

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism By: Robin DiAngelo

Racism – not for the first time in American history – is the topic of the moment. But this time, somehow, feels different. Something has shifted and one senses that this time maybe, just maybe, things will change.

Everywhere one turns, the focus is on racism – both its history and the moral imperative to confront it. From the Episcopal Bishop of Erie the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe's stirring condemnation of white supremacy at Victory Christian Center's Bishop Dwayne Brock's peaceful protest in downtown Erie against the murder of George Floyd, police brutality, and systemic racism; to the removal of Confederate statues commemorating those who betrayed their oaths in order to defend slavery, and a president who belatedly discovered what *Juneteenth* means, a half-century on Bob Dylan's words once again sound prophetic:

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone



If your time is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin' [1]

Moving rapidly, events changing daily, American society seems aswirl attempting to make sense of its racial heritage, its racial reality. Heeding Dylan's call "Come writers and critics/Who prophesize with your pen/And keep your eyes wide/The chance won't come again," mainstream media and social media are awash in cultural discourse as writers of all hues and political persuasion have taken up their pens in pursuit of racial justice. In the June 16 edition of the *Erie Times-News*, nationally syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. offered "What people should say instead of 'I am not a racist.'" [2] In *The Washington Post*, conservative pundit Michael Gerson wrote "What one of the founders of evangelicalism can teach us about racism." [3] All five books on *The New York Times* best seller list of combined *Print & E-Book Nonfiction*, headed by this week's *Book Notes* "book of note," *White Fragility*, scrutinize the subject; as do three of the five on its *Hardcover Nonfiction* and all five on its *Paperback Nonfiction* list. [4]

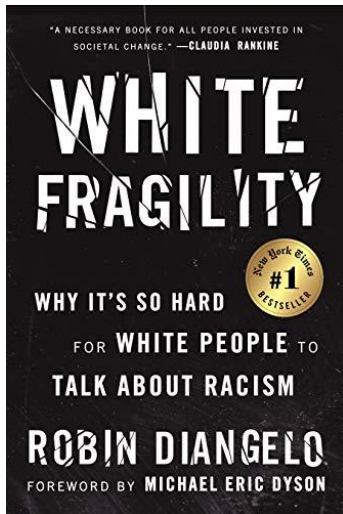
Yes, racism once again dominates both the news cycle and personal conversations. It is the topic of the moment, but it has been before. Like the rock Sisyphus kept pushing up the mountain, it has always fallen back down. Progress made, slow and painful, but the rock always slipped back, maybe not all the way back, but back it slipped.

This time, however, somehow *feels* different. Something has shifted and one senses that this time maybe, just maybe, things *will* change. The rock just might make it all the way up the mountain to racial equity, harmony, and justice, and if it does, it will not fall back as far.

Why does this time feel different? To begin, one big thing with several offshoots. As any therapist will tell you, in order to overcome some affliction – a dysfunctional relationship, a fear of heights, a fear of the dark, a fear of intimacy – you must first acknowledge the disorder. You must be willing to confront the problem openly, honestly, and without fear.

You must be willing to name the thing that must not be named – no evasions.

And that seems to be happening. First, the relatively easy part – confronting history. History is abstract; it's not personal. I don't have to change me. You don't have to change you. So, it's easy. Still, taking down statues, renaming forts, and calling out *Gone With the Wind* for its racist claptrap demonstrates real progress in confronting America's tortured racial history.



When I first started delivering presentations at the Jefferson Educational Society, the Chautauqua Institution and elsewhere on “Freedom’s Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender” as part of *The American Tapestry Project* I had to explain what the “Lost Cause” was, what the “Redemption” after the Civil War meant, and who the “Redeemers” were. Not anymore. When I’d say the Union won the war and lost the peace, people looked askance. Not any longer, as Heather Cox Richardson has demonstrated in her current book *How the South Won the Civil War*, which will be the focus of a future *Book Notes*. [5]

There simply isn’t space here to delve into that fraught topic, but in that future *Book Notes*, we’ll examine that complex history and how, in many ways, not only the civil rights movement of the 1960s but the subsequent culture wars are the playing out of issues left unresolved from the Civil War’s aftermath.

So, history, because I don’t have to confront myself or to change me, is the comparatively easy part. But me changing me, you changing you, that’s different.

That requires naming the thing that must not be named.

Naming that thing that must not be named is a process. It begins with taking action. Still, while not existentially challenging, it’s more difficult than criticizing an 80-year old movie. It requires us, like Sen. Mitt Romney joining a protest against police brutality, or, like NFL commissioner Roger Goodell belatedly admitting Colin Kaepernick might have had a point or, like myself and numerous other Erieites, taking a knee for justice during June 6’s peaceful protest, it requires taking action.

All of these actions are important, but they are only first steps toward confronting the thing that must not be named. Naming that thing that must not be named is the first step in confronting it and in confronting it, overcoming it. It is the first step in awakening to the deeply embedded systemic white racism that has defined America from the beginning. Again: Only by confronting that reality openly, honestly, and without fear can we hope to overcome it.

“Awakening” is the right word, too. Although I find Eric Liu’s *Become America: Civic Sermons on Love, Responsibility, and Democracy* [6] preachy in the worst sense of the word and those who proclaim their “wokeness” to be precious in their righteousness, “awaken” captures America’s current mood.

It is an awakening as from a dream, from a nightmare more apt, an awakening to America’s original sin of slavery. (It was James Madison who first used the

expression “the original sin of the African trade” to describe American slavery in a letter to LaFayette November 25, 1820.) [7] An awakening to *white racism*, slavery’s child, and all the work essential to escaping the vertigo and disorientation of this newly dawning reality in order to begin the work of reconstructing America.

It is to that “awakening” that Robin DiAngelo’s ***White Fragility*** speaks. More specifically, it speaks to the fraught, reluctant, and angst-ridden nature of that awakening. If the first two steps in confronting the thing that must not be named are understanding history and taking public action, both of which are somewhat impersonal, the third step is purely personal because it requires one to confront oneself, it requires one to confront white racism.

DiAngelo seeks to answer the question her book’s subtitle poses: “Why is it so hard for white people to talk about racism?”

DiAngelo, as she describes herself on her web site www.robindiangelo.com, has been “a consultant, educator, and facilitator for over 20 years on issues of racial and social justice.” [8] Currently, she is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Washington, Seattle. Over her career she has conducted numerous workshops on racism and its discontents, served as a corporate diversity trainer, and worked with many organizations and groups seeking to create inclusive communities.

In all these instances, the most difficult thing DiAngelo, herself white, encountered is getting white people to talk about racism.

Why?

Because white people do not see themselves racially. As she says, “Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility...white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.” [9] Curiously enough, white people do not think of whiteness as being a race.

Why?

What’s the joke – ‘whoever discovered water, you can be sure it wasn’t a fish’.

Why can’t white people see themselves racially? Because we have been socialized into an all-white world in which *whiteness* is seen as the default position – *whiteness* is the normative mode against which all *others* are not only seen but measured. We define ourselves by who we are not. [10] If the first step is difficult, the second – confronting racism – is grueling. White people either bristle or implode at the suggestion they might be racist. In racial discussions, white people’s skin is so thin it’s translucent!

Why?

Two reasons – 1) they do not see systemic racism (see comment above about fish in water) and 2) they equate racism with vile, violent, and derogatory behavior.

Let's take the second one first. Beginning with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when confronted with images of police turning fire hoses, then batons, on peaceful protestors, when little girls were murdered in church bombings, and Freedom Riders buses were set afire and the riders beaten, white people recoiled, particularly in the north, saying "that's not me."

They supported, more or less, civil rights legislation and then were done with the issue. It had been fixed. DiAngelo calls this the "good/bad binary." [11] Good people opposed racism; bad people were racists. In a simplistic syllogism, the majority of whites deduced "I am a good person/good people are not racist/therefore, I am not a racist."

Only bad people are racists. So, to suggest to someone that something they said or did might be racist is to call them a bad or immoral person triggering a defensive reaction that DiAngelo labels "white fragility." *White fragility* is white people's response to the stress of discussing racism because it might expose them to emotional discomfort. That defensive response might be an aggressive, in your face, "No I'm not" followed by sullen silence and withdrawal from the conversation – DiAngelo has an anecdote about a participant at an anti-racism workshop who took great umbrage at her mentioning racism! – to tears in which the white person is now the aggrieved in need of comforting. DiAngelo has a devastating chapter on "White Women's Tears."

So, the accusation of racism short-circuits the discussion. Why? Because most white people find it difficult to make the pivot from not seeing racism as an individual act to seeing it as a systemic issue which they have either willfully ignored or to which they are genuinely oblivious – back to that fish in water.

Before she defines racism, DiAngelo examines prejudice and discrimination. "Prejudice," DiAngelo states, "is the prejudgment about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs." [12] It follows, then, that "discrimination is action based on prejudice." [13] Most people will almost automatically react that they are not prejudiced – that they don't discriminate. Which, after even the slightest thought, one realizes is ludicrous. Life is all about choices; choices imply judgment and judgment is implemented by making discriminatory choices. As in, for example, on a trivial note, I like white pizza (pun intentional) and you do not.

DiAngelo is very good at diagnosing and describing how systemic racism works. She is weakest at prescribing what to do about it. First, her diagnosis. Back to prejudice and discrimination. One of America's organizing ideologies is individualism – we celebrate the individual and tend to ignore the fact that individuals are grounded in groups beginning first with the family and working out from there into ever more elaborate groupings. As Abraham Maslow pointed out, humans thrive in groups. And regarding groups, as the old saying has it and modern predictive analytics has adopted, “birds of a feather flock together.”

Systemic racism begins with group clustering resulting from socially constructed hierarchies. Most people attribute their success to their individual effort ignoring the benefits bestowed upon them by belonging to certain groups. I, for example, belong to several groups that privilege me: I am white, I am male, I had parents who acculturated me into a success ethic leading me to become highly educated, etc. etc. While not everyone with my background succeeded, I would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the advantages my group memberships provided me. More to the point, groups have the power to decide who is included and who is not, which is to say groups can discriminate about who to admit.

DiAngelo says that when group prejudice and the ability to discriminate is backed up by the full force of the law it becomes racism. [14] And the largest group in American history is the first group to which I belong. I am white. From the very beginning, membership in American society has been decided by determining who is white. In the Naturalization Act of 1790, citizenship was restricted “to immigrants who were free white people.” [15]

Expanding that definition by increasing the inclusiveness of who is “white” is in many ways the story of America, the story of American freedom; resisting that expansion, resisting that increasing inclusiveness is the story of American racism.

Exclusion is embedded in the system, as is its counterpoint – the struggle for inclusion. For example, it might surprise some readers of these notes of Italian, Irish, Jewish, or Eastern European ancestry to know that at different times they were not considered “*white*.” In fact, the Immigration Restriction League in the late-19th, early 20th-century characterized them as the mongrel scum of southern and eastern Europe. [16]

Most simply, American racism is the attempt to narrow the definition of who is considered *white* and thus entitled to enjoy the benefits of American life.

So, while there are individual racists, most people are not consciously racist. They are, in fact, good people. As DiAngelo says, you can exhale – you're not a bad person. But, to the extent that you do not attempt to grasp the system and how it

works, it could be said you're complicit. What seems to have changed this time is that people are recognizing their complicity and acting to change it.

How can you act to change it? First, by recognizing its existence and the many ways it permeates our culture. DiAngelo is, for example, very good at tracing out *white supremacy*, which as Bishop Rowe remarked in downtown Erie on June 6, is pervasive in our society. *White supremacy* is another of those phrases that cause instant brain cramps in white audiences, for they immediately conjure pictures of troglodytes driving cars into a crowd of protestors or a crazed gunman shooting up a church or synagogue. Those are white nationalists who would restrict membership in American society to a very narrowly defined group of *white* people.

DiAngelo uses the phrase *white supremacy* to describe the entire structure of American society, the implicit assumption of white superiority in all things social which privileges whiteness either *de facto* or *de jure*. *De jure* in zoning codes and restricted housing covenants, voter suppression laws and underfunding public education, for example; *de facto* in unequal enforcement of the law, as for example the crack cocaine epidemic being treated as a criminal matter and opioid addiction as a public health issue and a myriad of everyday microaggressions.

In short, systemic racism results from white people's implicit bias in favor of themselves at the discriminatory expense of all others. That this bias is implicit makes it more insidious.

Anti-blackness, which we examined in an earlier **Book Note** on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s ***Stony the Road***, is the reverse of *white supremacy*'s obverse. DiAngelo is very insightful in quoting Carol Harris, Ta-Nahisi Coates, Ibram X. Kendi, and others about how slavery and violence against blacks preceded racism. Racism, as Gates pointed out, is the after-the-fact justification for the immorality of slavery and the brutalization of black people through Black Codes, Jim Crow, and unequal policing down to the present. And it continues today, as for example in the familiar trope about affirmative action benefiting undeserving black people while in practice white women have been its chief beneficiaries. DiAngelo is at her best in showing the "unintentional" debasement of black males in the film ***Blind Side***, in which the athletically gifted but socially deprived black male can only succeed through the intervention of well-meaning white folks.

What's to be done? After detailing how "fragile" white people curl up in a defensive posture whenever the topic of racism in America is broached, how progressive whites might be the worst, assuming as they do that they are post-racial while they live in their all-white enclaves, how some white people simply cannot carry on the conversation, DiAngelo's conclusion is sadly anti-climactic.

Her strongest recommendations to white people are really two: 1) don't feel guilty – you didn't create the system and guilt will only cripple your ability to respond and 2) “strive to be less white,” by which she means to be less racially oppressive which requires becoming more racially aware, which requires becoming better educated about racism and how it actually works and to “continually challenge racial certitude and arrogance.” As she says, “to be less white is to be open to, interested in, and compassionate toward racial realities of people of color.” [17]

Her other suggestions are those of the therapist and, while not original, are worthy of reflection: breathe, listen, reflect, be attuned to the implicit bias in our thoughts and deeds, seek out others with whom to compare experiences and take the time you need to process and understand your experience. [18]

It's a big topic – it's the key topic in the American story and Robin DiAngelo does white people a profound service by bringing their “whiteness” to their attention, by helping them understand that white racism can only be solved by white people working with and on themselves, and by working together to transcend *whiteness* to a more inclusive future.

This time is different, I hope, because I sense that more and more people are coming to understand what a black minister and I shared with one another on a long ride to and back from Cleveland – he doesn't want to be me and I don't want to be him, but maybe, just maybe, working together we can become something else transcending either of us alone.

It's a thought; no, it's a hope; no, it's a project upon which we all should embark. What is different this time is that more and more and more people seem to be having the same “Aha moment!”

I have only surfed Robin DiAngelo's insights for you here, but her **White Fragility** is worth the read because it will make you feel, because it will make you think.

I have no higher praise!

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End Notes

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17. DiAngelo, p. 150.
18. Ibid., p. 147.

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