The Strategies of White American Masculinity

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In *Affirmative Reaction*, Hamilton Carroll examines the "devices and strategies" through which "white masculinist privilege" is currently being "reorient[ed]," and thus maintained, in a "posthegemonic" context (2). Responding to widespread claims that masculinity is in crisis, Carroll suggests that, in the wake of "broad transformations that have radically altered the landscape of labor and opportunity in the United States," white masculinity recuperates itself through a transformation from the universal to the particular (for instance, queer, Irish, "white trash," working class) "whereby the particular becomes a location from which privilege can be recouped" (6). He provides close readings of a range of texts, including the films *Brokeback Mountain*, *Million Dollar Baby* and *Traffic*, post-9/11 superhero comics, the television series *24* and *American Chopper*, and the lyrics of Eminem; these analyses work to "chart the devices and strategies" through which "white heteronormative white patriarchal privilege" is currently being maintained in and through popular culture (2).

Affirmative Reaction tracks these formations as "symptomatic and opportunistic responses" to the pressures of "domestic multiculturalism and identity politics," as well as "the globalization of labour" (3). Carroll's main argument –his "central theoretical claim" – is that "the true privilege of white masculinity – and its defining strategy – is not to be unmarked, universal, or invisible (although it is sometimes one or all of these), but to be mobile and mutable" (10). Carroll uses the term "lability" to refer to this mobility and mutability, repurposing a word used in physics and chemistry to describe the quality of being prone to "displacement" or "change" (10, 9). Carroll offers a series of well-written, engaging, and insightful readings to support this argument. For example, Carroll suggests that *Brokeback Mountain* (which he refers to as "the least queer film about same-sex desire imaginable") subordinates a narrative about homophobia to a "representation of the erosions of white masculinist privilege" in terms of labour and economic opportunity (17). Carroll exposes the ways in which the film appears unable to represent Jack and Ennis sympathetically without "citing [them] as "real men" and patriotic Americans," and suggests that the film offers an example of how white men "regain centre stage" by being called "gay men" (16, 12).

While the readings are lively and convincing, I found myself wishing the analyses had engaged more extensively with other contemporary analyses of gender and race. For example, the *Brokeback Mountain* chapter may well have benefited from a discussion of Jasbir Puar's work on "homonationalism," which she describes as a new form of "homonormativity," one that is implicated in "continu[ing] or extend[ing] the project of U.S. nationalism and imperial expansion endemic to the war on terror" (2007, 2). At other points in the book, I wondered how Carroll's analysis differs from, or complements, work on intersectionality. While Carroll does speak to the "symbiotic imbrications" of whiteness and masculinity, and points to the ways in which white masculinity "inhabits a contingent space in which it is altered" in relation to other axes of identity (8), a more sustained comparison of the concept of lability and intersectionality might help the reader to understand what exactly lability is, and how exactly it works, in Carroll's argument.

When the concept is first introduced, lability appears to be a quality that a thing possesses: "to be labile […] is to be "prone to undergo displacement in position or change in nature"" (10). And yet, when lability is invoked in terms of white masculinity's *response* to sociopolitical transformations" through "various strategies," it appears to be something that is deployed or operationalized – thus, presumably, more than just a quality that something does or does not possess (10). Although Carroll defines white masculinity as a "process through which or a location in which heteronormative white masculinity attains or regains privilege," he also speaks about white masculinity as an entity with beliefs, desires and plans (181). For example: white masculinity is said to engage in "sleight of hand" by "citing itself as […] needy and […] worthy"; it "turn[s] to the representational politics of identity" as it "attempts to hold on to majority privilege" (10, 6, 23). I wonder, what is at stake in presenting "white masculinity" and "the discourse of crisis" as entities with intentions and strategies?

I'm sympathetic to what I take to be the political position behind this choice; Carroll wants to disrupt structures that maintain white supremacy (7), and to identify and critique the particular set of interests that are produced and maintained through white privilege. But for me this language of "strategy" remains problematic, both within the terms of Carroll's own analysis, and potentially also in relation to larger scholarly conversations around discourse and culture. What one might describe as Carroll's construction of white masculinity as a coherent and self-aware entity seems to diverge from prevailing methodological trends in discourse-oriented cultural critique (as practiced by Judith Butler or Lauren Berlant, to give examples of two scholars cited by Carroll). Obviously diverging from trends is not a problem in and of itself, but in this case I found myself wondering what is gained or lost in attributing (even as rhetorical flourish or political strategy) such cohesion and intentionality to

"white masculinity."

While Carroll also describes white masculinity as "incoherent, reactive and contingent" and, as cited above, as a process and a location (8, 181), the language of "strategy" makes me a little uneasy: if the identification of intentionality is a criterion (even an implicit one) for identifying and critiquing racism, it becomes all the more difficult to identify the myriad ways in which processes of racialization proceed not only without conscious racist intention but even in sites, venues, and discourses which consider themselves to be, broadly speaking, anti-racist. In other words, granting a level of intentionality to a discursive construct (or, in Carroll's term, a "process") such as white masculinity may obscure its workings, and may even inadvertently play into a kind of liberal anti-racism in which intentionality is key to questions of injustice. That said, there may be a trade-off here; perhaps Carroll wants to maintain the language of intentionality in order to attribute responsibility and to avoid what some consider the potentially apolitical results of an analysis that emphasizes the heterogeneity, incoherency, and contingency.

I'll end by briefly addressing one final aspect of the book that raised questions for me: to what extent are the social formations Carroll describes really new, or, in his language, "post-hegemonic"? As I mention above, Carroll is critical of the notion that white men are socially or politically marginalized in post-World War Two America (a prevailing view, as he notes in the first pages of the book), but he nonetheless seems to employ a framework of historical break or rupture in ways that I would have liked to see further clarified (4). Carroll makes it clear that, although neoliberal economic policies have contributed to an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and to widespread deprivation, white people generally, and white men specifically, have nonetheless maintained disproportionate social, political and economic power (5). So if the crisis of masculinity may itself be "phantasmagoric," why describe contemporary formations as attempts to "reorient" (47), "reclaim" (73), or "reenfranchise" (159) white masculinity – if it was never disoriented or disenfranchised in the first place? For instance, discussing the immediate post 9/11 context, Carroll speaks of the "recuperat[ion] of a beleaguered masculinity" in the figure of the fireman (58). I'm not sure to what extent the model of the fireman as masculine paradigm was ever really beleaguered – to what extent the recuperation of this figure was ever really necessary. My own inclination, for what it's worth, would be to highlight the continuities between the cultural formations Carroll describes and earlier iterations of white masculinity; to speak in terms of "intensifications," or "reproductions" of prevailing norms. That said, Carroll's close readings are compelling and insightful; Affirmative Reaction does offer useful interpretations of certain contemporary formations of white masculinity, and I especially appreciate how Carroll critiques the discourse of white male injury in the context of the social and economic changes that

have occurred over the last several decades in the United States.

Works Cited

Jasbir Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke U P, 2007.

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