



REBIRTHING A NATION

**White Women,
Identity Politics,
and the
Internet**

Wendy K. Z. Anderson



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Safety for White People Only through Nationalism

Decoding Rhetorical Refinement of White Supremacist Values

Following the 2016 US presidential election, and the shock that many people continue to experience after its results, media outlets implicated various groups of people believed responsible for the election outcome. Some journalists criticized millennials not voting or voting for third-party candidates.¹ Other correspondents castigated voters with religious affiliations like evangelicals² or even working-class white voters³ for the outcome, yet evidence showed that a majority of working-class voters cast ballots for Hillary Clinton.⁴ However, based on exit poll data, many organizations statically located white women as the source or turning point for the 2016 election.⁵ Of all the different groups of people Donald Trump specifically targeted during the 2016 election (Black people, Latino people, Muslim people, women), more white women (53 percent) voted for Donald Trump than any other group of explicitly marginalized people polled: Black men (13 percent), Black women (4), Latino men (33), and Latino women (6).⁶ Further, news outlets like NBC made claims that “Alabama’s women wrote the verdict on Roy Moore,”⁷ even though an astounding 63 percent of white women cast a vote for Roy Moore.⁸ As shown by exit poll statistics from the 2016 presidential

election, US white women have become a force we must reckon with. And, when it comes to identity politics, white women are at the forefront of racial politics. While studying white nationalism and racism in digital space in the United States over the last fifteen years, I found that white nationalist women refined a rhetoric of whiteness, which was a foundation for coded white identity politics specifically in the 2016 election cycle. The process came full circle as conservative white women became a tipping point in the 2016 election. White nationalist women's rhetorics of privileged values, appropriated ideographs, and contained classifications served to refine white identity politics for the Tea Party. By offering rhetorical means to frame a cultural acceptance of racism, classism, and sexism, they provided rationales similar to those found within Donald Trump's campaign. Value, ideological, and classificatory efforts provided a foundation to reframe whiteness in US culture.

Due to fear of BIPOC, during the 2016 presidential election Trump's assertions about the values of safety and security (codes) dramatically influenced the results. Trump linked values of safety and security with BIPOC to institutionalize overt racism within our political systems. Trump's coded rhetoric, which he directed at people⁹ who share his white privilege filter (see chapter 2), mainstreamed racist rhetoric into US politics. Independent, Republican, and even Green Party candidates (such as David Duke, Tony Harvater, and Rick Tyler) followed his lead using "pro-White" campaign slogans such as "Make America White Again" and "White Lives Matter."¹⁰ While staggering racial discrepancies exist regarding legal enforcement (police), drug laws, mass incarceration, criminal justice, education, employment, economic security, career advancement, civil rights, media access, and housing,¹¹ claims of "political correctness" and "reverse racism" infused US political discourse during the 2016 presidential campaign.¹² Through his campaign promise to "Make America Great Again," Donald Trump harnessed values central to the white nationalist movement. At the height of white nationalist growth online in 2007, white nationalist women's websites became places of rhetorical refinement of survival over independence values to code rhetorics of whiteness within political discourse.¹³ The similarities between terminology and classifications¹⁴ of white nationalist women's online rhetoric in 2007 and Trump's presidential campaign rhetoric in 2016 illustrated how whiteness could be rhetorically refined into US politics by privileging survival values to perpetuate racist ideologies. By unmasking¹⁵ coded rhetorical refinement of values we can understand how white nationalist women and Donald Trump¹⁶

signal white people's potentially unwitting¹⁷ whiteness ideologies that codify white privilege in US cultural and political institutions.

White Nationalist Women as Advocates for a Whiteness Ideology

Although never absent from American social and political culture, over the last twenty years white nationalism has proliferated online.¹⁸ Klan chapters more than doubled in 2016, from 72 to 190 offshoots.¹⁹ When covering white nationalism, most media outlets have identified figureheads of white nationalist organizations such as Don Black and David Duke, or lone wolf bombers such as Eric Robert Rudolph, Buford O. Furrow, and Timothy McVeigh, all of whom are white and male. Not surprisingly, most research on white nationalism is focused on white men and their organizations.²⁰ Further, people who amplify the movement, like Donald Trump, tend to be white and male. Since white men usually made headlines as agents of change in white nationalism, this book steps in to fill a necessary gap in the literature that is itself expressive of a masculinist bias in criticism of white nationalism: white nationalist women. White nationalist men's rhetoric is less stylistically nuanced than concerns that are "rhetorically refined" in digital spaces of white nationalist women.

White nationalist women have made palatable white supremacist rhetoric and orchestrated organizational and recruitment efforts for the white nationalist movement. However, few studies on conservative and white nationalist white women's rhetoric exist.²¹ Sociologist Kathleen Blee clarifies, "[e]xtremist right-wing and reactionary women are nearly absent from studies on women in political movements, which have focused on progressive and women's rights movements or, to a lesser degree, on antifeminist movements."²² Yet, many white nationalist men see white women as the cornerstone of their households, guiding their families, including their husbands, long-term involvement in the movement.²³ Women are the child bearers, organizers of the household, and in some cases office managers of white nationalist organizations, roles similar to those white men attributed to republican women by philosophers of the Enlightenment era.²⁴ As American Studies professor Linda Kerber notes, "[t]he model republican woman was to be self-reliant (with limits): literate, untempted by the frivolities of fashion. She has a responsibility in the public scene, though not to act on it" as a

form of “self relian[ce],” and to preserve “virtue.”²⁵ White nationalist women and republican women alike have the expectation of understanding and supporting white men’s politics as a form of citizenship. Since women have historically been excluded from “citizenship” classifications within a “public” context, women in the political sphere function as a *counter-public*.²⁶ Being more educated and capable than many people assume (many hold associate or even more advanced degrees), through unique support roles, white nationalist women have facilitated the growth of the social movement,²⁷ even at the expense of their agency.

Although white nationalists historically have portrayed women as idealized goddesses and in subservient roles such as mothers and wives,²⁸ to improve “the image of white racial activism and advocacy,”²⁹ white nationalists are increasingly portraying white women in strong female roles such as Valkyries and Amazons³⁰ to reach white women disaffected with racially and gender-inclusive and intersectional feminism. Through both portrayals of white mothers and activist classifications, white nationalists subsumed “anti-” racialized “other” messages with “pro-white” ones, idealizing how white women who embodied the traditional roles or forecast intentions to be wives and mothers served as activists for white nationalist organizations. Yet, these white women offered more to the white nationalist movement. White nationalist women rhetorically refined coded whiteness to appear “more conversational and reasonable in tone” to attract more economically or culturally aggrieved audiences, specifically “women who might not want to consider themselves racists.”³¹ The websites white nationalists created included “pro-social” identities that balanced nurturing with instrumental qualities to assert community an underlying value of the movement. As women increasingly use the World Wide Web as a means to find social support, empowerment, and stable forms of identity through community affinity,³² women online have become a vulnerable audience to coded white nationalist women’s recruitment efforts.

Refining “Pro-White” as “Pro-Social” Rhetoric

Communication and sociology scholars describe the white nationalist movement as stemming from “hate,” “racist,” “separatist,” “extreme,” “radical right,” or “white power” groups, reducing its complexity. By analyzing their “pro-white” stance, scholars acknowledge the negative³³ or othering perspective

white nationalists forward. As I noted in the introductory chapter, white is a responsive identity term, only created after attempting to separate oneself from an out-group. By implying an out-group, the “pro-white” terms allowed white nationalists to rhetorically sidestep claims of overt, hate-focused racism,³⁴ reducing structural racism to only prejudice. The pro-white label evoked the [non-white] Other, coding colonialism into a cultural context. Social acceptance of white nationalism and an increase in racial discord and violence³⁵ have continued to fuel the Trump campaign and presidency.³⁶ White nationalists cloaked their racism³⁷ by changing the values in which they classify (see chapter 3) their content (as seen with martinlutherking.org) to forward white supremacy.

Instead of explicitly naming or blaming their enemies, white nationalists have increasingly used pro-social racist rhetoric or positive messages that focus on surviving as a community. Through a rhetoric of “new racism”³⁸ ideologically founded in “Kultural Pluralism,” white nationalists blurred cultural pluralism and white supremacy into emotional appeals directed at conservative whites.³⁹ White nationalists have conveyed feelings of love and pride for white racial heritage in an “idealized traditional family” to build community.⁴⁰ According to Patricia Hill Collins, an “idealized traditional family” included focusing on 1) naturalized hierarchies, 2) home(land), 3) blood ties, 4) rights with responsibilities, 5) socioeconomic class, and 6) family planning.⁴¹ Even by naming one’s progeny and family pets after prominent white nationalist figures, such as figures of Nordic mythology, white nationalists attempted to perpetuate a “white history” within their families.⁴² To better understand how white nationalist women rhetorically refined white nationalist values in public arenas, I studied white nationalist value-laden rhetoric in informal spaces of the digital sphere. Studying white nationalist women online provided clarification as to how values circulated around networks of communities.

Political Avenues for White Nationalism in the United States

Instead of ethnocentric arguments about white supremacy over other cultures, white nationalists appropriated reparation policies to address historic and systematic racial discrimination of BIPOC. In 2002, professor of Political Science and Law Carol Swain articulated:

[The movement] seeks to expand its influence mainly through argument and rational discourse aimed at its target audience of white Americans who have become embittered or aggrieved over what they perceive to be a host of racial double standards in the areas of affirmative action policy and crime reporting, as well as over the continuance of large-scale immigration from third world countries.⁴³

By targeting affirmative action policies, which use universal or neutral race terminology, white nationalists socially constructed and validated white identity politics.

Further, the relationship becomes tautological as conservative government agents provided nationalist groundwork for white nationalist claims about safety. For example, past presidents exploited highly charged catalytic events for government action and policy (like 9/11 and the Iraq War by George W. Bush, as well as the Patriot Act, which was renewed under Barack Obama⁴⁴) in relation to foreign relations and cultural differences in the public sphere. Following 9/11, the US government attempted to reestablish control of domestic and economic agencies through increased security efforts made within airports (not allowing objects such as scissors and liquids on planes or visitors past the baggage areas), at border stations (needing a passport to travel into Canada), and through controversial laws such as the USA Patriot Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001). These policies perpetuated rhetoric about “terrorist” actions taken against “America” by people not originally from the United States and justified an increase in border security, especially at the border between the United States and Mexico, to preserve a sense of “safety.”⁴⁵

In addition to historic events, arguments about perceived censorship of language constrained dialogue about independence values. Due to a fear of being labeled as racist, many white people were afraid to speak about race.⁴⁶ Censorship-type enforcement of “politically correct” language by fearful administrators and assumed or actual problematic application of affirmative action policies also bred resentment of opportunity based on racial makeup. In some cases, the adoption or forced adherence to politically correct language only masked racial tensions and differences in socially appropriate language (e.g., extreme “we are all the same” philosophy). Rather than discussing perspectives, white people’s perception of censorship prompted white people to use language that covered up how language culturally perpetuated

prejudice and stereotypes. However, “politically incorrect” language problematically enacted colonial racial structures as well as debased and retraumatized people through hate speech.

Without productive critical dialogue, white people do not recognize or understand racial disparities. Although the civil rights movement earned some recognition and rights for BIPOC, white people still express a post-civil rights attitude concerning race, or an attitude that racial disparities no longer exist in US society. Opinion polls show “favorable assessments of black chances for success often accompanied extremely negative judgments about the abilities, work habits, and character of black people,”⁴⁷ illustrating post-civil rights or “post-racial”⁴⁸ attitudes concerning equality and potential for making BIPOC a scapegoat for the litany of concerns I note above.⁴⁹ Favorable assessments of success with negative assessments of personal character illustrate external loci of control for BIPOC—that external influences, not a person of color’s abilities, are responsible for their success, while their efforts or existence become the limitation on or downfall of our “greatness.” Token examples (e.g., Obama as president)⁵⁰ serve as the rule rather than the exception that BIPOC have “succeeded” in the United States. Statistical discrepancies of racial discrimination and discriminatory enforcement of civil rights laws tell another story.⁵¹

White people may deny the existence of racial injustice because they may be “embarrassed by the benefits they receive from white supremacy, and others are inconvenienced or even threatened by the resentment it creates.”⁵² Recognizing oppressive structures may complicate or otherwise implicate the lives and choices of white people. Instead of engaging the insecurity they feel in race-based conversations, to retain a sense of white, male privilege and authority, “right populism fuels a ‘know nothing’ culture in response: one that disparages not only expert knowledge, but also deliberative processes of public judgment, in favor of more immediate forms of knowledge based parochially in ‘community and personal experiences.’”⁵³ White men focus on what “their gut” tells them rather than listening to research BIPOC’s experiences, because it maintains their privilege.

During his successful 2016 presidential campaign, Trump gained public support by appropriating coded racist rhetoric to fuel a white populism. By populism, I mean “both academic and public discourse” characterized “by its symbolic and affectively charged practices of identification, which arouse the people on behalf of a common vision of collective identity and political life

and either unsettle or shore up the borders of politics and democracy.”⁵⁴ By not addressing white privilege or equitable independence, white people reduce BIPOC to socially and culturally dependent terms within US politics. As Lipsitz clarifies, “by generating an ever repeating cycle of ‘moral panics’ about the family, crime, welfare, race, and terrorism, politicians are able to distance concerns from economic and social policy.”⁵⁵ Fears of identity (authority and privilege) safety successfully distract people from addressing social problems.

Due to the potential for white people to feel sympathetic toward white nationalist concerns due to shared values, a comparative analysis of how white nationalist women used US values with mainstream political rhetoric illustrated how rhetorical refinement of whiteness is built into US politics. US value systems⁵⁶ provided common ground to identify inferentially racist rhetoric that would connect with US audiences. White nationalist women and Donald Trump connected safety values to immigration, security values with rising expectations of racial and ethnic minorities and the global structure of the economy, independence values with a perception of unfair racial policies and a growing resistance to acceptance of multiculturalism and its emphasis on promoting racial and ethnic group pride and identity politics, and progressive values with the exponential growth of the Internet to justify white identity politics in the United States. Noting boundaries for safety and security values, critiquing pro-social values, and contextualizing independence values of political correctness as more than “being rude”⁵⁷ illustrated how rhetorical refinement of whiteness “codes” racism.

Exposing White Privilege Coded through Survival Values

To justify their white privilege, white nationalists and Donald Trump identified survival values of health, safety, and security through biological and physical boundaries. White nationalists simulated whiteness through bodily “material referents”⁵⁸ of white, young, innocent, fertile, and technologically empowered women and girls.⁵⁹ For example, on the National Alliance main page, a poster for *RESISTANCE* magazine depicted a young, large-breasted, partially naked female in a bikini and halter top.⁶⁰ Similarly, the kirkwomen’s website featured a black and white poster of a woman with long blonde hair in a tight black shirt and skirt or pants. The image revealed much of her white skin and large breasts as she holds a semi-automatic assault rifle—all referents

About the Author

Wendy K. Z. Anderson is an independent researcher and instructor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Her research interests lie at the intersection of critical rhetorics and digital media, where she examines how marginalized community rhetorics and critical dialogue (both in content and form) influence institutional, organizational, and infrastructural oppression to impact equity and social change. Dr. Anderson, her partner, Matthew, and their two children call the Minneapolis/St. Paul area home.