

Introduction

DISASTER WHITENESS

THIS BOOK STARTED AS A TONGUE-IN-CHEEK discussion of a question way back in 2019: Was Donald Trump the epitome of neoliberalism or the harbinger of its demise? But, of course, much has transpired since then and talking through that question led us down a grim path that brings together white power—which we see as the current extremist form of white supremacy—and neoliberal culture—as the current form of racial capitalism—in an exploration of topics much larger than any one individual. Indeed, our question became an entry point into the long history of American white ethnonationalism and white supremacy and their love-hate relationship with democracy of which Trump is merely a particular iteration, an expression of the patriarchal racial capitalism at the deep core of American neoliberal culture. Our work led us to analyze the violence of white power, which we investigate through sadistic novels and manifestos written by a range of figures with some connection to white power ideology. At the same time, we study the racist, misogynist core at the center of American neoliberal culture and the fundamental role of patriarchal family values in both white power and neoliberalism.

To stay with Trump for another minute, we may well ask what makes him so relevant to neoliberalism. As a self-styled pussy-grabbing businessman and huckster “billionaire” who emerged from bankruptcy by playing the character of a sensationalist dealmaker on his own reality television show, Trump personified neoliberalism’s entrepreneurial and emotional priorities. However, when we consider many of Trump’s other positions, a more complicated story emerges. For instance, when he promised, with a stunning lack of success, to overturn the Affordable Care Act (ACA), he did not reject the idea of publicly funded alternatives, even though neoliberal ideology firmly

opposes the social safety net, but instead said he would replace the ACA with “great health care.” So too, he expressed opposition to the neoliberal shibboleths of “globalism” and free trade as evidenced by his launching of a costly trade war with China.¹ Unencumbered by the technocratic expertise neoliberalism is known for, his policy pronouncements were not supported by thought-through political programs as much as vaguely sketched out far-right populist ideologies.

Such policies and pronouncements show that Trump and many on the far right are not motivated by the belief in the free market and small government that are assumed to be the central tenets of neoliberal ideology. They are driven by commitment to a principle much older than neoliberalism. They are motivated by a 150-year-old antidemocratic “white rage”—as historian Carol Anderson terms it—that has been simmering since the Civil War and flares up seemingly every time that people who are not white men achieve important milestones.² From this perspective Trump is less the leader of any movement and more the repudiation of Black Lives Matter and the negation of the first Black president, not to mention the would-be first woman president, of the United States. Reaching back further into U.S. history, Trump links us back to the founding of the United States on colonized land reshaped with the labor of stolen people. Seeing U.S. history from this viewpoint not only emphasizes this settler-colonial past, but it also redefines the most potent ideologies in U.S. life, such as the American dream. From here, the American dream as ideology and birthright shows that white power nationalism is only the latest version of an older ideology based on the twinning not just of racism and imperialism, but also of white supremacy and capitalist accumulation. From this long view, Trump can be seen as merely the latest spokesman for a crusade trafficking in the resentment of white heterosexist patriarchy. He is a personification of an ideology promoting economic, political, cultural, and social domination by those defined as white and male.

So, to understand the complexities of American neoliberalism, we examine the sources of that rage and of the white power affect that desires to “Make America Great Again.” We analyze the social conservatism at the heart of neoliberalism and of the writings of white power ideologues and ethnonationalists. We argue that neoliberal capitalism’s aims to eliminate barriers, strip regulations on economic activity, and enable the free flow of capital result in economic oscillations that are themselves a microcosm of the extremes that characterize the ethno-racism within American neoliberal culture, and ultimately within American capitalism itself.

Neoliberalism has been beset by wildly destabilizing oscillations, the Trump presidency marking only one of many moments of crisis and contradiction in the American neoliberal era. A quick scan of book titles from 2019 reveals that many scholars see neoliberalism as a catastrophe. Titles such as *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* to *Mutant Neoliberalism* to *Never-Ending Nightmare* suggest a level of alarm that, to be fair, had predated Trump but that in his wake raises several questions, not least of which is why has neoliberalism been so successful ideologically if it is such a nightmare? We will address that question in the pages to come.

But first we should take a step back to consider a larger point that has dogged scholars for decades. If neoliberalism has been a dominant cultural force since the 1970s, we may well ask if it remains a relevant framework given the many changes the world has since undergone. Stuart Hall asked that question himself in the wake of the globally destructive Great Recession of 2007–2010, and in answering it he saw the recession as marking a moment within “that conjuncture which we can define as ‘the long march of the Neoliberal Revolution.’” For Hall, the *conjuncture* is a “social configuration” that results from a period of crisis. It arises “when a number of contradictions at work in different key practices and sites come together—or ‘con-join’—in the same moment and political space.”³ So as we acknowledge the hesitation of some scholars to use the framework of neoliberalism at all, ostensibly because it is overused or too sprawling, we follow Hall, who maintained that the “neoliberal revolution” is nowhere near over.⁴ He determined that neoliberal ideas have proliferated throughout the world, reorganizing whole economies, governments, and societies.⁵

Today, as we write these words in a season of democratic crisis, it remains the case as Hall said that “naming neoliberalism is *politically* necessary to give resistance content, focus and a cutting edge.”⁶ In short, we can mobilize the tools that have been developed over these past decades to understand neoliberalism, and we can do our part to keep those tools updated in order to contribute to the resistance. Analyzing the targets of these policies and ideas has led us to explore the contemporary imbrication of white power racism and neoliberal culture in the United States. This leads to the second point that dogs scholarship on the issues we are discussing. Focusing on white power can seem to be disconnected from everyday racism, or even let the latter off the hook under the rationale that at least it is not as bad as the extremists’ kind. Focusing on extremism does not erase the daily, relentless racism of microaggressions, color-blind rhetoric, dog whistles, and institutional racism

that shapes quotidian lived experience and white fragilities. Indeed, it is deeply relevant that Trump, who has acted as a spark for the white extremist resurgence in the United States, was elected by a majority of white Americans who would not endorse the radical extremism we study in this book. But all of these “brands” of racism are tied together. Indeed, it is also relevant that some white liberals who would never vote for Trump have endorsed a system of overcorrection to white fragility that results in exoticizing racism.⁷ These positions result in a racism that enters from another door, and it too is an ever-present danger in Trump-inflected American culture.

In this book we try to find a space between the racial-neoliberalism-is-everywhere approach and the real-racism-exists-only-in-a-few-locations position, just as we reject the idea that being anti-racist is fundamentally about calling out racist personal attitudes or individuals. Our goal here is to analyze a deeply dangerous and growing threat to democracy and people’s lives that is installed at the fundamental level of capitalism. We do this by building on our previous separate scholarship that analyzes white power utopias (Chan) and American neoliberal culture (Ventura).⁸ We examine here the relation between the two in order to locate the white power resurgence we see around us in the context of the “neoliberal revolution.”

To contextualize that revolution, we argue that Trump embodies the white power moment that reconnects us to American neoliberalism’s misty prehistory as a market-obsessed “theoretical utopianism” of economic freedom against centralized planning.⁹ As it was put by Friedrich Hayek, one of the early theorists of neoliberalism, supporting the system of private property “is the most important guarantee of freedom.”¹⁰ As a result, freedom becomes the stated rationale for opposing the social service state with its required taxation and regulation. We argue that this rationale is only part of a regime that is fundamentally opposed to equality and democracy themselves, that opposes the social service state because it requires society as a whole rather than isolated individuals to bear the costs of social reproduction.

At least two forces have been operating at the core of American neoliberalism: fear of losing the cultural dominance of the patriarchal family and an economic motivation to shrink the social-welfare and regulatory state in order to funnel wealth upward to the super-rich. Examining the foundational roles of whiteness and the system of racial capitalism is crucial for understanding both forces. As neoliberal theorists position the white patriarchal family to take the place of the state in its governmental functions, white power groups prioritize reproducing more white people and construct-

ing a collective consciousness that begins with the traditional nuclear family and enlarges to encompass whiteness as a tribal family. We study this crucial nexus between white ethnonationalist ideology and neoliberalism in the form of the white heteronormative patriarchal family that extends seamlessly out to incorporate white people generally as a racial family.

Filling in what is left out of too many analyses of neoliberalism begins here at the intersection of white power and capitalism, in which race and family are not epiphenomena but constitutive categories. To critically analyze neoliberalism from the perspective that capitalism is necessarily raced means that analyzing the history of neoliberal politics, policy, and theory opens a space for us to make the unlikely connections between white power and neoliberalism's founding generation of professors and politicians, many of whom would never have explicitly supported white supremacy but whose actions created the conditions for its resurgence as white power—in the name of affirming family values.

In the United States, understanding the rise of neoliberalism and the perpetuation of white supremacy from this nexus of influences requires analyzing the political power of whiteness as a “gravitational force” and grasping that “the core contradiction of neoliberal society is race” with its production of the “possessive investment in whiteness.”¹¹ This strategy of converting whiteness into cultural, and consequently economic, capital has been successful when it has targeted white people who deeply resent the efforts to democratize American life more fully. In the United States of the neoliberal era, the targeting has taken many approaches, including, most notably for our analysis, the “long Southern Strategy” that according to political scientists Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields works like a triptych connecting religious fundamentalism and patriarchy as “separate hinged panels that can be folded inward—bent to cover or reinforce white supremacy.”¹² From this perspective we examine the rhetoric and politics of white patriarchal entitlement mobilized to build a future that deflects the gnawing fear of millions of white people that their racial identity has lost its value in a globalized and multicultural world.

And so we circle back to the question we started with. We know that Trump is a product of neoliberal culture, but he is hardly its apotheosis. We argue that the more significant development of the Trump years is the revitalization of white power that accompanied Trump's rise to the presidency through a campaign appealing to whiteness, which we study here through utopian novels and in the manifestos of white power actants and would-be

actants. By providing a larger context, we hope to add insight that helps in the effort at resistance. To that end, we maintain that studies of neoliberal culture should acknowledge what W.E.B. Du Bois and, after him, David Roediger have definitively shown: whiteness has historically been a value added to white people's paid wage.¹³ While some white people have never been positioned to use that wage to access wealth-building institutions such as favorable housing and well-funded schools, nearly all whites enjoy the relative freedom of a presumption of innocence in the face of overzealous policing and the dark powers of the carceral state. It is certain that for many white people, whiteness is a cultural wage that can but doesn't always link to actual material wealth, especially as evidenced by the deep poverty plaguing those states historically linked to the most extreme versions of white supremacy. However, the stories offered by the various agents of whiteness, from the political establishments to the ethnonationalist extremes, allow white people to maintain a tenuous grasp on the historic promises of guilt-free supremacy and exception offered to them for centuries.

The racially motivated violence by white power extremists in the years since the election of Barack Obama illustrates their effort to highlight the color line in the United States, and this is not even taking into account the murder and violence perpetrated against Black and Brown people by police that brought forth and continue to feed the Black Lives Matter movement. In 2008, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) described more than two hundred hate-related incidents as triggered by Obama's election.¹⁴ David Duke, of Ku Klux Klan fame, identified him as a "visual aid" to inspire white racial unity.¹⁵ After the 2016 election of Trump, the SPLC reported a spike in the number of hate groups, this time presumably inspired by Trump's frequent xenophobic and racist pronouncements.¹⁶ Thus, for different reasons, the elections of Obama and Trump fed a wide-ranging and insidious white identity politics as well as the more extreme cases of white racial terror. As we will argue, the violence of white power erodes the goal of striving toward a pluralistic society and reveals a bleak reality articulated by philosopher Cedric Robinson: "The purpose of racism is to control the behavior of white people, not Black people. For Blacks, guns and tanks are sufficient."¹⁷ This white power racism links easily with neoliberal ideology and governmentality to undermine the idea of society itself and thus the validity of the entire social service state. To take its place, both white power and neoliberalism offer the heteropatriarchal family as a replacement.

TERMINOLOGY: NEOLIBERALISM AND NEOLIBERAL CULTURE

To begin our study, we need to define the terminology that forms the parameters of this project. For starters, *neoliberalism* is a sprawling term traditionally naming a set of capitalist economic approaches favoring financialization, business deregulation, minimal taxation, globalization, free trade, and market fundamentalism supported by states dedicated to corporate interests. Neoliberalism develops from racial capitalism as a program to promote institutions and ideologies that protect private property and wealth. As a critical analytical approach, racial capitalism acknowledges the fundamentally racist, colonial, and thus racially exploitative nature of capitalism itself, which separates people from each other in order to, in lay terms, make the rich richer.¹⁸ Neoliberal racial capitalism enables tremendous economic inequality, which it reframes as a social good that rewards hard work and a sign that the system is operating correctly.

Neoliberal culture is the name for the massive infrastructure shaping everyday life under neoliberal racial capitalism. It is like an ecosystem in which contemporary life is lived and emotions are felt. American neoliberalism is hegemonic in the United States, and American neoliberal culture is a kind of atmosphere for daily existence in the United States. We see American neoliberal culture as having taken root as a reaction against the social movement activism of the civil rights / Vietnam / anti-colonialism era and established itself as a result of neoliberal and post-Fordist capitalism, subsumed under the larger category of racial capitalism. In the United States we see it coming to fruition with the end of the Cold War in 1989 and lasting through our present moment.

Neoliberalism's priority is to erode the notions of society and the commons (public goods and resources), and in this way it erodes the validity of the social welfare state. From another perspective it is a rationality, governmentality, and ideology that when taken together place capitalist economics at the center of existence as an element of nature, almost like the earth or water. It explicitly rejects the idea of society and social obligation, in some iterations positioning agency in the hands of the self-responsible individual and for many adherents endorsing a strong state to direct the actions of those responsible individuals. As a mode of subjectivity it is often said to produce *homo economicus*, the individualist who is supposed to be a rational evaluator

of the economic landscape, who sees the self as human capital and as a product to be maximized by making the “right” consumer choices and regulated through a rigid program of self-surveillance and self-discipline.¹⁹ But it also produces an additional idealized subject, less discussed in the literature about neoliberal subjectivity but who is proving exceptionally important in these times. This subject, *homo affectus*, whose existence centers on an affective mode, draws a sharp contrast with the economic rationality of the classic neoliberal subject but is a central figure in the emotional economy of the neoliberal workforce, especially as contemporary industries increasingly center on feelings, care, emotions, and service to others—a development that those operating in a stereotypically masculinist vein bristle against.²⁰ According to sociologist Birgit Sauer, the affective citizen is a product of a neoliberal governmentality that perpetuates fear resulting in a right-wing discourse in which people “are given the right to be furious and passionate, they are freed from caring about others (as they have always been), from feelings of solidarity; and men are encouraged to modulate fear into anger and direct this anger towards ‘Others.’”²¹ White power mobilizes this affective mechanism in order to recruit white people to its ranks and rationalize its ideology, such that the only solidarity allowed is with the white race.

TERMINOLOGY: WHITE POWER AND THE FAR WHITE

We have chosen to use the term *white power* to refer to the loose but parallel, and at times connected, conglomeration of ideologies and activities commonly designated as *white supremacy*, *white nationalism*, *white separatism*, (*white*) *ethnonationalism*, and *the far right*, as well as the relatively short-lived *alt-right*. These other terms, though similar, designate specific aspects of an overall regime of white power, a term that was also used in 1966 as a call to action responding to Black Power in the title of a manifesto of sorts by George Lincoln Rockwell, who had also founded the American Nazi Party in 1959. It is also used in the single most influential white supremacist novel—*The Turner Diaries* (1978), by William Pierce using the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald—as a call to arms.²² Our use of the term *white power* is influenced by C. Richard King and David J. Leonard and by Kathleen Belew, the latter referring to “the social movement that brought together members of the Klan, militias, radical tax resisters, white separatists, neo-Nazis, and

proponents of white theologies such as Christian Identity, Odinism, and Dualism between 1975 and 1995.”²³ However, we extend the period through to our own present, the years after Trump’s dismal presidency, and Belew has also recently referred to the resurgence of the white power movement.²⁴

It is important to employ such terms with awareness of their diverse meanings and the palimpsest-like way they have evolved. From the outside, all these groups are sometimes loosely conglomerated to the degree that they can be called a “movement,” and yet they often work disconnectedly and at odds and without clear leaders. Moreover, white supremacists are not necessarily white nationalists desiring a white-only nation, and white separatists might claim they are not white supremacists, only that they want to exist apart from nonwhites who are not necessarily racially inferior. Of course, the various manifestations of racism in the recent mainstreaming of the far right, the vociferousness of more openly white supremacist groups, and acts of white domestic terror are not unrelated, and each encourages the other in a larger framework of white power, envisioned here not only as a subject position but also as a set of ideologies.

In this regard we develop the additional term *far white* to capture the spectrum of white identity politics and ideologies, especially as they influence the estimated twenty-one million Americans who are not members of any white power group but who endorse the use of political violence. Politically, the belief that most commonly unites them is a fear of replacement, of white people losing their demographic and social position in U.S. society.²⁵ The term names those who invest in whiteness as a distinct identity but are not active in white supremacist groups; it captures a sometimes fuzzy overlap between far-right politics and white power extremism. The far white becomes a particularly dangerous identity when mainstream politicians and pundits express these racially extremist views and positions, whether genuinely or cynically. So while the far white are not willing to actually join a group that we would identify as white power, they nevertheless buy into some part of the ideology and are in some way sympathetic to the political ideals displayed in the August 11–12, 2017, Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the U.S. Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, and they might even engage in violence like some of the shooters we discuss in chapter 1.

For the far white, as for white power, rights can only be understood as a quantity: advancements in civil rights for others requires a loss of rights for them. These violent ideologies may originate on the fringes with extremists who fear the loss of white status and privilege—and the material wealth and

resources that accrue to those—but it seeps into the mainstream through conduits like Trumpism or the Tea Party, where it interacts with and reinforces already long-held assumptions, even if subconscious, about the structure of whiteness baked into the foundation and legacy of race relations in the United States through ideologies like Manifest Destiny, racial hierarchies, and so on. Although these ideologies may have been attenuated to some degree by struggles for racial equality, the inertia carries over into the present and reemerges in fears that white people will become vastly outnumbered by racial “others.” Indeed, the violence in incidents such as the U.S. Capitol insurrection, which was racially motivated to a significant degree,²⁶ speaks to the fact that the founding notion of “America” as a white country never really disappeared.

Central to both the far white and white power is a white identity politics that has been trading on notions of victimization since at least the 1970s but certainly has connections to the Reconstruction era. In its extreme form, it calls for outspoken racism in a time when dominant culture maintains that bigotry is no longer supposed to be open and pluralism is to be the *modus operandi*. As we discuss in chapters 2 and 3, neoliberal culture created a space for white people, particularly white men, to embrace a malignant racist politics that gained social acceptability by removing support for the New Deal big government programs that they had previously supported. Key to their support had been the exclusion of Black people from the benefits of the social service state. What changed was the reframing of society to no longer exclude Black people. When those neoliberal strategies that had used white resentment to successfully erode the social service state and increase the wealth of the nation’s 1 percent had been played out, Trump arrived to make America great again by embracing a masculinized alternative position that allowed white people to at least rhetorically reclaim the social service state by endorsing the kinds of exclusions that had been built into its original and more-popular-with-white-folks New Deal-era iteration. Thus, whiteness could find its identity in the far-right racist/xenophobic populism that helped propel Trump into office without him having to reject the social service state in principle or practice. Indeed, we see that an activist state, in the service of whiteness, is encouraged in the white power utopias we discuss in chapter 4. White power ideology doesn’t necessarily eschew the idea of the social embodied in the state as long as it doesn’t benefit those outside the white tribe.

We see white power as distinct from the mundane *white privilege*, important in its own way, which also assumes a version of racial supremacy and has