

BOOK REVIEW

White Rage: The Unspoken Truth Of Our Racial Divide

By Carol Anderson

Reviewed by Monesha Carter

New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing
2017

In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, Carol Anderson speaks of that often eschewed topic in American life, racial division. People have tiptoed around the depths of this issue, but Anderson walks us right through it with conviction. Black Americans have been blamed again and again for “black rage,” but Anderson asserts that it is “white rage” that has perpetuated racial inequality for years. Whites who do acknowledge systemic oppression often do not recognize the white rage that is behind it. When a black person brings up the dirt swept under America’s rug, many whites disparage it as “playing the victim.” Anderson gives us a powerful reminder that all is not well in the United States of America when it comes to race relations.

Anderson traces the history of the long, arduous fight for equality for black Americans and identifies the reason for the difficulty of the struggle as “white rage.” She says, “the truth is, white rage has undermined democracy, warped the Constitution, weakened the nation’s ability to compete economically, squandered billions of dollars on baseless incarceration, rendered an entire region sick, poor, and woefully undereducated, and left cities nothing less than decimated. All this havoc has been wreaked simply because African Americans wanted to work, get an education, live in decent communities, raise their families, and vote. Because they were unwilling to take no for an answer” (6). Anderson’s point reminds me of the situation in Greenwood, near Tulsa, Oklahoma. In the early 1900s, the black members of Greenwood, who were excluded from full participation in white-owned businesses, began starting their own businesses. They were so successful that the neighborhood came to be called the “Black Wall Street.” But in 1921, the whites took notice and began to terrorize the neighborhood, incarcerate innocent people, and burn their businesses down. The state government was involved in what became a white-sanctioned massacre

of black people and businesses, leaving the community decimated.

Anderson describes how time after time blacks had tried to find new ways to exercise their citizenship in the period after the Emancipation Proclamation through voting, securing jobs, and owning property. Although blacks had fought in the Civil War and worked arduously to be recognized as dedicated citizens, whites still tried to deter them from voting by intimidating them at the polls or enacting laws that made it difficult to vote. It is true that there were people such as General Oliver O. Howard who pushed for the newly freed blacks to receive the forty-acre plots that had been guaranteed to them. And there were some whites who tried to help enforce the principles of liberty and justice. But these efforts were met with rage from fellow whites who thought of social justice advocates as traitors.

No matter where blacks tried to move within the United States, it was difficult to gain equity and equality. During the Great Migration, blacks thought that moving to the North would give them more opportunities and a more progressive atmosphere. They were soon disappointed to find that they still faced discrimination. The civil rights era shed light on the deliberate and conspicuous racism that still existed in mid-century America.

Afterwards, white rage went underground. No longer wearing the obvious insignia of the Klan, white rage became more strategic. Anderson writes, “the focus on the Klan also helped to designate racism as an individual aberration rather than something systemic, institutional, and pervasive” (100). But white rage was foundational to the system and resisted black progress in institutional ways. I am reminded of the scripture in James: “But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind” (James 3:14-16, NRSV). Anderson’s book highlights how some white Americans, even among those who call themselves

Christians, exemplify this scripture by not accepting the truth about racism in America.

Anderson describes how many whites today claim that Obama's election indicates that racism is dead or not as prevalent as blacks make it seem. But Anderson quickly reminds us that many whites have had total disdain and contempt for Obama as president, even referring to him as a "nigger" (158). The Obama election has not been the golden ticket to unity in racial relations that some had anticipated, and it would be a mistake to believe that hundreds of years of racism could be dissolved in the span of two presidential terms.

Throughout American history, white rage has impeded the process of blacks becoming rightful citizens through methods ranging from discouragement to terrorism. In *White Rage*, Anderson gives readers a tour of race relations in that history by providing detailed information on how and why the racial divide still exists. The rage of whites continues to operate underground, fueling systematic and institutional mistreatment of blacks. Meanwhile, we blacks are told time and time again to get over our distrust of white people. But Anderson's account of the role of white rage in American history makes it clear why blacks find it difficult to do so, and it leaves us with the powerful reminder that we should not, and *cannot* do the work of reconciliation alone.



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