BOOK REVIEWS

Patricia Ventura and Edward K. Chan. *White Power and American Neoliberal Culture.*

Reviewed by Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, The Pennsylvania State University

White Power and American Neoliberal Culture, by utopian studies scholars Patricia Ventura and Edward K. Chan, feels like a *tour de force*. I say "feels" for a reason: if you live in America, what you read in this book feels entirely *familiar*, sketching out U.S. racialized socio-political dynamics. But I also experienced a feeling of uncanniness, as Ventura and Chan expose the underbelly of a white supremacist United States—in which I happen to live. I have not read so clear and so well historicized an account of the kinds of events that prompt me to say, almost nightly, "This country is insane." The book does not change that opinion—but it does do something else: it *makes sense* of the insanity. It is a diagnosis of the social and ethical dis-ease, the etiology of which the authors locate in the country's very earliest days (indeed before). I do not usually point at book jacket blurbs in reviews, but I found the comments on this text's back cover absolutely accurate, with words like "urgent," "striking," "gripping," "timely," and "chilling" precisely describing my own experience of reading *White Power and American Neoliberal Culture.* Part of that affective impact, for a well-educated white citizen of this country, comes from the book's frank assessments not only of white supremacists' ongoing threat to democracy but also of the complicity of the "intellectual class" in this country, which often finds itself frankly baffled by such phenomena as a twice-impeached, four-times-(so-far)-indicted, overtly racist and sexist ex-president to be the unchallenged frontrunner for the Republican Party's nomination for the 2024 presidential election. The authors of *White Power* do not hesitate to describe events such as the Charlottesville white supremacy march and the January 6 insurrection as anything but a "horror"; that said, the point of their analysis is not to demonize "Trump voters" as "far white" supremacists and "cultists"

(CNN's most frequent nomination recently) but to distinguish carefully the factors at play that pull together "normal Republicans" and fringe racist and nationalist groups under one banner. The "red thread" from the founding of the colonies to this moment is always, and still, they argue, race. It *is* actually "chilling" to read Ventura's and Chan's explanation of how the white nationalist movement, which seems (and is) so radically anti-democratic, makes a certain kind of sense, and why a populist attraction to authoritarianism will continue to threaten what "we" (the identity of which is, of course, *the* central question) have (mis)understood "democracy in America" to be.

Many readers will know that Ventura and Chan have collaborated for some years—and to see a co-authored book emerge from that work is a testament to how that collaboration has thrived, by "building on our previous separate scholarship that analyzes white power utopias (Chan) and American neoliberal culture (Ventura)" (4). In the overlap of their work, they have illuminated a troubling gap in the literature of neoliberalism and utopia alike: race. The intersection of critical race studies and utopian studies was only starting to appear in the 1990s and early 2000s; the collaboration of Ventura and Chan in mining the historical and narratological resources of thinking utopia through race, and race through utopia, has proven itself more than the sum of its parts, as they say: their work has been generative in several fields.

Moreover, their *mutual accountability* as authors has a direct impact on the quality of the book's prose. Both are admirably clear writers in their own right. In *White Power*, the rigor of this collaborative process, which ultimately depends on trust and on an intellectual *consensus* about what they put down on paper, informs the confidence and concision of the prose; the careful historicizing of literary/aesthetic, political, and economic contexts heightens the urgency of the book's conclusions. There is even something of a manifesto stylistic resonating through the text: while its four chapters aim to *problematize* or (hopefully) deprogram the programmatic nature of American neoliberalism, as readers we are reminded again and again of what is at stake in their argument.

The central argument organizing this work is "the fundamental truth that the United States was founded as a racial dystopia." In "America and/ as White Supremacy," a forthcoming chapter for the *Cambridge Companion* series (2024), Ventura and Chan identify the considerable gap in American utopian scholarship that has made the intervention of *White Power* so important: "Considering utopian thought and writing in the context of 'America'— whether seen as eutopian (a good place) or dystopian (a bad place)—must include notions of race and white supremacy, which have been underexplored

in utopian studies, though this has begun to change." That change has been spurred in part by this very collaboration, as they begin to theorize and read critically this conjuncture of critical race studies and utopian/dystopian theorizations and texts. The authors argue that many so-called classic American utopian and dystopian texts "implicitly reinforce a white supremacist framework by essentially ignoring nonwhiteness," which in and of itself has the effect of "marking BIPOC" as "the Other in the structures of power and cultural artifacts like literature." The first chapter of *White Power* comprises therefore a sort of (very detailed) glossary of terms, parsing the differences between such terms as "white power," "white supremacy," "white nationalism," "white rage," and "white fragility," not to mention the code-language and visual semiotics of white supremacist groups themselves. These terms and others are historicized carefully, identifying when and where they have bubbled up, and how they have gathered very particular usages. The seeming neutrality of a word like "neoliberalism" is shown to be anything but: that neutrality obscures the contradiction sitting at the center of the concept itself, in the tension between "rights," "race," and "recognition."

The second chapter extends the analysis of race(ist) language by adding terms that describe the contemporary sense of white victimhood that has led to the kind of ethnonationalist populism undermining American democracy today: the dynamics and complexity of the triad "race, racism and U.S. capital" within "particular historic conditions of their present" (68). The instability of US neoliberalism gives rise to such terms as "immiseration culture" and "disaster whiteness." Ventura and Chan come up with a new, wonderfully neologistic term, "the far white." This latter term consolidates their argument regarding the unique nature of white supremacist culture in America today, helping the reader to understand a breakdown of the Republican Party today: the far right might argue for small government, individual self-reliance, and an end to expensive social programs in order to balance the budget; the "far white" goal is not to achieve a particular model of government, or even a balanced budget: but the defense of "the existential imperative to not be non-white" (99). Race, quite literally, trumps all.

The third chapter explores the shaping of "far white" politics, which replaces an obsession with "good governance" from the nation's capital with the governance of the family—which means the white heteronormative family. No longer trusting in the government and eschewing, in manifestos and other such statements, the "corrosiveness of individualism" (which has led only to the widening wealth gap in the US), the far white, Ventura and Chan

argue, find stability in the sociality of the family and kin. And yet, counter-intuitively, they note "that this white power worldview is actually congruent with neoliberal ideology, and that its apparent opposition to neoliberalism is easily reinscribed by neoliberals foregrounding ideology and policy that elevates the white patriarchal family" (70): neoliberalism itself, they explain, sets up the chasm between "deserving and undeserving within a perceived crisis of white extinction anxiety" (61). Many white supremacists, they argue, are not opposed to government aid per se—as long as it benefits the ones who "deserve" it: white people (71).

In their discussion of the violence triggered by white extinction anxiety, Ventura and Chan come back repeatedly to a distinction they introduce at the beginning of the book: *homo economicus* and *homo affectus*. Within the neoliberal logic that is "rooted in affective economies and conjunctural crisis" (62), white rage finds its self-justification: "American neoliberal forces exploit a lack of knowledge of political processes and exploit the rhetoric of white supremacy and the emotional privileges of 'white fragility' and white rage" (62). White ethnocentrists, they conclude, "are trying to position themselves as representing a squeezed middle way, the natural choice in a zero-sum game in which the rich have closed off admittance to their ranks at the top, and the poor occupy the feminized ground level"; this is neoliberalism "from the far right and for the far white" (65). The "family" trope also endorses the white supremacists' rejection of "the ostensible tyranny of big government"; to aspire toward the "purity" of a white supremacist nation, "white people as a whole are increasingly figured as family" (65).

By the time we reach the fourth and final chapter, this study has brilliantly clarified how profoundly "racial capitalism" has undergirded the neoliberal economics and politics of the United States, effectively "disenfranchising a large majority of Americans—of all races—and producing the conditions that enable white power to move toward the mainstream through the support of alienated white people suffering from economic hardships, thus making a new form of fascist white power attuned to the neoliberal era attractive" (74). With "white power" rhetoric and the neoliberal political economy inextricably entangled and "anchored by the fetishization of the white heteropatriarchal family," this chapter focuses on the far white's construction of the family's role as the anchor of tradition, and as a metonymic figuration of a national—and aspirationally global—"tribal family" of whiteness. This, Ventura and Chan point out, is an undoubtedly *utopian* construction, as a *narrative* that at once contradicts and deploys neoliberal tropes.

Thus chapter 4 turns to texts that few scholars have paid attention to: white supremacist utopian texts. Reading four recent novels through their prismatic lens, Ventura and Chan describe the rhetorical and formal strategies these texts deploy in order to visualize a "consolidation of whiteness across economic gaps"; to operationalize white rage; to activate violence. This hardly sounds "utopian," but of course, for the far white, it is: "utopia acts as a mechanism through which white consciousness can activate the ideal of whiteness as a racial tribalism, leading to the fantasy of a white ethnostate centered around the family—a construct whose affective power is not just imaginary but deeply ideological and rooted in white power ideologies" (74). Where utopian theory comes into play in far white utopian texts is in their articulation of a "collective consciousness" that excludes anyone but the tribal family, thus casting out not only nonwhites, but "anyone sympathetic" to nonwhites. As Toni Morrison said following her own utopian masterpiece, *Paradise*, "utopia is designed to keep people out." It was in this chapter that I learned the term "hatecore"—which, once explained, I realized I had heard blasting from across my own street one evening. My neighbor turned it off just before I called the police, not because of the excessive volume, but because of the terrifying lyrics.

The role of women in these utopian novels is a surprising focal point of these readings, "surprising" only because white supremacy is so relentlessly patriarchal. Within that framework women are, to evoke another literary text, "handmaids" to the far-white patriarchy, and as such "always in support of race consciousness" (78). Women's value is measured by the number of children they can birth, building up the legion of "race warriors," of which they are one. The contradictory nature of white supremacist ideology shows up here as well: women and/as mothers are constructed as symbols of white futurity, on the one hand, but also as symbols of the *vulnerability* of the white race. Finally, these white power utopian novels are said to

> enact the affectivity that promotes white racial consciousness and the white backlash against racial justice and leftist notions of social progress. The neoliberal persona of *homo affectus* embodies that consciousness and backlash, operationalizing the rage that white power aims against the acceptable norms of multiracial and multicultural pluralism in play since at least the civil rights movement. (74)

These readings bring us full circle, but unsettled by having had our sights fixed on the double-bind in which "we Americans" find ourselves.

Ventura and Chan's book presents with frightening clarity a "far white" counternarrative to the exceptionalism of the American myth of equality and democracy. Their project exposes the depth and width of ideological formations that have structured themselves around "the biggest lie": that America is—*or even aspires to be*—a land of free and equal citizens. That this utopian "myth" of America persists despite the avalanche of evidence that argues otherwise makes a certain kind of sense, if we consider Roland Barthes's definition of myth as an "alibi": a form of discourse that, in building up a fantasy of the ideal, *deflects* receivers of that discourse from the contradictions that lie at the heart of the myth. Mystification can be one of myth's essential functions, at once filling to excess the positive (or ideal) meaning of the narrative, and also emptying it of *any* meaning that negatively draws away from the fantasy of the master narrative. In the case of "America," at least, the greater the disjunct between ideal and real, the more fiercely the "mainstream" would protect the "beacon on the hill" utopian narrative, while white power nationalists would prefer to fulfill their notion of a utopian America by storming that very hill.

I hope that *White Power and American Neoliberal Culture* becomes a crossover book, read not only by scholars but by citizens (here and abroad) looking for a concise account of what's going on in America today. I applaud the authors for "going there" and reading white power utopian writing on its own terms, while also framing it within a national mythological structure that keeps such narratives conveniently, and dangerously, on the periphery of "mainstream" media and politics.

Mark Schmitt. *Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst.*

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