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BOOK REVIEW

***Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland*, by Metzl, J. M. (2019). New York, NY: Basic Books.**

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In *Dying of Whiteness*, psychiatrist Jonathan M. Metzl explores the impact of conservative policies on the health and perspectives of white Americans. Travelling through Missouri, Tennessee, and Kansas, Metzl discovered that negative attitudes toward gun control, social services, and government spending arise from a deeply embedded politics of “racial resentment” and that more white Americans are willing to vote against their own interests in order to protect what they consider to be their fundamental freedoms, such as the right to bear arms. Using a combination of field research and public health data, Metzl successfully argues that the resulting policy decisions, supported by many white Americans, are rooted in white supremacy and the history of racism in the United States.

The book is organized into three main parts, each focusing on a single state and policy issue. The first part of the book explores pro-gun laws in Missouri and increasing rates of accidental injury and/or death by suicide involving firearms among the white population in the state. Working with a suicide loss survivor group, Metzl found that even though many of the group members lost loved ones to firearm related suicide, the majority were willing to defend their freedom to own a gun. Most survivors in the group believed that their loved ones died because they failed to see the warning signs associated with depression and suicidality. When asked if they thought that guns made it easier to commit suicide, the majority upheld the belief that suicide prevention rests on recognizing symptoms and warning signs and do not believe that access to a firearm is a danger.

Metzl connects these assertions to a broader politics of “racial resentment” and the history of racism and gun laws in the United States. He traces these ideas back to early colonial America, during which time firearms were “armaments of white upper-class power”

(p. 64). Lower-class white people were also given access to arms to separate them from Black people. This idea of guns as a white supremacist power symbol was reflected in the assertions of participants that they needed guns to protect themselves from growing Black populations in their cities. Yet, as Metzl reveals, white men in Missouri were seven times more likely to die by their own guns than they were to be shot by intruders or those who they perceived they needed protection from, namely Black men (p. 108). In this case, “privilege itself becomes a liability” as white men become their own biggest threats (p. 109).

Moving on to Tennessee, the second section of the book explores attitudes toward the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and Medicaid. Despite warnings that Trump’s healthcare policy would hurt “Trump Country” (p. 121), white American voters in Tennessee overwhelmingly supported policies that blocked ACA in the state. Talking to groups of both white men and Black men, Metzl found that attitudes toward state-funded healthcare were clearly divided along racial lines. While Black men tended to support healthcare to protect the interests of all, white men literally “voiced a willingness to die” (p. 124), rather than support a policy that might benefit minority populations or immigrants. The majority of the white men that Metzl interviewed suffered from serious, chronic illnesses, yet were still unwilling to vote for affordable healthcare, demonstrating the extent to which they are willing to sacrifice their health to maintain white supremacy and vote against the health of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour.

In the third and final section of the book, Metzl explores how anti-tax policies and the defunding of education have contributed to negative consequences for white Americans in Kansas. Kansas has been particularly hard hit by “GOP-style austerity politics” (p. 196), making it a significant setting for studying this issue. In this part of the book, Metzl sought to understand what it was like to live in a state like Kansas, and whether those who voted in favour of austerity measures were happy with their decision to defund social services. Similar to white Americans interviewed in Missouri and Tennessee, participants in Kansas were willing to defund quality education if it prevented immigrants from educating their children in the same school districts as white Americans.

Sitting at the intersection of critical race studies, policy studies, and public health, *Dying of Whiteness* will surely become an invaluable tool for those studying in these fields, particularly for those interested in the development of American health policy. This book reveals the destructive and violent nature of the current racial landscape in the United States. By linking racist politics to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and slavery, Metzl not only demonstrates how policies grounded in white supremacy impact the health of white Americans, but also demonstrates how whiteness is more than merely a racial category. The

book illustrates that whiteness itself is a violent institution built on the legacy of colonialism and slavery in the United States. By exposing public health data linking these policy decisions to increased mortality for lower- and middle-income white Americans in southern and midwestern states, Metzl reveals that whiteness itself becomes a negative health indicator.

Though the problems exposed in this book are important in any context, the book is particularly critical within the contemporary moment. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the United States currently has the highest number of COVID cases in the world. In the news, we are seeing images of white people protesting against wearing masks to prevent the spread of the virus, arguing that being forced to wear a mask is a violation of their civil liberties. This type of behaviour exemplifies what Metzl warns against in *Dying of Whiteness*—the disturbing fact that white Americans are willing to risk their lives to protect their interpretation of their rights and freedoms. Importantly, given that mask-wearing is only protective if the majority participate in it, white Americans' refusal to wear masks goes further, expressing a willingness to risk oneself in order to not protect the lives of people of colour.

Furthermore, as Black Lives Matter demonstrations proliferate across the United States and Canada, more people are being exposed to the violence of policing and white supremacy. By taking whiteness to task, Metzl's work might appeal to those who are wishing to confront their own whiteness and the project of white supremacy. However, while focusing on whiteness might facilitate the "calling in" of white people to discussions of race, by focusing only on whiteness, the book has a potential to be misread as attempting to garner sympathy for white Americans making violent policy decisions. While it is true that white Americans in the Midwest and southern states are misled by false promises fed to them through Trump's divisive rhetoric, it remains crucial to foreground the fact that backlash politics lead to the disproportionate death and injury of people of colour and that these policies are racist by design. If white supremacy is indeed a threat to white American's health, the impetus for dismantling white supremacy needs to be grounded in a collective struggle for the lives and freedom of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour in the United States.

Overall, Jonathan Metzl's *Dying of Whiteness* offers a disturbing yet poignant entry point into the lives and minds of many white Americans living in the United States who have fallen prey to white supremacist rhetoric. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, Metzl convincingly argues that whiteness is both a racial category and a violent system of power. This book effectively balances the argument that white people are victims to their own willingness to vote against their best interests, while also recognizing that they are active players in white supremacy. In this way, Metzl offers a nuanced examination of racism and

power dynamics in American politics and his book proves valuable as a tool to teach white people about the harmful impact of whiteness and to spark important conversations about dismantling white supremacy.

References

Metzl, J. M. (2019). *Dying of whiteness: How the politics of racial resentment is killing America's heartland*. New York, NY: Basic Books.