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# Book Review: Seyward Darby, Sisters in Hate: American Women on the Front Lines of White Nationalism

(New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2020), 320 pp., $35.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780316487795

**Jamie R. Noulty**[a1]
[a]PhD Student, Cultural Studies Interdisciplinary Graduate Program, Queen's University, Ontario, Canada

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## Review

Seyward Darby's book is an exceptional ethnographic study on the American white nationalist movement from a gendered perspective. As the perception of "*angry white men"* (Darby, 2020, p. 15) dominates most conversations, there has been very little discourse dedicated to women despite many being a sustaining feature. They have been in "backrooms and classrooms, chat rooms and newsrooms, boardrooms and bedrooms" (p. 11). The book is divided into three sections, each dedicated to a singular but prominent figure. As each had a different account in relation to their conversions, which included "imagine[d] solutions to problems both political and personal" (p. 12), Darby draws from a range of primary and secondary sources and includes additional information from blogs, Twitter feeds, personal websites, and other digital sources. The book focuses on their identities, ideologies, and their commitment to the movement; however, the book also aims to explain the needs and motivations of the women and why they were drawn in. The book signifies what the movement offers them in return, which is also imperative.

[1] Corresponding Author Contact: Jamie R. Noulty, Email: 21jrn3@queensu.ca, Cultural Studies - Queen's University, Kingston, ON K7L 3N6. Canada

Part I is dedicated to Corinna, a proponent of the extreme ideology of national socialism. Corrina, in her search for information on skinheads, stumbled across *Stormfront*, one of hates' oldest internet forums. Despite having no predisposition to the ideology, she readily agreed with the forum's interpretations of, and the posted information in support of those views. With responses "plentiful and affirming" (p. 20), within a few months, she had put her career on hold and gave up access to her children to live as an "avowed racist" (p. 21). Hate can be understood as a bond: a "complex phenomenon that occurs among people as a means of mattering and belonging" which can arise in "particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts", (p. 25). with the potential to shape future social interactions. As Corrina, who readily admitted that she had struggled socially, felt distant, alienated, and isolated, got more involved, this new form of social camaraderie connected her to a relatively supportive community making her feel part of a cause, which, in turn, was reciprocated. As one of the "underlying forces" in extremism is the basic desire to have meaning in one's life, "the quest for personal significance", the movement gave her the "need, narrative, and network" (p. 26). This included the "rewards" of being an insider in a community that allowed her to "express and act on resentments", making her "feel religiously and morally righteous" (p. 26). Hate became her cure.

Part II is dedicated to Ayla, a proponent of 'trad life', which advocates for a return to the traditional Christian values and hierarchies between men and women. Although formerly believing in equality, she now believes "white, Christian, heterosexual people, who represent all that is natural and good" (p. 64), are under threat from multiculturalism and diversity. She also blames feminism, stating that it did not value and support her as a traditional mother. Despite her embracement of a movement which is entwined with "politics that emphasise the performance of whiteness as synonymous with good womanhood" (p. 65), Ayla insists she is not hateful. She only wants "safety, prosperity, and health for her family and nation" (p. 65), a classic defensive trick weaponised by the alt-right to advance their initiatives. As the movement advocates for a return to the traditional past, it treats motherhood as a "cornerstone of its racial project" (p. 90), with specific language, imagery, and literature aimed at offering validation under the guise of protecting their families. Darby notes that many women, as wives and mothers, have found agency and purpose in these roles; they support loved ones while also serving a higher racial cause. It justifies their ideology as maternal responsibility.

Part III is dedicated to Lana, who promotes the theory of white genocide on the podcast *Radio3Fourteen*. Although originally describing herself as an anarchist with political guests that leaned towards the far-left or libertarianism, within a few months of broadcasting, she began to incorporate anti-feminist, anti-communist, and anti-Semitic ideologies into the show, eventually shifting towards full promotion of white genocide. As the show promoted this ideology, it featured guests "under the banner of alternative history and forbidden truth[s]", (p. 132) which continued to shape the theories and presented information to "supplement, expand, and localise" (p. 128) the cultural genocide narratives, and the pundits cited the same tropes, falsehoods, and generalisations repeatedly. Darby notes that the public can become more credulous of an idea the more times they encounter it; meaning, people are more likely to perceive statements that they have encountered on multiple occasions as true even if they already know the statements are false. With the perceived loss to equality movements, corresponding with intense feelings of anxiety, ostracism, or a sense of losing control, narratives become sources of power, validation, and even superiority. Additionally, "women are just as effective, if not more" (p. 136) so at expanding on this narrative, especially when the cultural ideals of white "beauty, family, home" (p. 150) are under threat.

Darby does a tremendous job in detailing the varying organisations and their nuances, and the theoretical concepts used to analyse their individual needs and motivations are exceptional. With the in-depth and detailed analysis of the complex subjects and their ideological positions, Darby is correct in her assertion: the movement offers solutions to [imagined] problems, both political and personal. The ethnographic methodology is also unique as it added depth to the context of ideology and suggested how certain misguided beliefs can lead to more extreme forms of ideologies. The three perspectives were also remarkable in that they added evidence-based knowledge to the field, which is essential as online platforms have enabled gender specific discourse to expand. As these movements continue to grow, there is a need to pay attention to all their 'members', especially as "journalists, politicians, and concerned observers too often rely on flawed assumptions... that white nationalism is the province of angry white men" (p. 18).

As women's participation has always been crucial to the perpetuation of white nationalism (see Blee 2002, Borgeson, 2003, Mattheis 2017, Latif et. al, 2020), we need to understand the needs and motivations of women who are drawn to the movement. Women

"have agency, they make choices, and they locate power in places other than standard political authority. Whether they're in a dominant order or a fringe crusade, women are getting something they want out of these positions: validation, security, solidarity, visibility, purpose, bragging rights" (p .93). As Darby indicated, for the three women who embraced hate, it involved a "search for place and purpose, born out of personal need" (p .65), and the movement enabled them to fulfil their own specific needs. However, Darby also notes that 'Exiting Hate' is similar. "A person does not necessarily exit because they are suddenly able to see hate for what it is, they leave because it makes sense to them and for them" (p. 65). Further, leaving white nationalism demands a replacement for the value that hate provides; "an alternative source of self-worth and affirmation" (p .65) is necessary. The case studies also brought to light certain principals and problems within each movement which can help inform future dialogue around further participation.

Despite being an excellent analysis, the sample is small, and I would have appreciated a few more stories, especially from other women who continued to support the movement after the incarceration or death of their partner. In addition, although one participant eventually changed her ideological position, a few more case studies of other women becoming deradicalized would have strengthened the evidence. Despite this, Darby notes one of the most important aspects of "combating hate requires understanding it—not what it seems to be or what we hope it amounts to, but what it *actually* is" (p. 195). Moreover, "that includes who supports it, why they do, and how their experiences reflect a reality we all share" (p. 195). As many Western societies continue to become more polarised, not just culturally and socially, but also politically, it is possible this will continue to be problematic as these divisions could further exacerbate the general animosity and negativity toward anyone considered the 'Other'. For anyone interested in reading why some women embrace the movement and what it may offer in return, this book is highly recommended.

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