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Continuing the Conversation: Dying of Whiteness

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October 15, 2019

Continuing the Conversation: Dying of Whiteness

Editor's Note: *Anne Figert (Loyola University Chicago sociologist) and Neil Baum (MD) have an ongoing column Continuing the Conversation responding to various issues that emerge in our print edition. In this piece, Figert reviews the recent book Dying of Whiteness and invites us to consider how we respond to the many issues that have racism at its root. How do we address these issues at our Jesuit colleges and universities? How does doing so help steward our mission in the 21st century?*

BY ANNE FIGERT

Back in July when I proposed that Neil and I discuss the recent book *Dying of Whiteness* (<https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/jonathan-m-metzl/dying-of-whiteness/9781541644984/>) by Jonathan Metzl (2019, New York: Basic Books) I thought it would be interesting because it was written by a sociologist with a Ph.D./MD. Neil is the MD and I am the Ph.D. and this work speaks to us both in our given professions. I sent him to this web site (<https://www.dyingofwhiteness.com/>) and included a couple of interviews by Metzl for our discussion.

The argument that Metzl (the Frederick B. Rentschler II professor of sociology and psychiatry (<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/mhs/faculty/jonathan-m-metzl/>) at Vanderbilt University and director of its Center for Medicine, Health, and Society) makes is that systemic racism (particularly notions and policies of white supremacy) and the politics and policies of racial resentment are threatening the health and well being of all the population in the U.S. How? Increased deaths by suicide, gun violence and lack of health care especially in states not signing onto the Medicare expansion of the Affordable Care Act. As a result, life expectancy is going down in the U.S. and this is especially true for poor white Midwestern and Southerners (the people studied in this book). Metzl tries to understand how the politics and policies of racial resentment that we have seen magnified in the last 30 years have health implications.

As a medical sociologist, Metzl's argument makes a lot of sense to me and the way that he supports his argument with interviews with his target population gives clarity and highlights his points. Why don't some poor and middle class white people support health care as a human right? Because they have bought into policies and ideologies that feed into their fears about having something taken away from them by non-whites and immigrants. "Their America" is increasingly non-white and instead of embracing that, they are trying to hold on to the past. And, he suggests that we have to get beyond the point of calling people "racists" because that doesn't help. It doesn't help to call Trump a racist and a lot of recent polls/studies of white voters highlight this.

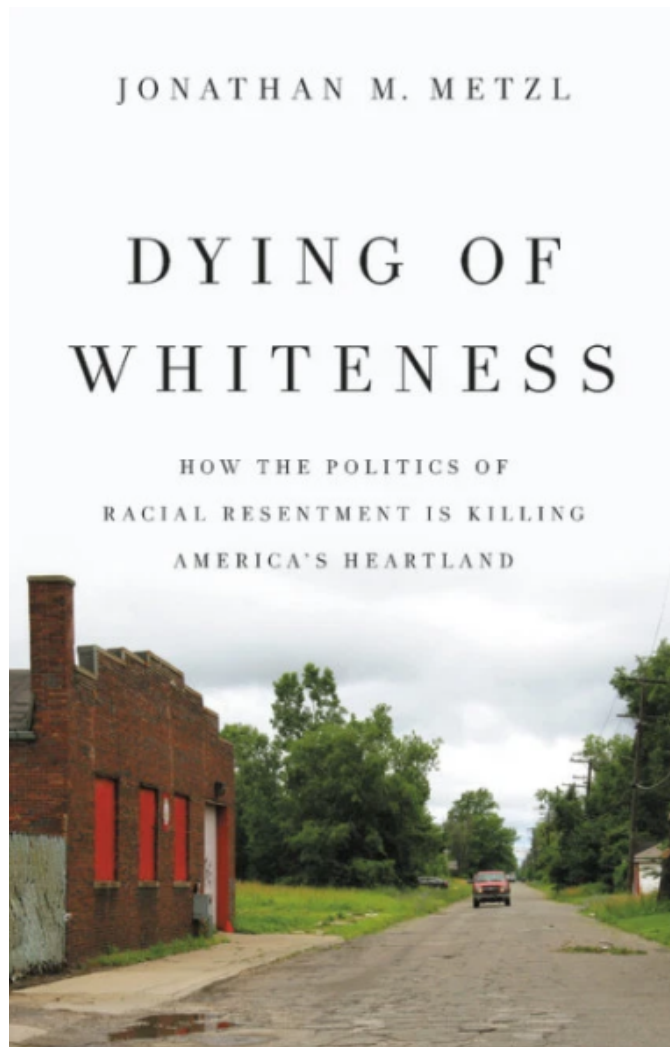
As Metzl writes about his findings, he states (<http://bostonreview.net/race/jonathan-m-metzl-dying-whiteness>):

"... racism matters most to health when its underlying resentments and anxieties shape larger politics and policies and then affect public health. I say this in part because many of the middle- and lower-income white Americans I met in my research were not expressly or even implicitly racist. Race did not even come up in many of our conversations. Yet racism remained an issue, not because of their attitudes but because they lived in states whose elected officials passed overly permissive gun policies, rejected health care reform, undercut social safety net programs, and a host of other actions. In these and other instances, racism and racial resentment functioned at structural levels and in ways that had far broader effects than the kinds of racism that functions in people's minds."

In a nutshell, Metzl argues that structural policies have been put into place that support cultural notions of white supremacy and are systematically hurting the health and well being of American citizens.

This is the part of the conversation that I started to write ... but then something happened. Over Labor Day weekend, my phone started dinging with texts. Was my family o.k.? At first I didn't know how to answer. Were they talking about the hurricane approaching Florida? I have family there. But no, I checked the news and learned of a mass shooting in Odessa, Texas. My hometown which was better known for football and oil production.

Thankfully, my family and friends were o.k. but it took a while to find this out. All I knew from the news, was that there were multiple fatalities and the suspect was not surprisingly a thirty something white male who was indiscriminately firing a high powered rifle at people while driving around the city. And, I wasn't surprised that was happening in Odessa. It was still shocking but not surprising. I have gone to movies at the theatre where a final shoot out happened, worked at the hospital's emergency room and traveled the streets and roads described in the media accounts.



In the end, the shooter was killed by the police and the details of his life emerged: he lived alone on the outskirts of town, managed to skirt around the gun check laws, and had been fired that morning from his job. Now, there are lots of people that might fit that description in Odessa but they didn't start a killing rampage. Except, this is happening more and more and by people with similar demographics (young white men). In a place where white people are no longer the majority, where there are lax gun laws and with all the hateful division and rhetoric about race and immigration in this country, I can only think more and more people are going to die.

With Neil's encouragement, this has turned out to be more of a one sided and personal reflection than our usual conversation. But I don't want my point to get lost. As educators, staff and students in Jesuit colleges and universities, it is our obligation to try to understand this epidemic of gun violence as a social justice issue. I think that

Metzl's work in his book *Dying of Whiteness* gives us another and useful perspective in which to view and analyze our world today. It is not just an issue of too many guns, the political power of the NRA or toxic masculinity. It is all of these and more and it is especially connected up to the social reality of racism in

American society. Any time scholars and educators bring up the hot button issues of racism and masculinity, we are accused of being too “politically correct” and catering to “snowflakes.” This is just a rhetorical deflection on the part people unwilling or unable to have important and difficult conversations. We have to do better, especially at Jesuit colleges and universities.

Anne Figert (<https://www.luc.edu/sociology/faculty/annefigertphd.shtml>) is a professor and former chair of the sociology department at Loyola University Chicago (<http://luc.edu/>). *Neil Baum* (<http://www.neilbaum.net/meet-dr-baum.html>) is retired physician and current student at Loyola University New Orleans (<http://loyno.edu/>).

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