Hannah Noel, *Deflective Whiteness: Co-Opting Black and Latinx Identity Politics*

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REFERENCES

1 With a title like Deflective Whiteness: Co-Opting Black and Latinx Identity Politics, it is no surprise that Hannah Noel’s new book came under right-wing rhetorical attack. To give one example, the “center-right” outlet PJ Media accused Noel of “[r]abid race hate” in an article filed under the tag “woke” (Bartee). The irony is that such reactions simply offer more proof of Noel’s thesis: that white Americans deflect antiracist critiques by repositioning themselves as the true victims of contemporary racial politics. Noel names this strategy “white deflection,” and defines it as “a predictable two-step dialectic: (1) calls of White victimhood, accompanied by (2) the appropriation of racial justice rhetoric” (2). While the introduction briefly discusses the examples of Nazism and of the 2017 Unite the Right rally, the book as a whole is concerned with the more “insidiously covert” rhetoric that pervades American “everyday consciousness” (24).

2 Noel draws on “Third-Wave Whiteness” studies to analyze “White discourse across historically White media sites” and to critically understand “trans-mediated White supremacy” (19). Besides the introduction, the book comprises five chapters and an epilogue, divided into two parts: “Overt White Deflection” and “Inferential [or Covert] White Deflection.” The first chapter of the of the book’s first section uses mixed quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the “militant victimhood” of the Blue Lives Matter media company (44). Mapping the company’s Twitter ecosystem, Noel shows how this reactionary response to the demands and challenges of the Black Lives
Matter movement is not simply “fake news, poor journalism, or partisan politics,” but “a radicalizing echo chamber for millions of like-minded individuals” (51). Blue Lives Matter weaponizes whiteness and masculinity to position police officers as victims, not perpetrators of racism.

Chapter 2 continues the analysis of whiteness and masculinity by showing that they are “rhetorical construction[s]” that can be “embodied by individuals of any identity” (64). The chapter discusses the discourses surrounding Ashli Babbitt, Gina Carano, Nikki Haley, and Candace Owens to argue that “feminized victimhood” feeds into discourses of aggrieved white masculinity. Chapter 3 turns its attention to music—more specifically, country singers’ deflection of accusations of racism. Noel’s discussion of Cowboy Troy and Lil Nas X shows how the genre’s boundaries are policed and is the starting point of a broader exploration of its racial and class politics. The chapter critically interrogates not only country’s (performance of) white, working-class identity politics, but also how the ostensible protection of country’s traditionalist authenticity erases its appropriation of Black contributions to the genre.

Chapter 4 opens the section on “Inferential White Deflection” with an example of “liberal White deflection that exploits historically marginalized groups in selling a brand image and product:” American Apparel advertising (148). Discussing the clothing company’s employment of Latina workers, its targeting of white ethical consumers, and the self-positioning of American Apparel CEO, Canadian immigrant Dov Charney, as a victim of US immigration policies in the same way as his transmigrant employees, Noel offers a biting critique of liberal diversity. This continues in chapter 5, which assesses NPR’s coverage of the largest US immigration raid, the 2008 arrest of 400 slaughterhouse workers in Postville, Iowa. Noel convincingly shows how NPR’s reporting erased the structural violence and exploitation suffered by these workers. In turn, the white, liberal, middle-class listeners became the news cycle’s true victims through an emphasis on the accusations of identity theft brought against Latinx workers.

These last two chapters are the best of Deflective Whiteness. They weave together rhetorical analysis with an attention to racialized labor and the material dynamics of racism, inclusion, and exploitation. This holistic approach shows that white deflection is part of racial capitalism and cannot be understood in isolation, a key contribution of Noel’s critique of liberal antiracism. In contrast, the first three chapters’ normative upshoot is somewhat dampened by the centering of categories such as whites’ “luxury of not paying attention” (10), “hypocrisy” (3), or “narcissism” (33). While these do important work in highlighting the epistemological dimensions of the analysis, they need to be complemented with more attention to how deflection is not only defensive, but feeds into the development and reproduction of white supremacist capitalism in the US.

The first chapter’s consideration of the possibility that Blue Lives Matter’s ignorance about racism might be “willful” and profit-oriented (51-3; 58) opens an avenue of further exploration in this direction. The attention to intentionality and duplicity, however, also muddles one of the book’s structuring analytical categories: its division into overt and inferential white deflection. Indeed, Noel herself introduces this dichotomy only to immediately challenge it, as “even within overt racist rhetoric there are insidious signatures of inferential rhetoric as well” (21). Case studies categorized under overt racism are thus analyzed as “covert” (69), “racial dog whistles” (114), or
even “benevolent” racism (28). On the other hand, the supposedly “inferential” NPR coverage is described as “overtly reinforc[ing]” nationalist sentiments (158). There is no clear reason to divide the chapters into these two categories. Rather, the book’s structure better reflects Noel’s ambition to show that insidious white supremacist rhetoric permeates both sides of mainstream US politics, conservative and liberal alike (18).

This, however, does not take away from White Deflection’s academic and political contributions. In the epilogue, Noel encourages white academics and “allies” to move beyond performative solidarity and engage in the critical deconstruction of white supremacy. She notes that, in this project, “inferential White deflection—everyday acts of racism—are the most elusive to identify and strategic in their exploitation of historically marginalized groups” (188). Her emphasis on their analysis even in the case of supposedly overt racism is, then, a way of taking on this task. Noel offers her readers an important toolkit for identifying and taking apart the inner workings of everyday white supremacist discourse. For this reason, Deflective Whiteness is a useful book not only for students and scholars of rhetoric and media, but for all critical observers of US political discourses.

BIBLIOGRAPHY