This is a serious project. All immigrants to the United States know (and knew) that if they want to become real, authentic Americans they must reduce their fealty to their native country and regard it as secondary, subordinate, in order to emphasize their whiteness. Unlike any nation in Europe, the United States holds whiteness as the unifying force. Here, for many people, the definition of “Americanness” is color.

Under slave laws, the necessity for color rankings was obvious, but in America today, post-civil-rights legislation, white people’s conviction of their natural superiority is being lost. Rapidly lost. There are “people of color” everywhere, threatening to erase this long-understood definition of America. And what then? Another black President? A predominantly black Senate? Three black Supreme Court Justices? The threat is frightening.

In order to limit the possibility of this untenable change, and restore whiteness to its former status as a marker of national identity, a number of white Americans are sacrificing themselves. They have begun to do things they clearly don’t really want to be doing, and, to do so, they are (1) abandoning their sense of human dignity and (2) risking the appearance of cowardice.
Much as they may hate their behavior, and know full well how craven it is, they are willing to kill small children attending Sunday school and slaughter churchgoers who invite a white boy to pray. Embarrassing as the obvious display of cowardice must be, they are willing to set fire to churches, and to start firing in them while the members are at prayer. And, shameful as such demonstrations of weakness are, they are willing to shoot black children in the street.

To keep alive the perception of white superiority, these white Americans tuck their heads under cone-shaped hats and American flags and deny themselves the dignity of face-to-face confrontation, training their guns on the unarmed, the innocent, the scared, on subjects who are running away, exposing their unthreatening backs to bullets. Surely, shooting a fleeing man in the back hurts the presumption of white strength? The sad plight of grown white men, crouching beneath their (better) selves, to slaughter the innocent during traffic stops, to push black women’s faces into the dirt, to handcuff black children. Only the frightened would do that. Right?

These sacrifices, made by supposedly tough white men, who are prepared to abandon their humanity out of fear of black men and women, suggest the true horror of lost status.

It may be hard to feel pity for the men who are making these bizarre sacrifices in the name of white power and supremacy. Personal debasement is not easy for white people (especially for white men), but to retain the conviction of their superiority to others—especially to black people—they are willing to risk contempt, and to be reviled by the mature, the
sophisticated, and the strong. If it weren’t so ignorant and pitiful, one could
mourn this collapse of dignity in service to an evil cause.

The comfort of being “naturally better than,” of not having to struggle or
demand civil treatment, is hard to give up. The confidence that you will not
be watched in a department store, that you are the preferred customer in
high-end restaurants—these social inflections, belonging to whiteness, are
greedily relished.

So scary are the consequences of a collapse of white privilege that many
Americans have flocked to a political platform that supports and translates
violence against the defenseless as strength. These people are not so much
angry as terrified, with the kind of terror that makes knees tremble.

On Election Day, how eagerly so many white voters—both the poorly
educated and the well educated—embraced the shame and fear sowed by
Donald Trump. The candidate whose company has been sued by the Justice
Department for not renting apartments to black people. The candidate who
questioned whether Barack Obama was born in the United States, and who
seemed to condone the beating of a Black Lives Matter protester at a
campaign rally. The candidate who kept black workers off the floors of his
casinos. The candidate who is beloved by David Duke and endorsed by the
Ku Klux Klan.

William Faulkner understood this better than almost any other American
writer. In “Absalom, Absalom,” incest is less of a taboo for an upper-class
Southern family than acknowledging the one drop of black blood that
would clearly soil the family line. Rather than lose its “whiteness” (once again), the family chooses murder.

This article appears as part of a larger feature, “Aftermath: Sixteen Writers on Trump’s America,” in the November 21, 2016, issue.

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