

Book Review

White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide. By Carol Anderson. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2016. 304 pages. ISBN 9781632864130.

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"America has a rhetoric of freedom and a reality of slavery." Julius Lester

The title of the book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* may lead the reader to draw on images of marching, hooded Ku Klux Klan Clan members, lynching of African Americans, violence against peaceful Civil Rights protesters, the Dylan Roof of the world, or white catholic school boys with "MAGA" ("Make America Great Again") hats standing defiantly in the face of a Native Elder. While similar narratives are woven into the tapestry of this book, Carol Anderson focuses on redefining "white rage" and exposing the sophisticated ways in which it manifests itself through policy and legal structures in the United States.

Carol Anderson, a Charles Howard Candler Professor and Chair of African American Studies at Emory University, initially wrote about white rage following the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American young man shot by a white police officer who was never convicted of Brown's murder. In response to this heinous crime, the African-American community of Ferguson, Missouri protested and rioted. As a result, media and political rhetoric were dominated by the term "black rage," diverting focus from the issue that caused the uprising in the first place: police brutality and the murder of an innocent African American teen.

As a means to process and reframe the racial tensions during this time, Anderson turns the reader's gaze onto white people and their rage, to reveal the perversity of the dominant political, social, and cultural climate. Anderson argues that while mainstream America was focused on the riots and black rage, white rage remained untouched and undisrupted. Anderson states in the prologue: "white rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies... Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively" (p.3). Anderson, thus, sets out to "make white rage visible" (p.3), and she succeeds.

Anderson's book achieves two things: it catalogues the calculated, systemic, and comprehensive ways in which white America has consistently and persistently waged a race-disguised-in-economics war against African-Americans; and it presents a compelling argument about how whiteness, both as an identity and as a social construct, must be unsettled and

exposed. White identity has been constructed not only as neutral but also as good, pure, innocent, composed, rational, and desirable. Anderson challenges this “innocence” and the neutrality of white identity, and asks the reader to reconceptualize whiteness and its rage, for the evil and insidious ways in which it operates to inflict long-lasting and detrimental effects on the African American community. Using historical accounts and individual narratives, Anderson shows how white rage is an essential component of the political, colonial, nation-building project of modern-day America.

Painting a genealogical portrait of white rage through tracing policy and law – from post-emancipation Reconstruction, to the Great Migration, education and Civil Rights, and ending at the presidency of Barack Obama – Anderson showcases the persistent, systematic, and comprehensive ways in which white rage continuously morphs itself into new systems of oppression and segregation, with the ultimate goal of holding onto white power and stopping Black advancement.

In chapter one, Anderson traces present-day racial tensions and systemic inequality in America right back to chattel slavery and the brutality of the reconstruction era. Anderson rejects emancipation discourses that are whitewashed and reduced to a temporal error, a slip in judgement that ended with the outlawing of slavery. Abraham Lincoln, hailed as the great slave liberator and humanitarian, did nothing more than enact the legislation that ended slavery. Further, historical analysis demonstrates that he had no commitment to meaningful emancipation. Anderson notes that “America was at the crossroads between its slaveholding past and the possibility of a truly inclusive, vibrant democracy” (p.8); while America rhetorically and metaphorically started moving towards a democracy, in reality, Anderson argues, it remained in its “slaveholding past.” (p.15). Anderson succeeds in providing the reader with the tools to understand how African Americans came to be “at once contained and dispossessed by the state” (Butler & Spivak, 2007, p.5). Anderson uses historical facts and events to convey that reconstruction was a farce and merely an extension of slavery; it was never meant to provide real freedom to African Americans, with its economic, social, cultural benefits.

The Great Migration, chronicled in the second chapter of the book, was the north-bound movement of African Americans out of the Jim Crow South and the peonage system that had become the re-incarnation of slavery after emancipation. African American economic, political, and social advancement would never be possible in the South. White response to the Great Migration was rage and vicious resistance enacted through violence, imprisonment, and relentless legislative and political tactics determined to stop the now-free men. Southern whites defied legislative and constitutional rights if it meant that they could continue to possess the free or cheap labour upon which they had built their wealth and empires. The white rage that accompanied the Great Migration offers another layer to understand the dynamics of present-day structural inequalities plaguing African Americans as they pertain to freedom of movement, discriminatory housing policies, and phenomena of gentrification and ghettoization.

James Baldwin had this to say about the fundamental right of education: “the paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.” In the third section of the book, Anderson discusses how withholding education from African Americans has always been a weapon of whiteness precisely because educated folk are critical folk. This chapter discusses the great lengths and depths that white Americans went to in sabotaging the implementation of the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*, a decision that would ensure universal education for African Americans. At this juncture in the analysis, the reader is encouraged to think about the emergence of the contemporary phenomenon of a “school to prison pipeline.” Ken McGrew (2016) speaks to the importance of situating this “metaphor” in its historical context. McGrew rejects narratives of a “benevolent” public education system and shows how “poor people” in the United States have been historically targeted in an effort to “undermine their political growing influence and to serve the needs of the capitalist class” (McGrew, 2016, p. 350). From a race perspective, this is precisely what Anderson achieves: the African-American community has been historically (and presently) targeted in an effort to undermine their economic advancement, and their political and social influence. Withholding education was but one tool. As such, any analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline would be insufficient and inadequate without the historical context of *Brown*.

Anderson supplements her illustration of white rage through exposing the white political response to the civil rights movement. She deconstructs the benevolent and colour-blind political rhetoric of Richard Nixon (1969-1974) and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), showing how they managed to successfully redefine the civil rights movement and reduce it to an infantilized version about bus seats and water fountains. As such, white people who did not wear hoods could not possibly be racist; racism was reduced to an individual aberration rather than a systemic and structural manifestation of the colonial nation-state that is the American empire. Anderson argues effectively that the construction racism as an individual fallacy obscures the systemic nature of racism, allowing it to continue to marginalize racialized bodies. It is a calculated myth and a liberal misconception that by dealing with individual racist views, racism can be undone. What Anderson wants the public to know is that African American suffering runs deeper than individual racist acts; the suffering and oppression of African Americans is historical, systemic, and rooted in white insecurity and rage.

Anderson's portrait of white rage culminates with the “un-election” of Barack Obama. The republican/white reaction to President Obama's win is exemplified in Republican South Carolina senator Lindsay Graham's (who presently remains a senator) words: “we're not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business long term” (Washington Post, 2012) This election resulted in the Republican party making it its mission to generate angry white guys and to sabotage/limit voting for African Americans and Latinos through voter suppression. Once again, Anderson catalogues the determined and perverse ways in which white politicians and law makers made voter suppression successful and thus “legally” eliminated millions of Americans

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(specifically African Americans, Latinos, and the poor) from voting. Hatred towards a Black president, voter suppression, and Black rage elected Donald Trump in 2016.

In the afterword, *After the Election: Imagining*, Anderson cites sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom: "Whiteness defends itself. Against change, against progress, against hope, against Black dignity, against Black lives, against reason, against truth, against facts, against native claims, and against its own laws and customs" (as cited in Anderson, p.172).

White Rage provides a critical account of the creation of modern-day America and provides an analytical grounding for contemporary Black/White dynamics. The roots of injustice, as Anderson demonstrates, run deep and are painfully entrenched in the very essence of the modern nation state. It is a necessary text for those embarking on a social justice journey: one cannot work towards social justice if one does not know what the roots of injustice are. The centrality of Anderson's thesis is that the US nation is built on racialized bodies. The present rise of white nationalism is a white response to the perceived threat of African American's political and social advancement. The scaffolding on which racial disparity has been constructed has been hiding in plain sight. *White Rage* pulls off the mask, turns on the light, and lays bare the core of the problem. The work of building true sustainable racial equality can only begin once this fundamental truth is embraced. These principles should be adopted to the Canadian context, one that is mirroring the American rise in white nationalism. Canadians must dig deeper into own histories to unlearn the whitewashed versions of our national history. Social workers, whose own institutions have been complicit in the colonization and oppression of racialized peoples, must continue to trace, as Anderson has, how whiteness drives the profession, and expose our involvement in these colonial and racist projects. This is a crucial step towards transformative justice.

Lastly, Carol Anderson's *White Rage* echoes against the powerful words of Charles W. Mills:

White ignorance . . . It's a big subject. How much time do you have? It's not enough. Ignorance is usually thought of as the passive obverse to knowledge, the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment. But . . . Imagine an ignorance that resists. Imagine an ignorance that fights back. Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly— not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge (cited in Sullivan and Tuana, p.13, 2007).

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