

Demographically Doomed: White Supremacy, Electoral Power and Reproductive Justice

Loretta J. Ross

Editors' note: In this *DifferenTakes*, author Loretta Ross offers provocative commentary on how white supremacists may respond to the rising number of black and brown people in the US population with strategies to maintain white electoral power and suppress dissent. She analyzes three potential white supremacist options that have the potential to undermine democratic process, strengthen nativism and xenophobia, target LGBTQ people, and sharply restrict sexual and reproductive health, if not perpetuate population control abuses. The author suggests that reproductive justice (RJ), which promotes reproductive and sexual autonomy and an anti-racist valuing of all bodies, offers a framework for resisting white supremacy.

— Marlene Fried and Anne Hendrixson

White men in America have a problem. The problem is democracy. Those in power who control the country's economy cannot continue, as they have for 500 years, to maintain white supremacy to generate and protect wealth if they solely rely on the mechanics of democracy: freedom of speech, voting rights, corporate media, participatory civic engagement, and populist movements. In a few decades—about the middle of the 21st century—they will not have enough voters who will dependably support white supremacy, either openly or covertly. These men suffer from majoritarian insecurities, believing they are under siege from hordes of non-whites who threaten their control over America.

Their fears are not unfounded. According to the US Census in 2017, "While all other groups experienced natural increase (having more births than deaths) between 2015 and 2016, the non-Hispanic-white group alone experienced a natural decrease of 163,300 nationally."¹ Population politics can influence the fate of nations because all empires

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need bodies, through which to exert “biopower”: the capacity of a government to regulate life, health, and the body through coercion and incentives.²

These white men have choices. One, they can abandon white supremacy as an ideology and accept a multicultural power-sharing arrangement that can still be orchestrated to protect white privilege. Frankly, this may remind them too much of the Obama years to be seriously considered.

Two, they can accept a people-driven democracy based on electoral majorities. This requires elasticizing the definition of whiteness, and establishing different tiers of citizenship and voting rights based on race and immigration status. For instance, possibly categorizing some Latinos and Middle Easterners as “off-white” thus definitionally increasing “white” births to enlist more supporters to enlarge their voting base. They can also decrease the number privileged as citizens by further restricting non-white immigration.

Three, they can abandon democracy as a governing strategy and seek another form of government that allows a small minority to control the majority through authoritarian means. In this paper, I will use the lens of reproductive justice to explore these options and make recommendations for strategies of resistance and pathways for the future we may consider as human rights activists. I will consider these three options in reverse order.

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Abandoning Democracy

The first problem facing those who want to hang onto power by any means is that constitutions matter. Option #3, abandoning democracy as a governing strategy, means they must at least change the Constitution, unless they totally disregard the rule of law. They have already started.³ It takes 34 states to vote for a constitutional convention and 32 state legislatures are currently controlled by Republicans who are agitating for a convention to test the strength of our democracy by raising questions about Who is a citizen? How are senators and representatives elected? Who has voting rights? How is marriage defined? Should fetuses be declared persons from the moment of conception? Should there be a separation between church and state? What are the rights of immigrants? Are property rights forever superior to human rights? What issues decided by the Supreme Court should be constitutionally reversed?⁴

The last Constitutional Convention was in 1787, when the Constitution was originally written. The truculent right believes it has the muscular if unprincipled power to redefine how electoral privileges are allocated, so that a small(er) minority can permanently control the majority. A policy seeking to retaliate, especially to recover lost territory, is called revanchist. Allowing the revanchist party currently in power to reconsider these questions during a constitutional convention is strikingly unoriginal. It was called apartheid.⁵

The process of deconstructing democracy has begun with attacks on the media, voting rights, universities, civil liberties, and the judiciary. As many observers have pointed out, Donald Trump is fighting the truth, and the truth is losing. A public that no longer believes in anything, as Hannah Arendt said, “is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.”⁶

They have already tipped their hand in the words of paleo-conservative (extremely Far Right) Thomas Fleming of the League of the South, who declared in 1996:⁷

Among the most dangerous of our theoretical illusions are the political fantasies that can be summed up in words like democracy; equality, and natural rights; the principle of one man, one vote and the American tradition of self-government. No one who lives in the world with his eyes open can actually believe in any of this.⁸

This brazen constitutional convention strategy can't move forward without broad public consent. Can the Right manufacture sufficient consensus using the corporate-controlled media? This strategy risks severe resistance. There may be more people prepared to defend the Constitution than deconstruct it if the attack launches prematurely.

Obviously, we who are most at risk of constitutional disenfranchisement will be energized to block such sweeping changes. If we lack the electoral power to produce a human rights-based outcome from a constitutional convention, we must at least keep the white base fractured by ensuring that our white allies don't succumb to their own magical thinking to support such a risky plan. Leftists may hope to broaden constitutional protections for vulnerable groups, a missionary response, so to speak, with the "good white people" saving us from the "bad white people." History warns of such naiveté: collaborating with fascists or ignoring them never strengthens the power of the left.

There may also be resistance within the white supremacist base. To sell this scheme to the broader public as a legitimate faux populist goal, the puppet politicians may have to disguise their intentions by appearing to abandon the myth of racial purity and the blood politics that currently define whiteness. White identitarianism is important to their most loyal voters, yet they must expand beyond their base to use this misdirection strategy.

White elites on the right have convinced poor white people on the right who do not successfully compete in this Darwinian neoliberal struggle that they are not examples of failed personal responsibility, but victims of shut-down coal mines, nefarious doctors who have hooked them on opioids, and culture wars that threaten the white, heterosexual, and patriarchal privileges which have been pillars of their "deplorable" world. They see themselves as threatened by white liberals, uppity people of color, immigrants, and all these gay people who want to invade the sanctity of their fragile marriages. It won't be the first time those holding bigoted views have proven they'd rather be haters than electorally enduring. The working class Know Nothings of the 1830s blew up schemes by elites seeking to manipulate them for profits until overwhelmed by the Democratic Party of the day that more openly supported slavery.⁹

The anti-democratic threats are real and wide-ranging. For example, if white supremacist Republicans are successful, they could eliminate Article 6 of the Constitution, which requires legal enforcement of international treaties. They might throw out the ratified International Convention against Genocide and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They could repeal the 14th Amendment granting citizenship to African Americans and children born in the US to undocumented immigrants. This would mean that eugenics measures such as forced sterilizations of undesirables, increased discriminatory incarceration, and even more openly racialized immigration restrictions and expulsions could once again become blatant government policy to prune targeted populations.

Citizen de-naturalization policies will also increase the proportion of the white population.¹⁰ If fewer non-whites emigrate to America, and those who have previously been granted citizenship are expelled, the racial

and ethnic numbers will shift. Such policies are unfair and transparently xenophobic, of course, but they embolden the white supremacist base.

For reproductive justice activists, it's as important to focus on the policies that seek to increase the white race because of demophobia—fears about the decline of a desired part of the population.¹¹ This is Option #2, enlarging their base.

Manipulating the Number of White People

Reproductive justice analysts have long asserted that restrictions on birth control, abortion, and evidence-based sex education are designed to socially engineer an increase in white births to counter the voluntarily achieved decreased fertility among educated white women. The strategy is working: teen pregnancies have decreased over the past few decades except for one group: white teens in the most conservative areas of the country with the most restrictions on abortion and birth control.¹²

White supremacists and their apologists have already been persuaded that abortion is a nefarious plot to reduce their numbers. Oath Keepers' Nighta Davis, national organizer for the now-defunct National 9-12 Project (part of Glenn Beck's Tea Party movement), believes that abortion rights advocates are part of a eugenics program targeting Christians.¹³ A panic attack about decreased fertility among white women who pursue educational and employment opportunities was blurted out by Steve King (R-IA), who declared, "We can't restore our civilization with someone else's babies!" in March 2017.¹⁴

It's likely that abortion and birth control will be recriminalized, as they seek to coercively force white women to bear more children. A pseudo-documentary entitled *Demographic Winter* spells out apocalyptic fears of losing control of (white) women's fertility while carefully never mentioning the word race.¹⁵ Birthing incentives may be offered to white women, like those in parts of Europe and Japan.¹⁶ Feminists have long demanded free child care, health care, and paid maternity leave. These demands could be co-opted by neo-liberal white power brokers if the benefits were restricted to white women.

In this context, an openly racialized *Handmaid's Tale* does not seem so farfetched.¹⁷ It would be only the beginning of the chaos, because the separation of church and state would also fall to the wayside. Elected officials whose primary allegiance is to religious values could determine who has sex, under what conditions, and could use the power of the state to punish transgressors. Such abuse of individual freedoms would concretize the concept of sexual citizenship.¹⁸ Citizenship could be conferred or denied depending on conduct, identity, and relationships. People with the "wrong" identities, sexual behaviors, or non-normative relationships would be excluded, with exceptions made for those with class, gender, and racial power to insulate themselves.

Pregnancy policing, already in place to punish women of color, would be expanded and even more strictly imposed. Any behaviors considered dangerous to the fetus or women's "obligation" to raise children would be punished by the government, such as competing against men in the job market. In fact, they could revert to being as intrusive as the German Nazis who used routine health screenings to monitor women's periods.¹⁹

It is also possible that new definitions of whiteness will emerge: perhaps Latinos, Native Americans, or Middle Easterners who want to be perceived as white, or very wealthy East Asians, may be reluctantly and provisionally counted as white. When researching egg donors, it seems that eggs from East Asian donors are a hot commodity for white couples; they are third on the most-requested list. The myth of the model minority may become a provisional passport into whiteness, providing all dark-skinned Asian Americans are excluded.

Perhaps mixed-race children with one white parent will be afforded an “off-white” status, seeking acceptance as some Jewish people have done under the false promise of safety through assimilation.

People who find this scenario terrifyingly possible should heed the lesson of Charlottesville from August 2017. When the white supremacists chanted “Jews shall not replace us!” they offered an alarm clock for those who fail to heed that the wages of whiteness are ephemeral at best. The anti-abortion movement is already deeply populated by racists and anti-Semites.²⁰ All reproductive justice advocates would do well to remember the hardcore blood politics of white supremacists: the perception of racial purity ultimately decides who is defined as subhuman.

Abandoning White Supremacy

Option #1, abandoning the concept of white supremacy altogether seems the least likely choice white men in power will make. As Trump’s election proved, the current crop of Republicans is depending on their base to be bigoted enough to forsake the values of democracy. They risk everything if they consider abandoning white supremacy as an ideology.

Trump is a con man selling the snake oil of whiteness as permanent power. White supremacy appears to compensate white folks for their impoverishment and lack of substantive support for their economic labor so they become good helots enriching their corporate masters. The apotheosis of the bankruptcy of traditional conservatism became apparent as congressional Republicans prostituted their party in supine obeisance.

They count on people drugged by consumerism and the irrelevancy of the mainstream media. The deluge of outrageous behaviors and misogynist and racist policies create an atavistic new normal that treats white supremacy as natural and inevitable, instead of socially constructed to generate wealth. Under such a system, democracy can continue to be manipulated to protect white supremacy, vulnerable as Americans are to racist dog whistles and baked-in, toxic masculinity, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.

These white identitarians hope that young people will be deterred from resistance, intimidated by the systemic violence of police departments and immigration officials, or even random white men shooting up schools. Of special concern are educators who fail to resist white supremacy on campuses, in pedagogies, and, in fact, who seek to punish students for being woke.²¹ The multi-generational cycle of white supremacy cannot be broken without empowering young people to disrupt it.

The people currently in power daily demonstrate that they care nothing for the laws of decency and governance, just the power to impose their will on the country. They are not patriotic or selfless enough to abandon white supremacy to defend democracy. Their machinations make us wonder if deconstructing democracy is their real goal, that is, capitalism run by anarchists.

Another comparison to South Africa seems apt. The Afrikaner Resistance Movement has not yet given up its commitment to white secession, long after the country’s politics have made them apparently impotent. Formed by a former Afrikaner police officer in the 1970s, their commitment to civil unrest and defiance of federal authority is echoed by the Oath Keepers in the US, who are members of law enforcement who vow not to obey any laws they perceive as unfair to white interests.

If the reactionary politicians do not get their way through Options #2 and #3, they may believe that secession is their last choice. Secessionist rhetoric is decidedly unoriginal. They of all people should remember how the Civil War worked out for them.

The women on whose wombs all these strategies depend may knit more pink pussy hats when the alternative is to wear the red robes of the Handmaids.

But they may be on to something, because they lost the war yet won the battle of historical revisionism as people romanticize the false history of the battle over slavery, and proudly fly Confederate flags to show their support for Trump and the Lost Cause of whiteness. Some white women may be willing to have babies for this revolution. The Quiverfull movement will spark more television shows to mimic *19 Kids and Counting* to normalize white overbreeding.²² Short of that, white women have also shown that they can be counted on to support Trump— 53% voted for him.²³

At the same time, some number of educated white women are jumping ship, thus shrinking the Republican electoral base, as demonstrated by the failed Senate candidacy of Roy Moore. The women on whose wombs all these strategies depend may knit more pink pussy hats when the alternative is to wear the red robes of the Handmaids. If this modern Christian Reconstructionist movement succeeds in pulling off a constitutional convention or ramming through even more draconian measures designed to attack women's human rights, will white women embrace the anti-democratic movement of the Koch brothers, or the pro-democratic movement for human rights demanded by reproductive justice activists?

Reproductive Justice for All

Reproductive justice theory and practice moves beyond biological processes to examine the history and trajectory of America to understand whose bodies matter, and when and why. Core to reproductive justice is the belief that everyone has the human right to reproductive and sexual autonomy, and the right to live and raise children in safe and healthy environments, without fear of state, corporate, or individual violence.

Reproductive justice advocates are using the framework to resist white supremacy, biological determinism, false equivalences, scientific racism, and mostly, the deconstruction of American society because of the spite of white people. Examples of organizations that uphold RJ and resist white supremacy include SisterSong's Trust Black Women²⁴ and National Advocates for Pregnant Women²⁵, and the promising theoretical work of Caroline McFadden.²⁶

Of course, many women of color in the reproductive justice movement do not believe that investing in the consciousness-raising of white women about white supremacy is worth the effort. Doing so risks re-centering white women who have neglected women of color for far too long. This should not replace strengthening our communities, building our resilience, and voting to keep fascists out of power like Black women did in Alabama.

I get that. As a Black woman and long-time activist both inside and outside the mainstream white feminist movement, it is exhausting to repeat elementary information they should have learned long ago about why Republicans covet their fertility. The evidence is all around them, and it takes a studied ignorance to maintain white fragility; the inability to tolerate racial stress when confronted with racial injustices.²⁷

But I also believe that we cannot defeat white supremacy without white people. They built it and maintain it. While everyone does not have the stomach for this work, those of us who do understand that converting white people on the right and the left to human rights weakens white supremacy. One of our best strategies is to splinter white solidarity and build a human rights culture among white people who are resisting fascism, especially those drawn to the reproductive justice movement. White identities are not the problem;

white supremacist ideologies are. White women are our problematic allies; neglected, they may become our enemies.

Women's rights are human rights. Women's rights can save the planet from the ravages of white supremacy *if* white women do not remain complicit. Challenging the presumed innocence of white women is a viable way to ensure that those who fear they are demographically doomed are right.

Women's rights can save the planet from the ravages of white supremacy if white women do not remain complicit.

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