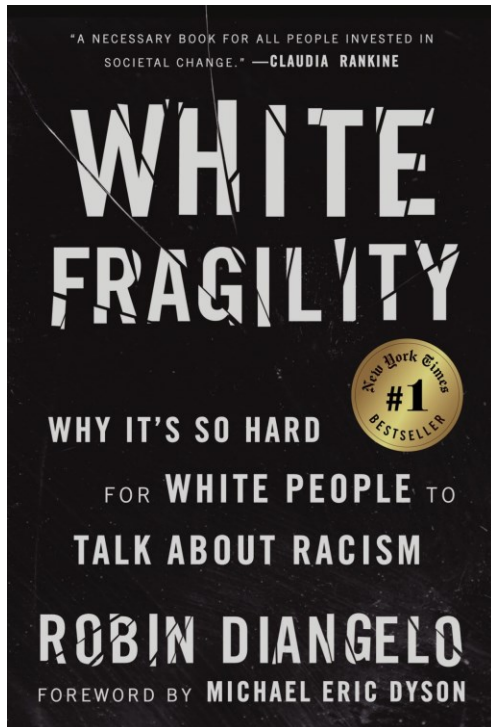


WHITE FRAGILITY: WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM



Adult

By Robin Diangelo

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Book Summary:

This book presents the idea that United States of America is founded in white supremacist ideas and white individuals have knowingly or unknowingly, allowed the continuation of racism.

Summary of Concerns:

This book contains references to racism; controversial racial, historical, political, and social commentary; alternate sexualities; alternate gender ideologies; and derogatory term use.

2/5

Teen Guidance
BookLooks Review Rating

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ix	<p>Race is a condition. A disease. A card. A plague. Original sin. For much of American history, race has been black culture’s issue; racism, a black person’s burden. Or substitute any person of color for black and you’ve got the same problem. Whiteness, however, has remained constant. In the equation of race, another metaphor for race beckons; whiteness is the unchanging variable. Or, to shift metaphors, whiteness has been, to pinch Amiri Baraka’s resonant phrase, the “changing same,” a highly adaptable and fluid force that stays on top no matter where it lands. In a sense, whiteness is at once the means of dominance, the end to which dominance points, and the point of dominance, too, which, in its purest form, in its greatest fantasy, never ends.</p> <p>...But whiteness goes even one better: it is a category of identity that is most useful when its very existence is denied. That’s its twisted genius. Whiteness embodies Charles Baudelaire’s admonition that “the loveliest trick of the Devil is to persuade you that he does not exist.”</p> <p>...Robin DiAngelo is here to announce, in the words of evangelicals—and rappers Rick Ross and Jay-Z—“The Devil Is a Lie.” Whiteness, like race, may not be true—it’s not a biologically heritable characteristic that has roots in physiological structures or in genes or chromosomes. But it is real, in the sense that societies and rights and goods and resources and privileges have been built on its foundation. DiAngelo brilliantly names a whiteness that doesn’t want to be named, disrobes a whiteness that dresses in camouflage as humanity, unmask a whiteness costumed as American, and fetches to center stage a whiteness that would rather hide in visible invisibility.</p> <p>...One must wave off racist stereotypes and conjure a rich history of combatting white supremacy and white privilege and white lies—a history that has often been buried deep in the dark, rich, black American soil. DiAngelo knows that what she is saying to white folk in this book is what so many black folks have thought and believed and said over the years but couldn’t be heard because white ears were too sensitive, white souls too fragile. DiAngelo joins the front ranks of white antiracist thinkers with a stirring call to conscience and, most important, consciousness in her white brothers and sisters.</p> <p>...But she is clear-eyed and unsentimental in untangling the intertwined threads of social destiny and political prescription that bind white identity to moral neutrality and cultural universality.</p> <p>...No less an authority than Beyoncé Knowles recently remarked, “It’s been said that racism is so American that when we protest racism, some assume we’re protesting America.”</p>
xi	<p>DiAngelo forces us to see that all politics have rested on identities, and that those identities are critical features of wrestling with how we have gone wrong in the effort to set things right—which too often has meant make them white.</p> <p>...For most of our history, straight white men have been involved in a witness protection program that guards their identities and absolves them of their crimes while offering them a future free of past encumbrances and sins.</p> <p>...Instead of covering up for a whiteness that refused to face up to its benefits and advantages, its errors and faults, she has sought to uphold the humanity of the unjustly maligned while exposing the offenses of the undeservedly celebrated.</p> <p>...In truth, their suffering comes from recognizing that they are white—that their whiteness has given them a big leg up in life while crushing others’ dreams, that their whiteness is the clearest example of the identity politics they claim is harmful to the nation, and that their whiteness has shielded them from growing up as quickly as they might have done had they not so heavily leaned on it to make it through life. <i>White Fragility</i> is a vital, necessary, and beautiful book, a bracing call to white folk everywhere to see their whiteness for what it is</p>

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	and to seize the opportunity to make things better now. Robin DiAngelo kicks all the crutches to the side and demands that white folk finally mature and face the world they've made while seeking to help remake it for those who have neither their privilege nor their protection.
xiii	Yet the nation began with the attempted genocide of Indigenous people and the theft of their land. American wealth was built on the labor of kidnapped and enslaved Africans and their descendants. ...The identities of those sitting at the tables of power in this country have remained remarkably similar: white, male, middle-and upper-class, able-bodied.
xv	People of color cannot avoid understanding white consciousness to some degree if they are to be successful in this society, yet nothing in dominant culture affirms their understanding or validates their frustrations when they interact with white people.
xvi	The dynamics of what is termed “passing” —being perceived as white—will also shape a multiracial person’s identity, as passing will grant him or her society’s rewards of whiteness. However, people of mixed racial heritage who pass as white may also experience resentment and isolation from people of color who cannot pass.
xvii	My hope is that you may gain insight into why people who identify as white are so difficult in conversations regarding race and/ or gain insight into your own racial responses as you navigate the roiling racial waters of daily life.
1	I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color. ...White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage. ...These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as white fragility. Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.
3	I began to see what I think of as the pillars of whiteness—the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses. I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. And in light of so many white expressions of resentment toward people of color, I realized that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve; I saw our investment in a system that serves us.
4	If, however, I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth. One of the greatest social fears for a white person is being told that something that we have said or done is racially problematic.
5	Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be, and even how long we can expect to

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7	It's not really possible to grow up in the United States or spend any significant time here—or any other culture with a history of Western colonization—without developing opinions on racism.
8	These forces include the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity.
15	<p>Many of us have been taught to believe that there are distinct biological and genetic differences between races.</p> <p>...The idea of race as a biological construct makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions we see in society are natural. But race, like gender, is socially constructed.</p> <p>...Freedom and equality—regardless of religion or class status—were radical new ideas when the United States was formed. At the same time, the US economy was based on the abduction and enslavement of African people, the displacement and genocide of Indigenous people, and the annexation of Mexican lands. Further, the colonizers who came were not free of their own cultural conditioning; they brought with them deeply internalized patterns of domination and submission.</p> <p>...Jefferson suggested that there were natural differences between the races and asked scientists to find them. If science could prove that black people were naturally and inherently inferior (he saw Indigenous people as culturally deficient—a shortcoming that could be remedied), there would be no contradiction between our professed ideals and our actual practices.</p> <p>...Race science was driven by these social and economic interests, which came to establish cultural norms and legal rulings that legitimized racism and the privileged status of those defined as white.</p>
16	Similarly, historian Ibram Kendi, in his National Book Award–winning work <i>Stamped from the Beginning</i> , explains: “The beneficiaries of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration have produced racist ideas of Black people being best suited for or deserving of the confines of slavery, segregation, or the jail cell. Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many Black people.” Kendi goes on to argue that if we truly believe that all humans are equal, then disparity in condition can only be the result of systemic discrimination.
17	Race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage.
19	<p>Still, although working-class whites experience classism, they aren't also experiencing racism.</p> <p>...But I also always knew that I was white, and that it was better to be white.</p>
20	When a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors.
21	Racism is a system. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the intersection of race and gender in the example of suffrage; white men granted suffrage to women, but only granted full access to white women.

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22	<p>Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society.</p> <p>...Racism differs from individual racial prejudice and racial discrimination in the historical accumulation and ongoing use of institutional power and authority to support the prejudice and to systematically enforce discriminatory behaviors with far-reaching effects.</p> <p>...People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against their own and other groups of color, but this bias ultimately holds them down and, in this way, reinforces the system of racism that still benefits whites.</p> <p>...When I say that only whites can be racist, I mean that in the United States, only whites have the collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color. People of color do not have this power and privilege over white people.</p>
24	<p>Individual whites may be “against” racism, but they still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group. David Wellman succinctly summarizes racism as “a system of advantage based on race.” These advantages are referred to as white privilege, a sociological concept referring to advantages that are taken for granted by whites and that cannot be similarly enjoyed by people of color in the same context (government, community, workplace, schools, etc.).</p> <p>...Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others.</p>
25	<p>Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.</p>
26	<p>The story of Jackie Robinson is a classic example of how whiteness obscures racism by rendering whites, white privilege, and racist institutions invisible.</p>
27	<p>To say that whiteness is a location of structural advantage is to recognize that to be white is to be in a privileged position within society and its institutions—to be seen as an insider and to be granted the benefits of belonging. This position automatically bestows unearned advantages.</p>
28	<p>For sociologists and those involved in current racial justice movements, however, white supremacy is a descriptive and useful term to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as white and the practices based on this assumption. White supremacy in this context does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination. Again, racism is a structure, not an event.</p>
29	<p>Mills describes white supremacy as “the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.”</p> <p>...In this way, white supremacy is rendered invisible while other political systems—socialism, capitalism, fascism—are identified and studied.</p>
30	<p>Race scholars use the term white supremacy to describe a sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefits those defined and perceived as white. This system of structural power privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group.</p>
40	<p>For example, after a white nationalist march and the murder of a counter-protester, the president of the United States said that there are “very fine people on both sides.” This comment would have been unthinkable from a high-ranking public official just a few years ago. Yet if we asked the president if he was a racist, I am confident that he would reply with</p>

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	<p>a resounding no (in fact, he recently stated that he was “the least racist” person one could ever meet). In this chapter, I review various ways that racism has adapted over time to continue to produce racial disparity while it exempts virtually all white people from any involvement in, or benefit from, racism.</p> <p>...Advances are also tenuous, as we can see in recent challenges to the rights of LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual) people.</p>
46	<p>Racist images and resultant white fears can be found at all levels of society, and myriad studies demonstrate that whites believe that people of color (and blacks in particular) are dangerous.</p>
47	<p>The body of research about children and race demonstrates that white children develop a sense of white superiority as early as preschool. This early start shouldn’t be surprising, as society sends constant messages that to be white is better than to be a person of color.</p>
48	<p>“As I sit in a room with a bunch of frat guys, Phil walks in chanting ‘rotchie, rotchie, rotchie!’ I ask . . . what that term means and I am answered with a giggle and a quick ‘it’s slang for nigger, like niggerotchie.’ . . .” [Eileen]</p>
52	<p>The very context in which I entered the world was organized hierarchically by race. Based on this hierarchy, we could predict whether I would survive my birth based on my race.</p>
54	<p>This is yet another example of the concept of whiteness as property discussed earlier: whiteness has psychological advantages that translate into material returns.</p>
56	<p>This also allows white (male) writers to be seen as not having an agenda or any particular perspective, while racialized (and gendered) writers do.</p>
59	<p>Romanticized recollections of the past and calls for a return to former ways are a function of white privilege, which manifests itself in the ability to remain oblivious to our racial history. Claiming that the past was socially better than the present is also a hallmark of white supremacy. Consider any period in the past from the perspective of people of color: 246 years of brutal enslavement; the rape of black women for the pleasure of white men and to produce more enslaved workers; the selling off of black children; the attempted genocide of Indigenous people, Indian removal acts, and reservations; indentured servitude, lynching, and mob violence; sharecropping; Chinese exclusion laws; Japanese American internment; Jim Crow laws of mandatory segregation; black codes; bans on black jury service; bans on voting; imprisoning people for unpaid work; medical sterilization and experimentation; employment discrimination; educational discrimination; inferior schools; biased laws and policing practices; redlining and subprime mortgages; mass incarceration; racist media representations; cultural erasures, attacks, and mockery; and untold and perverted historical accounts, and you can see how a romanticized past is strictly a white construct.</p>
60	<p>And although globalization and the erosion of workers’ rights has had a profound impact on the white working class, white fragility enabled the white elite to direct the white working class’s resentment toward people of color. The resentment is clearly misdirected, given that the people who control the economy and who have managed to concentrate more wealth into fewer (white) hands than ever before in human history are the white elite.</p>
61	<p>The call to Make America Great Again worked powerfully in service of the racial manipulation of white people, diverting blame away from the white elite and toward various peoples of color—for example, undocumented workers, immigrants, and the Chinese—for the current conditions of the white working class.</p>

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63	<p>It has been well documented that blacks and Latinos are stopped by police more often than whites are for the same activities and that they receive harsher sentences than whites do for the same crimes.</p> <p>...When black and Latinx youth go before a judge, the cause of the crime is more often attributed to something internal to the person—the youth is naturally more prone to crime, is more animalistic, and has less capacity for remorse (similarly, a 2016 study found that half of a sample of medical students and residents believe that blacks feel less pain¹⁸).</p> <p>...For those of us who work to raise the racial consciousness of whites, simply getting whites to acknowledge that our race gives us advantages is a major effort.</p> <p>...Critical race scholar Zeus Leonardo critiques the concept of white privilege as something white people receive unwittingly.</p>
76	<p>Readers may recall a West Virginia county employee—Pamela Ramsey Taylor—who held a high-level position as director of county development and was suspended after posting racist remarks about First Lady Michelle Obama on Facebook (“ It will be so refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady back in the White House. I’m tired of seeing a [sic] Ape in heels”).</p>
83	<p>While everyone of every race holds prejudice and can discriminate against someone of another race, in the US and other white/ settler nations, only white people are in the position to oppress people of color collectively and throughout the whole of society. This claim defines racism as a fluid dynamic that changes direction according to each group’s ratio in a given space. While a white person may have been picked on—even mercilessly—by being in the numerical minority in a specific context, the individual was experiencing race prejudice and discrimination, not racism. This distinction is not meant to minimize the white person’s experience, but aims to clarify and to prevent rendering the terms interchangeable and thus meaningless.</p> <p>Moreover, the society at large is still reinforcing white supremacy, and everyone in the school was affected by it. It is likely that white students at such a school were treated better by teachers and that higher expectations were held for them.</p>
90	<p>In this chapter, I will address the uniquely anti-black sentiment integral to white identity. ...However, I believe that in the white mind, black people are the ultimate racial “other,” and we must grapple with this relationship, for it is a foundational aspect of the racial socialization underlying white fragility.</p>
91	<p>Creating a separate and inferior black race simultaneously created the “superior” white race: one concept could not exist without the other. In this sense, whites need black people; blackness is essential to the creation of white identity.</p>
93	<p>We see anti-black sentiment in how quickly images of brutality toward black children (let alone black adults) are justified by the white assumption that it must have been deserved. Such beliefs would be unimaginable if we had been shown images of white teens being thrown across schoolrooms, of white kindergarteners handcuffed, of a white child shot while playing with a toy gun in the park. We see anti-black sentiment in the immediate rejoinder to Black Lives Matter that all lives matter, that blue lives matter. And in the absurdly false comparison between the white nationalist and “alt-right” movement (now directly connected to the White House) with the Black Panther Party of the 1960s. We see anti-blackness in how much more harshly we criticize blacks, by every measure. We see it in the president of the United States positioning the avowed white supremacist neo-Nazi marching openly in the streets—including one man who drove a car into a crowd of</p>

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	<p>protesters—as equal in character to the people protesting them. As Coates notes in “The Case for Reparations”:</p> <p>The early American economy was built on slave labor. The Capitol and the White House were built by slaves. President James K. Polk traded slaves from the Oval Office. The laments about “black pathology,” the criticism of black family structures by pundits and intellectuals, ring hollow in a country whose existence was predicated on the torture of black fathers, on the rape of black mothers, on the sale of black children. An honest assessment of America’s relationship to the black family reveals the country to be not its nurturer but its destroyer. And this destruction did not end with slavery.</p>
95	<p>Thus, white identity depends in particular on the projection of inferiority onto blacks and the oppression this inferior status justifies for the white collective.</p> <p>...We see it today when commentators slam National Football League (NFL) players who kneel during the national anthem and exercise their right to protest police brutality as “ungrateful” and when former congressman Joe Walsh declares that Stevie Wonder is “another ungrateful black multimillionaire.” We see it when Robert Jeffress, Dallas evangelical pastor and adviser to the president of the United States, claims that NFL players who protest police brutality against African Americans should thank God they don’t have to worry about being shot in the head “like they would be in North Korea.” We see it in the outrage of the crowd of white progressives who showed up to hear Bernie Sanders speak in Seattle and were asked by black activists to grant four and a half minutes of silence to honor Michael Brown, an unarmed black man shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri: “How dare you!” the crowd cried.</p> <p>Carol Anderson, in her book <i>White Rage</i>, argues that “the trigger for white rage, inevitably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up.”</p>
98	<p>Individual black people can overcome their circumstances, but usually only with the help of white people.</p>
99	<p>Although white racial insulation is somewhat mediated by social class (with poor and working-class urban whites being generally less racially insulated than suburban or rural whites), the larger social environment protects whites as a group through institutions, cultural representations, media, school textbooks, movies, advertising, dominant discourses, and the like. Whiteness studies scholar Michelle Fine describes this insulation: “Whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/ or benefits of the doubt; how Whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity.”</p> <p>...But within their insulated environment of racial privilege, whites both expect racial comfort and become less tolerant of racial stress.</p>
104	<p>In a society in which whites are dominant, each of these challenges becomes exceptional.</p>
108	<p>As in other Western nations, white children born in the United States inherit the moral predicament of living in a white supremacist society.</p>
110	<p>The language of violence that many whites use to describe antiracist endeavors is not without significance, as it is another example of how white fragility distorts reality. By employing terms that connote physical abuse, whites tap into the classic story that people of color (particularly African Americans) are dangerous and violent.</p>

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112	White fragility keeps people of color in line and “in their place.” In this way, it is a powerful form of white racial control.
113	Let me also be clear that the term “white fragility” is intended to describe a very specific white phenomenon. ...It may be conceptualized as the sociology of dominance: an outcome of white people’s socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy. The term is not applicable to other groups who may register complaints or otherwise be deemed difficult (e.g., “student fragility”). ...However, we aren’t likely to get there if we are operating from the dominant worldview that only intentionally mean people can participate in racism.
116	I can describe our culture as white supremacist and say things like “All white people are invested in and collude with racism” without my fellow white people running from the room or reeling from trauma.
117	Throughout this book, I have attempted to make visible the inevitable racist assumptions held and patterns displayed by white people conditioned by living in a white supremacist culture.
127	Speak your truth: The admonition to speak the truth seems to be an unnecessary guideline.
131	The term white tears refers to all the ways, both literally and metaphorically, that white fragility manifests itself through white people’s laments over how hard racism is on us.
132	White women’s tears in cross-racial interactions are problematic for several reasons connected to how they impact others. For example, there is a long historical backdrop of black men being tortured and murdered because of a white woman’s distress, and we white women bring these histories with us. Our tears trigger the terrorism of this history, particularly for African Americans.
136	White men occupy the highest positions in the race and gender hierarchy. Thus, they have the power to define their own reality and that of others.
137	Men of color may also come to the aid of white women in these exchanges and may also be driven by their conditioning under sexism and patriarchy. ...White people do need to feel grief about the brutality of white supremacy and our role in it. In fact, our numbness to the racial injustice that occurs daily is key to holding it in place.
148	We can interrupt our white fragility and build our capacity to sustain cross-racial honesty by being willing to tolerate the discomfort associated with an honest appraisal and discussion of our internalized superiority and racial privilege.
150	Rather, I strive to be “less white.” To be less white is to be less racially oppressive.
152	It is white people’s responsibility to be less fragile; people of color don’t need to twist themselves into knots trying to navigate us as painlessly as possible.

Derogatory Term	Count
Nigger	8