
Book Review

Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy

Hope Kitts ^{1*}

Published: March 5, 2021

Book's Author: Talia Lavin

Publication Date: October 2020

Publisher: Hachette Books

Price (Hardcover): \$27/\$34 (CAD)

Number of Pages: 288 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780306846434

With *Culture Warlords* (2020), Lavin ventures down the rabbit hole of hatred, misogyny and bigotry to re-emerge with knowledge you never knew you did not want to know. Lavin, a prolific freelance writer based in New York, begins with what seems to be individual antifascist sabotage of right-wing online communities, and proceeds to encompass a collective and common project. Her work builds to reveal law enforcement's complicity with fascist organising and condemns major technology companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube, which profit from underground international domestic terrorist networking. She clarifies the loose movement, known as Antifa, and aims to mobilise others to subvert fascist organising. She speaks to radicals, liberals and moderates alike – anyone who might defend hate speech on the basis of free speech, thus becoming complicit in the legacy of violence enacted in the name of the so-called pure, white race. Although focusing on white supremacy, she shows how misogyny intimately connects with ideologies promoting white supremacist violence.

Lavin works in the company of her feminist predecessors, radical activist scholars who articulated the intertwined relationship between racism and misogyny (Combahee River Collective, 1979; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984). These scholars theorised what bell hooks (2013) later names Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy: a matrix of intersecting, interdependent ideologies maintained to perpetuate social, political and economic global subjugation of the masses. Rather than illuminating the simultaneity of oppressive structures that target women and people of colour as her predecessors have, Lavin asks if the relationship could be causal, if misogyny can act as gateway to white supremacy or vice versa (p.112).

To enact her subterfuge, Lavin adopts multiple white identities in order to gain entry into the online underworld of white supremacists and antifeminists. To the uninitiated she reveals the tactics, lingo and psychology of a virtual universe where white supremacist misogynists thrive via platforms named Telegram, 8chan and WhiteDate. Notably, she virtually becomes 'AryanQueen:' a blonde (of course) neo-Nazi single looking for love with like-minded bigots. She exposes the pathos of those who are known as 'incels,' or involuntary celibates, i.e., men who lack experience with physical intimacy and through this lack of connection become bitter, spiteful, self-loathing misogynists. Like an Antifa siren off the shores of MAGA, she lures unsuspecting incels so that they might be forced to face in their public life – who they really are. Rather than avoiding the stereotypes of the evil seductress, the succubus, the author links seduction and war, and relishes her deceit, happily playing the role of Jezebel.

Like those before her (Chisholm, 1970; Davis, 1983), Lavin illustrates the connection between white supremacy and antifeminism through analysis of the logic of control – both of the female body as a breeding machine and the

¹ Doctoral Candidate in Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Studies (LLSS) at The University of New Mexico, USA

*Corresponding Author: andromeda@unm.edu

victimisation of women of colour as the fulfilment of non-reproductive sexual fantasy. White supremacists' obsession with racial purity functions to subjugate white women to their reproductive capacity, limited to reproducing with white men. Thus, a woman's purpose, worth, and morality are linked to their sympathy with and loyalty to white supremacist values. Women's subjection is justified in this ideology because their sympathy and loyalty cannot be guaranteed.

The author shows white supremacist ideology, defined by binary logic and opposed to the hybrid, cosmic consciousness, Anzaldúa (1987) articulates. Viewed solely as breeding machines, white women are excluded from sexual acts defined by pleasure and spared sadistic sexual objectification, at least ideologically. Lavin reveals the men courting her on WhiteDate as surprisingly polite and deferential, if not a little dismissive of her freedom to shop around, as it were. The notion of a woman as fully human—sexual, moral and intellectual—is absent from white supremacist ideology which perpetuates what W. E. B. DuBois called 'the damnation of women,' that women (particularly Black women) cannot be both mother and worker, let alone thinker (DuBois, 1920). Lavin shows that by this logic women are either vessels for breeding the white race, race traitors or lascivious sub-humans.

Though Lavin animates the either-or logic of white supremacist misogyny, the simplicity of binary logic confines her analysis. While she vividly shows how white supremacy and misogyny operate through a good vs. evil, Black vs. white, pure vs. impure and male vs. female evaluative system, she does little to theorise the complexity of these ideologies beyond the body. White supremacist ideology is characterised as embodied in white men, while antifascist ideology is characterised by women of colour. Lavin points out that 'most major Antifa crews in the United States are led by women' (p. 232). Granted, these may be common themes and majority demographics, but failing to disarticulate embodied identity from ideology oversimplifies the insidiousness of these belief systems.

The author does introduce one young woman prominent in the alt-right, but fails to provide an analysis of how and why a young woman could promulgate ideas contrary to her interests as a woman. While it is safe to say that most white supremacists are white men, white supremacist ideology does extend to women and people of colour. bell hooks (2013), for example, states that 'we have all been raised to embrace the logic of white supremacy (this includes people of colour),' and other scholars show how white supremacist ideology, including misogyny, variously and intersectionally permeates cultures not considered white (Hurtado and Sinha, 2016; Neal, 2013; Nieto-Phillips, 2008; Sales, 2002). Furthermore, women are a powerful demographic within the alt-Right; white women, for example, voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election (Jaffe, 2018).

Lavin misses—or at least does not elaborate on—the nuance of white supremacy and the existence of critical white identity embodied in, for example, the many white men who participate in Antifa organising (Kitts, 2018). What motivates these white men to resist the controlling ideologies that would give them power? What logic underlies the impetus of straight, white men to fight against other straight white men for the benefit of those who do not look like them? How do people of colour and women promote ideologies that shame and degrade their own identities? These questions, if considered by Lavin, would provide complexity and nuance to her project. By adopting white identities, both male and female, Lavin's correspondence is limited to her white male interlocutors.

The book may have been made more analytically complex had Lavin devised a way to share the discourse of white Antifa men, white supremacist women, and people of colour espousing white supremacist and misogynist ideology. Her portrayal of people in these communities, white and male as they are, does not reinforce the image they seek to maintain: that of the staunch, gun-toting, brave manly-man. Rather, it reveals them as shameful, snivelling cowards afraid of being revealed for who they really are. One white male, for example, pretends to be his own mother in an effort to persuade Lavin to reverse her intent to expose him publicly.

These vehement white supremacists are anything but fearless soldiers on the front lines of an imagined race war, as they would like us (and themselves) to believe. They have favourite recipes, hobbies and pets, points which serve to humanise rather than pigeonhole. This humanisation, however, is not intended to draw sympathy, but rather shows how their rhetoric 'makes their choices more abhorrent' (p. 85). We can't imagine these dangerous, hateful people as existing over there somewhere away from us, but perhaps as our neighbors next door. They are 'hiding in plain sight (...) working in warehouses and on farms, on army bases (...) construction sites' and law enforcement, not somehow concentrated and identifiable, but geographically scattered throughout liberal and conservative leaning locales (p. 82).

While it is sickening to read about the inner workings of putrid hearts filled with hatred and illogic, with specific examples to illustrate, Lavin reveals how infinitely more self-destructive and consuming it was to actually enter these worlds on a daily basis. Lavin throws herself into the fire, so that we might know just how destructive it can be, and emerges as a Phoenix with guidance for others who seek to defend their communities from fascist violence. Lavin's work sounds the alarm – the alarm that fascist ideology is not something of the past, was not squashed in the allied victory of World War 2, but thrives often undetected and emerges unpredictably in real, physical violence. As is, it is a threat to everyone and especially people of colour, women, non-binary people and people with disabilities. For this reason, the author implores her readers not to get comfortable, but to get involved.

REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Chisholm, S. (1970). Racism and Anti-Feminism. *The Black Scholar*, 1(3-4), 40–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1970.11430673>
- Combahee River Collective. (1979). A Black Feminist Statement. *Off Our Backs*, 9(6), 6–8.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Davis, A.Y. (1983). *Women, Race & Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- DuBois, W. E. B. (1920). DuBois. *Darkwater: Voices from within the veil*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Howe.
- hooks, b. (2013). *Writing Beyond Race: Living theory and practice*. Milton Park, Oxfordshire: Routledge, Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108499>
- Hurtado, A., and Sinha, M. (2016). *Beyond Machismo: Interseccional Latino masculinities*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Jaffe, S. (2018). Why did a Majority of White Women vote for Trump? *New Labor Forum*, 27(1), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1095796017744550>
- Kitts, H. (2018). Speaking the Unspeakable: The Role of Speech in a Pedagogy of Critical Whiteness. *Whiteness and Education*, 3(1), 76–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2017.1423243>
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister Outsider*. Berkley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Neal, M. A. (2015). *New Black Man*. Milton Park, Oxfordshire: Routledge, Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315761916>
- Nieto-Phillips, J. M. (2008). *Language of Blood: The making of Spanish-American identity in New Mexico, 1880s-1930s*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Sales, A. dos S. (2002). Historical Roots of the ‘Whitening’ of Brazil. (Trans. L. Hallewell). *Latin American Perspectives*, 29(1), 61–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X0202900104>

Citation: Kitts, H. (2021). [Review of the book *Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy*, by Talia Lavin]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 5(1), 15. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/9752>

Copyright © 2021 by Author/s and Licensed by Lectito BV, Netherlands. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.