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WHITE FRAGILITY

New York Times BESTSELLER

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

ROBIN DIANGELO

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

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Excerpts from White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism by Robin DiAngelo. Copyright (c) 2018 by Robin DiAngelo. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston.

INTRODUCTION

WE CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

I am a white woman. I am standing beside a black woman. We are facing a group of white people seated in front of us. We are in their workplace and have been hired by their employer to lead them in a dialogue about race. The room is filled with tension and charged with hostility. I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color. A white man is pounding his fist on the table. As he pounds, he yells, "A white person can't get a job anymore!" I look around the room and see forty employees, thirty-eight of whom are white. Why is this white man so angry? Why is he being so careless about the impact of his anger? Why doesn't he notice the effect this outburst is having on the few people of color in the room? Why are all the other white people either sitting in silent agreement with him or tuning out? I have, after all, only articulated a definition of racism.

White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage. Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society

we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*. Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.

Summarizing the familiar patterns of white people's responses to racial discomfort as white fragility has resonated for many people. The sensibility is so familiar because whereas our personal narratives vary, we are all swimming in the same racial water. For me, the recognition has come through my work. I have a rare job; on a daily basis I lead primarily white audiences in discussions of race, something many of us avoid at all costs.

In the early days of my work as what was then termed a diversity trainer, 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. They entered the room angry and made that feeling clear to us throughout the day as they slammed their notebooks down on the table, refused to participate in exercises, and argued against any and all points.

I couldn't understand their resentment or disinterest in learning more about such a complex social dynamic as racism. These reactions

of color endure from white people who see themselves as open-minded and thus not racist. This book is intended for us, for white progressives who so often—despite our conscious intentions—make life so difficult for people of color. I believe that *white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color*. I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or is less racist, or in the "choir," or already "gets it." 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.

Racism has been among the most complex social dilemmas since the founding of this country. While there is no biological race as we understand it (see chapter 2), race as a social construct has profound significance and shapes every aspect of our lives.[1] Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be, and even how long we can expect to live.[2] 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. My goal is to make visible how one aspect of white sensibility continues to hold racism in place: white fragility.

I will explain the phenomenon of white fragility, how we develop it, how it protects racial inequality, and what we might do about it.

CHAPTER 1

THE CHALLENGES OF TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

WE DON'T SEE OURSELVES IN RACIAL TERMS

I am a white American raised in the United States. I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview, and I move through the world with a white experience. My experience is not a universal human experience. It is a particularly white experience in a society in which race matters profoundly; a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race. However, like most white people raised in the US, I was not taught to see myself in racial terms and certainly not to draw attention to my race or to behave as if it mattered in any way. Of course, I was made aware that *somebody's* race mattered, and if race was discussed, it would be theirs, not mine. Yet a critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). 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.

OUR OPINIONS ARE UNINFORMED

I have never met a white person without an opinion on racism. It's not really possible to grow up in the United States or spend any significant time here—or any other culture with a history of Western

colonization—without developing opinions on racism. And white people's opinions on racism tend to be strong. Yet race relations are profoundly complex. We must be willing to consider that unless we have devoted intentional and ongoing study, our opinions are necessarily uninformed, even ignorant. How can I say that if you are white, your opinions on racism are most likely ignorant, when I don't even know you? I can say so because 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.

For example, I can be seen as qualified to lead a major or minor organization in this country with no understanding whatsoever of the perspectives or experiences of people of color, few if any relationships with people of color, and virtually no ability to engage critically with the topic of race. 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. If I am in a program considered progressive, I might have a single required "diversity" course. A handful of faculty will have fought for years to get me this course, likely having had to overcome resistance from the majority of their white colleagues, and will still be ghting to keep the course. In this diversity course, we might read "eth- authors and learn about heroes and heroines from various groups o color, but there's no guarantee we'll discuss racism.

In fact, when we try to talk openly and honestly about race, white fragility quickly emerges as we are so often met with silence, defensive- argumentation, certitude, and other forms of pushback. These are natural responses; they are social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively, and they function powerfully to hold the racial hierarchy in place. These rces include the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity.

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. The claims we offer up as evidence are implausible. For example, perhaps you've heard someone say "I was taught to treat everyone the same" or "People just need to be taught to respect one another, and that begins in the home." These statements tend to end the discussion and the learning that could come from sustained engagement. Further, they are unconvincing to most people of color and only invalidate their experiences. Many white people simply do not understand the process of socialization, and this is our next challenge.

WE DON'T UNDERSTAND SOCIALIZATION

When I talk to white people about racism, their responses are so predictable I sometimes feel as though we are all reciting lines from a shared script. And on some level, we are, because we are actors in a shared culture. A significant aspect of the white script derives from our seeing ourselves as both objective and unique. To understand white fragility, we have to begin to understand why we cannot fully be either; we must understand the forces of socialization.

We make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens. This lens is neither universal nor objective, and without it, a person could not function in any human society. But exploring these cultural frameworks can be particularly challenging in Western culture precisely because of two key Western ideologies: individualism and objectivity. Briefly, individualism holds that we are each unique and stand apart from others, even those within our social groups. Objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias. These ideologies make it very difficult for white people to explore the collective aspects of the white experience.

Individualism is a story line that creates, communicates, reproduces, and reinforces the concept that each of us is a unique individual and that our group memberships, such as race, class, or gender, are irrelevant to our opportunities. Individualism claims that there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success and that failure is not a consequence of social structures but comes from individual character. According to the ideology of individualism, race is irrelevant. Of course, we do occupy distinct race, gender, class, and other positions that profoundly shape our life chances in ways that are not natural, voluntary, or random; opportunity is not equally distributed across race, class, and gender. On some level, we know that Bill Gates's son was born into a set of opportunities that will benefit him throughout his life, whether he is mediocre or exceptional. Yet even though Gates's son has clearly been handed unearned advantage, we cling tightly to the ideology of individualism when asked to consider our own unearned advantages.

Regardless of our protestations that social groups don't matter and that we see everyone as equal, we know that to be a man as defined by the dominant culture is a different experience from being a woman. We know that to be viewed as old is different from being viewed as young, rich is different from poor, able-bodied different from having a disability, gay different from heterosexual, and so on. These groups matter, but they don't matter naturally, as we are often taught to believe. Rather, we are taught that they matter, and the social meaning ascribed to these groups creates a difference in lived experience. We are taught these social meanings in myriad ways, by a range of people, and through a variety of mediums. This training continues after childhood and throughout our lives. Much of it is nonverbal and is achieved through watching and comparing ourselves to others.

We are socialized into these groups collectively. In mainstream culture, we all receive the same messages about what these groups mean, why being in one group is a different experience from being in another. And we also know that it is "better" to be in one of these groups than to be in its opposite—for example, to be young rather than old, able-bodied rather than have a disability, rich rather than poor. We gain

our understanding of group meaning collectively through aspects of the society around us that are shared and unavoidable: television, movies, news items, song lyrics, magazines, textbooks, schools, religion, literature, stories, jokes, traditions and practices, history, and so on. These dimensions of our culture shape our group identities.

Our understanding of ourselves is necessarily based on our comparisons with others. The concept of pretty has no meaning without the concept of ugly, smart means little without the idea of not-smart or "stupid," and deserving has no meaning without the concept of undeserving. We come to understand who we are by understanding who we are not. But because of our society's emphasis on individuality, many of us are unskilled at reflecting on our group memberships. To understand race relations today, we must push against our conditioning and grapple with how and why racial group memberships matter.

In addition to challenging our sense of ourselves as individuals, tackling group identity also challenges our belief in objectivity. If group membership is relevant, then we don't see the world from the universal human perspective but from the perspective of a particular kind of human. In this way, both ideologies are disrupted. Thus, reflecting on our racial frames is particularly challenging for many white people, because we are taught that to have a racial viewpoint is to be biased. Unfortunately, this belief protects our biases, because denying that we have them ensures that we won't examine or change them. This will be important to remember when we consider our racial socialization, because there is a vast difference between what we verbally tell our children and all the other ways we train them into the racial norms of our culture.

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*. I am proceeding as if I could know anything about someone just because the person is white. Right now you may be thinking of all the ways that you are different from other white people and that if I just knew how you had come to this country, or were close to these people, grew up in this neighborhood, endured this struggle, or had

this experience, then I would know that you were different—that you were not racist. I've witnessed this common reflex countless times in my work.

For example, I recently gave a talk to a group of about two hundred employees. There were no more than five people of color in their organization, and of these five, only two were African American. Over and over, I emphasized the importance of white people having racial humility and of not exempting ourselves from the unavoidable dynamics of racism. As soon as I was done speaking, a line of white people formed—ostensibly to ask me questions—but more typically to reiterate the same opinions on race they held when they had entered the room. The first in line was a white man who explained that he was Italian American and that Italians were once considered black and discriminated against, so didn't I think that white people experience racism too? That he could be in that overwhelmingly white room of coworkers and exempt himself from an examination of his whiteness because Italians were once discriminated against is an all-too-common example of individualism. A more fruitful form of engagement (because it expands rather than protects his current worldview) would have been to consider how Italian Americans were able to become white and how that assimilation has shaped his experiences in the present *as a white man*. His claims did not illustrate that he was different from other white people when it comes to race. I can predict that many readers will make similar claims of exception precisely because we are products of our culture, not separate from it.

As a sociologist, I am quite comfortable generalizing; social life is patterned and predictable in measurable ways. But I understand that my generalizations may cause some defensiveness for the white people about whom I am generalizing, given how cherished the ideology of individualism is in our culture. There are, of course, exceptions, but patterns are recognized as such precisely because they are recurring and predictable. We cannot understand modern forms of racism if we cannot or will not explore patterns of group behavior and their effects on individuals. I ask readers to make the specific adjustments they think

are necessary to their situation, rather than reject the evidence entirely. For example, perhaps you grew up in poverty, or are an Ashkenazi Jew of European heritage, or were raised in a military family. Perhaps you grew up in Canada, Hawaii, or Germany, or had people of color in your family. None of these situations exempts you from the forces of racism, because no aspect of society is outside of these forces.

Rather than use what you see as unique about yourself as an exemption from further examination, a more fruitful approach would be to ask yourself, "I am white and I have had X experience. How did X shape me as a result of *also being white*?" Setting aside your sense of uniqueness is a critical skill that will allow you to see the big picture of the society in which we live; individualism will not. For now, try to let go of your individual narrative and grapple with the collective messages we all receive as members of a larger shared culture. Work to see how these messages have shaped your life, rather than use some aspect of your story to excuse yourself from their impact.

WE HAVE A SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

The final challenge we need to address is our definition of "racist." 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. Therefore, if I am saying that my readers are racist or, even worse, that all white people are racist, I am saying something deeply offensive; I am questioning my readers' very moral character. How can I make this claim when I don't even know my readers? Many of you have friends and loved ones of color, so how can you be racist? In fact, since it's racist to generalize about people according to race, I am the one being racist! So let me be clear: 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. Now breathe. I am not using this definition of racism, and I am not saying that you are immoral. If

you can remain open as I lay out my argument, it should soon begin to make sense.

In light of the challenges raised here, 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. We can use it as a door out—blame the messenger and disregard the message. Or we can use it as a door in by asking, Why does this unsettle me? What would it mean for me if this were true? How does this lens change my understanding of racial dynamics? How can my unease help reveal the unexamined assumptions I have been making? 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?

If you are reading this and are still making your case for why you are different from other white people and why none of this applies to you, stop and take a breath. Now return to the questions above, and keep working through them. 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. Our next task is to understand how the forces of racial socialization are constantly at play. The inability to acknowledge these forces inevitably leads to the resistance and defensiveness of white fragility. 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.

CHAPTER 5

THE GOOD/BAD BINARY

He's not a racist. He is a really nice guy.

This chapter explores what is perhaps the most effective adaptation of racism in recent history: the good/bad binary.[1] Prior to the civil rights movement, it was socially acceptable for white people to openly proclaim their belief in their racial superiority. But when white Northerners saw the violence black people—including women and children—endured during the civil rights protests, they were appalled. These images became the archetypes of racists. After the civil rights movement, to be a good, moral person and to be complicit with racism became mutually exclusive. You could not be a good person and participate in racism; only bad people were racist. (These images of black persecution in the South during the civil rights movement of the 1960s also allowed Northern whites to position racists as always Southern.)

To accomplish this adaptation, racism first needed to be reduced to simple, isolated, and extreme acts of prejudice. These acts must be intentional, malicious, and based on conscious dislike of someone because of race. Racists were those white people in the South, smiling and picnicking at the base of lynching trees; store owners posting Whites Only signs over drinking fountains; and good ol' boys beating innocent children such as Emmett Till to death. In other words, racists were mean, ignorant, old, uneducated, Southern whites. Nice people,

well-intended people, open-minded middle-class people, people raised in the "enlightened North," could not be racist.

RACIST = BAD	NOT RACIST = GOOD
Ignorant	Progressive
Bigoted	Educated
Prejudiced	Open-minded
Mean-spirited	Well-intentioned
Old	Young
Southern	Northern

While making racism bad seems like a positive change, we have to look at how this functions in practice. Within this paradigm, to suggest that I am racist is to deliver a deep moral blow—a kind of character assassination. Having received this blow, I must defend my character, and that is where all my energy will go—to deflecting the charge, rather than reflecting on my behavior. In this way, the good/bad binary makes it nearly impossible to talk to white people about racism, what it is, how it shapes all of us, and the inevitable ways that we are conditioned to participate in it. If we cannot discuss these dynamics or see ourselves within them, we cannot stop participating in racism. The good/bad binary made it effectively impossible for the average white person to understand—much less interrupt—racism.

As African American scholar and filmmaker Omowale Akintunde says: "Racism is a systemic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality. For most whites, however, racism is like murder: the concept exists, but someone has to commit it in order for it to happen. This limited view of such a multilayered syndrome cultivates the sinister nature of racism and, in fact, perpetuates racist phenomena rather than eradicates them."[2]

The good/bad frame is a false dichotomy. All people hold prejudices, especially across racial lines in a society deeply divided by race. I can be told that everyone is equal by my parents, I can have friends of

color, and I may not tell racist jokes. Yet I am still affected by the forces of racism as a member of a society in which racism is the bedrock. I will still be seen as white, treated as white, and experience life as a white person. My identity, personality, interests, and investments will develop from a white perspective. I will have a white worldview and a white frame of reference. In a society in which race clearly matters, our race profoundly shapes us. If we want to challenge this construct, we must make an honest accounting of how it is manifest in our own lives and in the society around us.

Although individual racist acts do occur, these acts are part of a larger system of interlocking dynamics. The focus on individual incidences masks the personal, interpersonal, cultural, historical, and structural analysis that is necessary to challenge this larger system. The simplistic idea that racism is limited to individual intentional acts committed by unkind people is at the root of virtually all white defensiveness on this topic. To move beyond defensiveness, we have to let go of this common belief.

The good/bad binary certainly obscures the structural nature of racism and makes it difficult for us to see or understand. Equally problematic is the impact of such a worldview on our actions. If, as a white person, I conceptualize racism as a binary and I place myself on the "not racist" side, what further action is required of me? No action is required, because I am not a racist. Therefore, racism is not my problem; it doesn't concern me and there is nothing further I need to do. This worldview guarantees that I will not build my skills in thinking critically about racism or use my position to challenge racial inequality.

The good/bad binary is at play virtually every day in my work as a consultant on issues of racial justice. My job is to help individuals and organizations see how racism is manifesting itself in their practices and outcomes. I am typically received well when speaking in general terms—for example, "Your requirement that applicants have an advanced degree rather than equivalent experience is automatically disqualifying some of the applicants that could bring the perspectives and experiences you say you are looking for." Yet when I point out a

Let me also be clear that the term "white fragility" is intended to describe a very specific white phenomenon. White fragility is much more than mere defensiveness or whining. It may be conceptualized as the *sociology of dominance*: an outcome of white people's socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy. The term is *not applicable* to other groups who may register complaints or otherwise be deemed difficult (e.g., "student fragility").

In my workshops, I often ask people of color, "How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism? How often has that gone well for you?" Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the consensus of *rarely, if ever*. I then ask, "What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?" Recently a man of color sighed and said, "It would be revolutionary." I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that response. It would be *revolutionary* if we could receive, reflect, and work to change the behavior. On the one hand, the man's response points to how difficult and fragile we are. But on the other hand, it indicates how simple it can be to take responsibility for our racism. However, we aren't likely to get there if we are operating from the dominant worldview that only intentionally mean people can participate in racism.

she had learned nothing about race and held no racism. I pushed back on this claim by asking her to reflect on the messages she had received from her childhood about people who lived in Africa. Surely she was aware of Africa and had some impressions of the people there? Had she ever watched American films? If so, what impression did she get about African Americans? I also asked her to reflect on what she had absorbed from living in the US for the last twenty-three years, whether she had any relationships with African Americans here, and if not, then why not.

We moved on and I forgot about the interaction until she approached me after the workshop ended. She was furious and said that she had been deeply offended by our exchange and did not "feel seen." "You made assumptions about me!" she said. I apologized and told her that I would never want her to feel unseen or invalidated. However, I also held to my challenge that growing up in Germany would not preclude her from absorbing problematic racial messages about black people. She countered by telling me that she had never even seen a black person "before the American soldiers came." And when they did come, "all the German women thought them so beautiful that they wanted to connect with them." This was her evidence that she held no racism. With an internal sigh of defeat, I gave up at that point and repeated my apology. We parted ways, but her anger was unabated.

A few months later, one of my cofacilitators contacted Eva to tell her about an upcoming workshop. Eva was apparently still angry. She replied that she would never again attend a workshop led by me. Notice that I did not tell Eva that she was racist or that her story was racist. But what I did do was challenge her self-image as someone exempt from racism. Paradoxically, Eva's anger that I did not take her claims at face value surfaced within the context of a volunteer workshop on racism, which she ostensibly attended to deepen her understanding of racism.

Let's start with the common emotional reactions that white people have (and that Eva demonstrated) when our assumptions and behaviors are challenged.

FEELINGS

- Singled out
- Attacked
- Silenced
- Shamed
- Guilty
- Accused
- Insulted
- Judged
- Angry
  Scared
- Outraged

When we have these feelings, it is common to behave in the following ways, as Eva did:

BEHAVIORS

- Crying
- Physically leaving
- Emotionally withdrawing
- Arguing
  Denying
  Focusing on intentions
  Seeking absolution
- Avoiding

Given that these are strong emotions and reactions, they need to be justified. What claims do we make to justify these feelings and behaviors? Some of the following claims suggest that the claimant has been falsely accused. Others suggest that the claimant is beyond the discussion ("I already know all this"). But all of them exempt the person from further engagement or accountability, as Eva's claims exempted her.

CLAIMS

- I know people of color.
- I marched in the sixties.
- I already know all this.
- You are judging me.
- You don't know me.
- You are generalizing.
- That is just your opinion.
- I disagree.
- The real oppression is class [or gender, or anything other than race].
- You are elitist.
- I just said one little innocent thing.
- Some people find offense where there is none.

- You don't do this the right way.
- You're playing the race card.
- This is not welcoming to me.
- You're being racist against me.
- You are making me feel guilty.
- You hurt my feelings.
- You misunderstood me.
- I don't feel safe.
- The problem is your tone.
- I can't say anything right.
- That was not my intention.
- I have suffered too.

Several of these claims are also made in an email I received through my public website; the following comments are partly excerpted and summarized (caps in original email). The writer opens by saying that according to her assessment of my age, I did not live through the things that she lived through, and therefore, "I seriously doubt that there is one single thing you could tell me about race." She goes on to state her credentials—how she lived through the momentous events of the civil rights movement, studied race and gender in college, is familiar with many famous black feminist writers and black politicians, and has known many black people throughout her life: neighbors, classmates, and colleagues. Further, the author suffers from the same illness that a black friend's sister died from decades earlier. This shared illness appears to be further proof of her alliance with black people. She uses these experiences and relationships as evidence that she has been able to shed any racism she may have had: "All the things you say whites 'absorb'? I got them wrung out of me through my life and my education." Her next move takes race off the table and replaces it with an oppression she experiences, sexism: "No, I don't want to talk about race any more. I want to talk about GENDER." She ends by closing down any further engagement, saying that she likely wouldn't read any email I would send her.

I am confident that some of the feelings, behaviors, and claims illustrated in this email message will be familiar to white readers; we have either made some version of them ourselves or have heard others make them. Yet as with so many aspects of racism, we rarely examine or consider them problematic. So let's go under the surface and examine the framework of assumptions many of these claims rest on.

ASSUMPTIONS

- Racism is simply personal prejudice.
- I am free of racism.
- I will be the judge of whether racism has occurred.
- My learning is finished; I know all I need to know.
- Racism can only be intentional; my not having intended racism cancels out the impact of my behavior.
- My suffering relieves me of racism or racial privilege.
- White people who experience another form of oppression cannot experience racial privilege.
- If I am a good person, I can't be racist.
- I am entitled to remain comfortable/have this conversation the way I want to.
- How I am perceived by others is the most important issue.
- As a white person, I know the best way to challenge racism.
- If I am feeling challenged, you are doing this wrong.
- It's unkind to point out racism.
- Racism is conscious bias. I have none, so I am not racist.
- Racists are bad individuals, so you are saying that I am a bad person.
- If you knew me or understood me, you would know I can't be racist.
- I have friends of color, so I can't be racist.
- There is no problem; society is fine the way it is.
- Racism is a simple problem. People just need to . . .
- My worldview is objective and the only one operating.
- If I can't see it, it isn't legitimate.
- If you have more knowledge on the subject than I do, you think you're better than me.

Now that we have identified the underlying assumptions that engender these feelings, behaviors, and claims, let's consider how they function.

FUNCTIONS OF WHITE FRAGILITY

- Maintain white solidarity
- Close off self-reflection
- Trivialize the reality of racism
- Silence the discussion
- Make white people the victims
- Hijack the conversation
- Protect a limited worldview
- Take race off the table
- Protect white privilege
- Focus on the messenger, not the message
- Rally more resources to white people

These behaviors and the assumptions undergirding them do not in fact present the claimant as racially open; quite the opposite. They block any entry point for reflection and engagement. Further, they block the ability to repair a racial breach. They fan racial divisions as they seethe with hostility and resentment. In summary, the prevailing white racial assumptions and the behaviors they engender protect racism.

It is difficult for me to imagine that my aforementioned interaction with Angela would have been as constructive if it had occurred before I began this work. I simply could not and would not have responded well if I had been operating from the dominant paradigm. When my coworker let me know that Angela was offended, I would have been filled with anxiety and immediately explained my intentions to my coworker, seeking her understanding and absolution. I would have felt unfairly accused and seen myself as the victim of Angela's unfairness. In responding this way, I would have lost any potential relationship with her, protected my limited worldview, and stunted my emotional and intellectual growth. Yet day in and day out, this defensive reaction is what people of color get from white people, and it explains why they more often than not don't even try talking to us.

However, from a transformed paradigm, when we are given feedback on our inevitable but unaware racist patterns, we might have very different feelings:

- Gratitude
- Excitement
- Discomfort
- Guilt
- Motivation
- Humility
- Compassion
- Interest

When we have these feelings, we might engage in the following behaviors:

- Reflection
- Apology
- Listening
- Processing
- Seeking more understanding
- Grappling
- Engaging
- Believing

What claims might we make when we have these feelings and engage in these behaviors? Notice that none of the following claims