

## Review

“Rebels Against the Dream: The American White Nationalist Novel and the Culture of Defeat”

By mgr Eric Starnes

Mgr Starnes's dissertation, “Rebels Against the Dream: The American White Nationalist Novel and the Culture of Defeat,” is an attempt to catalog and identify white nationalist novels from 1834 to 2015, while tracing their development. In describing this separate genre, Starnes persuasively shows how its authors inextricably connect race and identity, and employ recurring motifs that set the genre apart from other, similar literary works. In doing so, Starnes primarily situates his work in antebellum period of Reconstruction and the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, thereby “testing the hypothesis of the historical interdependence between trauma and group memory” that has resulted in the “culture of defeat” among Southerners. Authors who fail to note this “sense of grief, loss and trauma experienced by certain sectors of the white population” as one of the “roots of the ideology,” miss a large part of the literary equation. White nationalist literature, Starnes also posits, has created an “alternative paradigm in which the vilified [racist Southerners] may see themselves as virtuous and the victors [northern carpetbaggers and liberals] are villains.” Starnes notes, rightly, that few scholars have adequately explored this area of literature, and more consideration should be given to its messages and origins. Those scholars who have explored the genre, meanwhile, have put forth flawed assessments based in a drive to disprove the novels' racial theories, rather than understand their contours.

“Rebels Against the Dream” takes us through the cycles of the white nationalist novels and the periods, sometimes overlapping, that have emerged. The dissertation introduces the

basics of white nationalism's rise in the South (and to a lesser degree in the Northwest), the development of nativism and scholarly reactions to it, and the cultural fracturing that has taken place in the United States since WWII. Starnes looks at literature from the following periods: Pre-Civil War (1834–1860), Klan apologia/redeemer fiction (1882–1924), the first Red Scare (1878–1944), and the renaissance in white nationalist fiction that occurred in response to Civil Rights movement (1975–present)—with greatest emphasis on this last period. Throughout, he “analyzes the psychologically motivated historical mechanisms responsible” for white nationalist literature through the prism of the emotional costs borne by defeated nations. Starnes demonstrates a vast degree of knowledge on this strain of literature, and (given Trump's recent election and the events surrounding it) this timely dissertation should be prepared for publication as soon as possible. Generally, the dissertation shows considerable originality, depth, and nuance. It is also impressive that Starnes consulted many of the authors whose works he discusses. Given its elevated level of scholarship, there is no impediment to granting its author a doctorate. Sometimes a work is as worthwhile for the questions it raises, as much as the questions it answers. This dissertation is one such example. For these reasons, the author is encouraged to rectify remaining shortcomings. What follows are a series of suggestions and observations meant to refine the work.

Firstly, there is an issue with some of the language—not arising from the imperative of political correctness, but a lack of precision and greater context. The term “white race” used outside of quotes without qualification is archaic. “Caucasian” is better and safer. The term “social engineering” also cannot be used without qualification or interrogation because it is a highly loaded word derived from the right-wing vocabulary—not a neutral term. There is also a strong tendency to employ phrases and words like “powerful rhetoric,” “honorable word,” and

“greater good” (21), and “dignity, honor, respect, and racial pride” (32) without adequate context. In terms of this project, these words mean little to nothing without explanation for how Southerners perceive their meanings. Lynching, for instance, was often used to avenge the “honor” of the “white race.” Or is this another type of “honor” to which the author is referring? What is “dignity”? Does this mean not having to eat in the same restaurant as a black person? Clarification is needed. There should also be more explanation surrounding the term “cultural standards,” which are to be “cherished” and taught to children (30), while the term “traditionally minded” Southerner seems to indicate a code to which the reader is not necessarily privy. A similar problem occurs on page 86, which states that the Civil Rights movement has led to a “loosening of morality and realignment of morality.” Such statements open up questions about meaning such as: Whose “morality”? What does it consist of? Is this the white nationalist perspective? Are we speaking of sexual morality? Miscegenation? A decrease in religiosity? How was religion moral in the South where Protestantism was against race mixing and black churches were bombed for practicing non-violent resistance to segregation? And lastly, there is the term “patriot”—which certainly raises an eyebrow when ascribed to secessionists who rejected their nation rather than risk obeying its laws. When dealing with all the above concepts, more precision is welcome.

Another problematic aspect of the work is as follows. In the preface, Starnes says the point of his dissertation is “not to take sides,” but to explain the phenomenon. This he does, but it is sometimes unclear if the author is accepting the paradigms of the white nationalist perspective or not. On page 23 there is an odd bit about having a “biased or unbiased” view of white nationalist racist groups by watchdog organizations. How can one be biased against objective prejudice? It is confusing. The writing therefore needs to display more distance. This is not to

say that Starnes has not given an objective evaluation, but more care must be taken to distinguish the authorial voice from the voices quoted, and distinguish the attitudes of white nationalists from reality. For instance, on page 148 Starnes writes, "In essence, there is no place to hide from the values of multiculturalism and diversity that is promoted by current American society." It is initially unclear whether this is a statement of perspective or fact. It is later made clear that the author does not necessarily agree with veracity of statement, but the initial confusion has already occurred. Also, there is often a tendency to overstate the depth and scope of selected American cultural trends. On page 106, "the fear and psychological trauma at being denigrated and laughed at for being white, male, heterosexual, traditional, politically conservative (if not right-wing or neo-Nazi) in 21<sup>st</sup> century America" is apparently proposed to be widespread and pervasive. Yet the precise opposite seems true in light of recent political events. So too is the influence of writers like the "anti-male" Sontag greatly exaggerated (139). She was a minor figure even at her peak, but one would assume here that she is number one on the Redneck Reading List.

Along these lines, the political landscape of the South is a fascinating and contradictory aspect of the dissertation. Starnes's account and his "culture of defeat" thesis are tremendously thought-provoking. And if one will allow, I would like to point to some of the reflections it inspires, because they might be useful in preparing the work for publication. Reading the dissertation, one wonders why the Southern psyche is so embattled, for prior to the 1960s when racial order was overturned by Washington, what did white supremacists really have to complain about? Johnson pardoned the confederates, Reconstruction ended in a defeat for the North, Jim Crow, black prison labor, and sharecropping were instituted and enforced extra-legally, while monuments to the Confederacy appeared everywhere and KKK remained strong and politically influential even in the Midwest. Meanwhile, Hollywood glorified the myth of the Old South,

Dixon's work was popular nationwide, and President Wilson praised Griffith's *Birth of Nation*. Likewise, the racial attitudes "advocated by current white nationalists would have been considered mainstream until fairly recently," as Starnes writes on page 87. There is also the "perceived loss of the culture wars" (155). How have they been definitively lost after 50 plus years of Republican political dominance in the South and Nixon, Reagan, Bush, Bush, and Trump? Instead, it often seems that the South lost the battle of the 1860s, but won the long-term war that followed up until the desegregation of the 60s and 70s, only to score more victories with Reagan, Bushes, and Trump. Asking these questions and making these points would strengthen the work's presentation of South and its contradictory mindset.

There are, as well, a number of small corrections that could polish the work for publication. Starnes is correct about his discussion of how the myth of the Old South informs present white nationalist literature, but a clear indication that Old South is a myth comes only on page 98. This myth should be established and described in full earlier to act as a prism through which to see the culture of defeat. Giving the full text of "Good ol' rebel" would be welcomed early in the work. William Hamilton's sadly specious comparison of owning cars and slaves on page 26 must be commented on rather than seemingly taken as a legitimate argument. The dissertation goes a bit too far with blood memory theories, especially on page 191. Perhaps the author should curtail reliance on this line of argument. Some of the ironies and contradictions of the novels and perspective discussed would also add value to the work—especially white nationalists' veneration of the New Testament, its Jewish Messiah, etc., the outrage at miscegenation when white on black rape was *de rigueur* in the Old South for so long, and how white nationalists in Idaho live in a state with virtually no black population, yet continue their obsession. Some relevant works to add to the bibliography would be: Foner's *Reconstruction*,

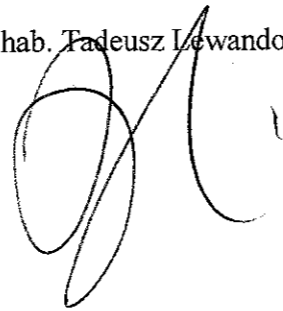
Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and Botham's *And God Created the Races*—particularly relevant for rebutting Ferber on page 93. More historical underpinning/description would improve the dissertation, especially the fear of black political power during Reconstruction the current economic anxieties that might fuel white nationalism and its utopian goals.

Finally, though the dissertation rightly eschews condemnatory judgment on white nationalist literature as an interpretive standpoint and encourages us not merely to dismiss the genre as “rantings of fanatics,” one could argue that some judgment is required in light of the original theories presented. In one of his routines, the American comedian Louie CK once said that black Americans have a more legitimate right to complain than white Americans. But after detailing the horrors of slavery and the economic and social oppression that followed the Civil War, Louie CK admitted that (we) whites, too, had some things to complain about—“Like when they took our slaves away.” The “culture of defeat” that Starnes describes in without question a real phenomenon and driving force within white nationalist literature and the larger Southern psyche. Such literature can certainly be seen as “artifacts of a movement that is experiencing cultural trauma,” but perhaps there should be some acknowledgement of the apparently hypersensitive and racially entitled Southern psyche, which for whatever reason cannot come to terms with the wrongs of the past, and instead produces such reactionary product.

All these comments aside, Starnes's dissertation greatly expands our understanding of white nationalist literature. His work is original, methodical, and enlightening. It is rare that a dissertation brings something new to a field, much less carves new scholarly paths to follow. The author also demonstrates theoretical knowledge of the area of literature he explores. On the basis of this dissertation, and its fulfilling of the requirements under Article 13(1) of the Act of 14

March 2003 on Academic Degrees and Academic Title and Degrees and Title in the Arts  
(consolidated text Dz. U. [*Journal of Laws*] of 2003, No. 65, item 595, as amended), I  
recommended that mgr Starnes be awarded a doctorate for his potentially path breaking work.

dr hab. Tadeusz Lewandowski

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke, positioned below the printed name.