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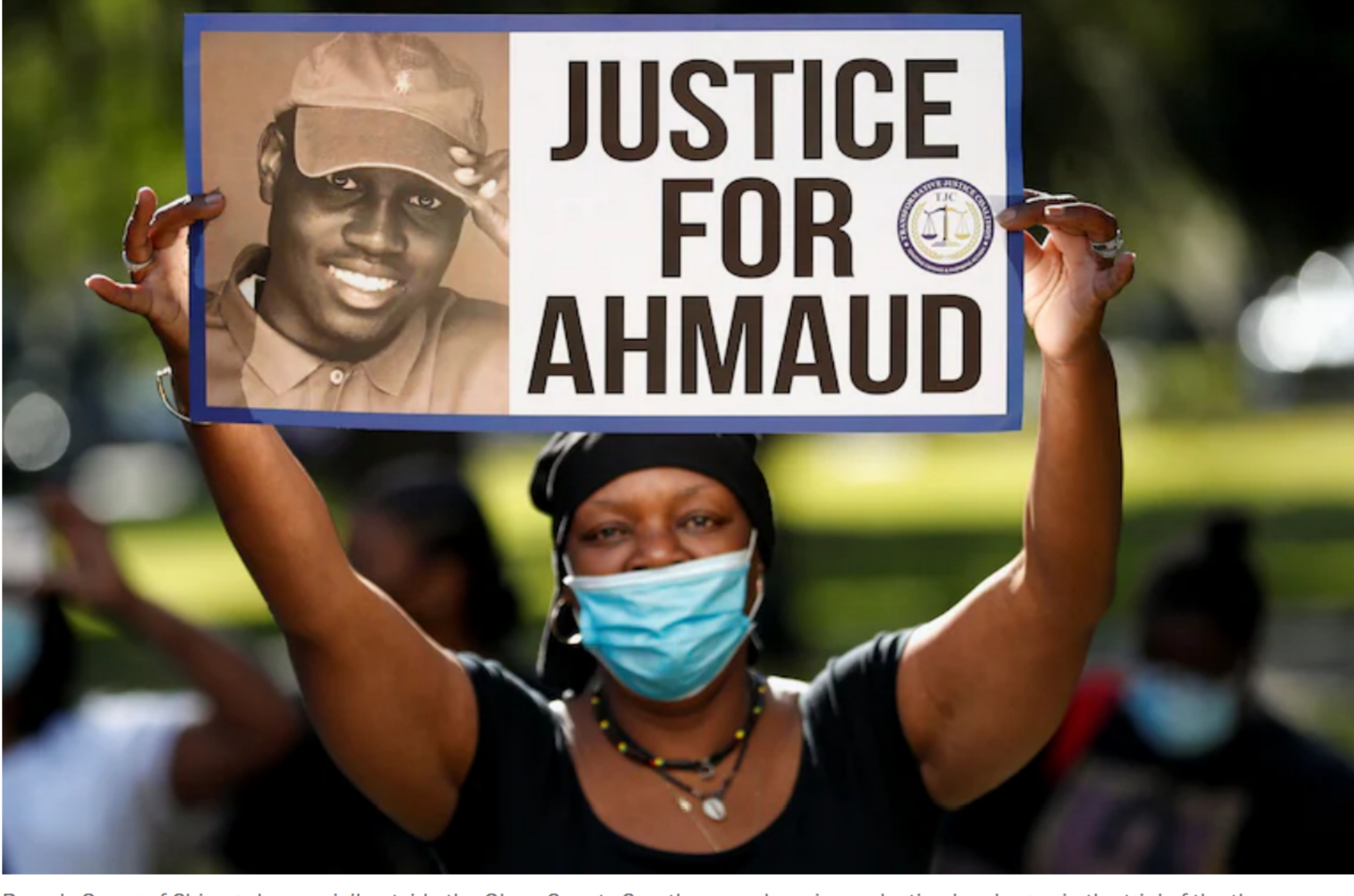
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The Critique • Perspective

# Claiming self-defense in the face of privilege and boogeymen

By [Robin Givhan](#)  
Senior critic-at-large

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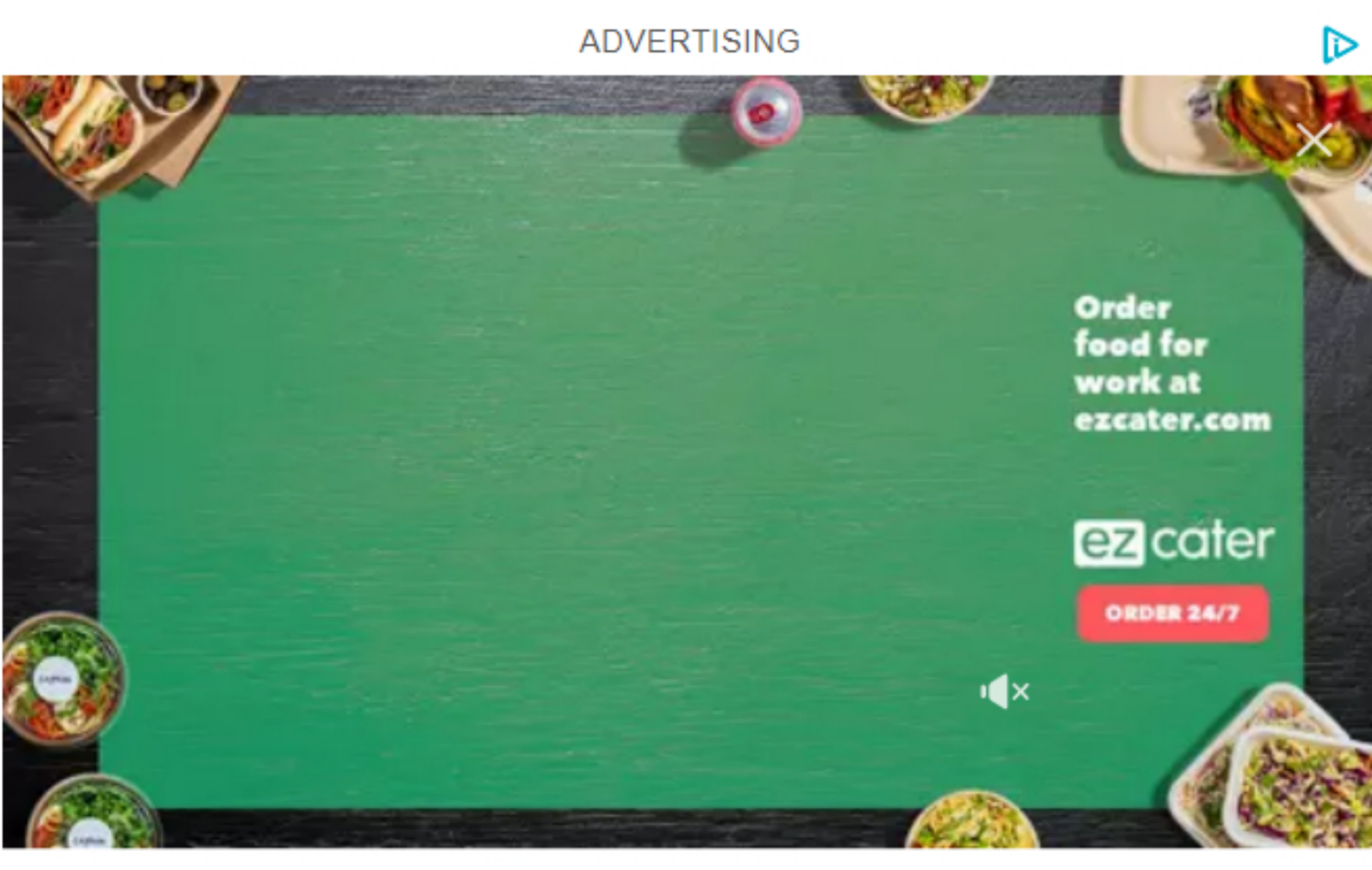
Beverly Green of Chicago keeps vigil outside the Glynn County Courthouse, where jury selection has begun in the trial of the three men accused of murdering Ahmaud Arbery. (Octavio Jones/Reuters)

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The three White men accused of murdering Ahmaud Arbery as he jogged through their neighborhood are claiming self-defense. In their narrative, they chased and tussled in a fatal game of survivor. But if that is true, they did not fight to the finish to protect themselves from a 25-year-old man who they suspected was up to no good. They didn't steel themselves against clear and present danger.

They defended themselves against the audacity of Blackness.

Their tale of survival has them hopping into their trucks and driving them like hunters on the veld. They were following Arbery, but they were also chasing the ghosts and boogeymen who populate our racialized imagination. They wrestled and fought with him in defense of their privilege. They fired shots at an unarmed Black man to protect a social hierarchy that has grown rickety and obsolete.

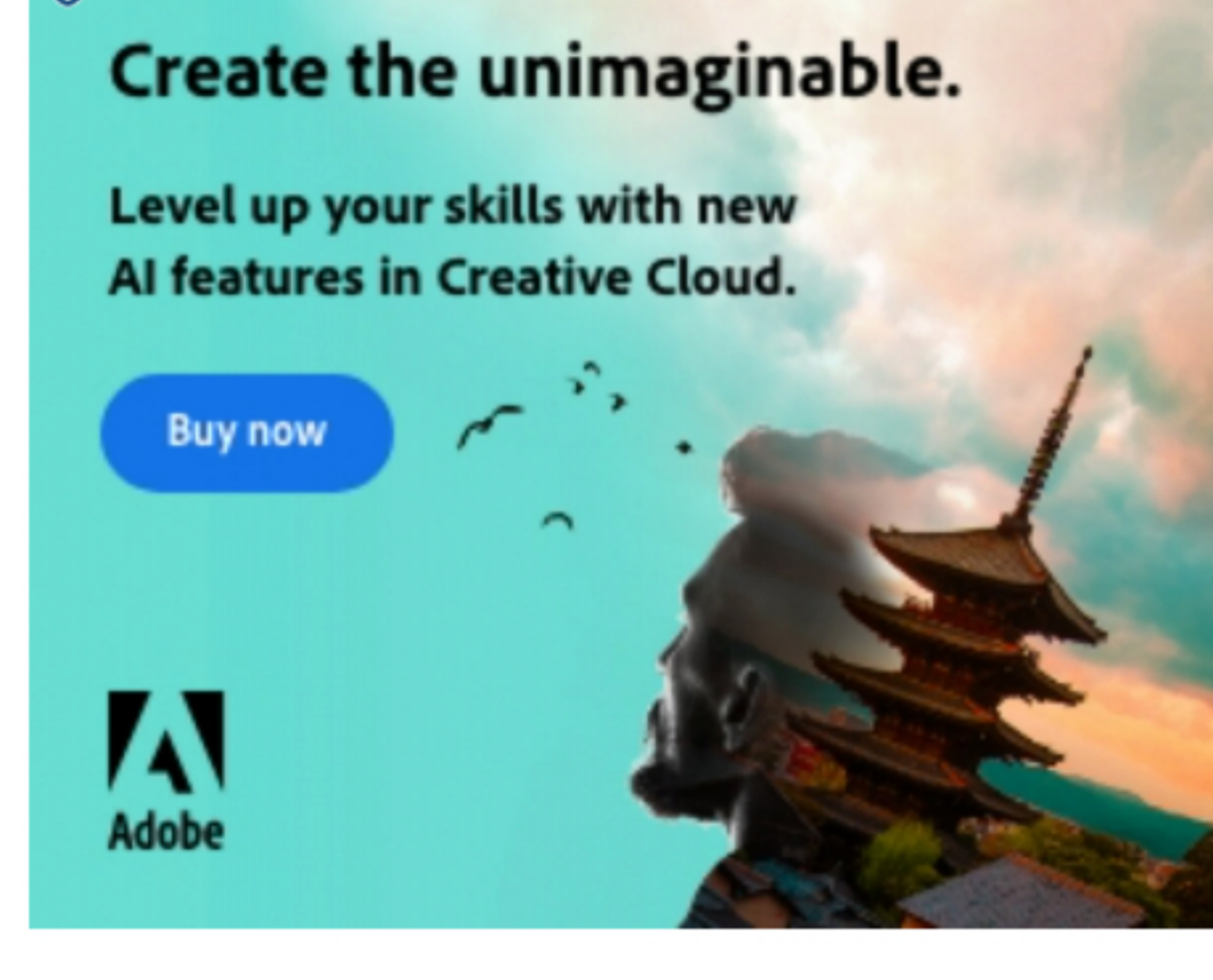


And in the process, they killed Ahmaud Arbery.

Jury selection began this week in Brunswick, Ga., in the trial of Greg McMichael, his son Travis McMichael and their neighbor William “Roddie” Bryan. In February 2020, Arbery died after being shot in the chest by Travis McMichael. Arbery lay dying on the yellow dividing line on an asphalt street that wound through a tree-lined residential neighborhood.

There's video of the altercation between Arbery and Travis because Bryan documented much of the chase. He taped it the way one might memorialize an adrenaline-fueled adventure. He taped it in the manner of someone hoping to create a viral social media moment. He taped it the way a braggart might.

There's police body-camera video, too. It shows the aftermath of the shooting. In it, dispassionate police officers photograph the scene. They note there is nothing they can do for the “gentleman” who takes his last gasp of life in the middle of the road. It seems as though Arbery's last human touch comes from the gloved hands of the police who can't do anything to help him. Who don't assure him that aid is on the way. Who don't encourage him to hang on. Who won't offer a word of human comfort. Who don't utter his name.

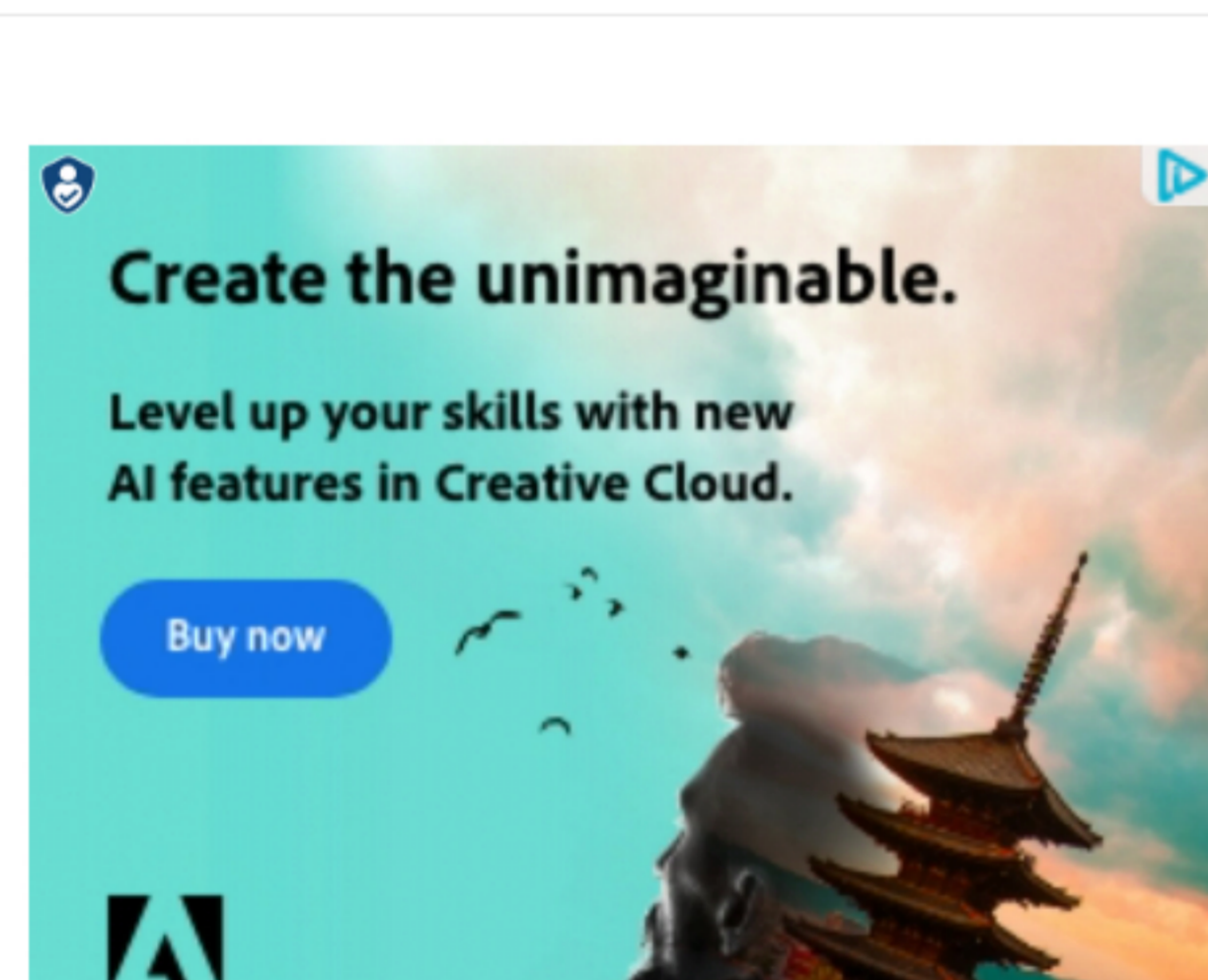


The police body-camera video captures Travis, too. He's covered in blood. He has admitted to fatally shooting a man. He's pacing around. But no one seems concerned about his movements.

“He's not going too far,” says an officer. “He's just trying to figure it out.”

Travis asks for water. And an officer spends several minutes roving from one colleague to another trying to find him a bottle of water — as if Travis was a dying man gasping for just a little bit of comfort. Finally, after an exhaustive search, the officer is able to give him cooling grace in a little plastic bottle.

The McMichaels aren't restrained in any way. They spend no small amount of time lamenting to anyone who will listen that if Arbery had “just stopped,” if only he'd done what they told him to do, none of this would have happened. But Arbery had the temerity to believe that he didn't have to obey the commands of these White men that he didn't know who were chasing him in a pickup as he went for a jog. He could react to them with disregard. His disregard was a threat, as bruising to the ego as a punch to the jaw.



In defense of their right to order *other* people around, in defense of their power position at the top of the social pyramid, Travis fired.

*[Murder trial in Ahmaud Arbery's killing begins with sparring over questions about race]*

The defendants said there had been burglaries in the neighborhood. And so they were on alert. Arbery caught their attention because ...

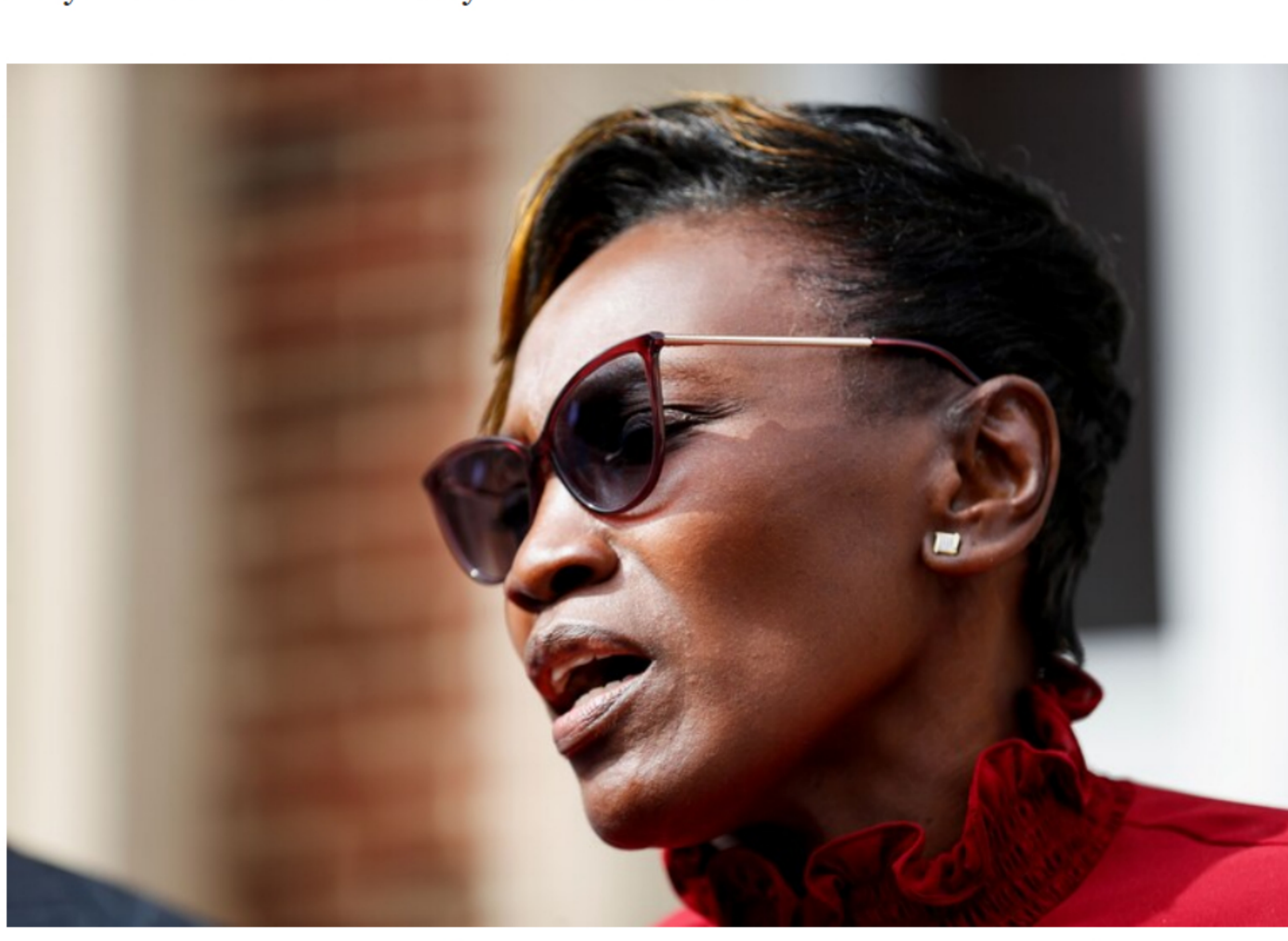
He was obviously guilty because ...

He didn't belong there because ...

There had been break-ins, and the fearsome boogeyman in society's subconscious is all too often a Black man — even one just jogging amiably along in the bright light of day, rather than White men with guns.

Travis fired in defense of his right to be an armed bully rampaging through a residential neighborhood in broad daylight.

His father told police officers on the scene, “He had no choice.” And this is the magnificent falsehood. Travis and Greg and Roddie had choices. These men who police officers don't immediately handcuff even though they are involved in a homicide, who are given water, who are called by first name, have a multitude of choices. They had so many that perhaps they were overwhelmed by sweet abundance.



Wanda Cooper-Jones, Ahmaud Arbery's mother, speaks outside Glynn County Courthouse. (Octavio Jones/Reuters)

They could have chosen not to indulge in stereotypes about who is suspicious and who is not. They could have allowed for the possibility that maybe, just maybe, their every urge and instinct is not righteous and moral. They could have allowed their own fallibility. They could have given a moment's thought to how they might be looked from Arbery's perspective, through the long lens of history and from the vantage point of every Hollywood director's sweaty vision of Southern intolerance. They could have recognized Arbery's humanity instead of treating him like a trophy for their brag wall. They could have chosen not to make his mother grieve.

The men on trial had so many good choices. Instead, they are now arguing that choosing poorly was their best and only defense.

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By [Robin Givhan](#)  
Robin Givhan is senior critic-at-large writing about politics, race and the arts. A 2006 Pulitzer Prize winner for criticism, Givhan has also worked at Newsweek/Daily Beast, Vogue magazine and the Detroit Free Press. [Twitter](#)

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