BOOK REVIEW


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To borrow a phrase from a program that foreshadows much of Hamilton Carroll’s argument, *Affirmative Reaction* reads like a captain’s log of what stressed out, fed up, self-sacrificing white men are up to on America’s screens – and sometimes, on paper and CDs too. Drawing on films (Brokeback Mountain, Million Dollar Baby, Gran Torino, Traffic and Syriana), television programs (24, American Chopper), comics (The Call of Duty) and music (Eminem, including 8 Mile), Carroll argues that “appeals to injury... incorporate and mobilize failure as a constitutive force for the reorientation of posthegemonic forms of white masculinist privilege” (2). Rather than distancing itself from identity politics, associated here with “women’s rights, gay rights, and civil rights eras” (7), white masculinity now announces itself as a marginal identity: Clint Eastwood the reformed racist and conscientious hero in Gran Torino, Michael Douglas the troubled and transformed father in Traffic, and Eminem the ‘white trash’ upstart in 8 Mile. In other texts, notably Million Dollar Baby and a series of comics based on September 11 fire-fighters, the special status afforded to white ethnicity also serves as an alibi for familiar clichés of white male heroism.

The title of this book is misleading - better would be Hamilton Carroll’s closing quip, “the new man looks very much like the old” (179). A brief glance at Eastwood and Douglas’ filmographies (including Dirty Harry and Falling Down, respectively) remind the reader that this recuperative “white masculinity in crisis” is nothing new, and some of the author’s close-readings may have been strengthened through an acknowledgment of the embattled Italian Stallion of the Rocky sextet (1976-2006), or the many films that strategically couple white and non-white victim narratives, like The Defiant Ones (1958), The Deer Hunter (1978), or The Shawshank Redemption (1994). More concerning, however, is the ambivalence of Carroll’s historical argument for why these formations of white masculinity are ‘new’ in the first place. As many scholars have already argued, some white American men have tenably been victims of something (Carroll’s own example is job losses in manufacturing sectors), but many mistakenly blame the
cause of their injuries on the perceived success of minority groups, rather than other factors, such as class inequality or global economic restructuring. The extent to which media representations address the concerns of disenfranchised, working-class white men, as opposed to those merely cashing in on the renewed currency of victimhood, is unclear throughout Affirmative Reaction. For example, automotive television program American Chopper is described as attenuating “the putative losses suffered by working-class men under the postindustrial service economy” (79), then later summarised in the following way:

American Chopper constructs a nostalgic world of blue-collar work in which the skilled manual laborer ... still reigns supreme, untroubled by the supposed defeats suffered by hegemonic masculinity in the post-civil rights era and by the labor losses of neoliberalism (99).

Carroll wants to read his text alongside a historical narrative, that of a crisis in masculinity, while claiming that this same crisis, understood interchangeably as socioeconomic and symbolic, is “supposed” or “putative”. If these defeats are only supposed, why should American Chopper be troubled by them? This ambiguity reflects a tension between wanting to debunk the “so-called crisis in masculinity” (2), and arguing that texts can be read as symptoms of a real “erosion of privilege” (5, 11, 12, 17, 62). When Carroll claims that “white masculinity currently contests its dismantling”, that it has “learned how to profoundly manage the stakes of its own failure” (9), the norm becomes both sickness and symptom, actor and acted upon, cause and effect. Somewhere in this reaction to a reaction, the event everyone is reacting to seems to disappear. The important distinction that R.W. Connell has suggested, between forces that rupture the internal configuration of hegemony vis a vis privileged norms, and challenges to the social structure of hegemony itself, is never explicitly made, and leads to confusion about who is and is not properly a victim, and why it might matter.

Affirmative Action does raise some important questions about the pragmatics of suffering and identification in Hollywood film. In his reading of Brokeback Mountain, Carroll argues that the story of same-sex desire “is routed through domestic melodrama and subordinated to the film’s representation of the erosions of white masculinist privilege; thus Brokeback Mountain turns its queer subjects into disenfranchised white men” (17). Carroll is concerned that the anti-homophobic message dovetails too quickly with sentimental familialism and nostalgia for the masculine pastoral. Watching Brokeback Mountain, I also felt frustrated that complex political issues resolved themselves through self-sacrifice and virtuous suffering, not unlike Ang Lee’s Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) or Lust, Caution (2007). However, there does remain a strong popular perception that gay men have not been active participants in U.S. history, that homosexuals lack familial commitments, and that “queers” don’t belong on farms. If Brokeback Mountain was to showcase a gay couple refusing every conceivable “familial” norm, what sorts of political work would this do?

This kind of question requires careful treatment, and while Affirmative Reaction raises important questions about the limits of identity politics, it struggles to find
a space outside the logics of identity and injury from which to critique these texts. When discussing Traffic, for example, Carroll rightly criticises the negative depiction of the black drug dealer, but then complains that the film “is unable to imagine a drug addict who is not white” (168). Yet surely one possible alternative, a film where all the drug addicts are not white, would hardly be a gift-send from Hollywood. A casual comparison between these films and, say, Get Rich or Die Tryin’ (2005) or The Pursuit of Happyness (2006) would have complicated the tacit assumption that more diverse casts of victims will automatically challenge either white privilege or hegemonic masculinity.

Concerns about the overall argument notwithstanding, the two opening chapters of the book, grouped under the heading ‘Affective Time and the War on Terror’, work extremely well. Carroll shows how the formal aspects of TV program 24, including its real-time “ticking-bombs”, help to organise its post-September 11 moral universe, one in which the urgencies of terrorist threats are used to justify legal violations and impulsive brutalities, including the use of torture by U.S. agencies. By linking the vulnerable American hero to extant political rhetorics and memorial cultures, Carroll is able to demonstrate how white masculinity functions within a changing social structure (these chapters could be particularly useful for students wanting to bridge media analysis and political philosophy). As with the commentary on post-September 11 narratives, there is a wealth of media clippings and quotes from actors, directors, producers, and politicians, giving a strong sense of the personal idiosyncrasies shaping media production, and of the cumulative effects that particular images and word choices have in transforming representations of trauma into objectionable political agendas.

Carroll’s wide use of research materials also enhances the later discussion of the first Eminem three albums and 8 Mile, offering some intriguing insights into the rapper’s own negotiations of whiteness and class-based authenticity.

Affirmative Reaction does a good job of critiquing privileged media archetypes, while apprehensive about how to negotiate the inclusion of diversity in relation to the norm, or how to displace the norm altogether. This book will help forward an important dialogue about the contemporary status of white ethnicity, the masculinisation of class and nation, and the development of identity politics in the United States, but future work in this area needs to be clearer about what the stakes are in representing, contesting, or displacing white masculinity, and what the alternatives might be to a personal politics of injury.

Author Note

Timothy Laurie is a PhD candidate in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. He currently has an article on race, masculinity, and the Dreamgirls movie forthcoming in Social Identities, and a piece on gender, sexuality and the family forthcoming in Cultural Studies Review. His current research looks at white masculinities and primitivism in heavy metal MTV videos.
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