A renowned expert on genocide argues that there is a real risk of violent atrocities happening in the United States.

If many people were shocked by Donald Trump’s 2016 election, many more were stunned when, months later, white supremacists took to the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting “Blood and Soil” and “Jews will not replace us!” Like Trump, the Charlottesville marchers were dismissed as aberrations—crazed extremists who did not represent the real US. It Can Happen Here demonstrates that, rather than being exceptional, such white power extremism and the violent atrocities linked to it are a part of American history. And, alarmingly, they remain a very real threat to the US today.

Alexander Hinton explains how murky politics, structural racism, the promotion of American exceptionalism, and a belief that the US has have achieved a color-blind society have diverted attention from the deep roots of white supremacist violence in the US’s brutal past. Drawing on his years of research and teaching on mass violence, Hinton details the warning signs of impending genocide and atrocity crimes, the tools used by ideologues to fan the flames of hate, and the shocking ways in which “us” versus “them” violence is supported by inherently racist institutions and policies.

It Can Happen Here is an essential new assessment of the dangers of contemporary white power extremism in the United States. While revealing the threat of genocide and atrocity crimes that loom over the country, Hinton offers actions we can take to prevent it from happening, illuminating a hopeful path forward for a nation in crisis.

“Hinton offers deep instruction for anyone seeking to better understand the bigotry that permeates American society... Well-researched, readable account.” - Kirkus Reviews, Starred
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OVERVIEW

If many people were shocked by Trump’s 2016 election, many more were stunned when, months later, white power extremists took to the streets of Charlottesville chanting “Blood and Soil” and “Jews will not replace us!” Like Trump, the Charlottesville marchers were dismissed as aberrations—the momentary appearance of “racists” and “haters” who did not represent the real United States. Rather than being exceptional, these events are symptoms of the country’s long history of racism and systemic white supremacy, genocide, and atrocity crimes. And there is a high likelihood that such violence will occur here again. This reality, *It Can Happen Here* demonstrates, is a key lesson we learned from the Trump presidency. *It Can Happen Here* breaks new ground by raising the alarm about the ongoing threat of genocide and mass violence in the United States.

Questions for Discussion

- Why did the author choose to start the book with Trump’s reading of “The Snake” and conclude with “The Bird?” What do “The Snake” and “The Bird” symbolize and how do they relate to broader themes in the book?
- At different points in the book, the author states that, if dramatic, Charlottesville and the larger resurgence of white power extremism during the Trump administration are a symptom (as opposed to being exceptional events). What does the author mean and what are they symptomatic of?
- After reading the book, do you think “it could happen here?” Why or why not?
- In the preface, the author states that “Donald Trump’s presidency took the United States to the brink” (ix). What does he mean, and how close did the U.S. come to atrocity crimes around the time of the 2020 election through the January 6, 2021 Capitol Insurrection? The author also wrote an October 2020 op-ed, “Trump’s Helter Skelter,” which details the increasing risk ahead of the 2020 election and informs his statement the U.S. was “on the brink.”
- What sorts of literary strategies does the author use and why? For example, why did he situate the book in particular settings, use dialogue and “voice,” and follow a chronological progression? What advantages and disadvantages do these literary strategies have?
- In some ways, this book could be read as an on-the-ground history of Trump’s rise to and fall from power in the U.S. How does the author’s experience of “teaching in Trump’s USA” differ from conventional historical accounts?
- What does the author mean when he states, “this book has been an exercise in moral imagination” (198)?

Keywords

- Far-Right extremism, white power, racism, public anthropology, genocide, Trump
INTRODUCTION
The Snake (1-22)

At a 2016 campaign rally in Ohio, Donald Trump read “The Snake,” a parable warning of the dangers of terrorists, immigrants, and nonwhites. Beginning with this event, the introduction discusses the author’s path to writing this book, which was catalyzed by his post-Charlottesville experience of teaching in Trump’s USA. Indeed, the book is framed around the motif of “lessons” and the importance of “Education after Auschwitz” as philosopher Theodor Adorno put it. The book’s title echoes Sinclair Lewis’s bestseller, It Can’t Happen Here, written in the 1930s when fears of fascism in the United States spiked. Like Lewis’s text, the introduction notes, It Can Happen Here warns of the dangers of genocide and atrocity crimes in the contemporary U.S., as illustrated by the spectacular visibility of white power during the Trump administration and events like Charlottesville. But Trump and Charlottesville are not exceptional—they are symptoms of long-standing systemic white supremacy in the United States. A key postmortem lesson of the Trump presidency is that the United States has been, is, and will continue to be at risk for genocide and atrocity crimes against non-whites. The preface concludes with this startling possibility, which the remainder of the book explores.

Questions for Discussion

• Why does the author begin the book with Trump’s reading of “The Snake” parable? What is the meaning of the parable? Be sure to discuss how Trump uses the symbolism of “the snake” and “the tender-hearted woman.”

• The author states that the white power extremism that surfaced during the Trump presidency at moments like Charlottesville was “a symptom – not an exception” (18). What does the author mean?

• According to the author, how does the “motif of lessons learned” (18) inform the structure and focus of It Can Happen Here?

Keywords

• Donald Trump, “The Snake,” Cambodian genocide, Sinclair Lewis’s It Can’t Happen Here, Theodor Adorno, Frankfurt school, authoritarian personality, fascism, cultural Marxism, hypermasculinity, critical thinking, genocide education, lessons

Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

• (video) Donald Trump telling “The Snake” parable, Vienna, Ohio Campaign Rally, C-SPAN, March 14, 2016, (“The Snake” runs from 31:45-34:45)


• Theodor Adorno, “Education after Auschwitz”
CHAPTER ONE

Charlottesville Teach-In (23-50)

This chapter takes up the teaching of critical thinking, an issue stressed by Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School, at a time when the status of truth was regularly undercut by assertions of “alternative facts” and “fake news.” In response to an American Anthropological Association call, the author held a Charlottesville Teach-In in mid-September 2017 in which his class critically unpacked Trump’s “there were very fine people on both sides” claim. On the one hand, Trump used the pretext of the Robert E. Lee statue removal protest to mask the primary and clearly stated goals of the Charlottesville marchers: to unite the white-power-extremist right. On the other hand, Trump’s statement obscured how the controversy was directly related to race, as illustrated by monkey hoots and other offensive language and imagery the marchers used. The chapter concludes with the author’s class’s examination of the origins and history of the concept of race and its direct connections to the hate language, symbolism, and racial caricatures seen in Charlottesville. Along the way, the author notes that anthropological literature on domestic white power extremism is quite small.

Questions for Discussion

• How does the author answer the question, “How do you teach in Trump’s USA?”

• President Trump famously stated that there were “very fine people on both sides” of the Charlottesville / Unite the Right violence. What conclusions emerged in the Charlottesville Teach-In about Trump’s statement? Your answer should touch on the groups involved as well as race and history.

• How do the author and his class answer the question, “What is critical thinking”? In your answer, be sure to discuss critical pedagogy, the method of critique, analysis, and power. How is critical thinking linked to “greater autonomy and self-awareness” and Adorno’s “Education after Auschwitz” (21, 27) and his earlier discussion of the Frankfurt School and the “authoritarian personality” (9-13)? And how do critical thinking and analysis differ from opinion?

• How did the author’s class answer the question, “what, exactly, is race? And how is the idea of race related to racism”?

• Why haven’t anthropologists studied white power extremism in the U.S., particularly given their long history of speaking out on the issue of race? Is this lack of research on domestic white power extremism related to anthropology’s disciplinary assumptions, conceptual blockages, and power structures? Has the recent trend toward “public anthropology” helped refocus attention on issues anthropologists might otherwise have overlooked?
Keywords

- Charlottesville, white power extremism, Teach-Ins, Unite the Right march, “fine people on both sides,” gaslighting, “alternative facts” and “fake news,” “enemies of the people,” critical pedagogy, VICE video, alt-right, race, racism, “dog whistles,” Confederate monuments, Biden’s “battle for the soul of the nation,” Trump and the “Charlottesville hoax”

Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

- (video) “Charlottesville: Race and Terror,” VICE News Tonight, August 14, 2017 (20 mins)
- “AHA Statement on Confederate Monuments,” American Historical Association, August 2017
- (webpage) “Anthropologists Teach In,” Society for Cultural Anthropology
CHAPTER TWO
The Hater (51-82)

A key question in the study of genocide and mass violence is the “why?” of perpetration. It is a question the author directly took up during his expert witness testimony at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. It was also the focus of his Spring 2018 anthropology seminar in which his class sought lessons in the past to understand contemporary white power extremism in the United States. At first, the students dismissed the Charlottesville actors as racists, bigots, and haters. They soon realized that such one-word answers misdirect, masking longer histories and structural forces that create the backdrop from which moments of violence and hate emerge. In class, the students examined a range of cases, focusing especially on the Holocaust, ISIS, and the Khmer Rouge. All of these cases, like white power extremism, began as social movements that highlighted grievance, claimed to be righting wrongs, provided a vision for sociopolitical renewal, scapegoated out-groups, and offered a plan to expunge these “contaminating” threats from the pure new society in the making. The class also explored the circumstances in which these extremist regimes took power, in part by examining Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea’s path to revolution. It then turned to look at the parallels with white-power-extremist groups.

Questions for Discussion

- How did the author and his class answer the question, “What makes a man start fires” (50)? Be sure to mention Tony Hovater in your answer.
- What is “hate” (55)? What does the student mean when they state, “Hate isn’t much of a Rosebud answer” (55)? How does “the hater” explanation individualize and therefore obscure understanding about the “deeper structures underpinning violence and hate” (55-6)? What should we focus on instead?
- How did the author’s class answer the question, “What made Nuon Chea start fires of genocide and hate” (67)? Tie your answer to the broader discussion of the Khmer Rouge in the chapter, including the Khmer Rouge “fires” triangle (71-2) and FUEL (77-79) metaphor.

Keywords

- “The Hater,” “What makes a man start fires?,” Tony Hovater, hate, extremism, Holocaust, the Nazi “why?”, structure/agency, social movements, Nuon Chea, Khmer Rouge “fires” triangle, FUEL, “Professor’s asked us a trick question”
Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

• (video) “Charlottesville: Race and Terror,” VICE News Tonight, August 14, 2017 (20 mins)


• (website) “Cambodia, 1975-79,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
CHAPTER THREE

White Genocide (83-132)

This chapter connects insights about the past to the resurgence of white power extremism in the U.S. during Trump’s presidency. It begins at the August 2018 Charlottesville follow-up, the Unite the Right 2 rally in Washington, DC, where extremists signaled “white genocide” in their signs and “1488” tattoos. This number “1488” also appeared on the social media webpage of Robert Bowers, who attacked Tree of Life synagogue in October 2018, killing eleven worshippers. Just before his attack, Bowers posted, “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. . . . I’m going in,” another reference to white genocide. Everyone again began asking, Why? The author’s students were no exception. So, once more, he shuffled his syllabus and held a “Tree of Life Teach-In.” The chapter recounts his undergraduate class’s discussions of white genocide, a key white power frame that emerged after the civil rights movement, desegregation, and new economic stressors. The chapter discusses the origins of this idea and its connection to the pre– and post–civil rights history of white power extremism—ranging from the systemic white supremacy that informed settler colonial genocide and slavery to the ideology of contemporary groups like the alt-right.

Questions for Discussion

• What is “white genocide” and how does it inform contemporary white power groups and actors, such as the alt-right (as illustrated by A Fair Hearing), Hovater’s Traditionalist Workers Party, and the New Jersey European Heritage Association? Your answer should include discussion of Lane’s “White Genocide Manifesto.”

• According to the author, what are the three phases of contemporary white power and how do they differ?

• According to Shaw’s introduction to A Fair Hearing (122), what are the three key convictions of the alt-right?

Keywords

Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

- (website) Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University
- (website) “Hate Map,” Southern Poverty Center
- “David Lane,” Southern Poverty Law Center
- (extremist manifesto) David Eden Lane, “White Genocide Manifesto”
- (basic background on groups) Alex Hinton, “US Capitol Mob Highlights 5 Reasons Not to Underestimate Far-Right Extremists,” The Conversation, January 9, 2021
CHAPTER FOUR

Could It Happen Here? (132-165)

This chapter looks at how the lessons of the past can help us understand the present and calibrate our moral compass in dangerous times. The author also held a “Tree of Life Teach-In” in his graduate class, which was focused on atrocity-crimes prevention. As a result, this class took a different turn as the students drew on prevention models to consider the question that people in the U.S. were asking, as they had during Sinclair Lewis’s lifetime: “Can it happen here?” As opposed to examining fascism and authoritarianism, the class considered the related but different issue of atrocity crimes. Using a United Nations assessment framework, the class examined key risk factors, ranging from a history of past violence to the erosion of checks and balances. The U.S., the class concluded, was at elevated risk for genocide and atrocity crimes. In coming to this assessment, the class also considered the synergies between white power extremism and the Trump administration, especially in terms of the white genocide framings of its immigration rhetoric and policy, a connection presaged by “The Snake.”

Questions for Discussion

• How did the class answer the question, “Do you think it [genocide] could actually happen in the US” (132)? In answering, be sure to discuss how the class applied the risk factors in the “Framework of Analysis” to the U.S. situation. What conclusions did the class reach about the threat level of genocide and atrocity crimes taking place in the US?

• What does the professor mean when he says, “Every question also a directive” (133)?

• To what extent, according to the text, did white genocide / great replacement ideas circulate in the White House and in the media during the Trump administration?

• According to the text, what are the arguments for and against the case that Blacks in the U.S. are victims of genocide, an allegation made in the 1951 petition We Charge Genocide?

Keywords

• Tree of Life Teach-In, genocide, atrocity crimes, risk assessment, “Framework of Analysis” risk factors, hate speech and incitement, History of Violence, Motivation, Ideology and Incentives, We Charge Genocide, authoritarianism, fascism, immigration, American exceptionalism, Southern Strategy, Trump and “The Snake,” Stephen Miller, “the great replacement,” cultural Marxism, mainstream white power, Sinclair Lewis, Buffers and Safeguards, Triggers and Instability
Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

- Jason Kessler, “Yes, Virginia (Dare), There is Such a Thing as White Genocide,” VDare, June 19, 2017
CHAPTER FIVE
Can It Be Prevented? (166-200)

The chapter is loosely framed around the November 2018 verdict in Nuon Chea’s trial at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, where Nuon Chea was convicted of genocide. The judgment took place shortly after the Tree of Life synagogue shooting and President Trump’s politics of fear ahead of the 2018 midterm elections, which included warnings of immigrant “infestations.” With this backdrop in mind, the chapter considers different prevention strategies. Some interventions, like the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, are more long-term, including education, memorialization, accountability, and projects of redress. Reparations or a truth commission, the author notes, could be used to address the history of white supremacy and settler-colonial genocide in the United States. Other interventions are more proximate, such as those that seek to turn people from extremism through methods ranging from deradicalization to financial sanctions. The chapter also explores the global dimensions of the white power movement in which white-genocide great-replacement fears loom large. If the Trump presidency underscored the fact that there is an ongoing risk of genocide and atrocity crimes in the US, the author concludes by noting that there are strategies that can be used to prevent this from happening, including genocide education of the sort the author used in his classes while “teaching in Trump’s USA.”

Questions for Discussion

• What are the similarities and differences between the Khmer Rouge social movement in the 1960s and the white power social movement in the US today? What does the author mean when he refers to them as “genocidal social movements?”

• How can atrocity crimes prevention mechanisms be mobilized to prevent atrocity crimes in the US? Be sure to include examples of upstream, midstream, and downstream prevention, including transitional justice.

• According to the author, how can moral imagination assist in the task of prevention? Be sure to define moral imagination and provide examples from the text.

• What are four key points about white power extremism illustrated by the Suidlanders, a South African far-right group that frequently speaks of white genocide?

Keywords

• Khmer Rouge Tribunal (ECCC), transitional justice, atrocity crimes prevention, comparative method, social and revitalization movements, deradicalization, Suidlanders, South African “white genocide,” global white power extremism, red pilling, reparations, Canadian TRC, dialogue, deradicalization, moral imagination
Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

- (website) “A Tribunal for Cambodia” and “Cases,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
- “What is Transitional Justice?” International Center for Transitional Justice (2 pgs)
- (video) David McKenzie and Brent Swails, “They’re Prepping for a Race War, And They See Trump as Their ‘Ray of Hope,’” CNN, November 20, 2018
CONCLUSION

The Bird (201-218)

The book’s conclusion begins with the death of Nuon Chea on August 4, 2019, one day after a white power extremist, Patrick Crusius, opened fire in an El Paso Walmart, killing twenty-three people. Crusius’s manifesto claimed he did so as part of a race war to prevent an immigrant “invasion.” At the time, the author was visiting Chautauqua, an educational institute where the week’s theme was Grace. The conclusion draws together the preceding chapters to delineate the qualities of moral compass: Discernment, Orientation, Perspective, Prudence, and the center rose of the Awareness of Grace. Each dimension helps restore the rich context that is stripped away by the abstract violent ideologies of extremists and that is necessary to understand a situation and envision paths forward. The idea of moral compass, informed by the lessons of the past and demanding moral imagination, backlights the book’s argument that “it can happen here.” To underscore this point, the author finishes with a discussion of the “bird-in-the-hand” parable that Toni Morrison related in her Nobel Prize speech. Her metaphor and emphasis on dialogue, tolerance, and consideration of alternative perspectives serve as a concluding juxtaposition and counter to Trump’s campaign rendition of “The Snake.”

Questions for Discussion

• How do some of the speakers at Chautauqua explain the Crusius Walmart massacre and larger rise of white power extremism under Trump? Be sure to discuss the dangers of ideological certainty, “a word out of place,” “invasions,” and so forth.

• Does the idea of moral compass offer a way to avoid the paradox of cultural relativism?

• How does the discussion of moral compass, Grace, and language offer a path to holding difficult dialogues amid a situation of high political polarization and tensions centering on race? Be sure to discuss Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize address in your discussion.

• Drawing on the discussions at Chautauqua, how did the author end up defining moral compass with its “central rose” of Grace and “four cardinal points” of Discernment, Orientation, Perspective, and Foresight (215)? What does the author mean by these terms and his statement that, “[i]n a sense, this book is centered around these four cardinal points [of moral compass]” (215)?

• Why does the author end with Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize address? How does it contrast with Trump’s “The Snake” and pick up on earlier themes in the book, such as moral imagination, dialogue, and Adorno’s “Education after Auschwitz?”
Keywords


Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

- (audio) Toni Morrison, “Nobel Lecture,” The Nobel Prize, December 7, 1993 (33 mins)
EPILOGUE (219-234)

The epilogue begins with Trump’s July 3, 2020, address at Mount Rushmore, which invoked the dangers of evil far-left radicals who were, he claimed, destroying the country. His remarks were situated in the backdrop of enormous upheaval in the U.S, which began with the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic collapse and was contributing to widespread protests in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd. Floyd’s death sparked a broad consideration of pervasive structural racism in the United States, which was most visible in the toppling of monuments honoring people associated with white supremacy. A besieged Trump responded with a racialized law-and-order message that had white-genocide inflections. This was the backdrop of the author’s decision to hold a George Floyd Teach-In on structural racism. The remainder of the epilogue describes the planned teach-in, which serves to weave together various themes in the book, including systemic white supremacy, white genocide, and critical pedagogy. The epilogue ends with a discussion of the possibility of repair in the United States, ranging from reparations and a truth commission to pedagogical initiatives focused on systemic white supremacy in the context of global history, or what the author refers to “Education after 1492.”

Questions for Discussion

• According to the Epilogue, what events and factors led to the escalating threat of atrocity crimes in the US during 2020? Conclude by giving your own assessment for how high the risk was on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being “extreme risk”) at the time of the 2020 election.

• How did President Trump’s Mount Rushmore address use racist dog whistles and echo white nationalist themes, including white genocide?

• The book concludes with a call for critical pedagogies that focus on “Education after 1492.” According to the text, what topics and issues should be included in such an initiative?

• What is structural racism and how did George Floyd’s murder illustrate how it operates? To what extent has the US addressed the issue of structural racism since George Floyd’s murder?

Keywords

• President Trump’s Mount Rushmore 4th of July Address, Native American protestors, racist dog whistles, American Exceptionalism, pandemic, George Floyd protests, Lafayette Square, structural racism, risk assessment, George Floyd Teach-In on Structural Racism, transitional justice in the US, moral imagination, “Education after 1492”
Possible Short Readings / Videos to Pair with Chapter

- (video) “Frederick Douglass’ Descendants Deliver His ‘Fourth of July’ Speech,” *NPR*, July 3, 2020 (6 mins)
- Jamila Michener, “George Floyd’s Killings was just the Spark. Here’s What Really made the Protests Explode,” *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2020