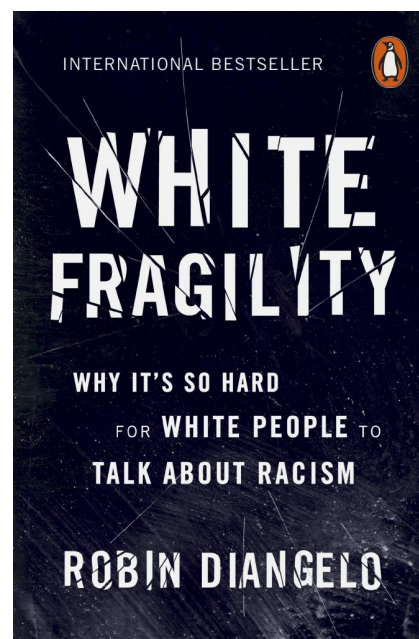


Review: White Fragility – Part 2: Exploring my ignorance

This is the second part of a multi-part review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. This book explores how *white* people struggle to engage with the reality of racism in our society; we do not understand ourselves racially, and are blind to how we participate in and contribute to inequality and the manifest bias against people of colour. In the first part ([link](#)) of my review I attempted to grasp DiAngelo's argument by using analogy; I correlated her observations regarding white racism with the cultural blindness of the English middle class. In this part I now seek to apply DiAngelo's points to myself; I admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience.



Part 2 – Exploring my ignorance.

A book like this cannot be read objectively. The main point of my analogy, in the first part, is to demonstrate why I, myself, might be racially unaware, and unable to taste the water I'm swimming in.

To that end, I need to admit to some anxiety. I don't *feel* the privilege of being of white. I know that, relatively speaking to so many others, I *am* privileged. Many of these privileges, ironically, are attached to assumptions of middle class

success. But I don't feel the *racial* privilege. I have seen acts of racism against my friends and neighbours, and, perhaps, have some internal gratitude that I don't have to weather those storms. But race isn't embedded in the calculus of my life.

Instead, my self-awareness, (and I'm confident I'm not alone in this), attends to where I *do* feel underprivileged. I am, for instance, an immigrant outsider to self-seeding ecclesial networks, my path did not lead to cushy jobs (which, to be fair, I no longer aspire to) or obvious financial security, and I've never worn an old school tie in my life! Like the anecdotal antagonist on DiAngelo's very first page ("A white person can't get a job anymore!"), I do not *feel* empowered. In fact, I often feel *excluded*, in particular, by those with the formal and informal power to categorise me – and perhaps even "cancel" me – because of a privilege (white, male, straight) that I never asked for, and can do nothing about. And, in complete awareness that I am writing this freely and publicly, and that I literally own a right to a public-speaking platform – I often feel *voiceless*, unheard, ignorable, different, alone.

But this is exactly where I think DiAngelo has a valid exhortation: **It's my job to get over that anxiety, and, to be honest, to get over myself!** Perhaps there *is* some injustice in my own broader experience, but that does not give me an "out" by which I can ignore other exclusionary dynamics, particularly racial ones, in which, whether I like it or not, I am a participant and a beneficiary.

What I have realised, from this book, is that with regard to racism, I have much to learn. I hadn't clocked, for instance, how something as ostensibly benign as "white women's tears" (page 134) could actually, and understandably, express racial power dynamics. That example clicked on a small light, and left me thinking, "if that is the case, then what else?"

A helpful pathway into my ignorance was the correlation with gender. I cannot be “colour-blind” in my relationships, just as I cannot be “gender-blind” (see page 81). The *bias* is there; for any number of reasons I will relate to a woman differently than to a man. The vast majority of those reasons are socially accepted, therefore I can admit to them, process them, and adjust them to ensure that they are not deleterious to anyone, including myself. But DiAngelo is right: As a white person, I have not had the opportunity or particular inclination to examine my racial bias. That effective denial of bias “ensures that we won’t examine or change them” (page 11). In short, I need to “name my race.”

... 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.

(Page 7)

To be clear, I am not on some crusade of virtuous self-flagellation here. I can make some robust assessment of myself: I truly don’t think I am guilty of overt or even aversive racism; I don’t *consciously* exhibit “racial disdain that surfaces in [my] daily discourse” (page 45). Similarly, I *don’t* share all of DiAngelo’s experiences. She reflects that “not one person who loved me, guided me, or taught me ever conveyed that segregation deprived me of anything of value” (page 67). That is simply not my personal experience. In fact, the opposite is true; my wife and I have experienced a diversity of cultural contexts, including ones that are multiracial, and when we find ourselves confined to an echo-chamber of progressive liberal whiteness we *feel* the deprivation of that segregation. And let me tell you about how the prophetic presence of an Iranian community impacted a previously pale church community one day!

However, as DiAngelo reinforces, racism is a system, not an event. It pertains not to my individual experience, but to the privilege of my racial class, a class which was *invented* by white colonials in order to protect that privilege. The ignorance I need to reflect on relates to my *complicity* to this system, this world. To a large degree, this is necessarily about admitting ignorance and deliberately informing myself.

I can, for instance, reflect on what DiAngelo presents as the “common set of racial patterns” engendered by our socialisation (page 68). These are characteristics of the white collective, things like “preference for racial segregation”, a “lack of understanding of what racism is”, and “seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization.” I can observe aspects of these in myself. I know, for instance, that I have “focused on intentions over impact”; I can remember nervously washing away someone’s awkward casual racist remark by asserting that “no harm was meant.” In other ways, I’m open to instruction. I don’t think I have, for instance, a submerged and “internalised assumption of racial superiority” (page 55), but would be glad to have it revealed to me. I’d rather deal with it, if it’s there, than pretend it away. In this way it is more uncomfortable, and also more useful, to be open to my complicity in the disproportionate advancement of white people as a collective.

The reality is that I simply do not have to think about being white. For sure, I live in a multicultural area, and I can see how my race might be impediment for certain church activities; to that extent I *realise* I am white. But I don’t have to *think* about it. As I think and dream and imagine my life, my *whiteness* is simply not a factor. To that extent, I *am* a beneficiary of some key sociological resources, of “self-worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom from the tether of race, freedom of movement, the sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement to all of the

above" (page 25).

I had assumed that this book was, in the main, going to give me an insight into the lived experience of people of colour. It does, of course, do that to some extent. But that is not the point; its intent is to give an insight into the *white* lived experience of ignoring or diminishing people of colour. It is actually more confronting. If it had been a book on how ethnic minorities experience racism, it may have left me informed, perhaps even angered, but, in the end, only *objectively*. In fact, I would have likely had a moment of self-congratulation for being open to understanding the plight of my non-white brother and sisters. *White Fragility* is more prophetic than that; it holds *our* feet *in* the racial story, so that we might understand *our* part.

Truth, however, takes a while to inhabit and explore. DiAngelo has given me a map of my ignorance, but it's up to me walk those trails myself. Like all maps, it turns what is unknown into "known unknowns". This book has given me the lie of the land of the racial privilege from which I benefit, the extent of my likely unconscious complicity, and, to a certain degree, what I might do about it.

However, it's that last question – what to do about it – where DiAngelo is less helpful. If I may draw on a religious example: *White Fragility* is like God's good law; it rightly, justly, appropriately, reveals what is wrong and our part in it... and yet I sense little power by which it can make things right. I will explore this further in the next part.