

# Who Gets to Be Afraid in America?

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Detail of "Running From Yesterday's Acquittal," 2019. Image courtesy of Chase Hall Studio

Oakmont beckoned outdoor runners—even novices like me.

We were the second family to move into Oakmont, a new housing development seven miles west of the University of Florida, when I joined the faculty in 2015. My partner and I loved how our living space wrapped around a green-dotted, open-air indoor courtyard like homes we'd seen in West Africa and Latin America. Nothing compared to being outside *inside* our courtyard home.

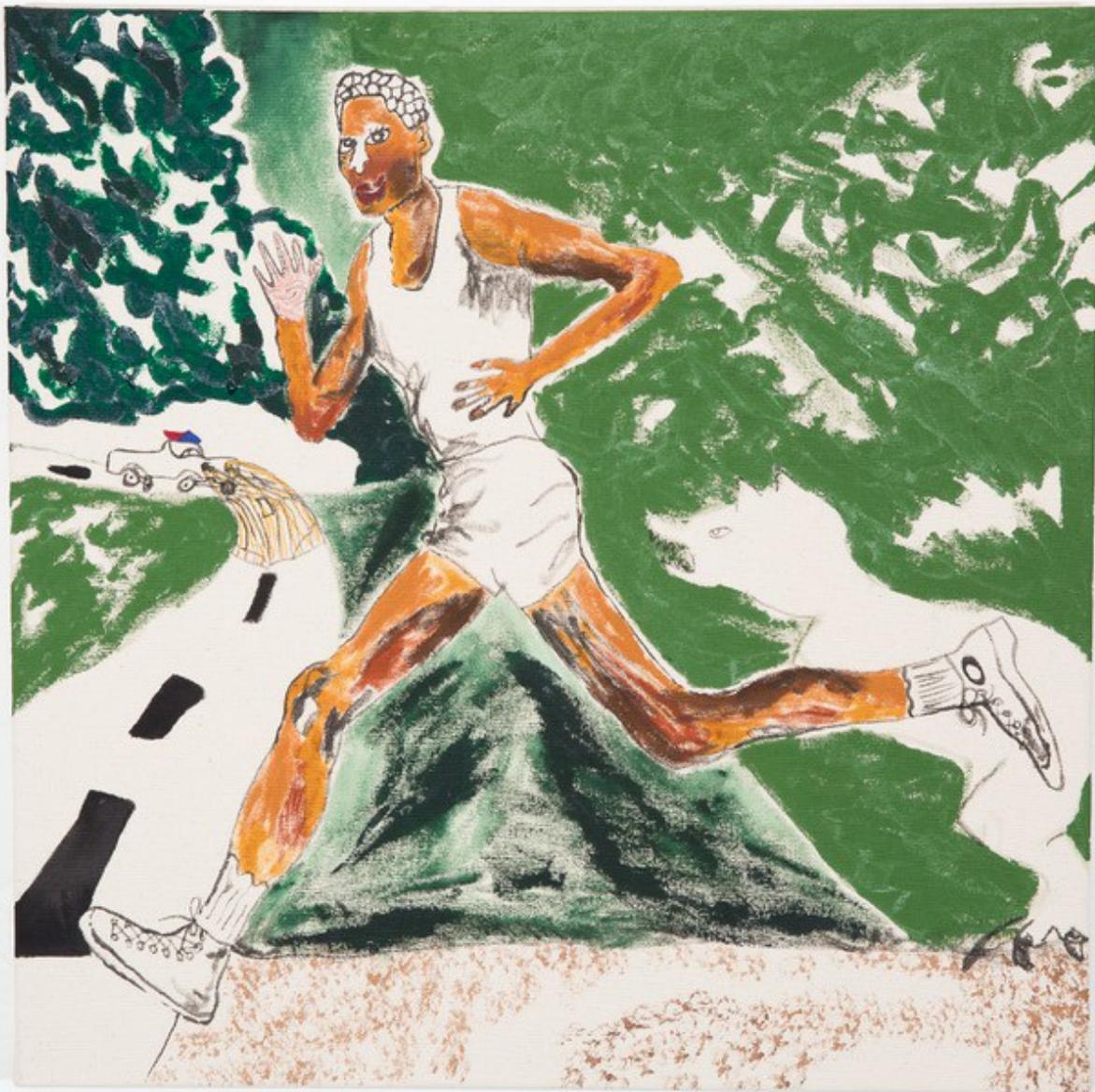
Well, maybe being outside in Oakmont—running down its newly paved roads, gazing up at stately oak trees with moss draping down, staring down into the ponds, racing all the galloping or flying animals, all to the sweet melody of quietness. Few houses. No people. Just paved roads. Just nature's sight lines.

At first, I hardly worried about cars while exercising. But the vehicles started coming. Trees were cleared. Foundations laid. New houses framed—a fascinating new picture screening every day for my curiosity.

As I ran on by, I imagined how the framed-out houses were going to look completed. Or I imagined living in the jumbo dwellings. Or as I ran on by, I stared at the construction workers as they stared back at me.

But not on one particular day. That day, no construction workers were around this half-built wonder. No vehicles were in sight. There was just my curiosity on overdrive—pushing me into the house to feed my imagination. I did not need long. I never needed long.

Minutes later, my feet were pounding the pavement under the moss. I am Ahmaud Arbery.



Running from yesterday's acquittal, 2019. Acrylic on cotton canvas. 24" x 24" (Image courtesy of Chase Hall Studio)

On Sunday, February 23, around 1 p.m., Arbery had just peered into a half-built home, as I did so many times in Oakmont. He ran away under the falling moss near the coastal Georgia town of Brunswick. Up the block lived Gregory McMichael, a former police officer and investigator for the local district attorney, and his son, Travis. McMichael did not see a former high-school football standout who normally jogs around the neighborhood, as Arbery's family describes him. McMichael saw a black male “hauling ass” from the scene of a crime, as he told investigators.

Adam Serwer: The coronavirus was an emergency until Trump found out who was dying

Arbery could have been any “black male running down the street,” as a 911 caller described him. He could have been anyone’s brother, father, son, cousin, boyfriend, husband, co-worker, friend. He could have been me running down the street. As a black male—not to the people who know me or who know Arbery, but to the Americans who don’t know me and think they do—I am Ahmaud Arbery. Those Americans think they know me when my curiosity gets the best of me. They think they know me when something has gone missing. They think they know me when they see me running down the road.

They don’t see me wearing the same white T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers that they wore the other day. They don’t see themselves in me. They certainly don’t see their own innocence in me. They see only their own guilt in me—their villainous fear marking me as the villain.

They don’t need to figure out *who* I am. All they see is *what* I am. A black male. And what I am pronounces who I am. A criminal. The embodiment of danger. The producer of fear.

Black males have been made into the fathers of fear. But the fears of black men are bastards. Broods we never wanted, but can’t escape. All these bastards are coming after us, suspecting us continuously, terrorizing us constantly, and we can’t escape. The black man can’t escape the fear of the black man.

Gregory McMichael “stated he was in his front yard and saw the suspect from the break-ins ‘hauling ass’” down the road, according to the police report. McMichael “stated there have been several Break-ins in the neighborhood and further the suspect was caught on surveillance video,” the report said. But where is the surveillance video linking Arbery to a recent burglary? And McMichael’s neighborhood had gone seven weeks without a reported burglary, a local police lieutenant recently told CNN. The last reported burglary was on January 1, when a 9-mm pistol was stolen from an unlocked truck outside the McMichaels’ home.

Ibram X. Kendi: We’re still living and dying in the slaveholders’ republic

According to McMichael, he ran in his house and grabbed his son, Travis, and both grabbed their weapons. McMichael told police they armed themselves because they “didn’t know if the male was armed or not.” McMichael also told police he saw Arbery “the other

night” stick his hand down his pants, which led him to believe he was armed. Arbery was not armed.

No one living knows what Arbery felt in his final moments. No one living knows what Arbery felt as he approached the white pickup truck parked on the two-lane road, blocking his way. No one living knows what he felt as he saw Gregory McMichael standing in the truck’s bed and saw Travis McMichael standing outside the passenger door wielding a shotgun.

All I know is what I would have felt. If I were running under the falling moss, if two armed white men were coming after me in their pickup truck—and a third not far behind—then I would have felt the wrath of terror: racist terror.

And I know the feeling of racist terror. I know what it feels like when a white man— in my case a police officer—suspects me as an armed criminal and pursues me and clutches his gun when I’m just out running (errands). I was three years older than Arbery, who would have turned 26 on Friday. I lived, and Arbery died. Arbery could have lived, and I could have died.

And I could have been placed in a morgue near all those black bodies falling from COVID-19, at rates higher than any other racial group, in states from Georgia to Maine, from Michigan to South Carolina, from Ohio to South Dakota, according to the COVID Racial Data Tracker. We can’t see the coronavirus like we can’t see the fears that terrorize us, but we keep feeling their lethal effects.

I just don’t think Americans fully realize how terrorizing it is to black males when we are falsely suspected as violent criminals. All Americans seem to be thinking about is their fear of us—not our fear of their fear. Black males fear racist fear because we know from experience what happens when the police are called, when the Klan is called, when faces are reddened, when purses or ropes or guns are clutched, when they cross the street away from us, or cross the street toward us clutching their police badges, or their badges of white masculinity.

It is terrifying to produce so much unwanted and unwarranted fear. And then we are harmed. And then we are killed. And then our killers claim self-defense. And then our killers cast us—the unarmed ones, the dead ones—as the aggressors, as Gregory McMichael cast Arbery in the police report, justifying his son pulling the trigger; as George Zimmerman’s lawyers cast Trayvon Martin in a strikingly similar case.

If I was chased by armed white men on an afternoon jog, then I would have thought they were trying to lynch me. I might not have run past their pickup truck, especially if they had been pursuing me for some time, especially if one of them was standing outside the car

holding a gun. I would have thought he had gotten out of the car to shoot me. I would have feared that if I ran past the car, he'd shoot me in the back. I would have felt the need to disarm him to save my life.

But then again, armed white men have fashioned a racist existence wherein I'm unable to stand my ground against their violence. When white men murder men like me, they call it self-defense. And they are believed. When men like me defend ourselves against violent white men, they call us the aggressors. And they are believed.

Self-defense, like the Second Amendment, like stand-your-ground laws, has been colonized by white men. These rights are not for black women such as Marissa Alexander or Catina Curley, nor for white women such as Francine Hughes or Jennifer Schlecht, who defend themselves against domestic abusers. They are not for Latinos fleeing state-sponsored xenophobia, Native warriors fighting off white invaders, or Asians warding off coronavirus hate. They are not for Muslims or Jews defending themselves against crusading neo-Nazis. The human instinct to defend one's right to life is considered divinely human in white men, and bestial in the rest of us. When I defend myself as a human, I am not seen as human. I am seen as a beast.

Arbery did not just die. His version of the events died with him. His ability to defend his right to live died with him.

But there are black men who have survived the terror of being wrongly suspected. There are black men who know what it feels like to be avoided like we are beasts, or to be "literally hunted" like we are beasts, to use the words of LeBron James. There are black men who know what it feels like to fear the fear.

But there are also black men who know what it feels like to have courage: to acknowledge our fears—and all the fears about us—and still muster the strength to do what's right in the face of this pandemic of fear. We can build a different existence for black men—for all feared peoples—as we all run under the moss draping down for Ahmaud Arbery.

We can build an existence wherein when people don't know us, they recognize that they don't know us. An existence wherein people see our tattoos, hair, flash, lyrics as our art. An existence wherein people see us as unarmed when we are unarmed. An existence wherein people see us as armed for self-defense. An existence wherein when people see us speeding recklessly down the road like Sean Reed, they see us in a mental-health crisis. An existence wherein when people see us wearing masks, they see us protecting ourselves and them from infection. An existence wherein when we are not wearing masks, people give us masks to wear out of care.

What I am—a black male—should not matter. *Who* I am should matter.

We can build an existence wherein the fearful stop fearing me, and terrorizing me with

their fear. Wherein they strive to get to know who I am, to get to know Ahmaud Arbery.

Or they don't. They just wave. They just let him run on by.

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