



Library podcast

Dr. Robin DiAngelo Discusses 'White Fragility'

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[00:00:36] Hello. Good evening. Thank you so much. My name is Misha Stone and I'm a Reader Services Librarian in the Reader Services department. And before we begin this evening I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered together on the ancestral land of the Coast Salish people. So together let us honor their elders past and present. We thank them for their stewardship of this land. Welcome to the library and thank you for joining us for this reading with Dr. Robin DiAngelo. DiAngelo's essays and talks have been so important and revelatory to me. I know that I'll be reckoning with my own internalized racism with my own socialization and trying to reduce harm throughout my entire life both personally and professionally. And what I love about the book 'White Fragility' is that it crystallizes so much of what I've heard her say and writes all in one place in a way that I can continue to move through it continue to reference it.

[00:01:39] So I'm so honored to be here for the book launch for 'White Fragility.'

[00:01:47] [Robin] So let me just be clear, you are not the choir. There is no choir. I am not the choir. When I say there is no choir it's because my- my learning will never be finished. In this moment I think I'm the choir. I think I'm going to be done and I'm going to have certitude. I often joke, but on some level it's kind of true. When I first applied to be that diversity trainer back in the early 90s, I thought: Well, of course I'm qualified to lead discussions on racism.

[00:02:20] I'm a vegetarian, how could I be racist?

[00:02:28] Now I would need to be vegan today. But you know in the 90s that was pretty alternative. Friday evening I got called a communist once. Then I said "No, I'm a vegetarian." But you know my point is I just thought it was all about open mindedness and alternative-ness and then you just say that you know I love Seattle and everything I learned about white fragility I learned here working with white progressives.

[00:02:58] So Chapter 1, challenges to talking to white people about racism.

[00:03:08] I have never met a white person who did not have an opinion on racism, have you? If you are not sure that all white people have opinions on racism just bring it up the next time you're around a bunch of white people. Maybe tonight when you have a drink in Ballard after the talk and see how that goes.

[00:03:31] Not only do we all have opinions, but they tend to be very emotionally charged and that has nothing to do with whether they're informed or not. I have an opinion on virtually everything that does not make them informed. I don't believe you can grow up or spend any significant time in the United States without developing opinions on racism and they will be emotional and strongly held. And again that has nothing to do with whether they're informed and in fact if you are white and you have not devoted years of sustained study struggle and focus on this topic your opinions are necessarily very limited and no trip to Costa Rica.

[00:04:20] Multiracial nieces and nephews. Right.

[00:04:26] These are not sustained studies. Struggle and focus now. Now, how can I say that when I don't know most of the people in this room and this of course is the first thing that tends to trigger white fragility.

[00:04:36] Generalizing about white people. As a sociologist, I'm really comfortable generalizing. White people's social life is predictable and patterned in really observable ways and we've got to grapple with those patterns.

[00:04:51] But I can say this that your opinions without a sustained study struggle to focus first, you know, on mistake-making relationship building and repair their superficial because nothing- nothing in society gives you the information you need to have more than that. In fact, you can get through graduate school in this country without ever discussing racism. Can you not? You can get through teacher education in this country without discussing racism.

[00:05:23] And if you have a... if you're in a progressive teacher education program you'll have one required multicultural education class but that doesn't mean you'd be talking about racism. You might just be talking about how to introduce ethnic authors in February.

[00:05:38] You can get through law school you can get so through social work. You can be seen as qualified to lead a major or minor institution in this country to lead a group of people to supervise people. You could be seen as qualified to do those things with virtually no ability whatsoever to engage with any complexity or nuance in the issue of racism can you not.

[00:06:04] All right. So that is the first challenge. Humility.

[00:06:10] The second is individualism. Apparently white people do not understand socialization because we really think that we are exempt from it and of course the irony of that is because we're socialized to value the individual.

[00:06:24] We put a lot of effort there but we think that just because I say I am or want to be I could be exempt from these forces. So. So that is another challenge and again generalizing suggesting race has meaning for white people will often trigger white fragility. We think if we don't see it isn't there and you haven't explained it to me yet enough so that I understand it so I'm not really sure that could be valid.

[00:06:50] And we tend to use our reactions as a way out.

[00:06:53] There is no way we're going to get where we need to go from a place of white comfort and I am comfortable racially virtually 24/7 so that is not my goal. But we will often use that lack of comfort as a sign that something's been done wrong rather than something probably has been done right and that we need to use that as a way in to the deeper framework that would cause such upset.

[00:07:19] Rather than use it as a way out and we don't understand racism as a system. So this is another key challenge which leads me to Chapter 2, which is racism and white supremacy. Racism is a system not an event.

[00:07:35] And it's the system we're in and none of us could be and none of us were exempt from its forces. But the way we're taught to think of racism functions beautifully to not only obscure the system but to exempt us from its forces or to have us believe we are exempted from its forces. Now as a white person I was raised to be racially illiterate and I actually think all white people are raised to be racially illiterate in this culture and in gaining racial literacy I have had to understand not just the collective dynamics and dimensions of racism but how racism impacts different groups who are perceived and defined as people of color how it impacts them differently. So not all peoples of color experience racism differently. The thing is I have to turn lies about different groups as different where and how they are positioned always in relation to whiteness or far away from whiteness and how that manifests. Right. All of that must be understood. But after a good 20 plus years of talking day in and day out to white people about racism I feel very confident to say that there is something profoundly anti-Black in this culture and that nothing seems to turn white people's cranks of resentment. Like thinking Black people got something over on us that they didn't deserve and end the deeper belief is that they're inherently undeserving. I believe in the in the white mind, Black people are the ultimate racial other. Right?

[00:09:11] And then there are these bookends. And again your perceived proximity to each end of that impacts how you're going to experience your racialization. So having said that and not really having time to do history I just want to give you one glance at the trajectory of anti-Blackness in this in this country since its beginning and this slide will be deliberately dense. We can literally think about it a state sanctioned organized crime that at least discrimination against African-Americans from the beginning and it starts with kidnapping and 300 years of enslavement torture rape and brutality and it carries on and about a quarter of the way in. You see bans on testifying against whites which made it technically legal to murder Black people in this country and you are now in my lifetime and I say it again because I get a lot of white people seem to think it ended a long time ago.

[00:10:15] We're in my lifetime.

[00:10:16] About a quarter of the way through that slide and then we see about two thirds of the way through employment discrimination and we are in 2018 with copious empirical evidence. So let's pick it up there. Employment discrimination educational discrimination bias laws and policing practices. White flight, subprime mortgages, mass incarceration, School to Prison Pipeline, disproportionate special ed referrals, and punishments. Testing tracking, school funding, biased media, representation, historical admissions, and so much more. It is a system- not an event. It's the system we're in and none of us could be and none of us were exempt from its forces. We want to be unique and special individuals than we need to figure out how whatever we see is special and different about us.

[00:11:08] Set us up into that system because it did so I'm talking. I know white people really well I'm talking X and you're like: "Ha! I was Y." Right? OK you were Y. Most whites are X. How did Y set you up?

[00:11:23] It did.

[00:11:25] The question is not if. It's how to repeat it. It's a system not an event. And how do we cope with the moral trauma of what I just read to you.

[00:11:38] Resmaa Menakem has a beautiful book, 'My Grandmother's Hands,' where he talks about racial trauma. There's a trauma I believe to white people of racism but I don't think it's different. It's a moral trauma.

[00:11:50] And it's a piece of white fragility, not being able to face our complicity in this system. Well historically we were projected to our sins onto the Black body. Very lazy. Shiftless. Criminal. We projected our sins onto the Black body. Today, in addition to doing that, we obscure the system of racism that we uphold and we exempt ourselves from its forces. And we do this in a way that appears to be progressive, right? That the race doesn't matter to us. This is the board after the grand champion college Jeopardy round. And for me it just... it just speaks volumes. Not not knowing our history and being able to trace it into the present is one of the volumes it speaks. Another one is that is the history of this country. It is not their history. It didn't happen in a vacuum. One of the aspects of institutional power is the ability to disseminate your worldview. For everyone to position it as objective and universal and to tell the story. Write the story of the other, when we are not in relationship with the other. So I want to give you an example of the power of the story. And I want to do it through the Jackie Robinson story. You all know Jackie Robinson, right? So Jackie Robinson has been quite celebrated for doing something. What's the tag line that goes with Jackie Robinson. He he broke the color line right. Now so let's do a little discourse analysis.

[00:13:40] Because every year on the anniversary we celebrate him breaking the color line so think about what that invokes. He was exceptional. He was special. He did it. Finally one of them had what it took to break through and play with us. Up until him, nobody had what it took. So subtext- inferior

group. But he did it. And of course the day he did it. The day he broke the color line racism in sports ended. So imagine if we told a story like this: Jackie Robinson, the first Black man that whites allowed to play Major League Baseball. And I want you to notice the difference in that story. One, that's the truth. It didn't matter how exceptional he was and I actually don't believe he was the first most exceptional. But if he did... if we didn't say he could play, he couldn't play. If he walked out onto that field before we said "you can walk out on the field" the police would have removed him. It wasn't up to him. Now the reason I want to tell the story the second way is one because it's true. And two, because I need role models, right? How did how did white people get organized? What did they do behind the scene? What barriers did they face? What challenges? What strategies did they use? And could we use any of those today and adapt any of those today?

[00:15:16] It's not about me wanting to point out how bad white people are. So Chapter 3 looks at racism after the Civil Rights Movement and after the Civil Rights Movement it made a brilliant adaptation.

[00:15:31] Those opposed civil rights racism got reduced to the following formula. A racist is an individual who consciously does not like people based on race and is intentionally mean to them. Always an individual must be conscious must be intentional.

[00:15:48] And that definition exempts virtually all white people from the system of racism. This definition, I believe, is the root of virtually all white defensiveness on racism. Have you noticed any white defensiveness on racism?

[00:16:07] Yeah.

[00:16:08] It makes it virtually impossible to talk to the average white person about the inevitable absorption of a racist worldview that we get from being socialist in a racist culture in which white supremacy is the bedrock because you suggest anything I have done is racially problematic in any way and I'm going to hear a question to my moral character and I'm going to need to defend my moral character. You know we've probably seen this a million times. I think that that definition actually functions to protect racism even as it looks like progress, right? Right. A racist racism became bad post civil rights. This sets up what I think about as the good-bad binary. It's either/or, right? Racist or bad. Not racist or good.

[00:16:59] And we know how to fill that in, don't we? Ignorant, bigoted, prejudice, mean-spirited. Definitely old. And when we die off there'll be no more racism. You know I've been working with a lot of these tech companies. When I walk around I think to myself: "God, I guess you have to be under 30 to work here."

[00:17:18] And I'm telling you, they cannot think critically about race. And the people of color that work with these young people are in so much pain.

[00:17:29] Right. No. I get asked all the time do you think young people today are less racist. Actually the question usually begins with "Don't you think" and just a heads up if you proceed with "Don't you think" the answer is no.

[00:17:42] Because that's not an open question.

[00:17:43] But no, I don't actually think young people today are less racist or because... because they're consciousness hasn't changed our outcomes in fact they're getting worse. OK. So Southern for sure.

[00:17:59] Don't you think around here. I'm pretty sure they live in Fife. I've never been to Fife. But on the way to Tacoma I see Fife. I'm like "Hoo, boy it looks like racist live there."

[00:18:16] And when I'm on the way up north it's like Smokey Point.

[00:18:21] Ok. All right.

[00:18:24] Not racist or good. We're educated progressive, open-minded, well-intended. We're young. We're Northern. We live on Phinney Ridge. But we're all moving to Portland really soon.

[00:18:39] Because Wholefoods is so corporate now.

[00:18:47] Again this this is the root of virtually all white defensiveness. It just functions so so beautifully to exempt us. So we just we just have to get rid of it. And when white people hear me and they feel angry and pissed off and defensive, can I just say this now that you guys are listening to me up here when you laugh at my jokes I'm gonna keep getting looser and looser. Damn white people are pissy about racism.

[00:19:09] We are so pissy on this topic. We're meeting on this topic, right? And so if you're sitting here feeling that you see if it isn't rooted in this definition and if you cannot let go of this you're just not going to be able to move forward.

[00:19:27] So aversive racism is a form of what sociologists call New Racism. Right. So it's racism that progressive whites are most likely to hold.

[00:19:36] But because it conflicts with their identities as good people were most likely to be in denial about it. So we find that piece. It's a manifestation of racism that well-intentioned people who see themselves as educated and progressive are more likely to exhibit. It exists under the surface of consciousness because it conflicts with consciously held beliefs of racial equity and justice aversive racism is a subtle but insidious form as aversive racists. In fact, racism in ways that allow them to maintain a positive self image e.g. I have lots of friends of color. I judge people by the content of the character not the color of their skin. And whites enact racism while maintaining a positive self-image in many ways. For example, rationalizing racial segregation is unfortunate but necessary to access

good schools. Rationalizing that our workplaces are virtually all white because people of color just don't apply. Avoiding direct racial language and using racially coded terms such as urban, underprivileged, diverse, sketchy and good neighborhoods. Denying that we have few cross racial relationships by proclaiming how diverse our community are workplaces and attributing inequality between whites and people of color to causes other than racism. Consider a conversation I had with a white friend. She was telling me about a white couple who she knew who had just moved to New Orleans and bought a house for a mere twenty-five thousand dollars.

[00:21:16] Of course she immediately added: they also had to buy a gun and Joan is afraid to leave the house. I immediately knew they had bought a home in a Black neighborhood.

[00:21:27] This was a moment of white racial bonding between this couple who shared the story of racial danger and my friend. And then between my friend and me she repeated the story through this tale. The four of us fortified familiar images of the horror of Black space and drew boundaries between us and them without ever having to directly name race or openly express our disdain for Black space. Notice that the need for a gun is a key part of this story. It would not have the degree of social capital it holds if the emphasis were on the price of the house alone. Rather the story's emotional power rests on why a house would be that change because it's in a Black neighborhood where white people literally might not get out alive. Yet while very negative and stereotypical representations of Blacks were reinforced in that exchange, not naming race provided plausible deniability. In fact, in preparing to share this incident I texted my friend and asked her the name of the city her friends had moved to. I also wanted to confirm my assumption that she was talking about a Black neighborhood.

[00:22:41] I shared the text exchange here.

[00:22:46] Hey what city did you say your friends had bought a house for twenty-five thousand?

[00:22:52] She replies.

[00:22:53] New Orleans. They said they live in a very bad neighborhood and they each have to have a gun to protect themselves. I wouldn't pay five cents for that neighborhood.

[00:23:02] My reply was "I assume it's a Black neighborhood."

[00:23:09] Yes. You get what you paid for. I'd rather pay 500,000 and live somewhere where I wasn't afraid. I reply. "I wasn't asking because I want to live there."

[00:23:21] I'm writing about this in my book the way that white people talk about race without ever coming out and talking about race.

[00:23:35] She had a very interesting response to that.

[00:23:40] I wouldn't want you to live there because it's too far away from me.

[00:23:49] Notice that when I simply ask what city the house is in she repeats the story about the neighborhood being so bad that her friends need guns. When I ask if the neighborhood is Black she is comfortable confirming that it is. But when I tell her that I'm interested in how whites talk about race without talking about race, she switches the narrative. Now her concern is about not wanting me to live so far away. This is a classic example of a version of racism holding deep racial disdain that surfaces in daily discourse, but not being able to admit it because the disdain conflicts with our self-image and professed beliefs. Readers may be asking themselves, "but if the neighborhood is really dangerous why is acknowledging this danger a sign of racism?" Research and implicit bias has shown that perceptions of criminal activity are influenced by race. White people will perceive dangers simply by the presence of Black people. We cannot trust our perceptions when it comes to race and crime. But regardless of whether the neighborhood is actually more or less dangerous than other neighborhoods, what is salient about this exchange is how it functions racially and what that means for the white people engaged in it. For my friend and me this conversation did not increase our awareness of the danger of some specific neighborhood. Rather the exchange reinforced our fundamental beliefs about Black people 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.

[00:25:46] Race Talk always implies a racial us and them, so folks who have seen me present before know that I used this metaphor and I do tend to think in metaphors and as I do the work that I do and I talk on a daily basis to white people. I literally got this image in my mind of a doctor appear. And what it signifies for me are two things one how surface or superficial are our narratives are but also the dark.

[00:26:18] If you look from above, it appears to be floating on the water but it's not there is an entire structure submerged under the water there props that dock up. It rests on literally pillars anchored into the ocean floor and everything I do in my work is trying to get us off the top of the dock and under there to examine those pillars. Because despite all the bullshit on top of the dock our outcomes have not changed. Right. So we have to ask ourself what's going on. So as I listen to these narratives I think about them into overall categories: color blind and color celebrate. So let's start with the first set color blind, probably the number one color blind racial narrative is I was taught to treat everyone the same. Anybody ever heard that one?

[00:27:16] Ok.

[00:27:19] We just tell you when I hear this from a white person. And I hear frequently. There's a bubble over my head and it has a few things in it.

[00:27:28] The first thing is oh this person doesn't understand basic socialization this person doesn't understand culture.

[00:27:37] Oh this person is not particularly self-aware. And I need to give a heads up to the white folks in the room when people of color here say this. They're generally not thinking. All right. I am talking to a woke white person right now.

[00:27:59] Usually some form of eye rolling in and actually a recently co-facilitator with with a Black woman who said that is the most dangerous white person to be.

[00:28:10] And so it's not functioning the way we think it is. And this is another piece of humility for us. We're the least qualified to determine whether we understand this or not. Because so often the things that we think conveyed that are not conveying that and all of these are within that you know it's in the past. Nope just everyone's struggles. My parents weren't racist that's why I'm not racist or my parents were racist that's why I'm not racist. Doesn't matter really what we say. First what comes next must be I'm not racist. So and so it just happened to be but it has nothing to do with race. And it also has nothing to do with why no one in the office gets along with her and this is another one I actually ask white folks to remove from their vocabulary.

[00:28:57] Oh by the way along with reverse racism which there's no such thing.

[00:29:02] All right.

[00:29:04] Removed from the vocabulary. Anything on the topic of race as it begins with just happened to be regardless including that your neighborhood just happened to be white.

[00:29:14] Right. Yes but at the human level when we make that move right get race off the table and let's position some kind of shared universal experience. There isn't one in this physical plane that we live in in a society deeply separate and unequal by race. So I call these colorblind because they basically say I don't see it and if I see it it has no meaning. And there's a question that has never failed me in my efforts to uncover how we pulled this off. And that question is not Is this true or is this false. Because if we apply that question we're going to argue and argue and argue. The question that has never failed me is how do these narratives function in the conversation. How does it function. And if we ask that question we can see that all of these narratives function to exempt the person from any part of the problem. All of them take race off the table. All of them close rather than open the exploration and in doing that all of them protect the current racial hierarchy in the way position within it doesn't have to be your intention. And I'll just be blunt I'm not interested in your intention. I'm interested in how this functions. What is the impact of these narratives. They are closer's not openers well probably the folks in this room were beyond colorblindness right. What do we say.

[00:30:51] Where's my little clicker here. OK.

[00:30:57] We say things like this. Oh I work in a very diverse environment.

[00:31:03] If we can't say that and many of us can't will come up with some kind of proximity and I have people calling my family me I'm not racist.

[00:31:14] You said in New York this one will get used interchangeably with I'm not racist I'm from Canada.

[00:31:26] I'm not racist I'm from Hawaii. I'm not racist I'm from Europe.

[00:31:32] I've... never since I was in the military apparently there is no racism in any of those places.

[00:31:41] When I hear that, when I use live New York or think "oh my god you walked by people of color and it means you're shit."

[00:31:46] That's amazing.

[00:31:48] Ok so how many of you in a conversation with a white person have heard some version of those narratives right there. Those three.

[00:31:58] All right. And it's going to be really honest. We've said some version of these narratives.

[00:32:02] That last one sociologist actually have a term for it it's called the inoculation case.

[00:32:07] I've been near people of color and it's strip me of my racism and I want you to notice how often white people invoke proximity as evidence. This this is important because it helps reveal what's under the dark. It helps reveal what we think racism is that we would invoke proximity to shows that we're not racist.

[00:32:32] And I need to understand what I think racism is. If I'm going to unpack my role in it. Right. So let's do some discourse analysis let's think critically about these three narratives. When a white person invokes one of these narratives in a conversation about racism they're giving you their evidence right. Racism comes up. I say this is my evidence in my mind what's that my evidence of what you are. Make sure you know I'm not racist. All right. So in order to be good evidence it must distinguish me from a racist. So apparently a racist cannot do these things or this wouldn't be good evidence.

[00:33:11] So racist cannot work three cubicles down for a person of color could not have people in their family and they would find living in New York intolerable even though I could think of at least one racist lives in New York.

[00:33:25] So I now I I've yet to let go of that little joke because I do enjoy it but it does rest on the good bad binary. I'm on the same continuum. The person I'm thinking of is on to be clear about that.

[00:33:43] Ok so I'm going to just ask a rhetorical question to the people in this room and I'm going to look at my dear friend Aisha over there and Paula I'm going to say could a racist work three cubicles down from you help yes.

[00:34:01] All right. People of color.

[00:34:03] Do you have white people in your life who you love deeply and who on occasion reveal their internalized racial superiority? Their their internalized racist assumptions about the world. White people do you hear? That could you even be married to them

[00:34:20] and they could still... it doesn't disappear the day they fall in love with you?

[00:34:24] Ok. All right.

[00:34:29] So I hope I make it a bit because it's... it's ridiculous, right? But... but it's so ubiquitous. So we've really just got to ask ourselves "what do I think it is and what am I saying and how how is functioning?" Right. And clearly this rests on that and that simplistic definition apparently a lot of a lot of white people think that a racist cannot tolerate any proximity even the sight of people of color. And so if there's a new friendliness across race there cannot be racism. This is another thing that makes us so difficult in these conversations so I'm going to I'm just going to put it right out here. As a result of being born and raised as a white person in this culture I have a racist worldview. I have deep racist biases. I have developed racist patterns and I have investments in a system that has served me very well and is very comfortable for me and it really helped me get over sexism and classism that I struggle with. And I also have investments and not seen any of that for what it would mean for my identity and what it would require of me inaction I can choose it don't want it. Got it. And it's actually incredibly transformative and liberating to begin from that premise. So then you can begin to sink well how is it coming out in me so that I might be able to stop that or ameliorate that rather than it it's not coming out of me. I sometimes think if I if I'm going into the bathroom and I came out into the back of my dress was hiked into my pantyhose and my ass was showing a shirt. Hope you'd let me know. And I wouldn't say to you how dare you suggest my ass showing.

[00:36:10] And you better proceed as if it isn't.

[00:36:18] And yet you know the worst fear for white progressive as a person to say or do something racist but by god don't you dare say that I just said or did something racist rather than.

[00:36:28] Thank you. No I didn't I didn't see myself doing that. Now you know I can do something. All right. I was in the Peace Corps. I marched in the 60s.

[00:36:37] I voted for Obama. I'm on the equity team. To go on, already know all this I told you I've been to Costa Rica and tutored there for a week with the little children.

[00:36:53] And this is a real Seattle one.

[00:36:59] We don't like how white our neighborhood is but we move here for the schools. What can we do?

[00:37:06] I think it's very disingenuous. I think we do like how whiter neighborhoods are. And that's another conversation. All right. So these are not color blind, these are color celebrate. I love it. Right. I'm going to just say this. I love it in the right doses. I like it in the Montessori School with the children of the international workers that come from Microsoft. So again if we apply the same question. Not true false or right wrong but how do these narratives function in the conversation. We get the same answer. They all exempt the person from any part of the problem. They all take race off the table. They all closed rather than opened and they all protect the current racial hierarchy and the white position within it they're actually in practice and impact not any more progressive and they have not changed their outcomes. So we have to get under here and see what's going on. And what I think is going on what I think of as the linchpins of new racism is the good bad binary bad that one's really effective deep implicit bias which you can't help but absorb this precious ideology of individualism at the same time this idea that we don't speak from any particular position but speak for all of humanity and people of color speak for their group. And when we're interested in hearing about that we'll ask them but we'll cover everything else. And if people of color get asked to be on the equity team automatically when it's not even necessarily your interest or internalized superiority which you cannot help but have if you are raised white in this culture and in some level of investment and not seen this. And finally the power of segregation to hold it all in place.

[00:38:59] The deep profound I think for me the most profound message of all is that I could call a white neighborhood good.

[00:39:06] I could call a school filled with all white teachers and white children a good school. That's the fundamental message is that there's no inherent value in the perspectives or experiences of people of color. So these messages are raining down on us relentlessly 24/7 and we don't have umbrellas and nothing could and nothing did exempt us from their forces. It's on us to figure out how they shape us.

[00:39:36] Not if so all of this sets up some patterns.

[00:39:45] My preference for racial segregation, lack of understanding where racism is seen. Ourselves as individuals not understanding that we bring our history with us. History matters. It's a history of harm. Assuming everyone is having our experience arrogance lack of humility or unwillingness to listen. Dismissing what we don't understand apathy towards racial justice you know after 20 plus years I think most white people are pretty apathetic about racial injustice inability to our lack of interest in society sustaining relationships with people of color wanting to jump over the hard personal work and get to solutions. Confusing not agreeing with not understanding is it possible that you're not actually informed enough to disagree you ever had somebody say no you misunderstood. No you misunderstood. What if the person understood you perfectly in fact they even understood what you meant and you don't understand how what you meant comes from a racist framework. The

need to maintain white solidarity. That's the unspoken agreement amongst white people that will keep each other comfortable around our racism highest priorities. Face saving face. Always. You know when I do a caucus group or something in the way people are afraid I might think they're racist.

[00:41:09] I think you're racist because I think I am too, right?

[00:41:15] But less and less is done with that. And actually your carefulness and you're hiding yourself and you're not contributing to the conversation won't actually change that assessment at all.

[00:41:25] And people of color don't find that to build trust defensiveness course and a focus on intentions over impact. So when any of this is triggered we get off our white racial equilibrium. So what is white racial equilibrium no racial comfort. That's for sure. Seeing ourselves as individuals seeing ourselves as just human obliviousness. It's this funny. There's like a stew inside a white people that makes us really irrational on this topic and I've tried to kind of identify some of those pieces. But one of them is that we really are taught not to see this. So if you're a person of color scratching your head thinking how can they not see this. I just don't believe they don't see this. We actually really don't see it. Oh and hell yes we know it and we do see it but we cannot admit that it's both these things are actually true.

[00:42:25] We don't see it and we do see it but can't admit to it and that it's part of what makes us so irrational apathy dominance control don't need.

[00:42:38] I'm working on this huge comm contract with racial justice for large urbanization where they asked us to take the word white out of all the slides.

[00:42:50] That's a great example isn't it of white fragility. So don't name white.

[00:42:55] Don't name them that that's our racial equilibrium. Right. And entitlement to people of color.

[00:43:02] Bodies rest with Minikin talks about it's really been only in the last couple of decades that the people of color have had dominion over their own bodies. And so entitlement to people colored bodies comes out in lots of ways right. From just from just violating the space to touching the bodies to expecting you to carry the emotional burden or praise you know all of that. But you want to know for me like a really great example of the white fragility triggered when my entitlement or white entitlement to Black bodies is is a man quietly solemnly and respectfully.

[00:43:44] The great example of white fragility and it connected to this last bullet here is the eruption of umbrage and criminalization. When a Black man simply went down on one knee respectfully talking about Colin Kapernick.

[00:44:03] One an example so what interrupts our racial equilibrium.

[00:44:12] Well if you challenge objectivity if you talk openly about race if you challenge white entitlement to racial comfort if you challenge to the expectation that people of color will serve us and do our work for us. If you break with white solidarity you challenge white racial innocence. Oh by the way you can download all this on handouts from my website.

[00:44:39] Oh oh wait a minute. And it's in the book

[00:44:44] I challenge individualism, challenge to meritocracy, challenge to white authority challenge to whiteness and traveling to challenge to universalism, right? Suggesting that maybe in fact we don't speak for all of humanity. We speak from a particular perspective. And it's deeply limited. So this leads to white fragility.

[00:45:12] We actually have the poster boy for white fragility right here in the front row. Because I'm married to him and I made him pose in the kitchen.

[00:45:25] And he's like everyone's going to think I'm an asshole now.

[00:45:28] Yeah they are open the dictionary of white fragility fragilities you're going to see your picture.

[00:45:37] Ok. So back to something more serious, sorry I couldn't resist. So when

[00:45:44] All of this insular, coddled environment builds an inability to bear witness to two inability to have capacity to hold the discomfort. I've been thinking lately that part of. What it means to be white is to never have to be. Never have to bear witness to the pain of racism on people of color. And never having to bear witness to the pain I've caused to people of color never having to be accountable to that pain. Me and all the ways that I push off accountability I mean and so when I thought of this term white fragility the fragility part were fragile in that we can barely tolerate the slightest challenge right. I mean I'll show you my e-mails just the suggestion of being white has meaning will set off us off. But there's a continuum and so we're fragile in that way but it's not fragile at all in its impact. It's really effective. Right. I need you to stop. I need to get back into my position and my entitlement and my comfort and I will do what I need to do to get you to stop. And I think that white fragility functions as a kind of white racial bullying. We make it so miserable for people of color to talk to us about their experiences to call us in that most of the time they don't because it's not worth getting punished more.

[00:47:23] Trust me, they take home so much of it because it so rarely goes well. All right and just ask a rhetorical question of people of color in the room. How often have you tried to talk to white people about our inevitable and often racist behaviors and have they go well for you. I mean literally like not even once. And so and so it's weaponized defensiveness. It's weaponized hurt feelings. It's weaponized by denial and obliviousness. And so I'm not the I'm not the 1 percent. I've never been a manager. But I can control the people of color in my orbit through white fragility. Right. And so I also think of it as a form of everyday white racial control you can be in my orbit and I'll discuss diversity cover as long as you keep me comfortable. But if you challenge me you're going to become a

personal problem and you're going to be ejected aboard. We see this in the workplace. We want you on the committee. We're not going to pay you anymore but we do want you on the committee. As long as you don't actually do what we ask you to be on the committee to do

[00:48:46] Oh I got to read a piece from I got a story that I really want to read.

[00:48:52] Ok.

[00:48:53] So I was working with a group of educators who had been meeting regularly for at least eight sessions. The group was composed of the equity teams for a public school system self selected by people who wanted to support equity efforts in their schools. I had just finished an hour long presentation titled seen the water whiteness in daily life. This presentation is designed to make visible what the relentless messages of white superiority etc.. The room appeared to be with me open and receptive with many nodding along in agreement than a white teacher raised her hand and told a story about an interaction she had as she drove alongside a group of parents protesting the achievement gap in her school and she then proceeded to imitate one mother in particular who offended her. You don't understand our children. This mother had called out to her as she drove by the stereotypical way that the white teacher imitated the mother we all knew that the mother was Black there. The room seemed to collectively hold its breath that her imitation which was bordering on racial mockery. While the teacher's concluding point was that on reflection she came to realize that the mother was right and that she really didn't understand children of color.

[00:50:07] The emotional thrust of the story was her umbrage at the mother for making this assumption for the room the emotional impact was on her stereotypical imitation of an angry Black woman. As this story came to a close I had a decision to make. Should I act with integrity and point out what was racially problematic about the story? After all, making racism visible was literally what I had been hired to do. Further, several African-American teachers in the room had certainly noticed the reinforcement of a racist stereotype. To not intervene would be yet again another white person choosing to protect white feelings rather than interrupt racism. A white person who built herself as a racial justice consultant no less. Yet, I would be taking the risk of losing the group. Given the likelihood that the woman will become defensive, shut down and the room would split into those who thought I had mistreated her and those who didn't. This happens every time you actually call it out in the moment in the room. And I decided to do what would maintain my integrity.

[00:51:14] And I called it out. And I called it out as diplomatically as I could. I just said a teachable moment. I'm going to ask him not to tell that story again. Here's why. Here's how you could tell it in a way that doesn't reinforce that. We went back and forth a little bit but to make a long story short of course the room did erupt in twos. She left the group. She quit the group. This was the eighth session for equity teams. And again all the focus was on had I hadn't mistreated her. And this is often what happens. So why receiving feedback above and below, right? What feelings do white people have? One, we often try to give them feedback on our racist patterns right. If you don't recognize these attacked silence shamed accused insulted judged angry scared outraged now. Now how do we act when we feel this way.

[00:52:17] Well we withdraw. We cry. We go silent. We argue, we deny. We focus on our intentions. We seek forgiveness we explain we insist there was a misunderstanding.

[00:52:30] And so what and what kind of claims do we make to justify behaving this way.

[00:52:38] And feeling this way I know people are cold.

[00:52:42] I marched in the 60s. I took this in college. I was a minority in Japan. The real oppression is class. You misunderstood me. You're playing the race card. If you knew me or understood you know I can't be racist. This is not welcoming to me. You're making me feel guilty.

[00:53:04] I want to say something about shame. Whenever white people jump to a narrative really quickly on racism I'm always suspicious of it and shame is one we jumped to really fast white progressives have really really like to lean on how much racial shame they feel. And I

[00:53:23] I would actually ask you to think about on a daily basis how often do you if you are white, feel racial shame seriously. Well first of all probably just when racism comes up and even then so maybe 2 percent of the time I was in New York recently and I stepped over a homeless man who was Black on my way into WholeFoods and I felt shame for just a minute. But then Rainier Cherries are in season and I forgot all about it.

[00:53:56] I mean I'm serious like that. That's how that functions.

[00:53:59] I really don't think we feel that shame that much but even if we do and then you have to ask yourself how is it functioning what does it do for you what is the cultural capital that you get from that.

[00:54:13] And if you if you can't answer that it's somehow moving you forward in your anti-racist efforts and you're going to have to get through it right.

[00:54:24] It's just one little innocent thing.

[00:54:27] Some people find offense. You hurt my feelings. This is political correctness.

[00:54:31] I don't feel safe or just really quickly say the word safe coming out of the mouths of white people on topic of racism is illegitimate. What does safety mean from a position of social historical institutional cultural power and privilege?

[00:54:54] No it's generally we don't we don't feel comfortable. But that doesn't have as much cultural capital. It's not a precious problem is tone. And I know what it means to be oppressed. So if we think about the doc, right? The feelings the behaviors, the claims what could be the underlying assumptions that would lead us to make these claims.

[00:55:19] As a white person I will be the judge of whether racism has occurred.

[00:55:27] My learning is finished I know all I need to know. Racism can only be intentional not having intended it cancels out white people who experience another form of oppression can experience racial privilege if I'm a good person.

[00:55:44] I can't be racist. My unexamined perspective is equal to an informed one

[00:55:55] I'm entitled to remain comfortable so you have made a very serious social breach. As a white person I know the best way to challenge racism and you're doing it wrong.

[00:56:10] Nice people cannot be racist if I can't see it it's not legitimate.

[00:56:18] If I have any proximity to people of color, I can't be racist. If I have no proximity of people of color, I can't be racist because I'm racially innocent. I would make a case the way people who grew up on farms in rural environments. There are no people of color around, actually are less sheltered from racism because you are left to rely on the most problematic sources for your understanding of people of color. My world view is objective and yours isn't. I don't know what else could be functioning under there right. So how does all that function maintains white solidarity closes off self reflection minimizes silences the discussion makes white people the victims. Pretext a limited world view takes race off the table focuses on the messenger not the message rallies more resources to white people pretext racism. Looking at the clock I could get into this really deep but here's what I want to say about this. The reason I like this picture when I when I do presentations is because if for me this isn't an amplified visual of institutional power. If I walked in that room as a woman because that would be the salient identity for me in that room I would it would be visceral to me.

[00:57:43] The lifetime of entitlement exuding out of these men supports and so if you can see that if you can see not only the lifetime of entitlement but if you want to suggest to them that maybe they should have some women or people of color in that group. I can't know but I believe to my core they would feel contempt because they don't see the perspectives of women and people of color as valuable. I believe that to my core. I don't know them but I'm pretty damn sure if I can see it in them then and I don't relate to them right. But what version of that is coming from my pores. What version of that is visceral for people of color. When I'm in the room. Right. So women of color. You want to be the one that goes in there and helps those white women see their racism. All by yourself. They need some diversity.

[00:58:45] All right. So my point is I can be in this room experiencing sexism and patriarchy.

[00:58:52] And I can be in this room perpetrating racism. White women don't actually land any more softly on people of color and I think when we don't back people of color, the betrayal and the hurt is the deeper because we have a potential way in and we use it often as a way I don't think I'm not an angry feminist as the poster boy for white fragility over here but our resentment about sexism can

cause us to not back people of color and actually collude with the benefits of whiteness to get a little bit ahead. Right. OK. So I'm going to end by just bringing this question up so that I can preempt it because I really don't like this question and if this is the question you have right now if you're white and this is a question you have right now then I have one for you. What does allowed you to remain ignorant about how to interrupt racism. Why in 2018, is that your question? And that's actually a sincere challenging question because if you really start to map it out you'll have your answer. So I want to I want to share what could be under that doc if we had a transformed framework. But before I do it I want to give an example of a moment of racism that I recently perpetrated. And instead of reading it from the book it is written in the book but it's easier for me to just say it. I used to be the director of equity for a large non-profit and on the equity team or three people myself the co-director and executive assistant and Debra and Marcia were Black women. So there were three of us. Two of us were black. One was white and we hired a consultant to organization Harvard consultant to come in and design the web page and the website.

[01:00:51] And so she was going around setting meetings with all the departments to find out what we did so she could build each departments particular page. So she scheduled meeting with the equity team and it was 3:00 in the afternoon. We went in and it turns out that she was also a Black woman. I will call her Angela. Right away she had this survey that had lots of questions about what we do. But I miss the afternoon. I found the survey kind of annoying and it didn't... it was tedious and it didn't really speak to what we do. So I kind of shoved it aside and I said, let me explain. We go out into the different satellite offices and we lead, you know, racial justice trainings. In fact, we went up to the far north one recently and Deborah was asked not to come back.

[01:01:39] I guess her hair scared the white people. Make this little joke, right, because Debra has long locked hair. The meeting ends and I wish I could tell you that I realized what I had said but I didn't. So a few days later Marcia came to me and said Angela was really offended by that joke you made about Black women's hair and you know that I immediately I know better. Right. And so I immediately understood and said thank you for letting me know. And so I followed a series of steps to repair that. And the first thing I did is I called a friend of mine and other white woman named Christine and said I need to process something with you. And you know I vented my anxiety, my embarrassment. And then when I kind of got that off, we put our heads together and it's like let's think about how your racism was manifesting in that meeting. Get really clear. OK. I got clear and I felt ready to then come back to Angela. So I called her and I. I said Would you be willing to grant me the opportunity to repair the racism I perpetrated towards you in the meeting last week. And she said yes. Now she could have said no. And I was prepared. In fact I thought she was going to say no I thought she was because they wore you a hypocrite. And if I could not hold that then I was not going to be making an authentic repair. Right. So she didn't say no. However she said yes. And so we met and I said I just want to own that racism and that joke.

[01:03:14] And so we talked about it and she basically said I don't know you. I have no relationship with you I have no trust with you and I do not want to be joking about Black women's hair in a professional work meeting with a white woman I don't know. It was really clear so that white folks understand that piece of it. The other piece that I owned was that in my cockiness I was being the

woke white person and making fun of the white people who didn't get it. So I was making that move. I was credentialling myself. So I owned that and then because I knew that Christine and I as two white people would probably have missed some things I said Angela is there anything I missed. And she said yes, that survey you so glibly shoved aside. I wrote that survey and I have spent my life justifying my intelligence to white people. OK that was just like I mean because I immediately got it never occurred to me she wrote a survey and looking back at how I just dismissed it. So I owned that I apologized. And then next step I took was is there anything else that needs to be said or heard that we might move forward and she said yes the next time you run your racism at me I want to pause right there. Notice that she didn't say if she basically said if we're going to be working together I know you're going to run your racism at me again. So the next time you do it, would you like your feedback publicly or privately?

[01:04:53] Yeah I love her for that.

[01:04:55] And I said oh publicly. Definitely. Right. Like I think most white people would have said oh god no. Privately. But it's a really, really... I told her it's really important that other white people see that I am not free of these patterns. I run them less. I'm not defensive when I run them. Notice I never explained my intentions. I have very good repair skills but I have these patterns. And it's important to the white people see that and that I have the opportunity to model non-defensiveness and so anything else. No. Are we good. Yes. Let's move on and we moved on. And actually there was more trust there because one of the things she said to me is what you did in that meeting happens to us every day. This what you're doing right now this has not happened. Thank you. What I'm looking for is where can I go with you. I repair. So I want to end with what could be under that if we had a transformed frame because we can't get where we need to go from where we are right now. I being good or bad is not relevant. Racism is a multilayered system infused in everything whites have blinders on racism. I have blinders on racism racism is complex. I don't have to understand it. In order for it to be valid. White comfort maintains the racial status quo. Discomfort is necessary and important. I must not confuse comfort with safety.

[01:06:24] I am safe in discussions of race. The anecdote to Gilda's action I bring my group's history with me.

[01:06:33] History matters. I might see myself as just an individual like the people of color in her life see me as a white individual. The question is not if but how nothing exempt me from the forces of racism. Whites are unconsciously invested in racism. I am unconsciously invested in racism. I want you to imagine if white people internalize this framework how revolutionary it would be bias is implicit. I don't expect to be aware of mine without a lot of effort and feedback from people of color indicates trust because it is a huge moment of risk across a deep history of harm. I hate feedback on white racism is really difficult to give how I receive it is not as relevant as the feedback itself. You bring it to me upset bring it to me upset that there are no rules.

[01:07:34] For how you should tell me that I've harmed you.

[01:07:39] It takes courage to break with white solidarity. How can I support those that do. How can I go back if I'm not willing to step out and take a risk. How can I back other white people who do instead of turning them down.

[01:07:52] Finding out one thing that I said in this talk tonight that you can grab onto so that you don't have to look at yourself given socialization it's more likely that I am the one who doesn't understand the issue.

[01:08:06] Can you imagine why people are coming from that place. Racism hurts even kills people of color 24/7 interrupt union is more important than my feelings ego or self image. Thank you.

[01:08:42] I don't have time for two questions so here's one I'm going to answer. Will you be available in audio. Yes. OK. This one. How can a person of color navigate around white fragility in the workplace when direct confrontation usually ends in retaliation. Yeah I mean the first thing I just want to understand how much psychic and emotional labor people of color goes through truth to walk on eggshells around us.

[01:09:11] You know why people are so bitterly complain. Oh you mean I can't say anything and you have to walk on egg shells please. The emotional labor and the knots people of color tie themselves into so they don't trigger us. It is just heart wrenching and so so I guess the first thing I want to say is I want I want us to knock this nonsense off so that this doesn't have to be the question but it is the question.

[01:09:37] So there are different strategies. I actually think that choosing not to address it for people of color can be an empowered choice. I gotta get through the day.

[01:09:49] I'm not throwing my pearls so not to let go and that's actually a choice I'm making and it's an empowered choice. Another strategy that can beat it is to list one of those white progressives who says they are an ally and then say then step up and not not to take care not to take care of you. But there are times when that's a really good strategies. So much of my training came from women of color saying you go talk to that person that's giving us a hard time in the training they're going to hear from you better and you know I'm from Seattle. I'm as conflict avoidant as the rest of us. Who are white but they're really built up my stamina. So just really quickly those those are some strategies and because I know it's late and because of time I'm going to I'm going to close so. So just think you guys all our work will never be finished.

[01:11:05] This podcast was presented by The Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.