



Vigilantism and Political Vision¹

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Abstract Vigilantism, commonly glossed as “taking the law into one’s own hands,” has been analyzed differently in studies of comparative politics, ethnography, history, and legal theory, but has attracted little attention from philosophers. What can “taking the law into one’s hands” amount to? How does vigilantism relate to mobs, protests, and self-defense? I distinguish between several categories of vigilantism, identify the questions they are most useful for addressing, and offer an analysis on which vigilantism is a kind of political initiative done for the sake of enacting an immediate realignment of power in a polity in accordance with a political vision. In addition to defining a special kind of political initiative, my analysis helps us understand a range of rhetorical powers related to vigilantism, including some of the ways that attributions of vigilantism can mask instances of self-defense, and attributions of self-defense can mask instances of vigilantism.

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Behind a curtain is a vigilante. The vigilante wants to speak to you, not personally, but as part of a public that they take you to belong to. They regard you as politically relevant.

The curtain is figurative because this person’s vigilantist acts may have occurred in another era. Imagine the curtain can bridge one historical epoch to another and connect you either to fictional or actual historical figures.

If all you knew about someone is that they are a vigilante, how would you feel about them? Wary of their boldness or thankful for their courage? Afraid of a rogue criminal or reassured by a rogue hero? Or, in the face of such morally disparate and politically varied options, would you just draw a blank, not knowing how to feel?

The imaginative exercise might be simpler if we replaced the vigilante with a noisy mob, growing bigger and coming closer. Perhaps you’d appreciate the curtain that keeps you removed from the crowd and be loath to assume that you are on the mob’s side, or that it is on yours.

The curtain decontextualizes both the mob and the vigilante. Why might it be so much easier to figure out how to feel about the mob? If one’s main frame of reference is the United States, the difference may seem odd in light of frequent references to “vigilante mobs” in descriptions of the massacre aimed at Black Tulsa in 1920 and similar terrors inflicted on Black communities during the “red summer” of 1919, where the destroyers were often described as “mobs of white vigilantes.” If vigilantism

is as conceptually close to mobs as these locutions suggest, why don't we react the same way to both imaginative exercises?

In this essay, I defend an account of vigilantism as a type of political initiative that can generate a wide range of political affordances and social meanings. Due to vigilantism's political flexibility, the curtain leaves so much unknown that the situation should not elicit a definite reaction. The vigilante might be on your side, might be against you, or neither. By contrast, a mob projects an affect that is less ambiguous. And while some mobs are made of vigilantes, vigilantes need not form a mob.

Vigilantism should be a topic for philosophy for the same reasons that law is. Because of the political force that legal institutions exert, they generate complex relationships to morality and coercion. These relationships are so complicated that we need to inquire into the law's basic nature to understand the terms of the complexity. These same points apply to vigilantism. And just as law is a major political institution, vigilantism can be a major political force. At some places and times, it does more than legal institutions to determine political power.²

Writing in 1927 about the United States, Walter Lippman characterized the "private citizen" as politically bewildered, largely powerless, and consigned to the role of a spectator "who knows that his sovereignty is a fiction."³ By contrast, like monarchs who issue edicts, a president who signs a treaty, or a Politburo chief, vigilantes may feel that their sovereignty is fully realized. All of these figures personify political power. Yet vigilantist actions need no special roles, institutions, succession principles, or procedures to gain their political status. This kind of personification outside officialdom produces a host of puzzling features. Vigilantes' political power is not officially authorized, though they may be a politician's hired gun. They may even be a politician, acting in official capacity, but in a rogue manner. When vigilantes act, they do things that, in some contexts, could be merely interpersonal or private. But something bestows on vigilante actions a larger-scale political significance. The central question about vigilantism is what these bestowing features could be.

1. Two Jobs for an Analysis: Categorize and Interpret

Some social scientists seek to define vigilantism in terms that are general enough to identify instances of it at different places and times so that it can serve as a dependent or independent variable in inquiries that seek to generalize across polities or as a basis for coding vigilantism in statistical studies.⁴ Such studies could then probe such questions as: does vigilantism always reflect a weakened state? Does it strengthen or erode democratic accountability? What generalizations, if any, characterize the relationships between vigilantism and the state? A researcher who wanted to design experiments to probe these questions would need a definition of vigilantism that could be operationalized.

A different kind of inquiry into vigilantism focuses on what uses of "vigilantism" (and its cognates) in specific historical contexts convey, independently of whether any of these attributions are correct, and without seeking a general theory of what would

make any such attributions correct or incorrect. Here, the questions include: when someone is considered a vigilante at a specific place and time, what properties are attributed to them in that context? In cases where the attributions are contested, what are the stakes of the contestation? What other phenomena, distinct from vigilantism, have attributions of vigilantism been used to mask, and with what degrees of success? These questions belong to cultural history, as they concern the valences, resonances, and political and rhetorical roles at a place and a time.

These two research projects overlap in the subject matter they seek to understand. But the specific lines of inquiry they lead to are vastly different. Whereas comparative politics puts a premium on classifying actual or possible cases of vigilantism correctly, a cultural historian or ethnographer might reasonably take their historically specific findings to suggest that vigilantism defies definition.⁵

This essay highlights the ways that vigilantism itself and vigilantist rhetoric are interdependent. Like the social scientists, I aim to reveal a category that operates in the social world. I don't treat it as a constraint on an acceptable definition that vigilantism can be operationalized, however, as I'm not seeking a definition to guide experimental design.⁶

Where there are multiple, partly overlapping categories that are connected well enough to ordinary usage to be fittingly labeled "vigilantism"—and I'll argue that there are—there is no need for debate about which category among them is the true one. A category can earn its keep by showing what it can help us understand.

On my analysis, vigilantism is a kind of political initiative done for the sake of enacting an immediate realignment of power in a polity in accordance with a political vision. One of the things this analysis helps us understand is the range of rhetorical powers related to vigilantism.

We can see the first kind of rhetorical power at work when the status of some actions as vigilantist is explicitly contested in public discourse. For instance, a 2013 article in the *Tampa Bay Times* aptly headlined "Two portrayals of George Zimmerman: victim, vigilante," discusses whether Zimmerman, who killed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, was a "vigilante" or whether instead he acted in self-defense.⁷ In asking whether a defendant is "victim or vigilante," commentators use a frame that casts the vigilantist option as the less sympathetic one. By contrast, the frame "vigilante or villain?," which was used in a news report around the same time, makes the vigilantist option sound heroic.⁸

The political initiatives that my analysis identifies with vigilantism are regarded by some as crimes that add to the world's stock of problems but by others as heroic means of relieving social burdens. My analysis breaks down vigilantism into elements that include a political vision: a mix of beliefs and values concerning some aspect of public life. Given the range of possible political visions that vigilantism can express, it is natural to expect reactions to specific vigilantist acts to vary with the political vision they manifest.

A second kind of rhetorical power explained by my analysis concerns the possibility of using attributions of self-defense to mischaracterize acts of vigilantism, masking their political vision. The reverse possibility is that attributions of vigilantism can mischaracterize acts of self-defense, misattributing a political vision when there is none.

Consider the analysis that assimilates vigilantism to a form of “self-protection under conditions of disorder.”⁹ If vigilantism is by definition a form of self-protection, then there is no such thing as mischaracterizing self-defense as vigilantism, or vigilantism as self-defense. Such an analysis lacks the analytic structure needed to explain how vigilantism or self-defense could each be misrepresented as the other and why and when we should expect that mischaracterizations can easily take hold.

By contrast, my analysis can explain and predict these possibilities because it makes vigilantism a broader category than “self-protection under conditions of disorder.” I argue that vigilantism and self-defense are conceptually distinct but similar in enough ways that attributions of each of these phenomena can be used to mask instances of the other. We have already seen an example: some observers have argued that, contrary to the legal verdict exonerating George Zimmerman on grounds of self-defense, he was not acting in self-defense (as a “victim”), but he was instead a “vigilante.” The status of his act as vigilantist, according to this perspective, is masked by classifying it as self-defense. The fact that this perspective did not carry the day in court shows that both the status of Zimmerman’s action as vigilantist and its status as self-defensive are contested.

Other examples of contestation are cases in which self-defense is mischaracterized as vigilantism. Consider Chrystal Kizer, a sex-trafficked teenager who used her abuser’s gun to shoot him in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 2018. In explaining his decision to prosecute her, Wisconsin District Attorney Michael Graveley announced, “I cannot condone vigilante justice...when presented with evidence for premeditated murder.” In the context of the courtroom, Graveley made clear his position that the homicide committed by Kizer cannot be exonerated (as George Zimmerman’s was) on grounds of self-defense.

In calling someone a vigilante, one draws from the same fund of meanings, whether speaking in earnest or in bad faith, and whether in an attempt to portray the target as a praiseworthy rogue hero or a criminal rogue threat. Vigilante actions create an affectively charged interface between politics and individual people. They belong to a family of other such interfaces: voting, civilian terrorist acts, past war re-enactments, political protest, and other modes of publicly expressing political opinions, preferences, or threats. But unlike some of these phenomena, the time scale of vigilantism is short, and its effects are direct. Vigilantism would bestow a feeling of power and assertion of political entitlement to shape a political situation. It could feel exhilarating or matter-of-fact; it could feel empowering or terrifying, therapeutic or dreadful. The affective profile is shaped by the specific political vision and the context in which it occurs. But it arises from the fact that vigilantism is a personified

form of political agency.

Ultimately, my analysis will count as vigilanlist both acts that are violent and acts that are not; acts that are done in secret and acts that are done to create a spectacle; acts that cast the actor as a savior, a helper, or a hero; and acts that cast the actor as a villain, a violator, or a thug. It will encompass both certain acts of Batman the superhero, of Black Panther Party's police patrols in Oakland, and the Shiv Sena armed female force in 1990's Mumbai.

To see what could make such a wide-ranging category coherent, I begin in Part I at the opposite extreme, with a much narrower category that contains some core cases of vigilantism: vigilante justice. I then make the case for broadening the category of vigilantism by identifying the many meanings of perhaps the most common form of words used in English and other languages to characterize it: "taking the law into one's own hands."¹⁰ My strategy is first to distinguish among ways for a person to "take the law into one's own hands" and then argue that they are all efforts to immediately realign political power in accordance with a political vision. Part II explicates and defends this account of vigilantism. In Part III, I make the case that the continuities that connect the many guises of vigilantism are robust enough to explain how it relates to adjacent yet distinct phenomena, including mobs, protest, and self-defense, and to the rhetorical powers associated with these things. I end by highlighting the ways the analysis meets a general challenge for conceptual analysis.

Part I. Vigilantism, Law, and Vigilante Justice

2. Vigilantism as Vigilante Justice

According to the Miriam Webster dictionary, a vigilante is "a member of a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily (as when the processes of law are viewed as inadequate)." Wikipedia echoes this definition: "A vigilante is a person who undertakes retributive justice without legal authority or commission."

The San Francisco vigilance committees of 1856 fit the description given by the dictionary definitions and are often taken as the origin of the English term "vigilantism." The vigilance committees were collective endeavors that revived earlier attempts in 1851 to set up a community-based system for dealing with theft, murder, and other direct threats to social cooperation. These attempts to tame the chaos of new settlements occurred in the midst of the gold rush, during a time of rapid population growth in a setting where few forms of governance were established.

Some historians describe the San Francisco vigilance committees sympathetically as the manifestation of an informal means of attempting to secure social order when there was no other option.¹¹ On this version of events, there were genuine threats to the most basic forms of security, a genuine need for a systematic way to keep those threats at bay, and a genuine failure of the young and remote government to provide

basic forms of safety for inhabitants of the city. Vigilante justice was more effective than doing nothing and more effective than leaving investigation and punishment for theft and murder up to the government in its young and fragile form.

Let's call "vigilante justice" any act by which someone purports to administer "punishment" for theft, assault, or murder; does so in a way that bypasses a system of criminal law; and does so because that system of law is inadequate when it comes to apprehending thieves, assailants, and murderers. This gloss on vigilante justice is limited to three clear cases of crimes (theft, assault, and murder) and builds into the definition that there is an existing criminal justice system that is falling short of its stated purpose.

Vigilante justice will be a core case of vigilantism, according to the definitions that characterize vigilantism as a type of action that operates in parallel to an existing system of law by addressing a situation that a reigning, at least partly operative system of law treats as falling within its purview. Vigilantes "suppress and punish crime *summarily*" (according to Merriam Webster)—indicating that processes of criminal law are bypassed. Vigilantes undertake retribution "without legal authority or commission" (according to Wikipedia)—suggesting that the law had something to say about either the situation for which retribution was sought or the action done for the sake of evening a score, or both.

The definitions also focus on punishment as the locus of vigilante action, as opposed to mere investigation of suspected crime or apprehension of suspected criminals. In the core case suggested by the definition, a vigilante "punishes" a "criminal"—they don't merely help out the police efforts to apprehend a bank robber by standing in his way or by using a car to block the thief's escape vehicle.

In the context of these definitions, operating *informally*, in parallel to a system of law, is a negative feature. Where *formal* procedures for investigating crime, apprehending suspects, and punishing convicts are rule-governed, authorized, and regulated, *informal* means of investigating, apprehending, or punishing are none of those things. Informal procedures have no form, no standard, no rules, and no constraints. It is simply up to the whim of the person who happens to be investigating, apprehending, or punishing to proceed as they will.

Nothing stops a formal procedure from including procedures that give officials leeway to act however they wish when it comes to investigating, apprehending, or punishing. "Formality" is not sufficient for due process that conforms to principles based on respect and concern for human dignity, for instance. A police state has formal procedures for apprehension and punishment but no constraints on how the police or prison guards may act in carrying out these state functions. How stark the contrast is between informal and formal procedures of criminal justice depends on both what the formal procedures are supposed to be like and on how they actually operate.¹²

The definitions offered by Merriam-Webster and Wikipedia may bring to mind

contexts in which vigilantist modes of responding to crime differ in character from the “formal” procedures that operate in parallel, or are supposed to operate, in those same contexts. But nothing rules out the existence of core, uncontested cases of vigilantism that would not count as vigilante justice. Such cases would occur in contexts in which there is no meaningful distinction between formal and informal means of punishment, or in which there are so many different police forces operating at once over the same domains that none has uncontested authority. Finally, nothing rules out the existence of core cases of vigilantism that involve merely apprehending suspects or investigating crimes. Vigilante justice is too narrow a category to include such cases.

As narrow as it is, vigilante justice raises a host of important ethical and political questions. As an informal means of retribution, will vigilantism tend to undermine attempts to secure a formal system of law, or can it strengthen it by cultivating a sense of civic participation that is good for a polity? Does it cultivate any such sense? Is there ever, or always, a trade-off between the effectiveness of vigilante justice in the short term and security offered by formal legal systems in the longer term? If so, should efforts to justify or criticize vigilante justice be keyed to the long term, seen from the perspective of the social order, or keyed to the short term, seen from the perspective of the people who are seeking security through retribution for harm?

These questions focus on the relative merits and consequences of the formal vs. informal systems of criminal justice, comparing different kinds of responses to the same kind of infraction. Defining vigilantism as vigilante justice provides a convenient vocabulary for raising these questions.¹³

But these same questions also point to the usefulness of notions of vigilantism that extend beyond vigilante justice. If we want to know whether vigilantism will undermine trust in legal systems or build a sense of civic participation, or both, any of these effects might result from political initiatives that are otherwise like vigilante justice, except that (a) there is no actual infraction, or (b) there is, but the legal system is or would be effective in addressing it. And the questions arise equally about (c) responses to a perceived infraction is focused on investigating or apprehending but not punishing; or (d) actions that purport to be responses to crimes but are, in fact, attempts to dominate, terrorize, or intimidate people by accusing them of crimes.

Situations that are otherwise like vigilante justice but that meet any of the conditions (a) through (d) create a discernible type of political initiative. Imagine someone who decides to exploit the divergent sympathies and suspicions of his divided polity. Let’s call him Vale because he wants to be seen as valiant, is excited by the prospect of inflicting violence, and is exploiting divergent values among his co-politizens. Drawing on his deep knowledge of the terms of political division, Vale plans a violent public action to gain glory, notoriety, and approval from one segment of the polity and stoke fear, disapproval, and indignance from another. He promotes a narrative surrounding the action according to which the immediate threat was so great that the criminal justice system would not be in a position to “help,” and so he had to take matters into his own hands for the sake of self-protection. Vale’s sympathizers

resonate with his narrative, as to them, the person targeted by Vale's violence reads easily as threatening and prone to commit crimes, leaving them vigilant and poised to use force in self-defense.

There is no vigilante justice in situations like Vale's. Yet these situations raise many of the same questions as the ones that definitions of vigilantism as vigilante justice are employed to address. A movement of people acting like Vale who considered themselves responsible and responsive citizens would open all the possibilities raised by the questions listed earlier: it would cultivate a type of political initiative, and people living amidst such a movement might understandably want to predict its political effects. And such a movement would raise to salience a type of political relationship among *politizens*—denizens of a polity—in which one politizen confronts another as a political superior.¹⁴ These observations motivate a broader category of vigilantism that focuses on political relationships.

3. Vigilantism beyond Vigilante Justice

Is there any type of political initiative that encompasses vigilante justice yet can still be distinguished conceptually from adjacent phenomena, including mobs, social protest, and violent forms of self-defense?

A prominent analysis of vigilantism by political scientist Regina Bateson relies heavily on the notion of "extralegality," giving it a central role in defining vigilantism. She defines vigilantism as "the extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment of perceived offenses."¹⁵ Here, extralegality is the only thing distinguishing vigilantist modes of preventing, investigating, or punishing perceived offenses from non-vigilantist modes of doing those things. All the weight in distinguishing vigilantism from "the rule of law" falls on the notion of extra-legality.

What is extralegality? An extralegal action is an action done "outside the law." "Outside the law" could mean the same as "in violation of the law," in which case "extralegal" is just another word for "illegal"; or it could mean "indifferent to the law." The category of illegality would be too broad to operate usefully in Bateson's definition, as it would classify as vigilantist any illegal action done out of an angry desire for revenge, such as stomping on a neighbor's flowerbed because they insulted your dog. It would also rule out by definition that an action could change its status from vigilantist to non-vigilantist simply by changes in the law—a category we'll discuss examples of shortly (in section 4.2). That leaves us with notions of extralegality as "indifference"—a category that cross-cuts the distinction between legal and illegal.

In a first straightforward sense of "extralegal," being done "outside the law" means that it is neither proscribed nor mandated by any existing system of laws that purports to govern a domain in which the action was done, such as a city. Many actions, such as tapping one's fingers or proclaiming that a hat is ugly, do not fall within the scope of any law. A second straightforward sense of "extralegal" is tied to legal positivism, the idea that in evaluating a charge against someone for an action, when a court reaches a verdict that a defendant is guilty or innocent, their decision "posits" the status of

the action as legal or illegal, rather than discovering any pre-existing status the action had. On this legal positivist approach, most actions are extralegal, as legal status only comes into being with court rulings.

These kinds of extralegality are well-defined, but none of them help define vigilantism. A cautious apartment-dweller who installs an extra lock on the door to prevent break-ins does something “extralegal” in the first sense (it is neither legally prohibited nor mandated), but this lock-installer is not thereby a vigilante. A police officer who drives the wrong way down a one-way street to get from one part of his patrol beat to the next does something extralegal in the second sense if no court has decided whether he violated any rules. but he is not thereby a vigilante. These straightforward senses of “extralegality” do not narrow down any mode of “prevention, investigation or punishment” that could plausibly define vigilantism.

The types of extralegality that would be more useful in defining vigilantism would help refine the idea that a citizen is supplanting, replacing, challenging, usurping, or enhancing a function of the state. These are all ways of “taking the law into one’s own hands”—a phrase that Bateson avoids relying on by turning to “extralegality.”¹⁶ But when extralegality is defined in terms of this cluster of phenomena, it poses almost as many challenges to definition as vigilantism itself.

So the situation seems to be this: the flat-footed kinds of extralegality are irrelevant to vigilantism, but the relevant kinds of extralegality are no simpler to analyze than vigilantism itself. In this situation, rather than rely on any idea of extra-legality to illuminate vigilantism, it seems better to pass over this tricky term and focus directly on the idea that it is meant to stand for: the idea that vigilantes “take the law into their own hands.” If we can unpack the many ways that can occur and then look for common threads that link them, we will find a category of vigilantism beyond vigilante justice. That will be my strategy.

4. “Taking the Law into One’s Own Hands”

As Bateson notes, the phrase “take the law into one’s own hands” frequently occurs in discussions of vigilantism and proves useful cross-linguistically.¹⁷ The recurrence of the phrase in discussions of vigilantism suggests that an analysis should be able to explain in what sense instances of vigilantism are ways to take the law into one’s own hands. My method is to consider six ways to take the law into one’s own hands and then use these cases to help explicate and defend my proposal that vigilantism is done for the sake of enacting an immediate realignment of power in a polity in accordance with a political vision. I begin with the simplest examples.

4.1 Break a Second-Order Rule

Consider the difference between a city’s laws about where in public spaces parking is allowed or disallowed and the city’s rules about who is authorized to impose punitive measures on a person who violates parking laws, such as charging them a fine, booting their car, or forcefully detaining them. This difference is an instance of H. L. A. Hart’s

distinction between primary rules, which prohibit or demand behavior, and secondary rules and procedures, which determine who can establish, enforce, or change the primary rules, and by what procedures.¹⁸ We can think of the parking regulations as a first-order law and the rules granting certain city officials authority to punish parking offenders as second-order laws.

One way to “take the law into one’s own hands” is to act with the intent to enforce a “first-order” law by breaking a “second-order” rule. In 2007, while attempting to explode a bomb in Glasgow airport, Kafeel Ahmed was tackled and pepper-sprayed by Glasgow police. Stephen Clarkson, a builder who had gone to the airport to pick up family members returning from a holiday, jumped in to help. Clarkson was not authorized by any governmental entity to restrain anyone. So Clarkson, unlike the police, broke a second-order rule in order to enforce the various first-order rules that make it illegal to explode a bomb in Glasgow airport.

4.2 Take a Punitive Stance toward a Purported Law-Breaker

A private citizen can choose to occupy the social role of a law enforcer, even if they don’t thereby actually break any first-order laws or second-order rules concerning enforcement. This kind of taking the law into one’s own hands lives in the mind of the actor when they think of themselves as both enforcing a law, even while acting simply as themselves (a private citizen) outside any official capacity. It consists of an action, together with an attitude, a stance, and a relationship adopted toward another person.

For example, in 2018, Britany Jacobs was waiting in her car with two of her young children in a grocery store parking lot while her partner, Markeis McGlockton, shopped inside with their five-year-old son. Up sauntered Michael Drejka, who began berating Jacobs for being parked illegally. When McGlockton returned to find Drejka yelling, they exchanged words, and Drejka lethally shot McGlockton.

Drejka’s informal “enforcement” took the form of angry berating—a performance of his felt entitlement to scold. He was eventually convicted of manslaughter. But even if he had been acquitted, when he angrily approached Jacobs to begin with, he assigned himself a role that cast her as a criminal and him as a defender of legality.

There are many examples of this kind of taking the law into one’s own hands in which no laws are broken. In the United States, the Fugitive Slave acts of 1783 and 1850 incentivized unenslaved white-passing people to enforce laws of chattel slavery. More recently, Texas law SB-8, passed in 2022, allows ordinary citizens to sue anyone who helps a woman get an abortion by providing transportation or medical services, awarding ten thousand dollars to anyone who identifies a violation.¹⁹

The actions incentivized by these laws put private citizens in the role of law enforcers, even when the violation of the laws would not affect them directly. Such incentives color the relationship people stand in with one another when they are otherwise related only as people who share a polity—co-politizens. The new relationship among co-politizens raises to salience the possibility of political inequality,

in which the enforcer would stand as a political superior to the law-breaker. The reporting actions afforded and incentivized by these laws designate citizens themselves as agents of legal coercion.

The stance resembles a “private eye” who finds a criminal that official law enforcement has overlooked. By contrast, a central promise of “the rule of law” is to ensure that people are equal before the law, free from fear of arbitrary domination because the only agents of legal coercion come from within legal institutions.

It is not hard to see the potential appeal for someone to picture himself in this position of epistemic heroism and political superiority. It is equally easy to picture how such figures may be experienced by those people brought into relationships of detection, judgments, conviction, and punishment. As Thomas Hobbes points out in *Leviathan* while discussing the dangerous powers of pride, few of us respond with indifference to a claim, made by someone else explicitly or through their behavior, that their judgment, perspective, existence, comfort, security, or feelings are worth more than ours.²⁰ Confronted by a person who claims to have discovered that you are a criminal and he is helping the state by finding you, you are likely to consider this righteous person to be a nuisance, a terror, or both.

4.3 Treat a Space as a “Frontier”

So far, we have seen two ways to “take the law into one’s own hands”: by breaking a second-order rule to enforce a first-order law (as Clarkson did in Glasgow) or by simply designating oneself as an enforcer of an existing law (as Drejka did in Clearwater, Florida). These two ways of taking the law into one’s own hands are defined in terms of a pre-existing system of law. In a third way, any existing systems of laws are more remote. For instance, an intruder could treat the political system of a people he comes upon as null and void and purport to establish a new legal order, whether that order is more like a police state with arbitrary power or a system with its own set of rule-governed procedures. Think of a “cowboy” who treats the American prairie as politically uninhabited and considers anyone already living there as having no political system that will bind him. He acts as if there is no system of law and as if his role is to begin to build one. The “frontiersman” mode of regulation is interpersonal and backed up by force. At gunpoint, he will run the previous sheriff out of town or murder the leaders of the community he tries to dominate.

In addition to the violent, interpersonal form, the “frontier” version of taking the law into one’s own hands comes in a purely spatial version. A nighttime graffiti artist who beautifully decorates a wall on an overpass under cover of darkness is a rogue urban designer. So are people who convert a gaping pothole into a pond filled with rubber ducks. So are pedestrians who establish “desire paths” linking one part of public space to another—well-worn trails that prove their purpose more strongly with every use. Desire paths exist where a paved walkway could be but are not (or not yet) maintained by a city government. All of these actions introduce new norms of interaction in public spaces, new social arrangements, and new ways of organizing a

social landscape. These actions are only indirectly interpersonal, but they are ways to take the laws into one's own hands that create an immediate realignment of political power, at scales large and small.

4.4 Criminalize a Population

A fourth way to “take the law into one's own hands” is to treat certain behaviors or people as criminal when an existing system of law does not yet classify them that way. When then-President of the Philippines Rodrigo Duterte exhorted people to kill drug users, he singled out this group of people to be treated as criminals who deserve to die. In his political vision, drug users should be endangered and not protected by the state. These persecutions attempt to refine who among the people in the polity rightfully belong there. Their political vision would be realized in legal institutions if the targeted behaviors became illegal or the targeted persons lost their citizenship or other political rights, or if they were systematically unprotected by laws that apply to others in the polity.

In some of these cases, the political vision is proto-legal. If there were laws against using drugs, then the persecutors in these cases would be enforcing those laws, creating a pattern like the one the Glaswegian Clarkson fits into. But even where there are no such laws, someone who takes the law into their own hands creates relationships much like those defined by punitive measures imposed by law enforcers. Instead of attempting to maintain a legal order, these initiatives create the dynamics that would belong in a legal order. And just as some laws, such as Jim and Jane Crow, gave a legal basis to practices of domination that preceded them, some actions by which people “take the law into their own hands” in this way can also be proto-legal.²¹

For instance, in August of 2017, at the “unite the right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, twenty-two-year-old James Fields, Jr. drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer. Fields, Jr. was convicted of murder and 29 federal hate crimes and given two life sentences. Two years later, at his first sentencing hearing in 2019, Assistant Attorney General of Virginia Eric Dreiband stated:

the United States government will use its enormous power to bring perpetrators to justice, and we will continue to do so for as long as it takes to rid our nation of these vile and monstrous crimes.²²

By 2022, following an initiative by the Florida state legislature, Iowa and Oklahoma state legislatures had passed laws that provide civil immunity for people who drive their cars into crowds of three or more protesters. In Oklahoma, a similar law was passed shortly after an incident in which a man drove his pickup truck through a crowd protesting the killing of Americans at the hands of the police on a freeway in Tulsa. As a *Boston Globe* reporter describes it, the Oklahoma law “grants a driver immunity from criminal prosecution and civil lawsuits for an unintentional injury or death while fleeing from a riot, under a reasonable belief that fleeing was necessary” to avoid

being seriously harmed or killed, as long as they exercised "due care."²³ Fields, Jr.'s action proved to be proto-legal, much like the practices of arbitrary domination that later became enshrined in Jim and Jane Crow laws.

These laws converted a type of vehicular homicide directed at protestors from something illegal in 1970 to something legal five years later.

4.5 Enactive Monitoring

A different way to take the law into one's own hands targets accountability mechanisms for law enforcement. An example is the Black Panther police patrols formed in Oakland by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in the late 1960s as a way to hold officers accountable for their way of policing. Instead of breaking a second-order rule to enforce a first-order law, the Panthers' police patrols positioned themselves as regulators of second-order rules. Misleadingly portrayed in popular media as thuggish, the Panthers were, in fact, the opposite: rigorously academic legal experts fixated on accountability. They were careful to operate inside the law, which they studied carefully. They knew it was legal to carry guns openly and patrolled Oakland, Richmond, and Berkeley on the lookout for police abusing their powers. As historian Donna Murch recounts:

Upon witnessing the questioning of black subjects, they would approach, stand at the allotted, legal distance, and ask whether or not the detainee was being mistreated. In cases of obvious harassment, they loudly recited the penal code to educate both the victims and the bystanders of their rights... Panther vehicles even tailed the police with loaded weapons.²⁴

As armed accountability experts, the Panthers' police patrols were an enactive version of the fourth estate. As journalists hold politicians accountable to laws by putting their practices under a spotlight, the Panthers' police patrols did the same for police. Whereas journalists play their monitory role by publishing often dramatic stories, the Panthers played theirs by acting out the drama right there in the street, at the scene of policing. Here we see the enactive character of their political initiative.

Abstracting from this example, we can see that a way to take the law into one's own hands is that ordinary politizens take the initiative to monitor the government, attempting to temporarily supplant bureaucratically implemented accountability structures with a directly enactive one. Here, unlike any kind of political initiative that involves killing, and unlike cases in which one politizen assumes a stance of political superiority over another, the actions are done expressly to enforce political equality.

4.6 Rogue Politicians

So far, we have considered ways for private citizens to "take the law into their own hands" but have not considered whether there is any way for government officials to do the same. A role played by a branch of government is instead taken on by a private citizen. Nothing stops current or former government employees or military members

from acting in any of the ways described so far.²⁵

But it is possible for government officials to take the law into their own hands, even while acting in their official capacity. A public official who abuses the coercive powers that are meant to provide public safety may knowingly disregard the regulations that constrain his coercive powers and replace them with more extreme forms of coercion for the sake of enforcing a public order that they prefer. Had Mike Pence willingly complied when then-President Trump urged him to refuse to certify the 2020 presidential election in the U.S., he would have acted to redefine the polity in accordance with his boss's political vision.

Embezzling taxpayer money, sexual harassment, blackmail, or bribery can all be done merely for personal gain and not guided by any larger political vision. But in the hypothetical abuses described above, the means of governance become mere instruments for political power.

5. Three Vigilantist Moods

The examples I've discussed suggest at least three different kinds of overall sentiments that an act may express toward political association if it is a way to "take the law into one's own hands": conservative, corrective, or creative. These sentiments can overlap, and a single episode could have elements of all three. But some examples highlight one mood more than the others.

A conservative mood may be expressed by actors who seem confident that their political assertions will easily be met with legal vindication and widespread approval and therefore are not hiding under cover of darkness or going to lengths to highlight or reassure anyone their actions are legally allowed. For instance, when lawn signs in the United States (classified commercially as "gun décor") picture a gun and read "I don't call 911," the message suggests that the sign-posters feel confident that the state will trust their judgment as to who is an intruder, and who they may shoot at with impunity. Drejka may have thought of himself as helpfully enhancing and aiding the enforcement of parking laws.

A corrective attitude may be expressed by actors directing their efforts toward state actors themselves. The Panthers' assiduous rehearsals of the penal code communicated their knowledge they did not have the support of the state, even those they were expressing allegiance to the specific laws and principles whose protections they worked to ensure.

A creative mood may be expressed by actors who criminalize, especially near the start of the initiative. The creative mood can include both criminalization initiatives, performed as if their actors dare anyone to stop them, as well as urban redesign initiatives that may be stealth, as when a nighttime graffiti artist decorates under cover of darkness.

These moods can be combined. Ethnographer Atreyee Sen was embedded with a group of women operating during the 1990s in an impoverished part of Mumbai as a

women's arm of the Hindutva movement. The Hindutva leadership gave them guns and a meeting space and invited them to "regulate" the neighborhood. Building a large network of neighborhood women who were freed from their homes by this all-women's movement and drawing on their knowledge of their neighborhood, they identified sexual harassers and rapists and punished them, sometimes using torture. Using guns supplied by Hindutva leadership, they confronted a bank officer and secured a loan for one of the women to start a business selling donuts. Her business thrived, and she paid back the loan. When a public drain became clogged with plastic bags, they identified the shop owner whose bad disposal caused the problem and forced him at gunpoint to crawl into the sewer and get the bags out. In these ways, they "improved" the neighborhood using thuggish means. According to Sen's analysis, their legitimacy derived from their weapons and from their regular harassment of Muslim women. She recounts an episode in which the Shiv Sena women found a group of Muslim women on a beach and threw shoes at them until they moved.²⁶ In her account, we find a mixture of enforcing laws regarding proper plastic bag disposal in a conservative mood and criminalizing a population in a creative mood in an attempt to designate Muslim women as political outsiders.

As theorists of vigilantism, we face a challenge: formulating an analysis that can do justice to the many forms and moods that vigilantism can take while preserving both its differences and its continuities with adjacent phenomena.

The analysis I'll propose meets this challenge by appealing to a distinctive role of a political vision. My proposal is that vigilantism is done for the sake of enacting an immediate realignment of power in a polity in accordance with a political vision. I call it the political vision analysis.

There are likely to be multiple categories of vigilantism that meet the same challenge. Mine is distinguished by the conceptual relationships it highlights between vigilantism and adjacent phenomena and by the methods it lets us use to understand both instances of vigilantism and the discourse surrounding it. To show that it has these features, I begin by describing the relationship as I see it between my philosophical analysis and historical reality.

Part II: The Analysis

6. The Political Vision Analysis and Historical Reality

The political vision analysis is a theory of what makes an action vigilantist when it is. It tells us what will have to be true for the historical examples to be cases of vigilantism. It says that an action is vigilantist only if it is done to immediately realign power in accordance with a political vision.

The political vision analysis gives conditional classifications of historical events. But when we consider historical events, the reasons why actions are performed are not always discernible, and the idea of a "political vision" does not come with instructions for how to operationalize it.

In light of these facts, the political vision analysis is not equipped to decide or declare directly which actions performed by actual people at specific places and times are instances of vigilantism. That is a job, in part, for ethnography and cultural history. So the political vision analysis, like many other philosophical analyses, stands at a distance from historical reality.

The intellectual distance between philosophy and political history sometimes encourages the use of exclusively hypothetical or fictional examples. At worst, it can lead to misconstruing historical examples to match the theory by misrepresenting the situation or by ignoring features that would detract from the theory. For instance, Lyons argues that philosophers defending analyses of civil disobedience mischaracterized paradigm cases of it, such as the political strategies of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., when they present these leaders as regarding the prevailing systems they opposed as “basically just” in Rawls’s sense.²⁷ When these theorists characterize historical examples as matching the analysis, they misrepresent them in ways that would be obvious with richer historical detail.

To avoid this type of pitfall, what’s needed are discussions that are informed by both a philosophical analysis and enough historical perspective and detail to identify good candidates for that analysis. That is my approach. I treat some historical actions as good candidates for enacting a political vision and others as good candidates for lacking a political vision. It may be that further historical facts would give us grounds for adjusting how we classify these cases, and to that extent, my classifications are conditional.

7. The Political Vision Condition

The words “political vision” may evoke the priorities that orient a politician’s leadership and direct them to highlight certain issues, constituencies, and positions in their rhetoric. That kind of political vision would be available only to someone regarded as a leader in a party, a government, or a movement.

The kind of political vision at issue in the analysis of vigilantism is different. It is comparable to an individual’s “personal vision” in the sense developed by Iris Murdoch. Murdoch characterizes a person’s vision as manifesting in their

...mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conceptions of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, what they think fun: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.²⁸

The political vision at issue here is a personal vision of a polity. Like Murdoch’s notion, political vision is a mix of beliefs, values, fears, and other aesthetic sensibilities as to what one finds disgusting, disturbing, and reassuring.

For instance, when Batman battles against a corrupt dominant power structure, he is trying to weaken and replace it with a better political system. But even when he

doesn't do that, he is still acting to realign power in accordance with his political vision. The same fact holds true of vigilantes who belong to a dominant power structure. Consider a group of Klan members who burn down a church with impunity, purely for purposes of intimidation. They expect they won't face any sanction from legal institutions or other offices of government, and they are correct. They are not trying to realign or reconfigure the political institutions that tolerate them. The Klan makes a spectacle of their felt entitlement to dominate Black politizens by attempting to control whether their Church stands, whether they can live without fear, and whether they have to submit to violence. If the ordinary lives of Black politizens go unchallenged, then that status is aberrant relative to the Klan's political vision, according to which they must demonstrate their power to dominate. Violence done to intimidate is a form of vigilantism, by my definition, when intimidation expresses a political vision.²⁹

What makes such a vision political is its subject matter. It is directed toward political matters. But what are those?

7.1 What Is Political Vision?

Let's start with the idea of a political action, practice, or perspective. What could make any of these things political? We can distinguish two approaches to this question, metaphysical and perspectival.

A metaphysical approach tries to delineate the realm of political interactions as distinct from the realm of merely personal ones. In *The Public and its Problems*, John Dewey suggests that an interaction is private if its consequences are "mainly confined to the people directly engaged in it."³⁰ Picture person A, the only person using a library other than person B. Person A reaches into his bag for a metal nail-clipper and begins to trim his fingernails. The snipping noise gives B the chills, distracting her from concentrating and leaving her irritated. Before the noise began, they were merely sharing a large space, but now, they are interacting through the noise. Dewey would count this minimal interaction as private, so long as A and B are the only two people affected by the noisy nail clipper.

A different metaphysical approach comes from C. Wright Mills, who distinguishes among experiences of difficulty between "personal troubles" and "structural issues." In *The Sociological Imagination*, he writes:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.³¹

These metaphysical approaches try to differentiate actions and conditions as political as opposed to private or merely interpersonal, independently of the way they are seen. A classification of actions or conditions as political could then be either correct or incorrect. Both approaches can recognize the plain fact that which consequences an action has can change, depending on cultural factors. If there is a strictly enforced law against nail-clipping in the library, for instance, then person A's nail clipping may well have consequences beyond B's irritation, as it will make A himself vulnerable to sanction.

In contrast to metaphysical approaches, perspectival approaches characterize what it is to treat or consider an action or condition as political, as opposed to merely private or interpersonal. In their discussions, Dewey and Mills each develop a parallel perspectival approach alongside the metaphysical ones. Mills' "sociological imagination" is a way of viewing one's own personal circumstance as "an intersection of biography and history."³² Dewey emphasized the need for publics to become "visible," where publics are sets of people whose actions have indirect consequences for one another.³³

Dewey and Mills were each concerned with ways to develop political perspectives that would take account of features of a situation that might otherwise remain occluded or invisible. Such political perspectives take account of features that pertain to groups of people on a larger scale than an individual may be able to detect without further information or analysis.

With this distinction in hand, we can describe an important type of error. It is possible to view an interaction as mattering for a larger public, even when it doesn't. A merely interpersonal or sectional interest may be presented, disguised, or mistaken for a common public interest. "The trouble with people like you," person B might say in addressing the nail-clipping person A, "is that they spoil spaces like these for the rest of us." B is righteously treating A's behavior as if it were generally unacceptable, not just annoying to B herself. In this way, she is taking a political perspective on a situation. If, instead, she said, "Would you mind doing that somewhere else? The noise distracts me," she would be treating the situation as merely interpersonal.

According to the political vision condition, vigilantes bring to bear a political perspective on the situations in which they perform their vigilante acts. There are several ways to meet the political condition.

Consider first the type of circumstance that the young white seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse took himself to be in on the night that he killed two other white men, Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber, and severely injured a third, Gaige Grosskreuz, in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 2020. Rosenbaum, Huber, and Grosskreuz were among thousands of people protesting anti-Black violence at the hands of the police at a rally held shortly after the shooting of Jacob Blake. Rittenhouse traveled twenty miles from his home in Antioch, Illinois to find a business to guard. As he stood, armed, in front of a store he didn't own but that would become the scene of the

shooting, *Daily Caller* reporter Richie McGinniss asked him what he was doing there. Rittenhouse answered:

People are getting injured and our job is to protect this business. And my job also is to protect people. If someone is hurt, I'm running into harm's way. That's why I have my rifle; I've gotta protect myself, obviously. But I also have my med kit.³⁴

Here, Rittenhouse is distinguishing between protecting the business and protecting himself. He is not merely protecting himself, he says; he is also claiming to be a civic hero, like Batman.

Rittenhouse is widely considered a vigilante, both by people dismayed by his acquittal and by supporters who praised his actions. The St. Louis personal injury attorney and Missouri Senate candidate Mark McCloskey, who pointed a gun at protestors in the movement for Black lives in June of 2020, issued a statement during Rittenhouse's trial: "If you defund the police, and the government is not there to protect the citizens, citizens have to protect themselves."³⁵

A political vision may not live in the minds of the vigilantes but only in the minds of their employers. The Shiv Sena vigilantes described by Sen rely centrally on anti-Muslim sentiment, a core part of Hindutva sponsors who generally refuse to allow women to participate in the political life of their movement as leaders. But they make an exception for the all-women gang, which proves to be effective at mobilizing other people in Hindutva's favor and at terrorizing Muslim women. As Sen notes, while all participants in the vigilante force at a minimum tolerate the terrorizing, they may not all be a locus of the basic political vision. Some may be in it for the sense of empowerment they feel from becoming neighborhood activists.³⁶ Taken as a whole, they may collectively embody a range of potentially competing political visions.

Vigilante attacks on a person are not merely, and sometimes not even, expressions of dislike, distrust, or disapproval of the actors or actions attacked, but declarations that the practice or people attacked are unacceptable to the rightful public. There is a vision of the wider public in whose name the vigilantes are claiming to act. In the parking lot, Drejka treats Brittany Jacobs in her car as a problem for the public. In viewing her this way, he expresses a political vision.

Typical topics for vigilanism, both on the political vision analysis and other analyses we have mentioned, are features of large-scale association such as property, security, legality, the definition of a political community, and the uses of public space. By contrast, interactions that are private in Dewey's sense do not appear in any paradigmatic cases of vigilanism. Revealing someone else's secret may be rude, personally devastating, or friendship-destroying, but there is no vigilante telling of personal secrets (telling the FBI's secrets would be different if it endangered national security). Announcing to the person in front of you in line at the ATM machine that you find her hat ugly may be rude, but it is not a vigilante fashion critique. These

facts are explained by the political vision condition. Vigilantism, according to the analysis, is an assertion of entitlement to shape, regulate, correct, or redefine some aspect of large-scale association.

The political vision condition is easily met by actions done under the guise of law enforcement, such as the ways to take the law into one's own hands discussed in 4.1, 4.2, 4.4 and 4.5; or the creation of new laws or regulative practices, such as the ways discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.6.

The political vision condition is a key element in the analysis offered here. Its enactive form helps explain both continuities and differences between mobs and protests. It is also the locus of contestation that explains the complex relationships between vigilantism and self-defense and the mix of reactions to cases like George Zimmerman, Kyle Rittenhouse, and Chyrstul Kizer. So that we can see these roles in action, let's return to the scenario with which we began: a vigilante behind the curtain.

Part III: The Comparisons

8. A Three-Way Comparison: Vigilantism, Mobs, and Protest

This essay began with the observation that a decontextualized mob may elicit a more straightforward reaction than a decontextualized vigilante, even though mobs often are mobs of vigilantes. Why is there such a clear potential for overlap between mobs and vigilantes, and how do they differ from one another and from other forms of political agency? To address these questions, it is useful to compare mobs, vigilantism, and protest.

Like vigilantism on the political vision analysis, mobs are fundamentally enactive. They are not there to make an appeal to the rest of the public, as nonviolent protesters often do when they carry signs expressing a demand.

Live mobs gather to break things.³⁷ They break glass, and they break rules. They break down social distances and doors. They break the silence. They sometimes break people's bones.

A mob is at the mercy of its own dynamic. Crowds are widely regarded as things that can easily get out of hand and so need to be controlled, as evidenced by the branch of behavioral science known as "crowd control."³⁸ A mob need not be animated or constrained by any political vision beyond the powers it exercises in the moment. For all someone on the far side of the curtain knows, the mob addressing them from behind the curtain may be a visionless mob, or one that is no longer animated by any particular vision, just violent energy, directed indiscriminately. A mob could be composed of members who each think they're there for a different reason yet are united, for the moment, in violence.

By contrast, a vigilante is someone with a vision directing their action and a plan for the future.

A second difference is that a mob can lose track of its political vision, or it may never even have had one to begin with. After a dramatic sporting event, when spectators overturn cars and foul public spaces, they are acting as a mob, but they are not aiming to rearrange political power. They are simply exerting their will to destroy. In a mob, a violent disposition is a given, and political vision is optional. In vigilan­­tist action, there is always a political vision, and violence is optional.

Mobs, too, can be endowed with a political vision, and when they are, they may be mobs of vigilantes. Lynch mobs were intent on rearranging the polity to eliminate the people they regarded as having no political rights, no right to protection, no right to property, and no right to trial. The mob at the US Capitol on January 6, 2020 was focused on preventing the succession of presidential power.³⁹ These differences explain why reactions may differ when faced with mobs and vigilantes from the far side of the curtain.

Alongside these differences between mobs and vigilantes, they also share a common difference with common forms of protest. They are both fundamentally enactive means of rearranging the immediate social surroundings. This common feature underlies the contrast between mobs and vigilantes, on the one hand, and the kind of protest that makes an appeal to the public, on the other.

An appeal is a structure in which the protestors address their co-politizens with proposals, grievances, complaints, recommendations, or condemnations.⁴⁰ In this mode of address, protestors can chastise, moralize, bear witness, and even demonize in an attempt to resonate to a polity.

The time scale of an appeal extends beyond the gathering of protestors. A protest structured as an appeal is just one moment in a dynamic that the protestors hope to advance. What can happen in the time between the appeal and any enactment of changes proposed? There is, in principle, time to let a message or a set of prospective consequences sink in, and there is, in principle, time for deliberation. If a political response addresses the protestor's appeal, the response and the protest take on the structure of an exchange of messages. When thousands of people march in protest to end a war, they are not purporting to end the war right then and there. Perhaps they would if they could. But such protests lie at one remove from the changes they are proposing, even if they perform political realignment in other ways, such as James Meredith's 1966 March Against Fear, in which Martin Luther King, Jr. and Stokley Carmichael demonstrated their refusal to be dominated by fear of violence imposed by hostile whites.⁴¹

By contrast, due to their purely enactive nature, mobs and vigilantism operate on a shorter time scale. The mob exists only as long as it is gathered. Vigilantism is over and done with when the act is finished. In both cases, the time scale is structured by their actions. Like mob violence, vigilan­­tist acts, whether violent or not, are short-lived—though their consequences can last forever, as when a lynch mob “hurls men into eternity on supposition.”⁴² There is no proposal made by a vigilante for the

rest of a public or a government to accept or reject. There is no waiting or standing witness or other extended forms of pressure toward such acceptance. Vigilantism skips those steps and goes directly toward rearranging things. If there was any previous chastisement or complaint, it has advanced to corporal punishment or some other material consequence.

The similarities noted so far explain why news reports, histories, and political commentators so much more frequently find occasions to use “vigilante mobs” (or “mobs of vigilantes”) as opposed to “vigilante protestors” (or “vigilante protest”).⁴³

The political vision analysis allows that some forms of vigilantism are also modes of non-violent protest. It can classify a graffiti artist who decorates a previously blank wall on municipal property in a public space as a mode of urban design. For example, Srdja Popovic, architect of political activism, describes a politicized mode of urban repair, in which a city repeatedly refuses to fix a huge gaping dangerous pothole in the street. Some activists then turned it into a small pond by filling it with water and adding rubber ducks, supplanting the state’s function of overseeing the design of public space.⁴⁴

Popovic thinks this kind of situation creates a dilemma for the government. If they fix the pothole, then the original grievance has been addressed. If they don’t fix the pothole but remove the ducks, they present themselves as regarding rubber ducks as a public threat. And if they do nothing, Popovic argues, then the activists, and not the government, have shaped the meaning, use, and function of this part of public space. As Popovic sees it, “dilemma protests” force a choice between options, any of which, in its own way, will “weaken” the government’s power.⁴⁵ In this respect, like mobs and vigilantism, the urban repair and design is coercive and even shares a general structure with blackmail. Its coercion does not take the form of interpersonal violence or destruction of anyone’s property. But it falls under the category of vigilantism that the political vision analysis carves out, with urban design as a locus of immediately realigning power in a polity in accordance with a political vision.

The political vision analysis will classify certain cases of whistleblowing as edge cases that fall between vigilantism and protest. Consider Terry Albury, a former FBI agent in the Joint Terrorism Task Force, who leaked its official methods to *The Intercept*, both in order to aid lawsuits brought against the FBI for racial profiling and in order to reveal that the official practices of the FBI were at odds with their own principles.⁴⁶

On the political vision analysis, whistleblower cases have features of both vigilantism and protest. On the one hand, revealing information can be a political act of its own, as it is when FBI secrets are divulged. So the enactive condition of vigilantism is satisfied, and the action that satisfies it is one way to take the law into one’s own hands: in breaking his vow to secrecy, Albury breaks one law for the sake of enforcing the principles that according to the FBI handbook should govern its operations.

On the other hand, whistleblowing typically aims to be a first step toward effecting

change, rather than fully constituting the action itself, as an execution or act of intimidation does. Albury's whistleblowing was aimed at helping legal cases that charged the FBI with discrimination and could be seen as aiming more generally to help stop the practices it revealed. Relative to these goals, it is not directly enactive but more closely resembles protests that have the form of appeals.

The same features that make whistleblowing an edge case of vigilantism apply equally to some speech acts that initiate the kind of action in which one politizen who does not otherwise know another claims that they are violating a law (type 2). This kind of announcement was made by Drejka in the Florida parking lot, and we can consider what roles the speech act itself has beyond conveying the information. Tone, volume, proximity, spatial and social context, and bodily gestures can make the difference between a calm, superficially polite informing (or misinforming) of the legal or moral status of the addressee's action, which may or may not be a prelude to further sanction, on the one hand, and an aggressive act unto itself, rather than just a possible prelude to one. The more aggressive the spoken communication is, the more it may already embody a punitive action, rather than just forecasting the same or raising to salience the possibility of punishment. Cases at the aggressive extreme are self-arrogated sanctions of their own, and that makes them candidates for vigilantism.

So far, I've drawn on some of our earlier examples of "taking the law into one's own hands" to illustrate what vigilantism can look like on the political vision analysis and how it differs from mobs and protest. I now turn to the relationships between vigilantism and self-defense.

9. The Comparisons: Self-Defense

By many definitions, vigilantism and self-defense are conceptually independent. At the same time, all the definitions considered so far allow that a single act can be both self-defensive and an act of vigilantism.

But the relationships between vigilantism and self-defense are more complex than partial overlap. The complexity arises from the fact that the status of an action as self-defensive can be *contested* in various ways, and so can the status of an action as vigilantist. In this section, I explain how the political vision account captures the complex relationships between vigilantism and self-defense.

9.1 Independence and Coincidence: Uncontested Cases

Many definitions allow for cases of vigilantism that are not also cases of self-defense. For example, Bateson's definition of vigilantism as the "extralegal prevention, investigation, or punishment for perceived offenses" allows actors who do not consider their acts to be self-defensive to be vigilantes.

The political vision analysis shares this feature. A group of rogue graffiti artists could be vigilante urban designers, even if no one, including the artists themselves, thinks of their actions as self-defensive. Even a vigilante killer may not be or even believe themselves to be endangered by their victim. They could regard their victim

as weak and unsuspecting, destined to be overpowered, and a prime occasion for a show of force. In these circumstances, no narrative of self-defense needs to take hold in the vigilante, and none need to take hold in observers of the situation, either.

It is also plain that not every act of self-defense is vigilantism. Mistaking me for the person who just broke into his car, a man chases me down, screaming furiously, and lunges toward me to recover the wallet he thinks I have stolen. Realizing his mistake, I yell back, shove him away, and kick him in an attempt to shield myself from his oncoming weight as I try to explain what has happened. We have come to blows, but neither of us is a vigilante. Defending one's own body does not always have wide political consequences. Its only consequences may be to the people directly involved or to others who know them.

"Self-defense" has an ordinary meaning, and it is also a legal category. As a legal category, self-defense is a status tied to a set of circumstances under which actions that would otherwise be prohibited are allowed, such as assault. Exactly which circumstances these are vary historically. In the US, the circumstances that make a use of force count as self-defensive in the legal sense occur within a narrow temporal window. The actor's use of force is self-defensive in this sense only if they reasonably believe, at the time of using force, that they were then facing an "immediate" threat and that such force was necessary in order to avoid bodily harm.⁴⁷

By contrast, a use of force may be self-defensive in an ordinary sense, even if there is no temporally immediate threat to which it is a response. It is conceptually coherent for someone who faces violent abuse every morning, knows that she is physically overpowered, and knows that more abuse is coming tomorrow to take self-defensive action tonight while her aggressor is off-guard. The legal sense in which an action counts as self-defensive is an instance of a broader ordinary sense.

The wallet example is self-defensive in both senses.

We have so far considered examples of *uncontested independence* between vigilantism and self-defense. Some actions are vigilantist but not self-defensive (by many definitions of vigilantism), and others are self-defensive but not vigilantist (even on Maxwell-Brown's definition). Vigilantism is independent of self-defense in both the legal sense (as it stands in the United States) and the non-legal sense.

We can also find examples of *uncontested coincidence* of vigilantism and self-defense (in the ordinary, non-legal sense). Batman may, in one and the same blow, defeat a villain bent on destroying a city while also protecting himself from harm. In his fictional world, he has defended himself and defended the public at the same time, and he has done so in part for the sake of defending the public. These actions are both self-defensive and vigilantist according to the political vision analysis.

When self-defense and public defense coincide, the bodily integrity of the self-defender takes on an added layer of political significance. Contrast what happens when a person votes, signs a petition, or writes to a political representative with the aim of

defending their interests. In those cases, the interface between a private individual's action and politics is discursive. When vigilantism is joined with self-defense, that same interface is corporal. The degree to which a person's bodily integrity is preserved or violated becomes a measure of political consequence.

A historical example of uncontested coincidence may be Stephen Clarkson, the builder from Glasgow who independently decided to help the police tackle Ahmed during an attempt to set off a bomb in Glasgow airport. Clarkson did not go to the airport to attack the bomber the way a firefighter rushes to put out a fire. He was already at the airport when the bomber arrived. He was defending himself along with everyone else in the vicinity. His own retrospective rendition of his action contains a narrative that incorporates self-defense:

As soon as I hit him, I knew that he was going down. I don't mean to sound blasé. He'd been doing these commando-style moves to fight off the police, and he seemed well trained, but I grew up in Glasgow: it seemed natural to me that a wee forearm smash would sort it out. I'm not a street fighter, but **I know how to look after myself**.⁴⁸

It also contains a sense of entitlement to help the police attack the bomber:

I threw my full weight into it. My arm and shoulder met his chest and he clattered down. I stood on his legs while the police cuffed him. One officer shouted at me, "Who are you? Get out of here." That annoyed me. Who am I? I'm the one who's just put him on his backside.⁴⁹

In Scotland, Clarkson was widely praised as a civic hero by publics who felt reassured by his readiness to help the police do their job.⁵⁰ Brought into the public eye by his action, Clarkson retroactively enjoyed civic trust on the part of his fellow politizens. He was regarded as acting from a political vision.

9.2 What Is Contestation?

So far, in considering cases where vigilantism coincides with self-defense, we've considered only uncontested cases of coincidence. The relationships between vigilantism and self-defense become more complex when we consider cases in which the status of an action as self-defensive and/or vigilantist is contested, or its status as vigilantist is. Let's look more closely at what it can mean for the status of an action to be contested.

The headline "George Zimmerman: Victim or Vigilante?" is an example of publicly contesting the status of an action (Zimmerman's killing of Trayvon Martin) as vigilantist. We can say that the status of an action is *actually* contested if public discourse includes multiple ways of framing the action that afford different sympathies or political consequences. When it comes to the status of an action as legally self-

defensive, the norm is for its status to be contested, as the legal status has to be established by a legal procedure.

Actual contestation can take the form of disagreements between parties who are explicitly addressing one another, as parties to a debate do, or between lawyers who are each addressing the same jury. But disagreements in staged debates are only one way for an action's status to be actually contested.

A different mode of contestation is illustrated by Mabel and Robert F. Williams, intellectual heirs to the Black Power movement. The Williamses called for armed self-defense in response to incidents of sexualized terror by whites who were acquitted or never brought to trial at all. Following one such incident in 1959, Williams issued a press release that was printed in the *New York Times*, including the claim that:

there is no court protection of Negroes' rights here, and Negroes have to defend themselves on the spot when they are attacked by whites.⁵¹

In his Prologue to his 1962 memoir, Robert F. Williams, a World War II veteran and former chair of the Monroe, North Carolina NAACP chapter, diagnosed the political context of his call for self-armament. He wrote from exile in Havana:

Why do I speak to you from exile? Because a Negro community in the South took up guns in self-defense against racist violence—and used them. I am held responsible for this action, that for the first time in history American Negroes have armed themselves as a group to defend their homes, their wives, their children, in a situation where law and order had broken down, where the authorities could not, or rather would not, enforce their duty to protect Americans from a lawless mob. I accept this responsibility and am proud of it...

It has always been an accepted right of Americans, as the history of Western states proves, that where the law is unable, or unwilling, to enforce order, can, and must, act in self-defense against lawless violence. I believe this right holds for black Americans as well as whites.⁵²

Williams's strategy for responding to the lack of state protection from racial terror was widely known by sympathizers, by Black anti-militants who disapproved of their recommendations, and by the FBI.

It was plain both to Williams and the Black anti-militants who disapproved of his recommendation that U.S. authorities "could not, or rather would not, enforce their duty to protect [Black] Americans from a lawless mob." They disagreed about the best political response to this fact. By the lights of the political vision analysis, in recommending that anyone who finds themselves in this situation "can and must act in self-defense against lawless violence," Williams was recommending preparing oneself to act as a vigilante. The anti-militants did not endorse this recommendation.

Clarkson's example of self-defensive vigilantism was met with nearly universal trust and approval in Scotland. Williams's recommendation to prepare for self-defensive violence was met with a different set of responses from Clarkson's. He was removed from the NAACP, pursued by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, and fled to Canada and then to Cuba, where he lived the rest of his life in exile. The FBI's 1961 "Wanted" poster describes Williams as "armed and extremely dangerous."⁵³ It does not describe him as someone seeking self-defense, defending his property, or well-placed to apprehend criminals who enter his home and turn them over to the police. In this way, the FBI contested the status of the actions Williams recommended as self-defensive.

In this context, the actors known as vigilantes belonged to the Klan. The Klan was regularly described as "white vigilantes" in writings documenting and promoting the civil rights movement, including newspapers, pamphlets, and planning documents.⁵⁴

Given this rhetorical context, using the term "vigilantism" to describe the actions recommended by the Williamses would have evoked comparisons with the Klan. Such comparisons would be so misleading that one might expect such a rhetorical technique to be used by propagandists who wanted to stoke cynicism or confuse people as to where their sympathies should lie.⁵⁵ That goal would have been at odds with the FBI's campaign to suppress, discredit, and silence Williams and suppress the Black freedom movement. And it would have been at odds with the freedom movement itself.

The Williamses' recommendations give us an example of a contested coincidence between vigilantism and self-defense. The contestation did not take the form of disagreement or debate, with the Williamses and their Black anti-militant opponents on one side arguing that self-armament was self-defensive, and the FBI, on the other side, arguing that it wasn't. Instead, the Williamses' political strategy was the common cause of two frames of the same situation that focused on different things. Williams focused on racial terror and arming with guns as a response to it, whereas the FBI left racial terror out of the picture entirely and focused exclusively on Williams and his alleged crimes.

Following Ege Yumusak, we could see these frames in terms of lines of inquiry they prompt and questions they address.⁵⁶ The FBI's "Wanted" poster prompts the question: "What did Williams do to break the law?" and fabricated kidnapping charges offer an answer. Williams focuses on terrorizing done with impunity, in his memoir and in pamphlets used in the freedom movement, which prompts the question: "How is it possible to be safe from such attacks?" and offers his political strategy of arming for self-defense as an answer. These chunks of discourse are about the same situation, but their difference does not have the structure of a disagreement.

Besides competing frames in public discourse, or public disagreement, there are other ways for the status of an action to be contested. Consider a merely hypothetical action that gets no public discussion. It is sometimes reasonable to predict that the status of an action as self-defensive or as vigilante would be contested if it were discussed publicly. We can say that the status of an action as vigilante or

self-defensive is *predictably* contested relative to the political culture of a specific place and time if it's reasonable for someone with knowledge of that political culture to predict that it would be contested if its status became a topic for public discussion.

If the status of an action as self-defensive or vigilantist is contested, what can we conclude about whether that action really is self-defensive or whether it really is vigilantist? Does contestation of these sorts always show that contested actions are edge cases in which there is no clear fact of the matter as to their status? To give ourselves a vocabulary for addressing this question, let's say the status of an action as vigilantist is *reasonably contestable* if it is an edge case. What we want to know is then whether predictable or actual contestation is always reasonable contestation.

Being predictably or actually contested does not entail that the contestations are or would be reasonable. The Williamses give us an example of unreasonable contestation over whether actions are taken in self-defense.⁵⁷ The actions clearly are taken in self-defense against racial terror, whereas the supposed kidnapping threat was fabricated by Hoover's FBI. The fabrication makes the contestation unreasonable.

Similarly, the status of an action as vigilantist could be predictably or actually contested, even if there is a fact of the matter about whether it is vigilantist—relative to the political vision analysis or some other analysis. We saw a hypothetical example with this structure earlier: the case of Vale, who exploits divergent values among his co-politizens to plan a vigilantist action but characterizes it as self-defensive.

At the same time, nothing stops a case of predictable or actual contestation from tracking edge cases whose status as vigilantist (or as self-defensive) are reasonably contestable. The kind of contestation that would provide evidence that an action is an edge case of vigilantism is a kind where a reasonable case could be made. For instance, Terry Albury's whistleblowing shares some features of vigilantism (he took the law into his own hands by breaking one kind of law to defend another); but it was also part of an effort on a much longer time scale to change the FBI's anti-terrorism operations, and in that respect not fully enactive. This combination of features makes it an edge case of vigilantism on the political vision analysis.

9.3 How Does the Political Vision Analysis Predict Contestation?

In analytic philosophy, producing a conceptual analysis is a way to figure out the extension of a concept. If the analysis produces necessary and sufficient conditions, it will specify the extension exactly. Even if it doesn't produce necessary and sufficient conditions, it will still go some way toward identifying what it takes for something to fall under the concept that is analyzed.

On its own, conceptual analysis may not illuminate the rhetorical affordances of the concept or what kinds of misrepresentations are predictable. An analysis of the concept <garden hose> may tell us nothing directly, or nothing at all, about why such hoses can easily be misperceived and therefore well-disguised as snakes. It may not predict how and when imprecise or simply inaccurate uses of "garden hose" are

communicatively powerful (“Don’t be so paranoid, it’s nothing but a garden hose”) or what gives such misuses distinct political effects.

What similarities between self-defensive uses of force and vigilantism explain why one may be easily mistaken for the other? On the political vision analysis, both self-defensive actions and vigilantism can be initiatives taken in response to a threat. They are both forms of personified power and can both be interpersonal interactions. Both are attempts to realign power dynamics. And both can concern bodily integrity: violating it or defending against violations of it. If we take a violent interpersonal interaction and either add, subtract, frame, distort, misclassify, or illuminate it in terms of the political condition, we will have one of these forms of overlap. Just as a garden hose may be mistaken for a snake due to its shape, mere self-defense and vigilantism can each appear as the other due to these common elements.

Given that the political vision analysis identifies these features as similarities between vigilantism and self-defense, what differences between them can the analysis recognize?

Some self-defensive actions fail to be vigilantist, even though the relationship between defendant and attacker carries profound political significance, and even when as a result, the defense can transform political consciousness. Think of Frederick Douglass, who endured a childhood of abuse at the hands of the overseer Covey, the soul-driver in charge of keeping him enslaved. In Douglass’s autobiographical narrative, Covey regularly overpowers, aggresses, and brutalizes him from childhood to adolescence. But one day, sixteen-year-old Douglass fights back, and though he remains enslaved, Covey’s beatings of him end once and for all.⁵⁸

In attacking Covey, Douglass was not taking it upon himself to perform a function that the United States promised to perform but didn’t. The teenage Douglass was legally enslaved, and the laws of the land promoted the violence internal to slavery. So there was no issue about the state failing to protect him. Douglass was also not part of any coordinated group effort to pick up the slack where the state falls short of its promises. Douglass’s action is not a form of taking the law into one’s hands in any of our senses.

These observations are compatible with the young Douglass assigning to his personal rebellion a wider political meaning to his rebellion, as generations of others after him have when they consider his fight with Covey a one-person slave revolt. On this reading, one and the same act is an act of self-defense and an act of resistance against slavery. This would make his rebellion politically enactive.

But the same observations are also compatible with Douglass’s political consciousness of the meaning of his resistance arising only after the fight and as a result of it, rather than animating it to begin with. In that scenario, the meaning, to Douglass, of resisting could have as its horizon only his own bodily integrity. In that case, it would not have been originally an act of vigilantism, though it may, in retrospect, come to be viewed as one.

9.4 How Can Attributions of Vigilantism Mask Self-Defense?

So far, we have considered how vigilantism and self-defense can coincide, how such coincidences can be contested, and what roles a political vision can play in contestations. We saw that a political vision can be purely retrospectively assigned to a self-defensive action (Douglass's response to Covey is a likely example).

In attributing both common elements to self-defensive and vigilantist actions, as well as differences, the political vision analysis predicts that there will be cases of mischaracterizations. An action that is vigilantist by the lights of the political vision analysis could be mischaracterized as purely self-defensive. Conversely, an action that is purely self-defensive could also be mischaracterized as vigilantist. Either way, if the mischaracterization gets some uptake, the result will be an action that has a clear status (as vigilantist, or as self-defensive) but that status is actually (or predictably) contested.

How can attributions of vigilantism mask the self-defensive nature of an action? A likely context for such cases are courtrooms where what's at issue is whether or not a defendant's violence has the status of legally protected self-defense and, therefore, whether it is also self-defensive in the ordinary sense or whether it is instead criminal. A prosecutor aiming to convince a judge or jury that a defendant's violence does not have the status of legally protected self-defense may describe them as a vigilante, exploiting the fact that the term evokes figures prepared to ignore the law as they see fit.

The philosopher Ayanna Spencer finds a prosecutor's rhetoric used in this way in her analysis of the 2018 legal proceedings against Chrystyl Kizer, whose case we discussed earlier.⁵⁹ When she was a seventeen-year-old survivor of sex trafficking in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Kizer was accused by the state of Wisconsin of arson and car theft and of killing thirty-four-year-old Randall Volar, a white man who the state of Wisconsin was also prosecuting for sex-trafficking and had sexually abused over ten underage girls, all of them Black.⁶⁰ In 2018, Kizer shot and killed Volar. In a written statement about the case, district attorney Michael Graveley wrote:

As district attorney, I cannot condone vigilante justice, and when presented with evidence of premeditated murder, I do not believe it is appropriate for prosecutors to weigh the value of the victim's life.⁶¹

By Wisconsin's "affirmative defense" law, Kizer would be shielded from prosecution if it could be shown that her actions were a "direct result" of trafficking.⁶² Affirmative defense is another mode of self-defense law. As Spencer observes, in prosecuting Kizer, Graveley takes the stance that affirmative defense law does not apply. He builds a narrative in which she acted with criminal intent, attacking Volar as a means for stealing his BMW so that her shooting was a step on the path to car theft, not a way to free herself from danger.

To understand the relationship between the status of being a vigilante and the

rhetorical power attached to being called one, we can ask two questions about this case. First, is Kizer a vigilante, either by the lights of the political vision analysis or by any other analysis? Second, what are the rhetorical effects of the prosecutor's calling her shooting an act of vigilantism as part of a case against legally exonerating her on the grounds of self-defense? Let us consider each question in turn.

On the political vision analysis, Kizer is a vigilante only if she is acting to realign power in accordance with a political vision, such as:

- She was trying to punish Volar for his crimes on the grounds that the state should have done that but didn't.
- She acted out of fury and resentment *at the state* for knowing that Volar was abusing teenagers but not acting quickly enough to stop him.
- Her violence against Volar was done, by her lights, on behalf of all survivors of sexual assault, trafficking, and other forms of abuse.

By contrast, the political vision analysis would not count her attack as vigilantist if she was merely trying to free herself from the dangers to which Volar continually subjected her and other young people. It would not count her action as vigilantist if, alongside trying to get free, she in addition acted out of fury and resentment toward him for his repeated abuses, but not toward the state.

What Kizer's attack on Volar meant to her is not something we can read off directly from the actions. As with Douglass, political consciousness could come afterward, either by the transformative effect of the action or by how it was taken up in public discourse. When the movement for Black lives took up Kizer's case, they attributed to it a political significance, raising to salience the terrifying vulnerability to which Kizer and the other survivors abused by Volar and other traffickers have been subject to.⁶³

On the analysis of vigilantism as vigilante justice, Kizer's action would be vigilantist if:

- She was trying to "get back" at Volar without leaving punishment up to the criminal justice system, or if
- She was simply trying to escape the danger he posed to her, given that the state was not helping her get free.

The rhetorical effects of Graveley's classification of Kizer's action as "vigilante justice" are tied to his role as a district attorney, making the case against the affirmative defense that would shield her from prosecution. If vigilante justice in the form of killing is a way of bypassing procedures for apprehension and punishment, one would not expect a prosecutor, speaking in his official role, to endorse bypassing these procedures. In the mouth of a prosecutor, a vigilante who kills is unlikely to be presented as someone laudable or brave who does what was needed in the situation. The law may welcome the occasional tip, such as information about the direction in which a suspect fled, but those who speak in their official capacity as a prosecutor or police officer do not use humility in the face of citizen power to exert punishment as

a defining trope. In “refusing to condone vigilante justice,” Graveley is refusing to describe his own performance as ineffective.

Spencer points out a different rhetorical effect of Graveley’s classifying Kizer’s action as vigilantism, given the context of arguing that affirmative defense does not apply to her. Drawing on political theorist Monique Morris’s claim that young Black girls are often treated by the US criminal justice system more readily as adults than as children, Spencer argues that “adultifying” Black teenage girls facilitates portraying them as non-victim criminals.⁶⁴ She writes:

Adultification... is an important staple for the DA’s invention of criminal intent to reframe Kizer’s actions from those of a survivor knowingly responding to danger to those of a non-victim criminal, knowingly acting with criminal intent.⁶⁵

Adults who feel empowered to aggress for retribution are oriented toward something they will do in the future, whereas children who fear for their safety are oriented toward terror in the present.⁶⁶ The rhetorical force of “vigilante justice” keeps in the background the fact that the violence done to Kizer and Volar happened in scenes of sexual violence.

9.5 How Can Attributions of Self-Defense Mask Vigilantism?

According to the political vision analysis, being motivated by a political vision can make the difference between an action that is merely self-defensive and an act of vigilantism. The discussions of Douglass and Kizer give us situations in which it is easy to picture someone using force in a way that is at a minimum self-defensive and would also be vigilantist (on the political vision analysis) if a political vision is added in.

In discussing six ways to “take the law into one’s own hands,” I have argued that they all involve a political vision. This aspect of the analysis gives us a way to explain how acts of vigilantism may be masked by attributions of self-defense: such masking can happen in the fact that a political vision is operative, is itself contested, or if its operation is hidden from some actors or observers. These circumstances may make it easy to mistake a case of vigilantism for mere self-defense. The political vision analysis has more resources for accounting for this possibility than accounts that limit vigilantism to vigilante justice or accounts that leave political vision out of the picture.

How can a political vision be occluded? Consider the Sheepdog Mamas, a Facebook group of nearly 20,000, founded in 2011 to provide space for mothers to discuss strategies for armed self-defense.⁶⁷ The Mamas share tips for safe gun storage, such as how to keep weapons ready to hand in case of a home intrusion but inaccessible to kids. They compare notes on which holsters are best for pregnant, nursing, or baby-wearing Mamas. They discuss how to conceal weapons in public, where dangerous strangers are thought to lurk.

Merely participating in such discussions does not make anyone a vigilante. But the group is oriented around the idea that the Mamas' social surroundings are structured by threatening "wolves" who are poised to attack vulnerable "sheep," who in turn need the protective services of a "sheepdog." The sheepdog metaphor and narratives surrounding it are a mainstay of a prominent type of police and security training that promotes a "warrior mindset" to offset the fear of the "wolves."

An attack can be done for the sake of the polity, even if the agent of the attack thinks they are merely acting in self-defense. Consider a sheepdog Mama in the grip of this mindset who attacked someone she didn't know because she suspected he was a "wolf," mistaking him as a threat to herself and her children. One might think that the status of the attack as purely self-defensive is settled by the perspective of the attacker alone. If she views herself as motivated by fear of imminent attack, then from her point of view, her action may seem purely self-defensive, done for the sake of protecting herself, her home, and her children—and therefore not for the sake of any larger political association. She may think of herself as a sheepdog guarding a domestic sphere, not a superhero capturing a villain to save a city, a brave citizen helping others deter similar attacks, or a paramilitary operator bent on extruding the "wolves." She may have no such grandiose self-conceptions.

Why doesn't our hypothetical Mama's perspective show that she merely distrusts the specific persons with whom she interacts?

In the vision animating our hypothetical sheepdog Mama's action, there lives an image of the polity she takes herself to occupy. As she sees it, the polity is populated with "wolves" poised to harm her and others. It is therefore only savvy to subject them to suspicion and prepare for violent confrontation.

A political vision informs perceptions of other people. The short-lived micro-interactions between people who do not know one another are ripe for the influence of political vision.⁶⁸

Consider a 2014 killing in Florida. From the back of a movie theater in suburban Tampa, Curtis Reeves, then a 71-year-old retired police officer, shot and killed fellow movie-goer Chad Oulson, who sat in the row ahead of him at the Monday matinee. Each man was seated next to his wife. Oulson was using his phone during the previews to communicate by text with the babysitter caring for his sick toddler. After Reeves told Oulson that texting in the movie theater was prohibited, he left the theater to complain, kicking the backs of the seats on his way out. When he returned, the two men exchanged words, Oulson threw popcorn at Reeves, and Reeves then shot and killed Oulson. Charged with second-degree murder, Reeves was acquitted in 2022 after his lawyers argued that he was reasonably afraid Oulson would kill him.⁶⁹

We may never know just from Reeves's behavior what kind of political vision, if any, may have informed his readiness to shoot a man who tossed popcorn at him in hostility. Reeves did not know Oulson and had little information directly from him on the basis of which to assess whether Oulson was especially dangerous. His lawyers

appealed to Reeves' long experience as a police officer, trained to detect and respond to danger. Saddled with a prior view of the polity as thick with dangers, finding danger right in front of him at the movies, Reeves could resemble a hypothetical Sheepdog Mama whose perceptions are driven more by prior fear than by inputs indicating danger.

In contrast, according to his legal defense, Curtis Reeves did not shoot Chad Oulson because he was texting in the movie theater during the previews. He shot him, according to his lawyers, because he was afraid of his life after Oulson threw popcorn in his face.⁷⁰ On the political vision analysis, this reconstruction of Reeves' reaction does not settle whether he is a vigilante or not. It depends on the role of a political vision in the interaction. Whereas the legal status of self-defense depends only on what happens in the short temporal window in which Reeves reacts to the oncoming popcorn by shooting Oulson, for the political vision analysis, the status as vigilante depends on more standing outlooks that guide Reeves' immediate response. In this way, the political vision analysis allows that attributions of self-defense can mask vigilantism.

10. Conclusion

In analytic philosophy, inquiries that seek definitions of things are sometimes considered inquiries into *metaphysics*. In attempts to characterize a type of phenomena such as vigilantism, it is natural to look to attributions of vigilantism for guidance. As with other inquiries that seek definitions, here, discovering what vigilantism is cannot be completely disconnected from what acts get called "vigilantist" and which people "vigilantes."

But the history of conceptual analysis shows that the relationship between metaphysical inquiries and inquiries into patterns of use of terms for the things whose definition is sought is far from straightforward. On the one hand, a definition of Xs cannot be completely disconnected from the things that are called "Xs." If we rely on the term "X" to fix the target of inquiry, but the definition the inquiry delivers does not respect any pre-existing uses of the term "X," then we could reasonably worry that the inquiry had missed its target.

On the other hand, when the status of an act as vigilante is contested, as we've seen happens often, then the contestation complicates the role of uses of the term in helping discover central features of a thing. Which uses of "vigilantism" are the true guides to the nature of vigilantism? When public discourse is divided as to whether George Zimmerman or Chrystal Kizer is or isn't a vigilante, which uses are correct and which are not? Some ordinary attributions of vigilantism found in public discourse should guide an analysis of what vigilantism is, serving as core cases that anchor the analysis to the phenomenon. Other equally ordinary attributions are misleading or incorrect, and to classify them as such, we need to rely on a prior understanding of what vigilantism is. How can we tell which attributions should play the guiding role and which ones should not?

My response to this situation has been to start with uncontested attributions of vigilantism, develop a category that draws on the central idea that vigilantism is a way to take the law into one's own hands, and then use that category to identify and predict contested attributions of vigilantism. The same situations that lend themselves to contestation over attributions of vigilantism will often lend themselves to contestation over attributions of adjacent phenomena, such as mobs and self-defense.

In providing a framework for analyzing these contestations, the political vision analysis of vigilantism does more than just identify cases of it. The skeletal structure of the concept has a placeholder for a political vision. A decontextualized vigilante, like the one behind the curtain, has a political vision, but so long as we consider figures without knowing their social identity, the social and political context, we will not be able to fill in its valences, its emotional profile, or its political roles, and that's why we won't know how to feel at the prospect of belonging to a public this vigilante wants to address.

And as an object lesson in philosophy, I hope this essay has shown that it is possible to simultaneously shed light on the nature of a phenomenon and illuminate the ways that the concept of that phenomenon may be twisted or hidden for political ends.

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Notes and References

1. For helpful discussion, thanks to Diane Davis, Richard Fallon, Jesse Hamilton, Ethan Harris, Denish Jaswal, Justin Pottle, Mark Richard, Ayanna De'Vante Spencer, Lucas Stanczyk, Brandon Terry, Amie Thomasson, Kevin Troy, Annette Zimmerman, and especially Caroline Light.
2. For examples and discussion, see Diane Davis, "Epilogue: Apocalypse Now?", in *Violence and Crime in Latin America*, eds. Gema Santamaría and David Carey, Jr. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 257-295.
3. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (Transaction Publishers, 1925/1993).
4. Regina Bateson, "The Politics of Vigilantism," *Comparative Political Studies* 54, no. 6 (2021): 923-955; Ray Abrahams, "Afterword: Some Thoughts on the Comparative Study of Vigilantism," in *Global Vigilantes*, eds. David Pratten and Atreyee

Sen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 419-440; H. Jon Rosenbaum and Peter Sederberg, "Vigilantism: An Analysis of Establishment Violence," *Comparative Politics* 6, no. 4, (1974): 541-570; Jon Rosenbaum and Peter Sederberg, *Vigilante Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

5. These two kinds of inquiry are not the only kinds. One could focus even more stringently than the political scientist on finding a definition by seeking either necessary and sufficient conditions or near-necessary and near-sufficient conditions that capture entirely fictional cases, as well as historical ones. Or one could seek a Weberian "ideal type" of vigilantism, as ethnographer Ray Abrahams does, not for the sake of having a definition exact enough to define a variable, but an approximation that helps identify cases at different places and times that can then be compared. See Abrahams, "Afterword: Some Thoughts"; Ray Abrahams, "Foreword: Some Further Thoughts on Comparative Study," in *Domesticating Vigilantism in Africa*, eds. Kirsch and Grätz (Suffolk: James Currey Press, 2010), x-xx.

6. To be useful for defining variables that can figure in political science experiments, a definition need not capture every single actual case of vigilantism, and it need not exclude every actual and merely possible case of non-vigilantism. It would be enough to define a phenomenon that is sufficiently representative of vigilantism that any generalizations using the definitions, if empirically confirmed, would still turn out to be true.

7. Associated Press, "Two Portrayals of Zimmerman: Victim, Vigilante?," *Tampa Bay Times*, 2013, <https://www.tampabay.com/news/nation/two-portrayals-of-zimmerman-victim-vigilante/2128403/>.

8. Contrast the headline "Two Portrayals of Zimmerman: Victim, Vigilante?" with the title of a 2021 public radio podcast "Rittenhouse: Villain or Vigilante?": <https://www.wgbh.org/podcast/all-revd-up/rittenhouse-villain-or-vigilante>. The term "vigilante" has a consistently positive valence in T. Dimsdale's classic 1866 study *The Vigilantes of Montana*, where the word is never used as a pejorative. From the book's first sentence: "The object of the writer in presenting this narrative...is twofold:... to furnish a correct history of an organization of administering justice without the sanction of institutional law; and ...to prove not only the necessity for their action, but the equity of their proceedings." This range of uses makes it reasonable not to know how to feel about a vigilante behind a curtain. See Thomas J. Dimsdale, *The Vigilantes of Montana: Or, Popular Justice in the Rocky Mountains* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1866/1953).

9. Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence And Vigilantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) defines vigilantes as "associations of citizens joined together for self-protection under conditions of disorder."

10. A few examples: Ray Abrahams, *Vigilant Citizens* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1998); Bateson, "The Politics of Vigilantism"; Brown, *Strain of Violence*;

Rosenbaum and Sederberg, *Vigilante Politics*; Peter Sederberg, “The Phenomenology of Vigilantism in Contemporary America: An Interpretation,” *Terrorism* 1, no. 3 (1978): 287-305; Thomas Kirsch and Tilo Grätz, eds., *Domesticating Vigilantism in Africa* (Suffolk: James Currey Press, 2010).

11. The popular website “Legends of America” describes the San Francisco vigilance committees in sympathetic terms: <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/sanfrancisco-vigilantes/>.

12. Lucas Stanczyk, “The Idea of a Liberal Capitalism,” Unpublished Manuscript; Kristie Dotson, “Accumulating Epistemic Power,” *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 129-154.

13. A concern with this comparison is the theme of a pair of books by legal scholar Paul H. Robinson: Paul Robinson and Michael Cahill, *Law without Justice: Why Criminal Law Doesn't Give People What They Deserve* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) and Paul Robinson and Sarah Robinson, *Shadow Vigilantes: How Distrust in the Justice System Breeds a New Kind of Lawlessness* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2018). In its own way, each book develops the argument that a legal system that tolerates misalignments of crime and punishment will become unstable as trust in the system erodes.

14. Politizens are people who share a polity. Why not call these people “citizens”? “Citizen” is a legal category. A person can live in a place but not be a citizen. It is useful to have a word for people who stand in the relationship of occupying the same polity, even if the status as sharing a polity is a live political or interpersonal issue. That word is “politizen.”

15. Bateson, “The Politics of Vigilantism.”

16. Bateson, “The Politics of Vigilantism,” 926.

17. Peter Charles Hoffer, *A Nation of Laws: America's Imperfect Pursuit of Justice* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010); Rosenbaum and Sederberg, “Vigilantism,” *Vigilante Politics*; Abrahams, “Afterword: Some Thoughts”; Brown, *Strain of Violence*; Robinson and Robinson, *Shadow Vigilantes*; Robinson and Cahill, *Law without Justice*; Davis, “Epilogue: Apocalypse Now?”; Kirsch and Grätz, *Domesticating Vigilantism in Africa*.

18. Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961/1988), chapter 5.

19. See <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/the-u.s-supreme-court-and-vigilantes>.

20. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1652/2008), chapter 11.

21. Comer Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

22. Find report: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdva/pr/ohio-man-sentenced-life-prison-federal-hate-crimes-related-august-2017-car-attack-rally>.

23. Oklahoma law: http://webserver1.lsb.state.ok.us/cf_pdf/2021-22%20ENR/hB/HB1674%20ENR.PDF. For overview and discussion of this family of laws, see 2021 Boston *Globe* special report: <https://apps.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2021/10/vehicle-rammings-against-protesters/legislation/> and <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/us/politics/republican-anti-protest-laws.html>.

24. Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Education, Migration, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 133.

25. A contemporary example: nearly twenty percent of the defendants charged with participating violently on January 6, 2020 at the US Capitol were military veterans. See: <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

26. Atreyee Sen, "Everyday and Extraordinary Violence: Women Vigilantes and Raw Justice in A Bombay Slum," in *Global Vigilantes*, eds. D. Pratten and A. Sen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 69-92.

27. David Lyons, "Moral Judgment, Historical Reality, and Civil Disobedience," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27, no. 1 (1996): 31-49.

28. R. W. Hepburn and Iris Murdoch, "Symposium: Vision and Choice in Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 30 (1956), 39.

29. Thanks to Angel Nwadiabia and Parris Sammut for discussion.

30. John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: Holt Publishers, 1927), 64.

31. Charles Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959/2000), 10.

32. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, 8.

33. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*.

34. Phillip Nieto, "Alleged Kenosha Shooter Told Daily Caller He Was There to 'Help People,' Protect Property before Shooting." *Daily Caller*, August 26, 2020, <https://dailycaller.com/2020/08/26/alleged-kenosha-shooter-he-help-people-protect-property-before-shooting/>.

35. McCloskey's statement is discussed here: <https://meaww.com/st-louis-mark-mc-closkey-gun-toting-blm-protesters-run-us-senate-missouri>.

36. Sen writes: "I realized the... system of delivering justice through organized violence allowed women to be equal participants in masculinist discourse....the use

of guns and knives or the freedom to drive vehicles also gave the women a chance to overcome pervasive feelings of envy against men” (“Everyday and Extraordinary Violence,” 83).

37. A live mob is episodic; it exists only as long as it is gathered. By contrast, some theorists use “the mob” as a term that attributes specific political dispositions to a set of people, whether the people said to belong to the mob are gathered together in a single episode or not. For Hannah Arendt, “the mob” consists of those people who “prefer mob rule to law.” See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951); Casper Verstegen, “Hannah Arendt and the Mob,” PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2018. Some dispositional uses of “mob” are clearly pejorative, as when they figure in attempts to discredit political movements by calling them “the Antifa mob” or “the Black Lives Matter mob,” thereby attributing to them a disposition to form violent or unruly crowds. See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Gireux, 1960/1984). I discuss mobs further in Susanna Siegel, “Histories of Violence: Mob Violence,” Interview by Brad Evans, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-mob-violence/> and in Susanna Siegel, “The Phenomenal Public,” Unpublished Manuscript, October 2021.

38. Canetti, *Crowds and Power* offers a phenomenological analysis of this dynamic. For its place in the history of crowd theory and its various attempts to analyze crowd and mob dynamics, see John McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob* (London: Routledge, 1989).

39. A more complicated example is the looting mobs formed often in response to miscarriages of justice, starting in Watts in 1965 and continuing for over a decade in large and small cities in the United States. Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire: The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion Since the 1960s* (New York, NY: Liveright, 2021) makes the case that because these events were responses to violent abuses either by police or by predominantly white politizens that remained unpunished, they were uprisings informed by a political vision, and therefore the standard classification of them as “riots” is mistaken. Her reading leaves open the extent to which all participants, or even most participants, were closer to being caught up in the momentum or viewed their actions as a political action. Given that there was probably a mixture of elements here, it seems likely that these are mixed cases. Brandon Terry, “Requiem for a Dream,” in *To Shape a New World*, eds. Brandon Terry and Tommie Shelby (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) finds in King, Jr (*The Trumpet of Conscience. New York : Harper, 1989*) a nuanced view of the uprisings that occurred before his assassination (many more followed it). Part of the nuance is that as Terry reads him, King, Jr. acknowledged a political vision in which “looting and riotous destruction...contain a kernel of egalitarian content, namely, the desire for the experience of taking, which involves fleetingly redressing the power imbalance that property [distribution] represents”—a point emphasized heavily by the Black Power movement (311). Taken as a whole, these uprisings provide cases where

a powerful strand of participants created a mob with a political vision.

40. A paradigm is David Walker, *Appeal, in Four Articles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, DocSouth Books, 1829/2011) in which he makes the case for ending chattel slavery.

41. The performative nature of the March Against Fear gives it an enactive nature that it shares with vigilantism. But unlike vigilantist acts, the March was not purely enactive. It was accompanied by demands and discussion and, in this way, belongs to a longer time scale than vigilantist acts. *At Canaan's edge*.

42. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892).

43. The google n-gram shows big peaks for the phrases “vigilante mobs” in the 1940’s and 2000: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=vigilante+mobs&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=2&case_insensitive=true. By contrast, there are zero uses of “vigilante protest[ors]” https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=vigilante+protest&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&case_insensitive=on&corpus=26&smoothing=2&direct_url=.

44. Srdja Popovic and Sophia McClennan, *Pranksters and Autocrats* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

45. Popovic initially theorized dilemma protest as a tactic to undermine autocratic governments specifically, focusing on the instances of it that he lived through and helped advise during the Color Revolutions and other pro-democracy movements they inspired. But nothing intrinsic to the techniques limits them to promoting democracy over autocracy, as is shown by the ways that anti-democratic movements have appropriated them. For discussion of this point, see Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventure in the War against Reality* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019).

46. Janet Reitman, “I Helped Destroy People,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/01/magazine/fbi-terrorism-terry-albury.html>.

47. For further discussion, see Cynthia Lee, *Murder and the Reasonable Man: Passion and Fear in the Criminal Courtroom* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).

48. Emphasis added.

49. Stephen Clarkson, “Experience: ‘I Stopped a Terrorist Attack,’” *The Guardian*, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/sep/01/i-stopped-a-terrorist-attack-experience>.

50. Clarkson, “Experience.”

51. Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, intro. Timothy Tyson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962/1998), p. xxiv.

52. Williams, *Negroes with Guns*, 3.

53. The poster is reproduced on p. 3 of Williams, *Negroes with Guns*.

54. A search for “vigilante” in Wisconsin historical society Freedom Summer Digital Collection returns 64 results; all use the term in the context of the white terror, not in the context of Williams. One example of many is an article in the Mississippi Free Press about “the white Klan and their vigilante gangs.” <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/60262/rec/5>. Full search results here: <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/search/searchterm/vigilante>.

55. For an analysis and history of this technique, see Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda* and Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020).

56. Ege Yumusak, “Salience as a Site of Contestation,” PhD diss., Harvard University, 2022.

57. Hoover’s FBI concocted charges of kidnapping against Robert F Williams. For discussion, see Timothy Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, ‘Black Power,’ and the Roots of the African-American Freedom Struggle,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 540-570.

58. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton Mulligan, 1855).

59. State of Wisconsin versus Chrystul D. Kizer. See Ayanna De’Vante Spencer, “Epistemologies of Criminalization: Tracking Epistemic Oppression in the Lives of Black Girl Survivors,” PhD diss., Michigan State University, 2021, <https://d.lib.msu.edu/etd/49839>.

60. Jessica Contrera, “He Was Sexually Abusing Underage Girls. Then, Police Said, One of Them Killed Him,” *The Washington Post*, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/local/child-sex-trafficking-murder/>.

61. Jessica Contrera, “Activists, Celebrities Call For Chrystul Kizer’s Release in Sex Trafficking Murder Case,” *The Washington Post*, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/activists-celebrities-call-for-chrystul-kizers-release-in-sex-trafficking-murder-case/2019/12/31/d11fa1aa-28d1-11ea-b2ca-2e72667c1741_story.html.

62. In July 2022, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that Kizer’s attorney’s can argue that she is not guilty of homicide on grounds of affirmative defense. If the case goes to trial, it is likely to be a live example of contesting whether an act of homicide is vigilantism or self-defense. See <https://www.wpr.org/wisconsin-supreme-court-allows-sex-trafficking-defense-chrystul-kizer-case>

63. See <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/rittenhouse-verdict-advocates-demand-justice-chrystul-kizer-rcna6352> and <https://www.newsweek.com/chrystul-kizer-case-under-spotlight-kyle-rittenhouse-acquittal-1652332>.

64. See Monique Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in School*

(New York: The New Press, 2016).

65. Spencer, "Epistemologies of Criminalization," 41.

66. Perhaps this is why focusing on fear in the moment can be infantilizing. On the childlike character of Rittenhouse's tears in court, see Moira Donegan, "Kyle Rittenhouse Isn't Crying for Those He Hurt. His Tears, Tellingly, Are for Himself," *The Guardian*, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/13/kyle-rittenhouse-isnt-crying-for-those-he-hurt-his-tears-tellingly-are-for-himself>.

67. See <https://www.guns.com/news/2016/07/14/sheepdog-mamas-a-safe-place-for-women-to-talk-about-guns>. I learned of this group from historian Caroline Light, who authored the sentences in this paragraph, which also appear in Caroline Light and Susanna Siegel, "'Warrior Mindset' Can Get People Killed," *Tampa Bay Times*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2020/12/18/warrior-mindset-can-get-people-killed-column/>.

68. The philosopher George Yancy describes such an interaction, which belongs to a narrative that is easy to recognize: "When followed by white security personnel as I walk through department stores, when a white salesperson avoids touching my hand, when a white woman looks with suspicion as I enter the elevator, I feel that in their eyes I am this indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a rapist, a criminal, a burden..." From George Yancy, "Elevators, Social Spaces, and Racism: A Philosophical Analysis," *Philosophy Social Criticism* 34, no. 8 (2008), 844.

69. See report: <https://www.tampabay.com/news/crime/2022/02/07/curtis-reeves-trial-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-pasco-theater-shooting/>.

70. Reeves was acquitted on the basis of Florida's "stand your ground" law. Pioneered by Florida in 2005 and subsequently (as of this writing) established in twenty-four states, stand your ground laws expand the range of cases in which homicides can be excused on the grounds of self-defense. Whereas earlier forms of self-defense laws included a duty to retreat, excusing deadly force only if retreat was not possible or ineffective, or if one was occupying one's own property, stand your ground laws remove the duty to retreat. They excuse lethal force so long as the attacker is found to have "reasonably" believed that they are in imminent danger so that fearing for their life would be a reasonable reaction to the situation. For history and discussion of these laws, see Caroline Light, *Stand Your Ground: America's Love Affair with Self-Defense* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017). Light and Thomas (2022) find it natural to describe many such killings when they are exonerated by stand your ground laws as acts of vigilantism. See Caroline Light and J. A. Thomas, "How Trayvon Martin's Killing Ushered in a New Era of Vigilante Violence," *Slate*, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/02/black-lives-matter-trayvon-martin-and-the-rise-of-vigilante-violence.html>.