers (Marshall 2023, 5). With respect to expertise on "terrorism" in the academy specifically, past work has characterised such expertise as "a chaotic incoherence" of researchers' profiles and backgrounds (Marshall 2023, 4). I argue, rather, that whatever disagreements exist within various terrorism studies communities surrounding the nature of expertise, whiteness persists as a dominant and rarely debated criterion. Recall that whiteness refers to a standpoint: one need not be racialised as white to privilege the characteristics and practices of whiteness in one's assessment of whose claims to knowledge are valid.

The concept of whiteness as expertise builds on the intellectual legacy of philosopher Charles Mills, who first wrote about whiteness as an epistemology of ignorance in *The Racial Contract* and fleshed out the idea in *Black Rights/White Wrongs*. Calling whiteness an epistemology reinforces its position as a standpoint fundamentally shaping the nature of how we come to know our worlds; naming that epistemology

as ignorance is to call attention to *not* knowing as the crux of one's relationship to those worlds. This not-knowing can arise from what Mills calls the "suppression of pertinent knowledge" (Mills 2017, 52), given the interests of dominant white groups in keeping prying eyes away from uncomfortable histories and policies. (Consider, for instance, attempts to sanitise the history of slavery in the US context.) These interests, however, imply intentionality on the part of at least some actors.[2] For these actors, Mills contends, white ignorance is not a lack of knowledge about white supremacy and the advantages it affords people racialised as white. Instead, it is an unwillingness to actively engage with this knowledge and its implications. This unwillingness is in turn shaped by a lack of incentives to confront whiteness head-on: the omnipresence of whiteness makes thinking in counterhegemonic ways more difficult (63), and moreover it is so deeply embedded in the fabric of whites' social worlds that the normalised order of things depends on its perpetuation. White ignorance, Mills writes, "refuses to go quietly" (49).

When it comes to policing inquiries into white supremacist violence, white ignorance manifests in claims of who gets to speak with authority and be trusted with shaping collective knowledge – in other words, in the adjudication of expertise. I contend that whiteness as expertise perpetuates the "unnamed" nature of white supremacy in making social worlds, including the world of academic knowledge (Mills 1997, 1). It does this in two primary ways. First, whiteness as expertise assumes that among kinds of political contention placed within the "terrorism" category by experts, authority to speak transfers. If one is deemed an expert on al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, for example, one can and should also claim expertise on white supremacist violence, since the root category of knowledge, "terrorism," is viewed to be the same. Thus whiteness attempts to achieve universal legibility within the "terrorism" category, erasing critique of the coloniality upholding that category (Khan 2023; Mohammed 2022). Second, whiteness as expertise assumes that white supremacist violence – and "terrorism," by association – belongs in a different analytical space than structural white supremacy. In other words, behaviour and structure are disconnected. In both cases – transferability and disconnection – terrorism is constructed as a relatively discrete, relatively unitary phenomenon, in which threads of white supremacy, imperialism, and settler colonialism are obscured if not outright buried.

Transferability

The field of Terrorism Studies, built in contexts of conquest and occupation, has been habitually preoccupied with outsiders it feels do not belong. Namely, Terrorism Studies has voiced concerns for decades about "interlopers" – individuals who rushed to study terrorism after 9/11 or the rise of the Islamic State and claim authority despite no past experience in the subfield. Alongside endless definitional debates over what it is the subfield is studying in the first place, Stampnitzky (2016, 23) argues that one of Terrorism Studies' few consistent features is that "anyone can become a terrorism expert." Horgan (2008, 58) takes a more clearly negative position on the interloper phenomenon, accusing Terrorism Studies of attracting "opportunists who do not do serious work." Certainly issues of faked data, surface-level case knowledge, and clear influence of government (and/or funder) interests have characterised Terrorism

Studies, as they have many areas of the social sciences (Eidelson 2023; Raphael 2009). Beyond these clear ethical hurdles, what constitutes "serious work," and who gets to decide, is often left unquestioned.

Implicitly, the notion of rigour in Terrorism Studies follows larger trends in the social sciences: generation of original data, employment of mixed methodologies (with a bent towards quantitative and experimental work), and hypothesis-testing within a positivist framework (Sageman 2014; Schmid, Forest, and Lowe 2021; Schuurman 2020). The scholars repeatedly making these points, some of whom are cited here, are usually white cisgender men with established research profiles – and, increasingly, similarly-positioned white cisgender women. Meanwhile, the critiques of Terrorism Studies raised by Muslim scholars and/or scholars of colour are of a different sort, focused not on positivist methodological rigour but on epistemological and normative gaps that perpetuate racism and Islamophobia (Ali 2023; Kundnani 2014; Qureshi 2020; Sabir 2022). When scholars whose communities are the most likely to be the targets of "terrorist" violence and of counterterrorism policies raise foundational alarm bells about basic safety, debates about methodological minutiae should vanish in the face of first-order ethical reflections (which also influence methodological choices) – but thanks to white ignorance, they do not.

That critiques surrounding "rigour" – and, in turn, the boundaries of what constitutes "rigour" – are gatekept by Terrorism Studies titans racialised as white reproduces both a unitary knowledge of "terrorism" and an ignorance of whiteness' role in constituting the "terrorism" category in the first place. To borrow from Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 42–43, 46–47), a preoccupation with rigour reproduces Western-colonial norms of research that position white experiences and knowledges as objective and others as subjective and thus outside the boundaries of acceptable science. Adherence to mainstream epistemological and methodological norms of the Western-colonial academy, in other words, stands in for substantive, context-specific knowledge. I contend that the whiteness espoused by these gatekeepers renders discussion of *internal* interlopers illegible, if not unspeakable. Embedded is an assumption that once someone has gotten their foot in the door of terrorism studies and either been deemed "legitimate" by the community or been around long enough to be accepted as a fixture, their work on any topic deemed within the remit of Terrorism Studies is generally valid. Thus, a scholar who built their name researching violence attributed to Muslims – and this is usually the starting point within Terrorism Studies – does not appear out of place researching the white far right, or indeed any other variant of violence that seems "new."[3]

Two recent examples illustrate. Mia Bloom, an academic with over 5,000 citations on Google Scholar, made a career for herself by researching suicide bombing, chiefly in Palestine and Sri Lanka. In 2021, she published a book on women members of the QAnon conspiracy movement at Stanford University Press, where she also edits the press' series on terrorism and political violence. The book's marketing references Bloom and her co-author, Sophia Moskalenko, as "experts of extremist radicalisation," a classification that presents both "extremism" and "radicalisation" as unitary concepts devoid of ideological or contextual variation and divorced from the racist and Islamophobic structures that built them. Expertise is assumed to transfer because different backgrounds, countries, conflicts, and identities are treated as icing on the same "extremist" cake: a detail that can be scraped off to reveal the same basic foundation.

Scholars with more robust research agendas on QAnon raised eyebrows at Bloom's book, including Marc-André Argentino, who originally coined the term "pastel QAnon" to describe the aesthetics adopted by women QAnon followers (Argentino 2021). Nevertheless, transferability did its job, and the book won bronze in the 2022 Independent Publisher Book Awards and landed on the *New York Times'* Editors' Picks list. The book's success illustrates that whiteness as expertise within Terrorism Studies is a standpoint: the assumption of transferability shuts down epistemic questioning of who should get to speak, privileging voices that are already dominant.

A similar epistemological positioning characterises Byman's 2022 volume *Spreading Hate: The Global Rise of White Supremacist Terrorism*. Byman is a well-established Terrorism Studies scholar, with nearly 13,000 citations and a portfolio of work on counterterrorism and the "global jihadist movement." In 2021, he published on white supremacist violence for the first time in an academic outlet with an article on the US context in *International Security*, followed by the book a year later.

In and of itself, developing new interests later in one's career is natural. Yet engagement with white supremacist violence all too often demonstrates the logic of transferability instead of deep contextual research encompassing different epistemologies. Much as scholars of violence attributed to Muslims have bemoaned "experts" without relevant language skills and knowledge of Islamic theology, so too do many "experts" on the white far right stop short of engaging with vast archives on structural white supremacy in their country of study. It is this lack of engagement that enables Byman to write, at the tail end of the Trump administration, in a country built through Indigenous genocide and Black enslavement, that "both the law and the government [of the US] now oppose white supremacy" (Byman 2022, 143). Byman treats the history of the Ku Klux Klan and white power in some detail in early chapters of the book, which demonstrates that knowledge of the facts of history is different from adopting an onto-epistemology that allows for white supremacy to exist as something systemic, rather than as an individual problem or an organisational identity (Dixit and Miller 2022). Put differently, Byman demonstrates that white epistemologies of ignorance are not a knowledge problem[4]: they are, again, a standpoint that confines white supremacy to the bounds of "terrorism" (and, thus, exceptionality) in order to make its larger form less visible.

My central contention is that there is a particular *whiteness* to this kind of interloping within the bounds of Terrorism Studies as a field. The assumption that "terrorism" is a homogenous enough category to allow claims of authority to travel within its boundaries produces a world in which an actor's positioning in a power hierarchy is largely irrelevant. The "terrorism" frame thereby writes out of academic analysis any variation in historical-geographical context – including imperial and colonial violence typically not considered deserving of the "terrorist" moniker by mainstream scholars – and makes "terrorism" the singular way that disparate violence is rendered legible (McQuade 2021, 12; Nguyen 2023, 28). This manoeuvre, perhaps ironically, *preserves* the privileged positioning of white experts within the hierarchy by perpetuating the fiction that an actor's relationship to social power does not shape their actions. Thus power hierarchies are rendered invisible so as to serve continued white power by making such power both unremarkable and seemingly neutral (Evans and Moore 2015, 440). Invisibilising structural white supremacy in this way reflects a second component of whiteness as expertise: disconnection.

Disconnection

If whiteness as expertise constructs "terrorism" as a unitary category, within which claims of authority transfer, it is worth asking what "terrorism" is considered to be. This is an especially important question given discourses positioning the violence of Anders Breivik, Brenton Tarrant, and the like as new and aberrant in the contemporary history of terrorism. How do we hold the apparent newness (and implied difference) of white supremacist violence at the same time as we allow it to be treated as just another form of "terrorist" activity?

I argue that the frameworks scholars reach for when analysing white supremacist violence create limitations due to their disconnect from broader scholarship and activism on white supremacy. Terrorism Studies has long evinced reluctance to deal with histories and presents of white supremacy, and especially how these histories and presents have constructed "terrorism" and "counterterrorism" as objects (Gentry 2020). This epistemological ignorance of systems of racialised domination extends to critical work. In examining articles published in *Critical Studies on Terrorism* between 2009 and 2020, Chukwuma (2022) finds that only four draw on postcolonial studies, a very small number for a field dealing with ideas of enemy and threat developed for colonial purposes. For Khan (2021), a lack of acknowledgement of the innate coloniality of the term "terrorism" – and, by association, the fundamentally colonial nature of the discipline of terrorism studies – hampers deeper engagement with the politics of setting boundaries around the "terrorism" concept, much less the academic discipline that studies it. This process, which Ali (2020, 580) calls "racialised bordering," uses white ignorance to obscure the racial logics that construct counterterrorism. By placing white supremacist violence under the "terrorist" umbrella, whiteness as expertise constrains possible approaches for making sense of this violence to those already developed for other kinds of "terrorist" violence, without interrogating how these approaches are innately generative of imperial and settler colonial principles.

Shifting from a "terrorism" frame to critical race, Black liberation, and/or abolitionist archives presents different tools for understanding white supremacist violence that, rooted as they are in the lifeworlds of communities who experience this violence, deserve wider consideration yet are cast as less credible within white epistemologies of ignorance (Mills 2017, 68). Two indicative examples illustrate. In "Terror Austerity Gender Excess Theatre," critical geographer and prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore begins immediately by invoking US state terror as acting in service of racial capitalism (Gilmore 1993). That (neo)imperial economic policies, domestically and abroad, make sense as "terror" is presented as common sense. Rather than justifying the equation, Gilmore assumes it will resonate with her audience – likely because her audience is not the white academy. In this way, Gilmore positions the violence of the US state itself as both white supremacist and belonging within a quotidian understanding of "terror." Gilmore is not a "terrorism" scholar, yet she illustrates powerfully that "terror" goes beyond analytical categories constructed in service of the state. For her, white supremacy *is* terror.

Closer to the margins of Terrorism Studies itself, critical legal scholar Atiya Husain positions inaction on climate change, hostile bordering, and the increasing role of corporate capitalist interests in US politics as part of the same story of terror. These policy areas were raised, she argues, "in the house that counterterrorism built" and have

"worsened the lives of poor people and people of color" – in other words, the work of white supremacy (Husain 2020b). Husain notes, however, that state security policy is often *de*-racialised, the roles of whiteness and white supremacy invisibilised in favour of supposed policy neutrality (Husain 2020a). "If originally whiteness was race," Charles Mills writes, "now it is racelessness" (Mills 2017, 63). This, too, is white supremacist violence, albeit of a structural rather than an immediately physical sort. That white supremacist violence is multiple and entangled is a reading lost when the boundaries of inquiry are policed by whiteness.

The assumed exceptionality of violence identified with white supremacy, and that it is only correct to apply the label "white supremacist" to neo-Nazis and the like, is explained compellingly by Olivia Rutazibwa as the "Hitlerian connotation" (Rutazibwa 2016). Rutazibwa's conceptual discussion is especially valuable for CTS scholars, who might be more willing than "orthodox" scholars to consider power structures yet still express hesitancy to discuss racism and white supremacy outright (Meier 2022). Asking why scholars who write openly about Eurocentrism in International Relations often choose not to employ racism as an analytical frame, Rutazibwa suggests that the "R-word" has been identified with the "Hitlerian moment." Any actions that fall short of the Hitlerian standard may be harmful and violent but are treated as incomparable with Nazi Germany and thus as not belonging in the same discursive universe. Further, mentioning them together is viewed as impeding "constructive dialogue" on racism by misidentifying what racism is, as defined by white elites (Rutazibwa 2016, 195). The Hitlerian connotation assigned to white supremacy suggests that applying the term more broadly would violate its sanctity – a rhetorical move captured by C. Heike Schotten in her analysis of the exceptionalism assigned to Auschwitz concentration camp: "It is both unlike any other camp that has ever existed and, in some sense, higher or better or more perfect than any other camp" (Schotten 2018, 24). For Mills, this is the "management of memory": the ignorance, or forgetting, of longer and enduring patterns of white supremacy in favour of turning white supremacy into a single moment that can be overcome (Mills 2017, 64).

Therefore, instead of viewing white supremacy as a structure constituting and impacting all aspects of society across historical periods, white supremacist violence is localised within a single moment as uniquely awful *as it manifested in that moment*. Contemporary actions only "make sense" as white supremacy, then, if they can be directly connected to this moment. This invocation of the Hitlerian connotation, though frequently unconscious, signifies a disconnect between terrorism scholarship on white supremacist violence and larger archives on white supremacy that privileges the comfort of whiteness over actually understanding where violence comes from. As I demonstrate below, this disconnection characterises both mainstream and much critical work on white supremacist violence, positioning backlash as not reactionary but rather a necessary move to keep the epistemological distinction holding up white ignorance intact.

Academic backlash and white ignorance

To demonstrate whiteness as expertise at work, I conduct a critical discourse analysis of two recent articles that criticise the amount of scholarly and policy attention received by the white far right. The analysis therefore centres how power, particularly racism, is reproduced through these articles' discourses (Van Dijk 2015), with attention to word

choice, framings, and omissions in what the authors chose to discuss and how they discussed it. Although both articles were published in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, one takes a more "orthodox" position on political violence, advocating an "objective" assessment of threat, while the other approaches the subject from a more traditionally critical position. Nevertheless, both articles employ similar logics that evince transferability and disconnection when it comes to researching white supremacist violence. That they arrive at similar places despite starting from different epistemological positions, as the below analysis will show, demonstrates the power of a white epistemology of ignorance as an overarching knowledge structure that spans countries, methodologies, and areas of substantive expertise.

One might reasonably question my decision to focus on two articles alone. By doing so, I do not suggest that backlash to work on the white far right is limited to these two articles; the above discussion should indicate that these articles display logics that are embedded much more widely in academic work on "terrorism." This paired comparison does, however, allow me to treat the discourse in each article in considerable detail, providing a window into how larger arguments are formed through careful attention to multiple instances of rhetoric and silence. Accordingly, I subject both articles to a process of sense-making, offering whiteness as expertise as a framework through which to understand particular rhetorical manoeuvres and locate them within larger power structures shaping academic research.[5] In doing so, I build on an interpretive methodological tradition that considers cases not as singular examples of a broader phenomenon (here, whiteness), but as constitutive of that phenomenon (Riofrancos 2021, 108). The discourses present in these two articles are useful analytically not (only) because they are examples of academic tendencies in how white supremacist violence and "terrorism" more generally are discussed, but most importantly because these discourses are among many sites through which the global structures of white supremacy, existing as they do in myriad areas inside and outside of the academy, are constituted.

The objective: Zenn's "war on terror 2.0"

"Far-right/WSE [white supremacist extremist] groups have been neutralised since [Timothy] McVeigh's 1995 bombing," writes Boko Haram scholar Jacob Zenn in his 2023 piece "War on Terror 2.0" (88). Published in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Zenn's article takes to task relatively "orthodox" work on white supremacist violence by terrorism scholars whose research informs (and is intended to inform) conventional counterterrorism policy conversations. Zenn's central contention is that academics, journalists, and other observers have inflated the threat of white supremacist actors (far-right and white supremacist extremists in his parlance) in part by "conflating them with ISIS" (63). In attempting to use "post-9/11 CTS frameworks" to critique existing work on white supremacist violence (64), Zenn evidences the logics of transferability and disconnection by misusing topics and methods unfamiliar to him. Simultaneously, he downplays white supremacy by equating it exclusively with white nationalism. His article is thus a clear example of whiteness as expertise at work.

Zenn starts from a position that would likely feel familiar to critical scholars and certainly to those advocating for abolitionist perspectives on counterterrorism. He describes the increasing attention of counterterrorism actors to white supremacist

violence as a second iteration of the War on Terror ("WoT 2.0"), and his concerns that this will expand state power, increase mass surveillance and entrapment, and "stifle opposition" are understandable (63). Indeed, the possible expansion of the counterterrorism apparatus and ensuing blowback on Muslims and/or people of colour is a widespread concern among academics and activists alike (Búzás and Meier 2023; Shamas and Ismail 2021). Zenn's ultimate prescription – to devote less counterterrorism attention and resources to white supremacist violence – is also consistent with an abolitionist politic aimed at countering the specific infrastructure of counterterrorism. Yet Zenn is not an abolitionist, and it becomes clear through his writing that his actual concern is the preservation of white comfort, which he achieves by downplaying the violence of white supremacy.

A telling moment comes in Zenn's discussion of Kyle Rittenhouse, a white teenager who fatally shot two protesters and wounded another at a racial justice uprising in Kenosha, Wisconsin in August 2020. Zenn raises the question of whether Rittenhouse's killings should be considered terrorism: Rittenhouse, Zenn asserts, never intended "far-reaching psychological effects"" for his victims and, in calling 9-1-1 for his first victim, acted in a way "uncharacteristic" of terrorism (68). For Zenn, Rittenhouse's violence did not reach the level of aberrance necessary to meet the constructed cruelty of the "terrorism" category: violence by a white protester in what Zenn describes as "self-defence" (68) at a protest against anti-Black state violence may not be ideal, but it is not outside the realm of legibility within a worldview coloured by whiteness. In this way, Zenn reifies the association between the "terrorism" label and unacceptable violence. Not present in Zenn's analysis are the power structures enabling Rittenhouse's violence as an armed white man, which also create space for viewing him sympathetically. Nor is Rittenhouse's own agency in bringing a loaded weapon to a different state to intimidate protesters at a racial justice uprising.

Positioned as it is in a section entitled "Different standards for 'far-right' and 'far-left' terrorism," Zenn uses Rittenhouse's example to allege normatively motivated preferential treatment by terrorism experts for "far-left" actors. Immediately following his discussion of Rittenhouse's attempts to "provid[e] medical aid" and "extinguish fires" in Kenosha (68), Zenn accuses the New America Foundation (NAF) of applying "different standards" (68) to the left by not classifying the shooting of pro-Trump protester Lee Keltner by antifascist Matthew Dolloff as terrorism. In contrast to his portrayal of Rittenhouse, Zenn describes Dolloff as providing "'security'" (air quotes in original) for counter-protesters and mentions his support for "socialism . . . BLM, #Occupy, and Antifa . . . however, NAF never listed Dolloff's killing as 'far-left terrorism'" (68). Why Dolloff's support for antiracism and antifascism should dispose experts towards considering him a terrorist is not explained. Yet, Zenn's treatment of the term "security" calls into question whether anyone at a pro-Trump protest should feel unsafe, erasing different social positions among attendees. Meanwhile, Zenn describes Dolloff's victim, Keltner, as a "Navy veteran hat-maker" (68), invoking notions of service and self-sacrifice not granted to Rittenhouse's victims, whom Zenn does not grant names and only mentions as "white pro-BLM protesters" who "rioted" and "threatened Rittenhouse physically" (68). Zenn's own double standard in discussing Rittenhouse and Dolloff, as well as their victims, is thus clear, yet white epistemologies of ignorance position this standard as default, socially acceptable, and normatively neutral.

Despite his stated concern for definitional and conceptual precision, Zenn's double standard remains evident throughout his article. In a section entitled "Conflating far-right /WSES and ISIS," Zenn rejects what he perceives as a false equation between white supremacists and the Islamic State and in doing so manages to conflate ISIS with all other Muslim militancy. "A final far-right/WSE to ISIS conflation involved GWU Program on Extremism's report comparing Afghanistan's 'safe haven for numerous Islamic extremist groups' since the 1990s to Ukraine's for far-right/WSEs," he writes, a comparison notable for not directly invoking ISIS at all (71). Here, however, the flattening of many organisations and ideologies under one heading, "ISIS," is taken as appropriate. This reflects a unitary assumption about the "terrorism" category, under which the academy usually positions such organisations, that asserts Zenn's assumption about the transferability of expertise within that category.

This assumed transferability allows Zenn, who built his career writing about Boko Haram (BH), to benefit from a pivot in academic (and practitioner) interest from BH and other organisations lumped clumsily under the "Islamist" or "jihadist" labels to white supremacist violence (Nguyen 2023, 20–22). Despite professing concern about alleged conceptual stretching of the term "white supremacist," Zenn engages with no scholars or activists actually writing about white supremacy as a concept outside of the terrorism studies field. Here he replicates the exclusion of wider archives mentioned earlier, an exclusion necessary for maintenance of the disconnection between white supremacy and white supremacist violence. Zenn's assumed transferability of expertise also allows him to draw on the CTS tradition, and publish in the leading CTS journal, while misusing and mischaracterising CTS. For example, he states that "CTS argues that labelling 'sabotage, vandalism and arson as "serious threats of domestic terrorism" is inappropriate" (Zenn 2023, 65). This claim is based on a single article, Loadenthal (2013), thus attributing to an entire subfield one perspective that is in fact a matter of debate (e.g. Ben Sasson-Gordis and Yakter 2023).[6] Zenn likewise asserts that "CTS scholarship distinguishes between 'lethal' and 'non-lethal' terrorism" (66) – a distinction he positions as crucial to his argument – but provides no evidence for this claim beyond Loadenthal's aforementioned article, which as clarified in endnote 6 is itself mischaracterised. By virtue of his positioning within the academy, however, Zenn is assumed to have the expertise to assert a sweeping, unsubstantiated statement as fact.

My critique is not that Zenn has a clear normative position – all academic researchers do, and asserting a subjective worldview is not in and of itself a problem, as there is no other kind. My aim, rather, is to underscore that Zenn's subjectivity is widely taken *as objective* by terrorism scholars and reflects a larger societal privileging of whiteness that similarly enjoys as privileged status as "objective" reality. The banality of structural white supremacy allows Zenn's characterisation of the cities of El Paso, Pittsburgh, Charleston, Buffalo, and Christchurch, all of which experienced major white supremacist attacks and have sizeable non-white populations, as "relatively back-water'" to stand (64; air quotes are Zenn's). And it is this banality that likewise enables Zenn to assert that calling self-professed white supremacists such as Dylan Roof "white supremacist" is "oppositional and stigmatising" and indicative of the term's "possible overuse" (78). Unspoken in this statement is the white discomfort underlying much opposition to the term "white supremacy," arising from its longstanding and concerted disconnection from the "Hitlerian moment" as described above. On some level, Zenn

reveals that he is aware that this disconnection is constructed: far-right podcast guests, he writes, may "condemn white supremacy … albeit while still defending Confederate veterans monuments" (78).

Altogether, Zenn's attempted critical takedown of a "double standard" applied to white supremacist violence is a more convincing account of whiteness as expertise than of the white supremacist threat being "inflated" (64, 65, 66, 69, 71). Demonstrating transferability, Zenn allows his positioning within the Terrorism Studies community to stand in for expertise in the CTS tradition, letting him pick up a framework and misinterpret it in that framework's own journal of record. More seriously, transferability allows Zenn to speak with authority on a topic, white supremacy, with whose rich and multidisciplinary history he does not engage. Disconnection, meanwhile, allows Zenn to advocate for further exceptionalising white supremacist violence as marginal by equating this violence solely with "lethal terrorism" divorced from the power structures enabling it. Through whiteness as expertise, the problem becomes the language of white supremacy, rather than white supremacy itself. The white epistemology of ignorance advanced by Zenn's article serves to not only gatekeep what counts as threatening with respect to the white far right, but also to render invisible the power dynamics his argument itself enacts.

The subjective: Jarvis' "critical terrorism studies and the far-right"

At first glance, Lee Jarvis' "Critical Terrorism Studies and the Far-Right: Beyond Problems and Solutions?" offers a welcome alternative to Zenn's article as a critique of scholarship on white supremacist violence. Notably, Jarvis is an established CTS scholar and in particular has written extensively on terrorist proscription and vernacular security. He is also one of the few "founding parents" of CTS to have ventured into analysis of white supremacist violence. Nevertheless, Jarvis' article ultimately evinces many of the same arguments present in Zenn's, couched in critical language. Jarvis' work therefore underlines that whiteness as expertise can still be present in critical work on the "terrorist" category, even when that category's constructed nature is well-acknowledged.

Jarvis' central argument is twofold. He comments on the essentialist approach to what he terms "far-right terrorism and extremism" (and which I refer to as white supremacist violence), reiterating a common CTS critique of Terrorism Studies' treatment of "terrorism" as an objective category. He argues that, for white supremacist violence, this tendency is also present among critical scholars: "Beneath this emancipatory appeal [of unsettling common understandings of what constitutes 'terrorism']," he writes, " … is a shared essentialism in which far-right terrorism exists 'out there' as an object of knowledge to be discovered" (Jarvis 2022, 25). Here Jarvis demonstrates the unthinkable nature of counterterrorism abolition within a critical argument, a point to which I return in the conclusion.

For now, however, I am concerned with the second prong of Jarvis' argument: "a temptation to emphasise, even accentuate, the scale of this threat" (13). The critical way forward, he prescribes, is to desecuritise the far right. In many ways, this argument mirrors Zenn's starting points as discussed above, echoing concerns about expanding authoritarian practices justified by the War on Terror even further. Positioning phenomena as state security concerns, he argues, "tends to facilitate secretive and unaccountable decision-making" (27); desecuritising the far right, by contrast, could "shift attention – and even

resources – to more pressing issues of public policy, whether relating to health, environmental or other forms of insecurity" (29).

There is a difference, however, between not treating white supremacist violence with a counterterrorism framework, or even a security framework, and dismissing it as a threat outright – a distinction that Jarvis misses. For example, Jarvis argues that desecuritising the far right will create "space for better engagement with, and even empathy for, individuals identifying with – or identified *as* identifying with – the far right" (29). This point echoes one of Zenn's, who, despite evincing different politics, likewise argues for "engag[ing] *anti-violent* radical right key thinkers'" and against policies "that restrict rights of *anti-violent* far-right/WSEs" (Zenn 2023, 86, 88; emphasis in original). Jarvis does not specify further who these individuals identifying with the far-right might be, just as Zenn does not clarify how anti-violent white supremacy is possible, and the reader is left wondering about the desirability of engaging with actors espousing racist, antisemitic, misogynistic, queerphobic, etc. beliefs and for whom it is safe to do so in the first place. Put differently, a white cisgender male academic is unlikely to be the target of white supremacist violence, and his safety concerns are likely to be quite different from victims.

A key reason Jarvis misses this distinction is his omission of any discussion of structural racism and its ensuing power dynamics. Jarvis occasionally hints at power relations, such as when he writes that desecuritising the far right would involve asking "whose interests are served – or who benefits – from specific framings of danger" (Jarvis 2022, 28), but he stops short of actually naming the "who" in this statement and thus sidesteps the issue of structural white supremacy. Because Jarvis addresses white supremacist violence without talking about white supremacy, the "threat" as he conceives it becomes limited to nonstate actor violence within the reductive bounds of "terrorism" or "extremism" – a reification of those categories that he would likely reject in other contexts. Thus this is a manoeuvre of disconnection: the ways that white supremacist actors align with hegemonic groups and hegemonic ideologies remain uninterrogated, even though more mainstream actors may disavow such ideologies. One could read this as a concern with expanding the category of "terrorism." An alternative interpretation, however, is that this disconnection in fact demonstrates the limitations and ultimate unsuitability of the "terrorism" framework for addressing white supremacist, and indeed any, violence. The possibility of thinking about the white far right and its sources *entirely* outside the framework of "terrorism," and this analytical move as a rejection or abolition of the "terrorist" category rather than the relegation of it to a narrower subset of violence, is not considered in Jarvis' argument.

In brief, power relations matter. "Empathising" with white supremacy is not equivalent to listening to Muslim communities who are treated monolithically as terrorists by the state and whose existence is criminalised accordingly. The possibility of a white person, or of a dominant white ideology, receiving the pejorative "terrorist" label can engender white discomfort due to a perceived loss of sociopolitical power to stand above the fray (Jardina 2019), but feeling uncomfortable is not the same as being unsafe. Yet the transferability of arguments from one critical research space to another is assumed, enabled by a white ignorance of power and the disconnection of broader power structures from nonstate actor violence. By invoking this transferability, Jarvis' argument ignores that not all securitised groups occupy the same relatively disempowered place in a sociopolitical hierarchy and thus may inadvertently create further harm for

marginalised communities targeted by white supremacists. Jarvis acknowledges this risk in a brief paragraph before concluding his article but states, "None of this is intended" (29). Yet downplaying this harm is the exact outcome of his formulation, which would see oppressors engaged and further legitimised within a system that already discounts structural white supremacy, to say nothing of its most violent manifestations. And it lands Jarvis' argument exactly where Zenn's ends, with these two very different academics both calling on scholars to "caution against methodologies that inflate far-right /WSE terrorism's threat" (Zenn 2023, 78) and "resist the temptation to emphasise – and certainly to exaggerate – the scale of this phenomenon, even for normative or political purposes" (Jarvis 2022, 30).

Lastly, the white epistemology of ignorance that makes structural white supremacy so banal as to not merit noticing (Freeman, Kim, and Lake 2022; Morrison 1992) leads to a slippery treatment of "threat," a key component of Jarvis' argument that he nevertheless treats alternately as objective or subjective in service of presenting white supremacy as overhyped. To illustrate his concern for the expansion of the security state, Jarvis initially turns not to the constructivist and desecuritising approach he puts forward later in the article, but instead to statements by Jacob Ravndal, a researcher of the far right. Ravndal, who maintains the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence Dataset, describes a perceived privileging by some actors of "anecdotal evidence rather than systematic events data" (Ravndal 2018, 787, quoted in; Jarvis 2022, 19). Ravndal's advocacy for statistical analysis feels out of place alongside Jarvis' eventual constructivist approach, which would call into question the categories used in political violence datasets and note these datasets' inherently interpretive and selective nature (Behlendorf, Belur, and Kumar 2016). A quantitative political violence dataset as a threat assessment is, however, in line with an argument that requires disconnecting structural white supremacy, a vast and difficult-to-quantify phenomenon, from white supremacist violence and certainly far-right "terrorism" and its narrower boundaries.

Centring the question of "threat," even when done critically, allows Jarvis to foreclose opportunities for engaging with racialisation in both policy and academic work on the white far right. As soon as questions about the role of race and power are posed, supposedly neutral frameworks for analysis of threat unravel and reveal the power dynamics of academic work.[7] A final claim Jarvis makes is worth considering on this front. Critical work on the white far right, he argues, "has important potential to reveal and unpack racialised histories, sociologies, and politics *within* the Global North" (24, emphasis in original). Still, Jarvis cautions, "there is a risk here that greater emphasis on the far-right within terrorism research hinders contemporary efforts to decolonise terrorism studies" (24).

Certainly scholarship from the Global North on far-right actors has not delved deeply into far-right violence in India, Brazil, Peru, and other countries where racial, ethnic, and religious power relations look different, potentially producing a relatively narrow view among majority-white Global North terrorism scholars of what the far right is. Yet the assertion that studying the white far right runs counter to decolonisation efforts only follows if one disconnects structural white supremacy from white supremacist violence. Coloniality does not exist solely in the Global South, and attention to the enabling power structures of far-right violence could in fact sharpen scholars' focus on coloniality, given that colonialism is often the source of far-right attitudes and practices in the first place

(e.g. Evang 2022). Just as studies of Global South cases are not automatically decolonial manoeuvres, studies of the white far right in the Global North are not automatically colonial – and are less likely to be so without the white epistemological assumption of disconnection imposed upon them.

Conclusion

Summarising his work on the oversight of whiteness and white supremacy within far-right studies, Mondon (2023, 890) underscores that the absence of attention to whiteness and systemic racism in academic scholarship can, in fact, reveal their presence. In this article, I have argued that this enactment of white supremacy within Terrorism Studies indicates a deeper episteme understanding whiteness as both exceptional and banal, abhorrent and constant. Through the concept of whiteness as expertise, I have suggested that an insistence on epistemological coherence within the "terrorism" category, to which white supremacist violence has been admitted by at least some scholars, removes the need to engage with the power dynamics shaping responses to political violence and choices in academic work alike. In this way, even purportedly critical accounts can perpetuate whiteness within the study of "terrorism."

A core implication of this analysis is that research on white supremacist violence would be well-served to embrace emancipatory frameworks, and that doing so would require privileging non-white epistemologies over the preservation of white comfort. This is a normative position, one which some critical scholars may not recognise as a valid approach alongside other critical strategies of subversion or destabilisation of concepts like "terrorism" (Jarvis 2019, 350). In advocating for explicit normativity, I emphasise that all academic arguments involve normative components, even if unacknowledged. Indeed, the analysis in this article demonstrates that there exists a dominant normative commitment to white epistemologies of ignorance in backlash to work on the white far right, even though scholars making reactionary arguments may not classify their positions as such.

Making a normative commitment to emancipation within work on white supremacist violence, and within Critical Terrorism Studies more broadly, requires taking abolition seriously as an outcome. Concerns about double standards in treating violence by Muslim actors vs. actors racialised as white are often met with valid caution regarding expansion of the counterterrorism apparatus, without entertaining that a better way forward may be to do away with the counterterrorism apparatus altogether. Abolitionist futures, unsettling as they do the assumption that state institutions can enact violence without perpetuating white supremacy and coloniality, tend to exist outside the realm of white legibility. Frequently I have had my own arguments misinterpreted by well-intentioned scholars who cannot conceive that I might be advocating the abolition of "terrorist" as a category of power and sense-making, rather than its refinement into something viewed as less racist.

So let me be clear: the solution to harms perpetrated in the name of counterterrorism is not to widen the scope of who we call "terrorist" or apply the term "correctly," but rather to imagine and collectively build a future in which the term "terrorist" and its associated discursive and policy apparatus do not exist. This means realising that what we call "terrorism studies" is in fact embedded within and in service

of structures of colonialism, racial capitalism, and cisheteropatriarchy, and that these formations of power are the logical targets of a critical approach, because it is they that give "terrorism" as a concept its legibility (Schotten 2024). Everything else is distraction.

Notes

1. I thank Munira Mustaffa for emphasising this point at the 2023 GNET conference.
2. I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me articulate this point.
3. It is worth considering how much "newness" is a euphemism for "faddishness," and the ways in which research fads are themselves often examples of past ignorance of experiences not had by dominant groups in society, i.e. white, straight, cisgender men.
4. With thanks to Heike Schotten for suggesting this language.
5. In the interest of full disclosure, both articles are also critical of my own work, if perfunctorily, among the work of many other scholars.
6. This point also takes Loadenthal out of context, whose reference to the labelling of sabotage, etc. as "terrorism" specifically relates to acts by the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front, not all acts labelled "terrorism," and in fact explicitly critiques the "terrorism" frame as generally limiting for making sense of violence. This is but one of many mischaracterisations or partial readings by Zenn of the literature he cites.
7. I thank Tom Pettinger for helping me articulate this point.

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