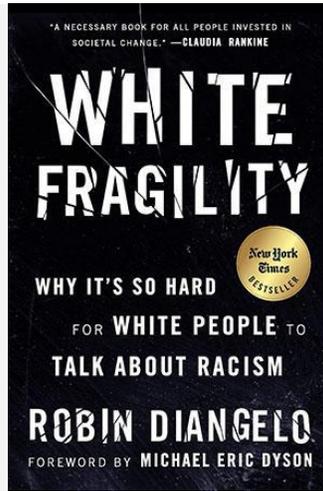


White Fragility Redux

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More than a year ago I wrote a [review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*](#) for the February 2019 issue of the *Voter*. The book is provocative for white people, and my review was frankly designed to engender thought and introspection among League members. As best I can tell, I failed. A few people thanked me for the review and indicated that they intended to read the book. Their interest was greatly appreciated but they were few in number. Not a lot of discussion or introspection ensued.

Now the world has changed. Complacency about race issues is no longer possible. Racism in America is again writ large on our National Landscape, steeped in blood, violence, tears, and death, painfully obvious and not avoidable. I had an exchange several days ago on Facebook with a woman who styled herself as a progressive. She indicated she didn't have any problem with Black Lives Matter as long as her "rights were not taken away." In two words, I pointed out the obvious "white fragility" and predictably got a firestorm back. You couldn't ask for a more obvious example of white fragility; once sensitized by DiAngelo you will find such examples everywhere. This woman was able to concede that black lives are not expendable and should be treasured—but only as long as she lost none of her unearned white privilege. Her lack of insight was staggering, but amazingly common. Needless to say, I wasn't going to win this argument on Facebook, although, being me, I did give it a try.

I am blessed to have a close black friend of many years who spontaneously has been guiding me to resources that I might not have otherwise encountered. These have included a Netflix documentary, *13th*, by acclaimed black filmmaker [Ava DuVernay](#). DuVernay, a native of Southern California and a graduate of UCLA, pulls no punches in showing us what life as a black person has been like since the Civil War. In case you thought that enslavement ended with the Thirteenth Amendment, you would be sadly mistaken. The Thirteenth Amendment provides that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, **except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted**, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Many of us thought that slavery was over when the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in 1865. Not so. The clause that I have placed in bold was used to further enslave black people. Convict them of a petty crime, give them a long sentence, and you can ruin their lives, make them work for you for nothing, and assure that white domination continues. [As reported in *The Washington Post*](#), 25 percent of the world's incarcerated population are incarcerated in the United States, while the U.S. population makes up not quite 5 percent of the world's population.

DuVernay graphically demonstrates why this is. Her documentary features appearances and commentary from a variety of famous people, including Bryan Stevenson (*Just Mercy*), Cory Booker, Angela Davis, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Melina Abdullah, and some people whom you might not expect, including Newt Gingrich and Grover Norquist. Please watch *13th*; it's a compelling companion to DiAngelo's book.

I am a white woman. I read *White Fragility* more than a year ago. I reread the book after the George Floyd murder. The book makes white people uncomfortable, and hence reviews are not all positive. DiAngelo readily acknowledges that she too must fight the racism that she has been swimming in all her life. She makes mistakes, saying or doing things that reflect her white privilege and white blindness. She is clear that the struggle to overcome pervasive white superiority is a lifelong effort for white people. From a different perspective, [Jonathan Capehart's review of the book](#), from the perspective of a black man, appeared just a few days ago in *The Washington Post*: "Dear white people, please read *White Fragility* —I implore you to read it." Capehart was moved to tears by DiAngelo's honesty and sincerity. In contrast, [Kasi Lemons](#), another illustrious black filmmaker ([Harriet](#)), is not quite so forgiving of us white folk: She accuses us of lacking imagination:

- Imagine being an unarmed man, three officers holding you down, one with a knee on your neck.
- Imagine that they relentlessly apply force while you plead for your life, while you call for your mother.
- Imagine them choking the life from you, checking your pulse to make sure you don't have one, then choking you three more minutes for good measure, then waiting three more minutes before calling an ambulance.

Lemons's point is that we apparently can't imagine or refuse to do so. On the other hand, she says: "We [black folk] ... know you very well. We've had to. We had no choice. We worked in your houses, did your dirty laundry, nursed your children, read about you in books and watched you on TV. We had to know you to survive you."

Tough stuff, but we deserve it because we white people have enjoyed white privilege from the day we were born. We are still enjoying it, and we didn't earn it. So what can we do about it? I, for one, am trying valiantly to be more sensitive, more aware of my white privilege, to search my soul, acknowledging my unearned advantages. I am trying to speak up, no matter how uncomfortable, when someone should, to not acquiesce to that racist joke or innuendo, that snub of a brown or black person, and I will refuse to share in that wink-wink of white solidarity. I am trying to educate myself to be more aware of injustice, past and present. My next assignment is to read *Stamped from the Beginning* (Ibram X. Kendi), to be followed by his subsequent book, *How to be an Antiracist*. It's a start on a long journey. Better late than never. I deserve no kudos, and I would be remiss if I didn't humbly thank my dear friend Shirley Bowens for her friendship and gentle guidance.

—Margan Zajdowicz, Co-editor, *Book Corner*

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