



Book Review

Book Review: White Fragility

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DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard to talk to white people about racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. ISBN 9780807047415 (paperback). \$16.

With the rise of the alt-right, the election of Donald Trump, and the continued violence and terror perpetrated against people of color, white progressives have been shocked by the supposed return of white supremacy. Yet, Robin DiAngelo's recent book, *White Fragility*, shows us that the dual forces of racism and white supremacy are more complex and deeply embedded than their obvious expressions in violence and bigotry. According to DiAngelo, racism has "adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist" (p. 39). Throughout this book, DiAngelo reveals how a white person can profess to be both "woke" in their support of the racially oppressed while also supporting systems of racial oppression through common beliefs and practices lacking explicit appeals to racist ideologies. A major consequence for white people, DiAngelo reveals, has been the moral alienation from their support of white supremacy, and she vividly shows the reader how this alienation is maintained through the deployment of white fragility.

The book's argument unfolds over 12 chapters. The first two chapters establish the phenomenon of white fragility and connect it to systems of white supremacy. White fragility is the emotional response of white people who perceive themselves as not racist when forced to confront the reality of their racist actions. DiAngelo takes great care to demonstrate how socialization within various white supremacist systems and ideologies ensure that everyone is shaped by racism. For white people, this means an implicit bias for whiteness, and she takes time discussing how cultural objects like movies; policies that concentrate poverty along racial lines; economic systems based on capitalism and merit constantly isolate and reinforce whiteness without being openly and distastefully racist, work together to create and confirm white people's implicit support of white supremacy.

Chapter 3 "Racism After the Civil Rights Movement" discusses how racism has undergone a significant transformation following the Civil Rights Movement. Prior to this, racism existed out in the open through civil and state segregation, and someone could actively support systems of oppression while viewing themselves as a morally good person. The large-scale use of violence employed to protect overt racism resulted in the bifurcation of racism and moral goodness, and this bifurcation between moral goodness and racism lies at the heart of white fragility. That is, white fragility occurs because it is viewed as impossible to commit racist acts and also be a morally good person. According to DiAngelo, white people did not

banish racism with this split; rather, racism moved underground through a complex system of coded language and action (e.g. color-blindness) that both shelters white people from the reality of their actions while also serving to perpetuate systems of racial oppression. Thus, DiAngelo pushes the reader to view the Civil Rights Movement as an important moment in the development of racism not because it eliminated or reduced racism but because it drove racism and white supremacy underground and deeply embedded it within a myriad of socio-political beliefs, technologies, and policies.

Having exposed the mental split between racism and moral goodness and the ways in which racism has become coded, DiAngelo spends the final chapters outlining why the phenomenon of white fragility is particularly insidious. White fragility manifests when someone is made aware of racist beliefs, words, and/or actions. This is registered as incompatible with their self-conception as a good person, and they view this calling out as a moment of misunderstanding or violence against them and their character. White fragility, according to DiAngelo, allows white people to shift the focus from their racism to the act of it being called out; it transforms the oppressor to the oppressed (at least for the fragile white person); and it sidelines the words and experiences of people of color. DiAngelo enhances her argumentation by drawing on her experiences leading workplace discussions on race to vividly illustrate white fragility's efficacy in preventing substantial discussions of race and white supremacy.

Overall, this is a valuable and accessible addition to the literature on critical whiteness. While many, through their own white fragility, will overlook this book, it can be a powerful teaching tool for white people aiming to be allies against systems of oppression. In particular, this book has serious implications for white educators as they occupy intersecting positions of power. White educators working with racial minorities must enter these relationships fully aware of their racist baggage. Being socialized as a white person guarantees that they will transgress, doing or saying something racist. What matters is not that they never transgress, but, rather, that they use the transgression as a moment of disequilibrium to accept feedback and grow. To act otherwise is to mobilize white fragility to defend oneself and, by extension, to defend white supremacy.



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