

# Americanitis: Architecture, Mass Media, White Supremacy

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The origins and definition of the word ‘Americanitis’ are opaque at best. It is generally believed to have appeared in medical journals of the late nineteenth century, describing a particular nervous ailment found in the inhabitants of the United States of America. Thought to cause disease, heart attack, nervous exhaustion, and even insanity, Americanitis was seen as a serious threat to the American public. In fact, in 1925, Time Magazine reported that Americanitis was responsible for claiming up to 240,000—white—lives a year.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, with the passing of the Great Depression, its position as a legitimate disease faded in the public eye. Now virtually forgotten, I wish to resurrect it, and propose that it be used to describe a disease that truly does claim lives: white supremacy.

Currently, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ‘Americanitis’ as ‘excessive nervous tension’ and an ‘enthusiastic or aggressive advocacy of Americanism’.<sup>2</sup> In my reinterpretation, I would like to expand upon this definition to describe Americanitis as a structural disorder which plagues American society at large, as opposed to a disease that merely infects individuals. I will argue it is an entanglement of power, fear, and amnesia that writhes under the surface of the American landscape. The foundation upon which white supremacy stands is a polarised sense of white identity as virtuous yet vulnerable to the supremacy of Black identity, which is regarded as impure and violent. It reinforces hierarchies by instilling a fear—indeed, an ‘excessive nervous tension’—of Black assault on white structures, people, and spaces. It fabricates a link between

the upward mobility achieved by Black Americans with the violent invasion of white spaces.<sup>3</sup> What belies its tactical purpose is that it has been repeatedly harnessed by white supremacist hate groups—‘aggressive advocates of Americanism’—to endorse racial violence as a defence strategy. Paired with mass media and its falsified depictions of Black violence, they seek to use this to justify attacks against Black communities and their spaces.

Mutative expansions of Americanitis have cycled since Reconstruction. In the twentieth century, cinema, television, and the Internet have emerged as effective platforms to spread a fear of encroaching Blackness through representations of architectural destruction. Cinema’s maturation in the early 1910s transformed the Neoclassical architecture of Southern plantations into a symbol of white supremacy and confederate nostalgia. Half a century later, at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s, the television was used to associate the Civil Rights Movement to the dread of imminent nuclear annihilation of racially segregated neighbourhoods by Soviet forces. Half a century after that, during the Obama era and the Trump era, the Internet and its social media platforms have allowed an association to be constructed between increased diversity, as well as movements like Black Lives Matter, with social discord and detriment to America’s structures. In this essay, I will explore each of these expansions, and the resulting white supremacist violence, in an effort to show how the through-line of Americanitis has been an essential tool for spreading and maintaining white supremacy. I will conclude with the recent white supremacist attack on the Capitol on 6 January 2021, to illustrate how this ‘disease’ very much affects the nation to the present day.

<sup>1</sup> ‘Americanitis’ Time (27 April 1925) 17–32.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Definition of Americanitis by Merriam-Webster’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Americanitis>> accessed 11 March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

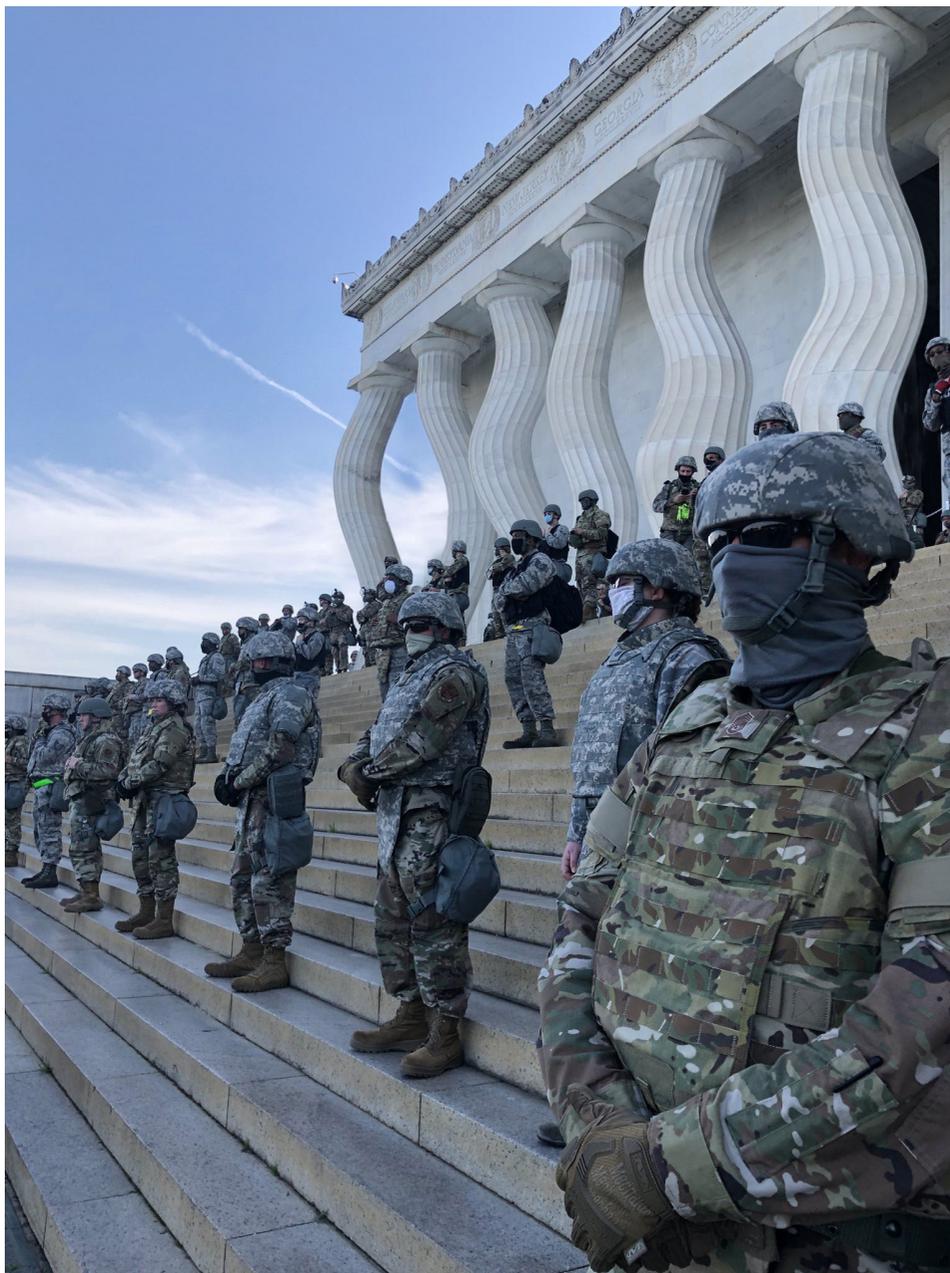


Fig 1. Lincoln Memorial (Nicolas Canal Tinius 2021, from photograph by Martha Raddatz 2020).

## Cinema, the First World War, the Great Migration

The 1910s and 1920s witnessed the mass migration of Black people to Northern American states in search of an escape from the mass lynchings and general lack of safety of the Jim Crow South. Jim Crow laws began at the end of the nineteenth century, and had enforced segregation based on race. During the First World War, immigration from Europe had decreased drastically, but the demand for unskilled labour exploded. Known as the Great Migration, approximately six million African Americans fled the South over the course of just a few decades.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Black Americans were able to find employment in Northern metropolitan centres such as Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York.

<sup>4</sup> University of Washington, 'Great Migration (African American)' <[https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/black\\_migration.shtml](https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/black_migration.shtml)> accessed 11 March 2021.

Harlem, which had originally been developed as a white-only area of Manhattan in the nineteenth century, became the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. It was transformed into a metropolitan centre for Black culture, inspiring generations of immense creativity and intellectual vigour. However, the Great Migration provided a narrative which Americanitis could distort and misconstrue to strike fear in white Americans, who, until then, had lived in a predominantly white society. The narrative was of a large-scale Black invasion of white spaces.

Cinema was surging in popularity in the 1910s, creating the ideal conditions for an increase in Americanitis. DW Griffith, one of its preeminent innovators, directed *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), arguably one of the most racist films of all time yet one of the most influential, pioneering, and successful. The film, which recounts a historically inaccurate version of the Civil War and Reconstruction,

relies primarily on architecture as a symbol of white supremacy. *The Birth of a Nation* mythologised Neoclassical architecture and placed it within a false historical narrative grounded in whitewashed and amnesic confederate nostalgia. At the beginning of the film, the wealthy inhabitants of a Neoclassical mansion sit on their front porch among pristine, white columns. Each time the building appears, while the Civil War rages throughout the film, the columns are more blemished. After the end of the War, Northern troops of Black soldiers march in front of the house. Behind them, the columns, once pristine, are almost entirely charred black. As the film concludes, the family which once inhabited the Neoclassical mansion is forced to flee into a tiny log cabin similar to the dwellings which enslaved labourers would have had to live in before the Civil War.

Griffith takes his narrative one step further by portraying an invasion of the Capitol after Reconstruction. ‘The negro party in control in the State House of Representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites, session of 1871’, reads a title card. The following card reads, ‘Historic incidents from the first legislative session under Reconstruction’. The politicians—primarily white actors in blackface—drink alcohol, eat fried chicken, and place their bare feet on the tables. Meanwhile, across the room is shown an obviously aggravated cluster of white men, while the next card reads, ‘The helpless white minority’. This scene signals the expansion from a fear grounded in the local and domestic, to a fear of governmental structures having turned against white people. In reality, however, only 17 Black representatives served between 1870 and 1887.<sup>5</sup> That number only decreased as the Jim Crow laws emerged. In fact, when *The Birth of a Nation* was released, there had not been a single Black office-holder for almost 15 years, and that would continue to be the case until 1929. By creating an entirely fictitious narrative, Griffith tapped into white fears that the Black minority had suddenly become a vast majority in government structures during Reconstruction and had only strengthened since. For Griffith, gradually defaced spaces and structures—specifically, the home with its intimacy, and the Capitol with its political power—were crucial to constructing a narrative of a Black invasion, which terrified and enraged white communities across the nation.

The sentiment of white loss grounded in the Great Migration, exacerbated by *The Birth of a Nation*, led to the vast spread of Americanitis. It inspired the revitalisation of the Ku Klux Klan, which had faded since its establishment after the Civil War. It provoked a wave of attacks targeting Black communities and their homes, causing a massive loss of life and homelessness. One major attack happened in 1917, in East St Louis, Illinois, where almost 12,000 Black workers had migrated to work in local factories aiding the war effort. Tensions began to boil over, and a three-day massacre ensued. Entire neighbourhoods were burnt down, leaving around half of the Black population homeless and over one hundred murdered.<sup>6</sup> In 1919, a series of almost three dozen similar race-related riots happened across America. This would become known as the Red Summer.<sup>7</sup> In Tulsa, Oklahoma, on 31 May 1921, one of

the most severe incidents of racial violence took place, leading to the murder of approximately 300 Black people (the exact figure was left unreported). Prosperous Black neighbourhoods were set ablaze, including more than 1,400 homes and businesses.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the massacre, around 10,000 people were left homeless. Americanitis had come full circle. White fear and anxiety of a Black invasion were weaponised by cinema, resulting in brutal massacres and spatial oppression committed against Black communities.

## Cold War, Civil Rights, television

The wave of Americanitis in the 1910s and 1920s would ultimately result in the establishment of segregationist policies aimed at subjugating Black spaces. Examples are the National Housing Act 1934, which was the beginning of redlining, and the racially oppressive Federal Housing Administration.<sup>9</sup> In the two decades after the Second World War, racially segregated suburban neighbourhoods—sanctioned by the Federal Housing Administration—were built en masse across the USA to alleviate the housing shortage that the government had been struggling with since the Great Depression.<sup>10</sup> Bland, unoriginal, and ubiquitous, the suburban home let middle-class families not previously considered white but not deemed Black either, such as Jewish and Italian communities, forfeit their cultural heritage and blend into white suburbia. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum rapidly, and it was not long before challenges to segregationist policies would gain national attention. Events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960, the Freedom Riders bus tour in 1961, and Martin Luther King’s March on Washington in 1963 all contributed to white fears of Blackness encroaching on white spaces. The Civil Rights Movement had made a point of occupying white spaces in order to bring the conversation about inequality into the spotlight.

The core narrative of Americanitis, of an invading Blackness, stayed the same in the post-war era. However, it became increasingly abstract because associations were constructed between communism and the upward mobility of the Black individual. Those associations were being made since the early years of the Russian Revolution, but in the 1950s they became virtually inseparable in white supremacist rhetoric. For example, in 1954, whilst addressing his congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, the prominent segregationist Reverend GT Gillespie announced:

The problem of race relations is not new. It is as old as civilization ... The problem has also been complicated by the worldwide spread of Karl Marx’s doctrine of Internationalism and the Classless society ... and the breakdown of all national and racial distinctions and to effect the complete amalgamation of all races.<sup>11</sup>

Gillespie exploited a white fear that Black and white people would mix if Communism were to take hold. This would have been a direct attack against the driving force of Americanitis.

5 History, Art, and Archives: United States House of Representatives, ‘Black-American Members by Congress, 1870-Present’ <<https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Data/Black-American-Representatives-and-Senators-by-Congress/>> accessed 11 March 2021.

6 Allison Keyes, ‘The East St. Louis Race Riot Left Dozens Dead, Devastating a Community on the Rise’ *Smithsonian Magazine* (30 June 2017) <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/east-st-louis-race-riot-left-dozens-dead-devastating-community-on-the-rise-180963885/>> accessed 11 March 2021.

7 National Archives: Rediscovering Black History, ‘Portal Spotlight: Civil Unrest and the Red Summer’ <[https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.](https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2020/05/20/portal-spotlight-civil-unrest-and-the-red-summer/)

[archives.gov/2020/05/20/portal-spotlight-civil-unrest-and-the-red-summer/](https://www.archives.gov/2020/05/20/portal-spotlight-civil-unrest-and-the-red-summer/)> accessed 11 March 2021.

8 Tulsa City-County Library, ‘Tulsa Race Riot of 1921’ <<https://www.tulsalibrary.org/tulsa-race-riot-1921>> accessed 11 March 2021.

9 Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (Liverlight Publishing Corporation 2017) 9. 10 *ibid* 13.

11 GT Gillespie, ‘A Christian View on Segregation’ (1954) 1 Pamphlets and Broad-sides <[https://egrove.olemiss.edu/citizens\\_pamph/1/](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/citizens_pamph/1/)> accessed 31 March 2021.

The link contrived between the perceived invasion by communist forces and the advancement of Black people in society was codified and extended to apocalyptic proportions by means of the television. Television ownership rose from 9% of the population in 1950 to almost 90% by 1961. It provided a new platform through which to steer the collective consciousness of white Americans toward a fear of Blackness.<sup>12</sup> It brought into the suburban home images of the riots and burning buildings resulting from resistance against the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the threat of Soviet communism and nuclear warfare. While the new suburban neighbourhoods were becoming established in cities across the country, replica versions of those same homes were being built in the desert of Nevada. The homes were filled with white mannequins, and television cameras were placed within them as well as outside them. One nuclear test was documented in a ten-minute film made by the Federal Civil Defense Administration, called *Operation Doorstep* (1953).<sup>13</sup> A voice introduces the film: 'For the first time in our history, American homes will be exposed to atomic blast'. Subsequently, there is a flash—the detonation of the bomb—followed by a shock wave which violently shatters and disintegrates a house. After the blast, footage of the house exploding is played back and described frame by frame, ending with, 'Now the blast wave gets inside, the house, under tremendous pressure, blows apart. Remember: what you have seen here in detail happened in just two and one third second[s]'. The film then inspects the aftermath. The narrator says, 'In the cold light of dawn, television cameras on "News Knob" make the threat of the mushroom cloud a dark reality at homes across the nation ... Will you, like a mannequin, just sit and wait?' The psychological anxiety deriving from the possible random, violent, and instantaneous destruction of white homes took advantage of associations being made between communist invasions and the Civil Rights Movement. It was made to be associated with the upward movement of Black Americans in American society. By means of television, the white collective consciousness was permeated with images of architectural destruction designed to instil a deep, existential fear of Blackness. Americanitis had succeeded in mutating white Americans' mental images of Black people pleading for peace and equality into mental images of a communist revolution and the potential end of the world.

The 1960s witnessed widespread assaults against Black people, similar to the wave of white violence resulting from the Great Migration and cinema. George Wallace, governor of Alabama between 1963 and 1983, was known for his staunch support of Jim Crow laws and segregation. He used the television to broadcast a narrative very similar to that of Reverend Gillespie one decade prior: that the Civil Rights Movement was deeply infiltrated by communists. His televised discourse bolstered serious racial tensions, leading to the white supremacist bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, a Black church in Birmingham, Alabama, which claimed the lives of four young girls. The narrative broadcast by Wallace provoked more white violence in Alabama in 1965, during the marches from Selma to Montgomery, where hundreds of protesters were met with extreme violence from the police force in an event that would become known as Bloody Sunday. The explicit housing discrimination that defined the Federal Housing Administration was deemed unconstitutional and it was replaced with housing policies that did not discriminate by race. This amendment came

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 'Statistics on Radio and Television, 1950–1960' (1963) 23 Statistical Reports and Studies 1.

<sup>13</sup> The Federal Civil Defence Administration, *Operation Doorstep* (1953) <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIWAs\\_avpbY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uIWAs_avpbY)> accessed 31 March 2021.

late enough, though, that the wealth gap—from the accumulated wealth grounded in home ownership of the post-war era—separated white and Black families to an irreparable degree. In other words, Americanitis became systematic and no longer relied on explicit policies to enforce segregation. Residential segregation persists to this day as a result and forms the core of the most serious national problems that Black Americans face: access to quality education, proper healthcare, residential safety, and the fair possibility of upward social mobility.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Americanitis succeeded in transforming the explicit racial landscape that existed before the Civil Rights Movement into a systematic one veiled by seemingly neutral laws.

## Today, Black Lives Matter, social media

The election of Barack Obama as President in 2008, alongside projections of a minority-majority America by the mid-twenty-first century, signalled a significant shift toward a multicultural America<sup>15</sup>. The combination of a Black national leader and a perceived deprivation of the white population represented the core propagator of Americanitis: a Black infiltration of government structures, and the demotion of whiteness in society. Donald Trump, a real estate tycoon and television executive, used his influence on social media and the television to project himself into the political spotlight, by questioning Obama's birthplace and therefore his legitimacy as president. Like DW Griffith before him, Trump exploited new media to spread fear, anxiety, and ultimately distrust in the government.<sup>16</sup> By unifying his supporters under the narrative of an infiltrated government, and by his promise to restore America to how it supposedly once was, he garnered enough support to become elected President himself.

Nearing the end of Trump's administration, racial tensions boiled over. On 25 May 2020, the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by two police officers sparked the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement and a wave of racial unrest. This was similar in scale to that of the Civil Rights Movement. Smashed windows and plywood-covered storefronts quickly became emblematic of the unrest, even though the vast majority of the protests were peaceful. Anyone who experienced them on social media and television would have been hard-pressed not to imagine entire cities looted and in flames. There were two central topics of controversy. One was demand for the removal of public monuments glorifying enslavers. The other was the Defund the Police campaign, which called for a large portion of the federal budget provided to the police force to be redistributed to non-policing forms of public security.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Rothstein (n 9) 195.

<sup>15</sup> Sandra L Colby and Jennifer M Ortman, 'Projections of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014–2060' (*US Census Bureau*, 2015) <<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p25-1143.pdf>> accessed 11 March 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Tim Elfrink, 'Trump tweets videos of Black men attacking white people, asks, "Where are the protesters?"' *The Seattle Times* (23 June 2020) <<https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/trump-tweets-videos-of-black-men-attacking-white-people-asks-where-are-the-protesters/>> accessed 25 March 2021; Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Martin, 'With Tweets, Videos and Rhetoric, Trump Pushes Anew to Divide Americans by Race' *The New York Times* (23 June 2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/us/politics/trump-race-racism-protests.html>> accessed 25 March 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Rashawn Ray, 'What does "Defund the Police" mean and does it have merit?' (*Brookings*, 19 June 2020) <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/06/19/what-does-defund-the-police-mean-and-does-it-have-merit/>> accessed 11 March 2021.

To many, the removal of public monuments represented the erasure of American history and what they saw as their cultural heritage. Defund the Police represented, to fearful white people, a removal of safety and protection, and therefore presented, theoretically, a threat to their homes and families. Both demands, alongside the repeated depiction of burning cities on social media platforms, resulted in a vast perceived assault on white space, and yet another wave of Americanitis.

When Obama became president, the idea took hold that a post-racial America was on the cusp of emerging. However, most of the racist policies established throughout the twentieth century are still very much present today. Violence against Black communities has had long-lasting consequences. Mass incarceration of Black people, continued racial segregation, police brutality, voter suppression, and an immense wealth gap between white and Black families are only a few of the persisting impacts of Americanitis. For example, Black people are 5.6 times more likely to be incarcerated and 2.8 times more likely to have a fatal encounter with a police officer than their white counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Infant mortality for Black people is double that of white people, and for Black women giving birth the mortality rate is three times higher than for white women.<sup>19</sup> The wealth gap, set in motion by the post-war redlining and housing discrimination, significantly widened between 2013 and 2016. This resulted in white families having a net worth around ten times greater than Black families.<sup>20</sup> The subsequent geographical segregation of Black people, a consequence of living in more polluted areas, has also resulted in higher rates of asthma, diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension.<sup>21</sup> Even though the Black population has not witnessed a fundamental improvement of their place in society, online conversation-based platforms such as Parler, DLive, 4chan, and Reddit have given rise to a variety of violent alt-right conspiracy theorist groups, ardent in their belief that whiteness is under attack and that Blackness has taken over.

## To conclude

As racial tensions have spiked in the Trump era, it is clear once more that Americanitis remains a potent mechanism for upholding white supremacy. Beginning with his 'Make America Great Again' slogan leading up to his election, Trump's central narrative was one of a lost America in need of restoration. His emphasis on architectural forms, designed to shield America from an influx of perceived external impurity, garnered him considerable support. Throughout his campaign and his first year in office, the primary architectural symbol was the theoretical construction of a wall barring entry from Mexico. In February 2020, an executive order in its draft

phase was leaked, which evidenced that Trump was focussing on another symbol: neoclassical architecture. Entitled 'Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again', it argued for the reinstatement of the neoclassical form as the predominant style for federal architecture.<sup>22</sup> As it became apparent that his 2020 presidential campaign was beginning to lose ground as a result of his handling of racial unrest and the pandemic, Trump turned to a more reliable solution. Instead of proposing the construction of new neoclassical buildings, he turned to Americanitis and spread the idea that the existing federal buildings had been infiltrated by an anti-white government. By the time Joe Biden came into power, Trump's narrative became one of an illegitimate government attacking America. In his speech just before the assault of white supremacists on the Capitol on 6 January 2021, Trump shouted to his spectators:

[Y]ou're the real people. You're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation ... Our country has been under siege for a long time. Far longer than this four-year period ... if you don't fight like hell you're not going to have a country anymore.<sup>23</sup>

With these remarks, Trump had flawlessly summarised and perpetuated Americanitis. A white supremacist mob subsequently streamed itself invading the House of Representatives. Drenched in irony, it produced images strikingly similar to the Capitol scene in *The Birth of a Nation*. The members of the mob filmed themselves placing their feet on tables, ransacking the building, and chasing a Black police officer down a hallway. They were there, without a doubt, to reclaim the country that they believed they had lost.

18 Sarah DeGue, Katherine A Fowler, and Cynthia Calkins, 'Deaths due to Lethal Force by Law Enforcement' (*US National Library of Medicine*, 2012) <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6080222/>> accessed 11 March 2021.

19 Bruce Mitchell and Juan Franco, 'HOLC Redlining Maps: The Persistent Structure of Segregation and Economic Inequality' (*National Community Reinvestment Committee*, 2018) <[https://ncrc.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2018/02/NCRC-Research-HOLC-10.pdf](https://ncrc.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2018/02/NCRC-Research-HOLC-10.pdf)> accessed 11 March 2021.

20 Lisa J Dettling, Joanne W Hsu, Lindsay Jacobs, Kevin B Moore, Jeffrey P Thompson, and Elizabeth Llanes, 'Recent Trends in Wealth Holding by Race and Ethnicity: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances' (*Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System*, 2017) <<https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/recent-trends-in-wealth-holding-by-race-and-ethnicity-evidence-from-the-survey-of-consumer-finances-20170927.htm>> accessed 11 March 2021.

21 Mitchell and Franco (n 19).

22 'Executive Order: Making Federal Buildings Beautiful Again', <[https://architexturez.net/system/files/Draft\\_of\\_Trump\\_White\\_House\\_Executive\\_Order\\_on\\_Federal\\_Buildings.pdf](https://architexturez.net/system/files/Draft_of_Trump_White_House_Executive_Order_on_Federal_Buildings.pdf)> accessed March 11 2021.

23 'Transcript of Trump's Speech at Rally Before US Capitol Riot' (*The Associated Press*) <<https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-capitol-siege-media-e79eb5164613d6718e9f4502eb471f27>> accessed 11 March 2021.