A Review of Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet

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In *Rebirthing a Nation: White Women, Identity Politics, and the Internet*, Wendy K. Z. Anderson analyzes the rhetoric of white women in digital spaces to identify how they “code whiteness into digital spaces” (p. 13) that ultimately branches out to wider communities and is even used by politicians. For Anderson, “White women can be framed as the victim, the object of desire, the vessel as a means to advocate for their support of white supremacy” (p. 12). Thus, white women’s rhetoric is important to study given that the focus is typically on men in relationship to white supremacist and/or white nationalist ideologies. Through an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue, Anderson investigates the state of white supremacy in the U.S., especially in digital spaces, how the digital context is conducive to white women’s empowerment (at the expense of other underrepresented groups), and what scholars can do to ethically respond to whiteness within our own research.

Section one, which incorporates the first three chapters, emphasizes the voices of white nationalist women. In this section, Anderson explores the value of safety as coded through nationalism, ideas of freedom of speech without the responsibility of said speech, and what Anderson calls “contained agency” (p. 63). Anderson highlights the importance of an intersectional lens in research, noting that white women turn to “white feminism” that is individually empowering as a “contained agency” (p. 63), an individual agency that allows them to sidestep important conversations about historical and structural oppression. The focus on white nationalist women in this section connects with similar rhetoric used by Donald Trump, such as safety and security as foundational to the conservative platform or that freedom of speech allows for a reinvigorated and “palatable” (p. 23) white identity politic to be forwarded.

Encompassing chapters four through six, Anderson looks at individual women’s voices as coding institutional white supremacy in section two. This includes Sarah Palin’s reclassification of outsiderism as an asset, as well as her use of “maternal feminism,” a pseudo-feminism that does nothing but reinscribe “gender roles to contain the feminist agency” (p. 85), specifically in the Tea Party movement, in chapter four. Chapter five focuses on white fragility within the alt-right movement, looking at four alt-right women in digital spaces for how they embodied positions as shield maidens. Anderson notes that alt-right women often name themselves as shield maidens for the movement, as “young, white women fighting for a white idealized, unachievable nation-state” (p. 119) who shoulder “the implications of white supremacy for the movement” (p. 101). In chapter six, Anderson flips this moniker, explaining how Kellyanne Conway, Ivanka Trump, and Sarah Huckabee Sanders operated as “maiden shields” for Donald Trump, as
“white women placed in strategic positions within the campaign and cabinet to insulate Donald Trump from the accountability of his oppressive rhetoric…” (p. 122). Anderson posits that these white women were placed in strategic positions to simulate empowerment without engaging in a feminism centered in structural critique.

Anderson’s epilogue serves as a useful place for readers to start. Although concluding the book, the epilogue gives a clear overview of the argument and direction of the book as a whole. Readers may wish to start at the epilogue to deepen understanding and clarity as they read. In the epilogue, Anderson calls upon white people to become accomplices with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color; p. 8), “listening to and learning from and with people who experience the very oppression we hope to combat…” (p. 149). It is in the epilogue where the strength of Anderson’s argument is clearest: studying white women’s rhetoric in digital spaces allows us to better understand how to engage with and counteract such rhetoric as well as how to understand (specifically for white people) when we may be drawing upon the same arguments in our own rhetoric. This includes, as Anderson highlights, (re-)considering white rhetoric within the field of Communication Studies, as seen in the 2019 “Distinguished Scholars” debacle.

This book is best suited for graduate-level courses on race and gender, or race, gender, and media, providing white women’s rhetoric to talk about white feminism specifically. As Anderson argues, “Rhetorically decoding whiteness becomes challenging when audiences want to believe they and their communities are not racist” (p. 10). Thus, *Rebirthing a Nation* offers a unique perspective on challenging whiteness in communities often rampant with (latent) racism.