

# White Fragility

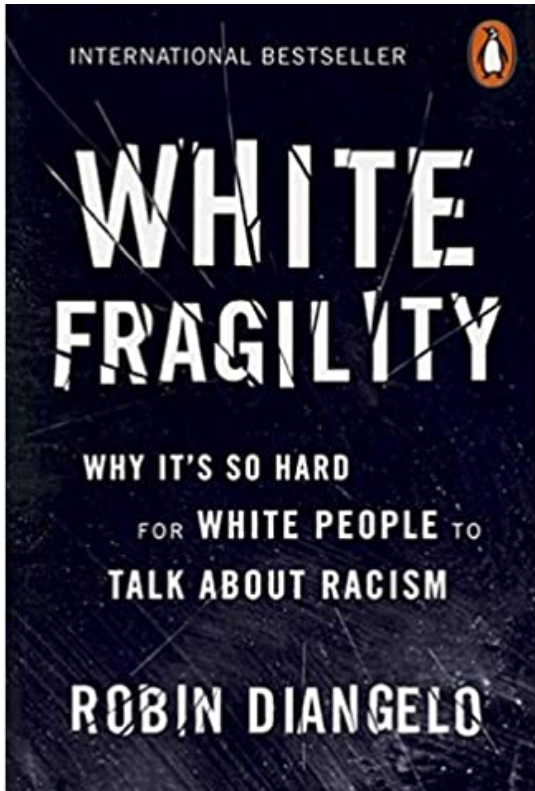
Why It's So Hard for White People  
to Talk About Racism

Robin J. DiAngelo

Boston: Beacon Press [2018]



## Why is this book worth our time?



#1 – This book presents an honest look at the realities of the black experience; though admittedly from the perspective of a white woman author.

#2 – White people who are not racist personally (i.e., in cruel, personal, harmful, overtly “racist” ways), are still racist in systemic ways. They need to become aware of these ways. This book will help.

#3 – This is not a time to worry too much (if any) about hurting the feelings of white people. White fragility is not worth defending. This book will help with that, also.

## Quotes and Excerpts from the book – the “best of” Randy’s highlighted passages:

### What is the point?

A white person’s discomfort should not be what is at stake in modern discussions of race. The white people are not the ones who have been wronged, and are being wronged.

• (From the foreword by Michael Eric Dyson):

1. One metaphor for race, and racism, won’t do. No, we need many metaphors. pg. ix
2. Race is a condition. A disease. A card. A plague. Original sin. pg. ix
3. Whiteness, however, has remained constant.
4. ...whiteness is the unchanging variable.
5. ...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. pg. ix
6. 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. pg. ix.
7. ...whiteness is a fiction, what in the jargon of the academy is termed a social construct, pg. ix
8. Whiteness, like race, may not be true -- But it is real. pg. x

9. Beyoncé Knowles recently remarked, “It’s been said that racism is so American that when we protest racism, some assume we’re protesting America.” pg. xi
10. ...the flow of white identity into American identity—of racist beliefs into national beliefs—must be met head-on with a full-throated insistence that what it means to be American is not what it means to be white, at least not exclusively, or even primarily. pg. xi
11. Robin DiAngelo is the new racial sheriff in town. White fragility is an idea whose time has come. pg. xi
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12. The United States was founded on the principle that all people are created equal. 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. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920, and black women were denied access to that right until 1965.
13. The term identity politics refers to the focus on the barriers specific groups face in their struggle for equality.
14. 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. pg. xiii
15. Exclusion by those at the table doesn’t depend on willful intent; we don’t have to intend to exclude for the results of our actions to be exclusion. ...While implicit bias is always at play because all humans have bias, inequity can occur simply through homogeneity; if I am not aware of the barriers you face, then I won’t see them, much less be motivated to remove them. Nor will I be motivated to remove the barriers if they provide an advantage to which I feel entitled. pg. xiii
16. All progress we have made in the realm of civil rights has been accomplished through identity politics: women’s suffrage, the American with Disabilities Act, Title 9, federal recognition of same-sex marriage. pg. xiv
17. Not naming the groups that face barriers only serves those who already have access; the assumption is that the access enjoyed by the controlling group is universal. For example, although we are taught that women were granted suffrage in 1920, we ignore the fact that it was white women who received full access or that it was white men who granted it. Not until the 1960s, through the Voting Rights Act, were all women—regardless of race—granted full access to suffrage. Naming who has access and who doesn’t guides our efforts in challenging injustice. pg. xiv
18. **Take women’s suffrage. If being a woman denies you the right to vote, you ipso facto cannot grant it to yourself. pg. xiv.**
19. **This book is unapologetically rooted in identity politics. I am white and am addressing a common white dynamic. ... when I use the terms us and we, I am referring to the white collective. pg. xiv**
20. These patterns have also been observed in white people in other white settler societies such as Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. pg. xv
21. We can never consider our learning to be complete or finished. pg. xv
22. I use the terms white and people of color to indicate the two macro-level, socially recognized divisions of the racial hierarchy. pg. xv
23. 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. pg. xvi

24. **In a racist society, the desired direction is always toward whiteness and away from being perceived as a person of color. pg. xvi**
25. “A white person can’t get a job anymore!” I look around the room and see forty employees, thirty-eight of whom are white. pg. 1
26. **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. pg. 1**
27. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable -- The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. ...behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.
28. 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. pg. 2
29. I was taken aback by how angry and defensive so many white people became at the suggestion that they were connected to racism in any way. The very idea that they would be required to attend a workshop on racism outraged them. pg. 2
30. **For example, many white participants who lived in white suburban neighborhoods and had no sustained relationships with people of color were absolutely certain that they held no racial prejudice or animosity. pg. 3**
31. **Other participants simplistically reduced racism to a matter of nice people versus mean people. pg. 3**
32. 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.
33. 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.
34. It became clear that if I believed that only bad people who intended to hurt others because of race could ever do so, I would respond with outrage to any suggestion that I was involved in racism.
35. I came to see that the way we are taught to define racism makes it virtually impossible for white people to understand it.
36. Given our racial insulation, coupled with misinformation, any suggestion that we are complicit in racism is a kind of unwelcome and insulting shock to the system.
37. 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. pg. 4
38. One of the greatest social fears for a white person is being told that something that we have said or done is racially problematic. pg. 4

39. **I believe that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color. ...White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice. White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so. pg. 5**
40. This book does not attempt to provide the solution to racism. Nor does it attempt to prove that racism exists; I start from that premise. pg. 5
41. Of course, I was made aware that somebody's race mattered, and if race was discussed, it would be theirs, not mine. pg. 7
42. Nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years. pg. 8
43. **I can get through graduate school without ever discussing racism. I can graduate from law school without ever discussing racism. I can get through a teacher-education program without ever discussing racism. pg. 8**
44. **Interrupting the forces of racism is ongoing, lifelong work because the forces conditioning us into racist frameworks are always at play; our learning will never be finished. -- Yet our simplistic definition of racism—as intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals—engenders a confidence that we are not part of the problem and that our learning is thus complete. pg. 9**
45. Many white people simply do not understand the process of socialization, and this is our next challenge. pg. 9
46. Our understanding of ourselves is necessarily based on our comparisons with others. pg. 11
47. We cannot understand modern forms of racism if we cannot or will not explore patterns of group behavior and their effects on individuals. pg. 12
48. In the post-civil rights era, we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; racists are immoral. pg. 13
49. If your definition of a racist is someone who holds conscious dislike of people because of race, then I agree that it is offensive for me to suggest that you are racist when I don't know you. I also agree that if this is your definition of racism, and you are against racism, then you are not racist.
50. I am not using this definition of racism. pg. 13
51. This feeling may be a sign that I've managed to unsettle the racial status quo, which is my goal. The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable. The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort. pg. 14
52. Is it possible that because I am white, there are some racial dynamics that I can't see? Am I willing to consider that possibility? If I am not willing to do so, then why not? pg. 14
53. To interrupt white fragility, we need to build our capacity to sustain the discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of being racially unmoored, the discomfort of racial humility.
54. To increase the racial stamina that counters white fragility, we must reflect on the whole of our identities—and our racial group identity in particular. For white people, this means first struggling with what it means to be white. pg. 14

55. The differences we see with our eyes—differences such as hair texture and eye color—are superficial and emerged as adaptations to geography. Under the skin, there is no true biological race. pg. 15
56. 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.
57. The colonizers who came were not free of their own cultural conditioning; they brought with them deeply internalized patterns of domination and submission.
58. 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... pg. 16
59. American scientists began searching for the answer to the perceived inferiority of non-Anglo groups. ...these scientists didn't ask, "Are blacks (and others) inferior?" They asked, "Why are blacks (and others) inferior?" pg. 16
60. The idea of racial inferiority was created to justify unequal treatment; belief in racial inferiority is not what triggered unequal treatment. Nor was fear of difference. ...As Ta-Nehisi Coates states, "But race is the child of racism, not the father." He means that first we exploited people for their resources, not according to how they looked. ... Exploitation came first, and then the ideology of unequal races to justify this exploitation followed. pg. 16
61. 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. pg. 17
62. When slavery in the United States was abolished in 1865, whiteness remained profoundly important as legalized racist exclusion and violence against African Americans continued in new forms. To have citizenship—and the rights citizenship imbued—you had to be legally classified as white. pg. 17
63. In 1922, the Supreme Court ruled that the Japanese could not be legally white, because they were scientifically classified as "Mongoloid." ...To justify these contradictory rulings, the court stated that being white was based on the common understanding of the white man. In other words, people already seen as white got to decide who was white. pg. 17
64. In reality, only European immigrants were allowed to melt, or assimilate, into dominant culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because, regardless of their ethnic identities, these immigrants were perceived to be white and thus could belong. pg. 18
65. If we "look white," we are treated as white in society at large. pg. 18
66. I grew up in poverty and felt a deep sense of shame about being poor. But I also always knew that I was white, and that it was better to be white. pg. 19
67. Prejudice consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little or no experience and then are projected onto everyone from that group. ...Our prejudices tend to be shared because we swim in the same cultural water and absorb the same messages. pg. 19
68. People who claim not to be prejudiced are demonstrating a profound lack of self-awareness. pg. 19
69. All humans have prejudice; we cannot avoid it. pg. 19

70. Prejudice is foundational to understanding white fragility because suggesting that white people have racial prejudice is perceived as saying that we are bad and should be ashamed. pg. 20
71. 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. ...**"Racism is a structure, not an event."** pg. 20
72. Women as a group could not deny men their civil rights. But men as a group could and did deny women their civil rights. Men could do so because they controlled all the institutions. Therefore, the only way women could gain suffrage was for men to grant it to them; women could not grant suffrage to themselves. pg. 20  
(and)...white men granted suffrage to women, but only granted full access to white women. Women of color were denied full access until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. pg. 21
- 73. Similarly, racism—like sexism and other forms of oppression—occurs when a racial group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. pg. 21**
74. The system of racism begins with ideology,  
75. From birth, we are conditioned into accepting and not questioning these ideas. pg. 21
- 76. The racial ideology that circulates in the United States rationalizes racial hierarchies as the outcome of a natural order resulting from either genetics or individual effort or talent. pg. 21**
77. People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against white people, but they lack the social and institutional power that transforms their prejudice and discrimination into racism; the impact of their prejudice on whites is temporary and contextual.
78. Whites hold the social and institutional positions in society to infuse their racial prejudice into the laws, policies, practices, and norms of society in a way that people of color do not.
- 79. 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. pg. 22**
- 80. The law's construction of whiteness defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity (who is white); of privilege (what benefits accrue to that status); and, of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status). pg. 24**
81. These resources include self-worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom from the tether of race, freedom of movement, the sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement to all the above. pg. 25
- 82. W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin, have been writing about whiteness for decades, if not centuries. pg. 25**
83. Racism against people of color doesn't occur in a vacuum. pg. 25

84. "Jackie Robinson, the first black man whites allowed to play major-league baseball." This version makes a critical distinction because no matter how fantastic a player Robinson was, he simply could not play in the major leagues if whites—who controlled the institution—did not allow it. ...Were he to walk onto the field before being granted permission by white owners and policy makers, the police would have removed him. pg. 26
85. White history is implied in the absence of its acknowledgment; white history is the norm for history. Thus, our need to qualify that we are speaking about black history or women's history suggests that these contributions lie outside the norm. pg. 27
86. Although rare individual people of color may be inside the circles of power—Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, Marco Rubio, Barack Obama—they support the status quo and do not challenge racism in any way significant enough to be threatening. pg. 27
- 87. The dimensions of racism benefiting white people are usually invisible to whites. pg. 28**
88. 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. pg. 28
89. The United States is a global power, ...white supremacy is circulated globally.
90. White supremacy (is) "the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today." pg. 29
- 91. To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying. pg. 30**
92. it is the deeper premise that supports this idea—the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm. pg. 33
- 93. Our umbrage at the term white supremacy only serves to protect the processes it describes and obscure the mechanisms of racial inequality. pg. 33**
94. At the most general level, the racial frame views whites as superior in culture and achievement and views people of color as generally of less social, economic, and political consequence; people of color are seen as inferior to whites in the making and keeping of the nation. pg. 34
95. If people of color did not live in your neighborhood, why didn't they? pg. 35
96. Clearly, the civil rights movement didn't end racism; nor have claims of color blindness. pg. 41
- 97. This defensiveness is rooted in the false but widespread belief that racial discrimination can only be intentional. Our lack of understanding about implicit bias leads to aversive racism. pg. 43**
98. Toni Morrison uses the term race talk to capture "the explicit insertion into everyday life of racial signs and symbols that have no meaning other than positioning African Americans into the lowest level of the racial hierarchy." ...Casual race talk is a key component of white racial framing because it accomplishes the interconnected goals of elevating whites while demeaning people of color; race talk always implies a racial "us" and "them." pg. 45
99. White children develop a sense of white superiority as early as preschool. pg. 47
100. Whites are operating under the false assumption that we can't simultaneously be good people and participate in racism, at the same time that we are dishonest about what we really think and do regarding people of color. pg. 49



- 101. George Zimmerman would not have stopped me as I walked through a gated suburban neighborhood. pg. 54**
102. While I am aware that race has been used unfairly against people of color, I haven't been taught to see this problem as any responsibility of mine; pg. 55
103. Whites are "just people"—our race is rarely if ever named. pg. 56
104. Of the fifty richest people on earth, twenty-nine are American. Of these twenty-nine, all are white, and all but two are men (Lauren Jobs inherited her husband's wealth, and Alice Walton her father's). pg. 59
105. The expectation that people of color should teach white people about racism is another aspect of white racial innocence that reinforces several problematic racial assumptions.
106. This framework denies that racism is a relationship in which both groups are involved.
107. Second, this request requires nothing of us and reinforces unequal power relations by asking people of color to do our work.
108. Third, the request ignores the historical dimensions of race relations. It disregards how often people of color have indeed tried to tell us what racism is like for them and how often they have been dismissed. pg. 64
109. In other words, racists were mean, ignorant, old, uneducated, Southern whites. ...people raised in the "enlightened North," could not be racist. pg. 72
110. "Racism is a systemic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality. pg. 72
- 111. 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 (while he was president)... Loc. pg. 93**
112. I believe that the white collective fundamentally hates blackness for what it reminds us of: that we are capable and guilty of perpetrating immeasurable harm. pg. 95
113. White fragility may be conceptualized as a response or "condition" produced and reproduced by the continual social and material advantages of whiteness. pg. 105
114. White people are receptive to my presentation as long as it remains abstract. -- Shaking my head, I think to myself, "You asked me here to help you see your racism, but by god, I'd better not actually help you see your racism." pg. 117
115. I have found that the only way to give feedback without triggering white fragility is not to give it at all. pg. 123
116. If I cannot handle (honest feedback on my racism) it's on me to build my racial stamina. – (I need to simply say) Thank you. pg. 126
117. I repeat: stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don't have them. We do have them. We do have them, and people of color already know we have them; our efforts to prove otherwise are not convincing. An honest accounting of these patterns is no small task given the power of white fragility and white solidarity, but it is necessary. P. 129
118. The default of the current system is the reproduction of racial inequality; our institutions were designed to reproduce inequality and they do so with efficiency. pg. 153

# The White Fragility

Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism

**Robin J. DiAngelo**

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## Some of the Key Content and Ideas from the Book

### **Definition:**

*White fragility is "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves."*

*As I have tried to show throughout this book, white people raised in Western society are co conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions.*

I expect that white readers will have moments of discomfort reading this book. This feeling may be a sign that I've managed to unsettle the racial status quo, which is my goal. The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable. The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort.

- **Are you good at self-reflection?**
- **Let's start here – with white women's tears...**
  - *a woman of color pulled me aside and told me that she wanted to attend but she was "in no mood for white women's tears today."*
  - (remembering the Emmett Till story; and Carolyn Bryant's deathbed confession) – *"When a white woman cries, a black man gets hurt."*
  - problem – a white woman's pain takes the emphasis away from the actual victims of racism
- **This is a book for white people...**
- **Among the problems:**
  - **white people do not see themselves as white**
    - *Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.*
    - *Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people.*
  - **white people do not see themselves as racist**
    - be careful how you define "racist" – "racist" is not individualness meanness (only)
  - **white people do not see themselves as privileged**
    - *David Wellman succinctly summarizes racism as "a system of advantage based on race." These advantages are referred to as white privilege.*
  - **white people do not see the ongoing reality of white supremacy**
    - *Whites control all major institutions of society and set the policies and practices that others must live by.*
    - *Charles W. Mills describes white supremacy as "the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today."*
  - **Black people are discriminated against in the workplace**
    - *Countless studies show empirically that people of color are discriminated against in the workplace.*

- **The bad side of “individualism”**
  - a deep belief in American individualism makes us blind to collective flaws...
  - For many white people, the mere title of this book will cause resistance because I am breaking a cardinal rule of individualism—I am generalizing.
- **The “path”...**
  - supremacy and privilege...lead to prejudice...justifying discrimination
    - *Discrimination is action based on prejudice. These actions include ignoring, exclusion, threats, ridicule, slander, and violence.*
    - *When the prejudice causes me to act differently—I am less relaxed around you or I avoid interacting with you —I am now discriminating.*
- **Let’s try this: predict the race of the people at work based on their jobs...**
- **Who are we talking about?**
  - the “non-racist” white people; who are, in fact, racist...
- **Remember the “Southern Strategy” (Lee Atwater, interview, 1981):**
  - “You start out in 1954 by saying, “N\_\_\_\_\_, n\_\_\_\_\_,, n\_\_\_\_\_,.” By 1968 you can’t say “n\_\_\_\_\_,” —that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff.”
- **Look at this, and ponder: The groups listed are the most powerful in the country. (Ask: what kind of society produces these numbers?) (R.M., I did not update these numbers):**
  - Ten richest Americans: 100 percent white
  - US Congress: 90 percent white
  - US governors: 96 percent white
  - Top military advisers: 100 percent white
  - President and vice president: 100 percent white
  - US House Freedom Caucus: 99 percent white
  - People who decide which TV shows we see: 93 percent white
  - People who decide which books we read: 90 percent white
  - People who decide which news is covered: 85 percent white
  - Teachers: 82 percent white
  - Full-time college professors: 84 percent white
  - Owners of men’s professional football teams: 97 percent white
- **The challenges of the white woman diversity/racism trainer, Robin DiAngelo:**
  - the audience denies being racist
  - the audience is fragile; if accused of being racist, they quickly make the issue about them
  - the audience really is ignorant of history: personal history; American history; “city” history
- **This is what white fragility “looks like”...**
  - FEELINGS • Singled out • Insulted • Attacked • Judged • Silenced • Angry • Shamed • Scared • Guilty • outraged • Accused
  - BEHAVIORS • Crying • Denying • Physically leaving • Focusing on intentions • Emotionally withdrawing • Seeking absolution • Arguing • Avoiding
- **White people, with their rules on how to talk about racism carefully/correctly, end up with rules that:**
  - obscure racism, protect white dominance, and regain white equilibrium
- **The call is to courage and intentionality!**

• **The book:**

Foreword by Michael Eric Dyson

Introduction: We Can't Get There from Here

1 The Challenges of Talking to White People About Racism

2 Racism and White Supremacy

3 Racism After the Civil Rights Movement

4 How Does Race Shape the Lives of White People?

5 The Good/ Bad Binary

6 Anti-Blackness

7 Racial Triggers for White People

8 The Result: White Fragility

9 White Fragility in Action

10 White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

11 White Women's Tears

12 Where Do We Go from Here?

## Some Lessons and Takeaways

#1 – There is no reverse racism. Do not let that “lie” stand. Racism requires superiority and structural exclusion. White people do not experience such in the United States.

#2 – The discrimination, the exclusion, the racism-based superiority, is a multi-century reality. It is (still) every-day reality for people of color. Do not pretend that it is not.

#3 – If you are white, do not claim to be color blind. First, you are not. Second, it does not help.

#4 – Do have gatherings/conversations with people of color. Listen. Really; for extended periods of time, listen. And do not ever turn such meetings into meetings about your feelings of fragility...

#5 – Okay – if you are white, admit that you are racist. Maybe not intentionally; but, you are racist. You have supported, and stood silent at, the systemic white superiority and racist hierarchies of our culture. Admit it. And guard against it.

#6 – And, if you consider yourself an enlightened white person, and an ally to people of color – be careful about how you say such things. Be very careful.

## Randy Mayeux

214.577.8025

randymayeux@sbcglobal.net

Randy blogs about business books at

[www.FirstFridayBookSynopsis.com](http://www.FirstFridayBookSynopsis.com)

Follow Randy on Twitter: @Randy1116

Synopses available at [www.15MinuteBusinessBooks.com](http://www.15MinuteBusinessBooks.com)

