

Wendy K. Z. Anderson, **Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet**, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021, 266 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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The rhetoric of white<sup>1</sup> supremacy and its connection to conservative politics in the United States did not start with Donald Trump. In **Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet**, Wendy K. Z. Anderson traces coded racism back through the mid-2000s, interrogating white identity politics and the women who sustain white supremacy in U.S. institutions through the strategic deployment of color-blind rhetoric.

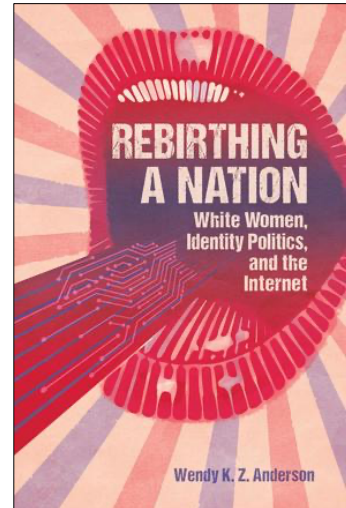
The book traces connections between white supremacist, alt-right, and conservative rhetoric in the United States from the mid-2000s to the late 2010s, and demonstrates the specific role played by white women in refining white supremacist rhetoric and making it palatable to conservatives. Anderson is quite successful in bringing together these three political groups and showing how the rhetoric of white supremacy underpins alt-right and conservative discourse. Less successful is the book's promise to foreground digital contexts; while Anderson does engage with the inequalities and classificatory principles encoded in website design, hashtag use, and search algorithms, the treatment of these subjects is not in depth and is secondary to the book's focus on white supremacists' language use.

Chapter 1 interrogates the coded rhetoric of whiteness, demonstrating how pro-white rhetoric is rebranded as "pro-social" and couched in terms of safety and security. Anderson conducts a comparative analysis of white nationalist websites from 2007 and U.S. presidential campaign rhetoric from 2016, showing that the rhetoric of white nationalist women parallels that of Donald Trump. In chapter 2, Anderson analyzes this rebranding, demonstrating that white nationalist women use a coded rhetoric of color-blind ideographs, including the notions of "diversity" and "freedom of speech," to make their agenda more palatable to conservatives. Chapter 3 turns toward the digital, unpacking how white nationalist women's websites encode ideologies of white supremacy through their design, creating gated digital communities where their ideologies can flourish. Again focusing on 2007-era websites, Anderson argues that white nationalist women evoked a feminist framing by co-opting language of gender marginalization, even as they derided feminism.

In the first three chapters, Anderson considers white nationalist women as a group; in the second half of the book, her focus shifts to individual conservative and alt-right women as core political actors. Chapter 4 argues that Sarah Palin's campaign for vice president during the 2008 U.S. presidential election served as a

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<sup>1</sup> While APA style calls for capitalizing "white" and "whiteness," in this review I preserve Anderson's decision to use lower case. While Anderson does not explain this choice in the text, her decision is in line with AP style, as explained in detail in Daniszewski (2020).



rhetorical testing ground for targeting conservatives through color-blind white nationalist ideology. Chapter 5 presents an analysis of four alt-right women's online discourse from 2018, showing that they targeted white feminists who felt disaffected or left out of the increasingly intersectionality-conscious feminist movement. Finally, chapter 6 demonstrates that conservative white women Kellyanne Conway, Ivanka Trump, and Sarah Huckabee Sanders, all placed in positions of power by Donald Trump during his presidency, served as shield maidens, downplaying controversies and deflecting critique of Trump.

Much of *Rebirthing a Nation* is dedicated to applying Anderson's terms "contained agency" (p. 18) and "privilege filter" (p. 17). Anderson describes contained agency as "the boundaries, limits, or restrictions placed on transcending historical, biological, and cultural oppression when systematic, political, and institutional foundations for oppression are not addressed" (p. 18). Contained agency allows white people to retain their privilege filter, which is a framing of "observations and the meaning of experiences based on how members of a dominant identity group understand the world" (p. 47). In other words, both contained agency and privilege filters describe the ability of dominant group members to ignore or rationalize the oppression of nondominant group members, while constructing themselves as victims. Anderson gives the example of white women being heard and included by white men, feeling individually empowered, and then denying larger structures of intersectional oppression. Thus, "offers of contained agency become an incentive for tokenly identified people of a singular oppressed status to reinforce oppressive structures rather than utilizing revolutionary approaches to address systemic, institutional oppression" (p. 66).

Anderson concludes with an epilogue that calls on readers—and specifically on white scholars—to actively counter racism and white supremacy through intersectional engagement. This closing chapter names the naturalization of white administrators' criteria for "merit," tokenizing appointments of women or BIPOC that do not address structures of inequality, and the use of the ideograph "freedom of speech" to dehumanize and silence others within the classroom as specific problems that academia must address. It also calls on those who identify as liberals to recognize and work against their own privilege filters and commit to confronting racism both without and within.

*Rebirthing A Nation* is not a captivating read. Its prose is plodding, sometimes garbled, often requiring careful detangling to follow the author's point. Yet Anderson's analysis of white women's rhetoric and its role in sustaining white nationalist, alt-right, and conservative movements is essential work. As Anderson clearly demonstrates, the intersection of white privilege and women's "outsider" status creates a unique position with a specific kind of power—in other words, "contained agency" (p. 18). The power of white women's contained agency has its limits but also operates in ways and spaces that the power of white nationalist and alt-right men cannot, providing a crucial avenue for recruitment of women to white supremacist causes and for the protection of white men from the consequences of their actions.

The text seems targeted toward white scholars who identify as progressives but whose critical consciousness is limited by blind spots born of white privilege. The audience is also expected to have at least a moderate knowledge of U.S. history and politics over the last two decades; references to political figures such as former Senate candidate Roy Moore and Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel are presented without explanation. At times, it is hard to follow Anderson's main point; the suturing of old and new research is not quite successful. The book jumps back and forth between analysis of websites from 2007 and political rhetoric from the Trump

era of U.S. politics. Readers might benefit from an organizational structure that better contextualizes these objects of analysis as part of overarching historical and sociopolitical developments. Yet the enduring salience of identity politics and rhetorics of whiteness speaks to the importance of Anderson's topic, and few other scholars specifically focus on the role that white women play in advancing white supremacy.

The key thread that runs through *Rebirthing a Nation* is the specific positionality of white nationalist, conservative, and alt-right women and their deployment of white supremacist rhetoric. By following this thread, Anderson develops connections that are not adequately explored in other scholarship; at the same time, this focus limits the depth with which other topics in the book are treated. Readers may wish to supplement Anderson's text with other works, such as Chatterjee's (2021) *Alt-Right Movement: Dissecting Racism, Patriarchy and Anti-immigrant Xenophobia*, which devotes one chapter to alt-right women. Chatterjee (2021) covers some of the same individuals as Anderson, but with more attention to the intersections of misogyny and whiteness and more economic and sociopolitical context. Furthermore, Anderson's text, while it does analyze the online postings and political activities of some non-U.S. citizens, does so from a soundly U.S. perspective. Readers who are looking for a transnational take may be interested in the edited collection *Global White Nationalism: From Apartheid to Trump* (Geary, Schofield, & Sutton, 2020). Finally, those whose focus is on antiracist pedagogy, rhetoric and whiteness, or whiteness on social media may wish to seek out Ryden and Marshall's (2012) *Reading, Writing, and the Rhetorics of Whiteness*, as well as the edited collection *Rhetorics of Whiteness: Postracial Hauntings in Popular Culture, Social Media, and Education* (Kennedy, Middleton, & Ratcliffe, 2017).

Regrettably, Anderson's book remains timely 15 years after her initial research. Indeed, this work is arguably ever more important as the rhetoric of white supremacy continues to animate racist killings and hate crimes in the United States. As Anderson rightly notes, more work on racist rhetoric—its crafting, testing, recoding, and integration into ever more mainstream discourse—is sorely needed. *Rebirthing a Nation* takes the first steps to help readers “recognize a vernacular of liberal white supremacy” (p. 170)—and to combat it.

### References

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