Robin DiAngelo knows how to work a crowd. The author of White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism is confident without crowing, rehearsed yet sensitive to the audience at hand, funny and smirking and cajoling. “Seeing the Racial Waters,” DiAngelo’s touring half-day workshop, promises to “explore topics including white socialization, systemic racism, white solidarity, the specific ways racism manifests for white progressives, safety versus comfort, [and] the politics of emotions.” She would, she warned us, “say the word white ... about 100 times” in a span of three and a half hours—a joke and a pledge. “You're all gonna be fine,” she said. We laughed. The work had officially begun.

On a Tuesday in July, roughly 300 of us gathered at the Brava Theater Center in San Francisco’s historic (and gentrifying) Mission District to unlearn our parts in the too-routine burlesque of anti-racism. The audience demographics were about as expected for an event on racial literacy: some black women besides myself, some other women of color, some men of color, a few white men, and a huge number of white women, in a range of ages and haircuts. The stage was mostly dark, illuminated by the calming blue palette of a projected photograph: schools of fish swimming in divergent directions among their own kind, just below the water’s surface. As I craned my neck and waited for the show to begin, I was joined to my left by a woman named Mary, who would soon share with me the racial shame of her white burden.

DiAngelo, a professor at the University of Washington who specializes in whiteness studies and critical discourse analysis, first introduced the concept of white fragility to an academic audience in a 2011 article published in the International Journal of Critical Pedagogy. In her formulation, white fragility encompasses the range of physiological responses white people exhibit when so much as nudged to consider the racial implications of their existence—when forced to see themselves as white with the worldview to match, regardless of political affiliation. The slightest amount of “racial stress,” as DiAngelo calls it in that article, can fracture composure, giving way to “emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.” In her book, she tells the deliciously haunting story of a white woman whose white co-workers feared she “might be having a heart attack” after hearing feedback about how her comments affected co-workers of color.

White fragility might have stayed in academia if Brendan Kiley, writing for the Seattle alt-weekly the Stranger, hadn’t applied the term in a 2014 essay about yellowface casting in a local production of The Mikado, the satirical Gilbert and Sullivan opera set in Japan. The short article, which explicated the “deflection and denial”—filled defense of a white man who’d been cast in the show as an Asian character, propelled DiAngelo and her term into popular circulation. Virality led to a book contract, and White Fragility has yet to leave the New York Times bestseller list since its debut in June 2018, making it the fastest-selling book in the history of Beacon Press (our shared publisher). White Fragility has been hashtagged and ‘grammed by book bloggers and celebrities and covered by outlets such as Elle, the Washington Post, the New Yorker, NPR’s Morning Edition, the Call Your Girlfriend podcast, and this magazine.
Pulling out the paperback in public, I soon realized, was an invitation for comment. “Love that book,” a white hairstylist told me, passing by as I sat under the dryer. The colorist, black, later asked me what I thought of it. As yet three-fourths finished, I still hesitated before answering that much of the material felt intuitive. I wasn’t sure if it was a matter of me being jaded or black. It’s worth checking out, I offered.

White people tend to rebuke the idea that they share general traits, a reflex DiAngelo takes to task in her writing and workshops. Surely, though, some generalizations can be made about any cohort of white people willing to spend as much as $165 on a workshop about systemic racism. (DiAngelo’s organizational partner, Education for Racial Equity, offers scholarships for black and indigenous participants of color and lower-income individuals. Seventy-five percent of the workshop’s proceeds, we were told, would be donated to local nonprofits that support communities of color, such as Idle No More SF Bay.) They are likely affluent, degreed, and housing-secure even if debt reaches up past their ears. They know what to say and not to say in mixed company; they tsk at relatives who can’t keep up with the times, but pass the salt when beckoned. Their social circle is racially homogenous, but if asked they would attribute this to chance over design. If they voted, they voted for Hillary, and they felt good about it.

“White progressives,” as DiAngelo calls them in her book, are also the group most responsible for the social exhaustion that people of color experience on a daily basis. They are the hair touchers, the “you go, girlfriend!” cheerleaders, the “not even water?” inquirers, the “this is not my America” mourners. They are so finely parodied during two iconic garden party scenes—in The Boondocks and Get Out—that they might fail to recognize themselves. They might ask, with feigned naiveté, what you thought of this whole Jussie Smollett situation. “White progressives are my specialty,” DiAngelo told us during the workshop. She was smiling but not kidding.

When DiAngelo puts the spotlight on whiteness, she means it, and she starts with herself. “I am reinforcing whiteness and enforcing whiteness,” she said onstage, articulating the hazard faced by any white person who gets applauded for anti-racist work. She knows that for all her expertise, this mostly white, mostly female audience will grant greater authority to any white person sharing their white truth. DiAngelo is a white woman who has spent decades deliberately mired in the race question. Much of her audience has not. How much can be learned in a single afternoon? I wondered. What good is a workshop?

Before Robin DiAngelo and “white fragility,” there was Peggy McIntosh and “white privilege.” McIntosh had her racial awakening in the late 1970s and early 1980s, working for the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. At Wellesley, she conducted seminars on college curricula, instructing faculty on how to incorporate women into courses of study. In this role, she met resistance from men who considered the study of women merely supplemental, “soft stuff.” When we spoke on the phone, McIntosh emphasized the tone of these responses, hostile niceties not precisely attributable to sexism. That tone inspired McIntosh to reevaluate her response to black women doing adjacent political work in Boston at the time, specifically the authors of the 1977 Combahee River Collective Statement, who condemned the racism left unchecked by the white women’s movement. “At first I didn’t see why they could say that,” the 84-year-old McIntosh told me. “I thought we were nice, so nice.”

In 1988, McIntosh published a plain-spoken paper narrating her awakening to the unearned advantages of white identity. A better-known abbreviated version of the paper, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” provides a 50-point list of the “daily effects of white privilege.” In that list, the I of McIntosh’s personal experience bleeds into a repetitive that functions as an
address, conscripting readers to consider their own racialized existence. No. 5: “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.” No. 15: “I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.” No. 20: “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.” No. 41: “I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.”

In popularizing “white privilege,” McIntosh, whose first book was published this summer, introduced audiences to the notion that white identity ought to be critiqued from the inside. Now, DiAngelo—who Michael Eric Dyson calls “the new racial sheriff in town” in the foreword to White Fragility—has taken up that mantle. “White fragility” is “the current moment’s ‘white privilege’ by Peggy McIntosh,” DiAngelo told me, with good humor. DiAngelo, like her predecessor, offers an accessible layman’s route between common race sense and the contentious academic field of critical whiteness studies.

Whiteness studies is decades or centuries old, depending on who’s asked. The notion of a white race is younger than ideology would have us believe—dating back just centuries—but is by no means new, and neither is its explication. In a speech delivered in Chicago in 1854, the same year as the publication of George Fitzhugh’s Sociology for the South, Frederick Douglass connected the codification of whiteness to the threat posed by abolitionism, saying, “The word white is a modern term in the legislation of this country.” W. E. B. Du Bois wrote disciplined observations of whiteness in his work, from the seminal sociology of 1899’s The Philadelphia Negro to 1935’s formidable Black Reconstruction in America, in which he puts forth the idea of a “public and psychological wage” awarded to white laborers, who “were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white.” Discussions of white privilege, by that name, were in the air among civil rights era and post-‘60s organizations, such as the aforementioned Combahee River Collective. As feminist scholar Sara Ahmed writes, “any critical genealogy of whiteness studies, for me, must begin with the direct political address of Black feminists such as [Audre] Lorde.”

Among all this work lies the suggestion that nonreciprocal expertise about white behavior, white history, white ethnics, and white sociality has always been mandatory for nonwhites in America. As the Ex-Colored Man claims in the 1912 novel by James Weldon Johnson, “the colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them.” Or, as Du Bois eerily conveys in his 1920 essay “The Souls of White Folk”: “Of them I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. … I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know.” More recently, sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom has shared the credo of “know our whites.” As she writes in her 2019 essay collection Thick, “If you truly know your whites disappointment rarely darkens your door.”

The history goes long as history is wont to do, and yet there is a difference between the knowledge produced by nonwhite people experiencing whiteness and what has since formally taken the name critical whiteness studies. The precious scaffolding the academy provides for areas considered worth study—workshops, conferences, special journal issues, book contracts, syllabi, continued printing and reissues, and anthologies tied together by, most importantly, funding—matters. That shrinks the history of whiteness studies to the past 30-odd years, pinned (somewhat retroactively) to such early-‘90s publications as David Roediger’s The Wages of Whiteness, Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Alexander Saxton’s The Rise and Fall of the White Republic, Ruth Frankenberg’s White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness, Noel Ignatiev’s Race Traitor journal, and Eric Lott’s Love and Theft:
In remarks opening a symposium on whiteness in 1995, Mike Hill, a professor of English, noted the "white renaissance manifest within critical race studies." Hill continued, I guess one could say that this work, in all good intention, follows numerous appeals by black feminists to interrogate whiteness. ... But one could say, on the other hand, that whiteness comes almost too easily now ... the sheer ubiquity of white-on-white critique carries with it the potential for at least a little irony.

The speakers who followed chewed on the epistemological challenges of the burgeoning field, struggling to incorporate a newly self-conscious whiteness into older academic discourses on class, gender, and empire. Said one audience member: "Whiteness in my view can't ever be a basis from which to form radical notions of subjectivity, even when you pretend to talk critically about it."

While Margaret Talbot was overly flip in her 1997 assessment of the field for the New York Times, reducing it to "a lot of silly posing," whiteness studies has, for good reason, been anxious about a "me-search" problem. Writing on "whiteness qua whiteness," to borrow from Richard Dyer's influential 1997 book White, can so often veer toward whiteness pro whiteness—whiteness in the interest of whiteness, whiteness for whiteness' sake, whiteness to hear itself talk. It's difficult to translate for a general audience all the discourse of a field that's been defined, at times, by its crises of faith. Confession is a much better sell.

Consider Tim Wise, whom Cornel West has dubbed "a vanilla brother in the tradition of John Brown," and who made his debut in the trades with 2008's White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son. Tonally, thematically, and through and through a memoir, White Like Me nonetheless yearns to transform testimony to pedagogy, recruiting the necessary pronouns—you, we, us—to assert a collective story. Wise's writing binds personality and anti-racist analysis so as to suggest one cannot exist without the other. DiAngelo admires Wise, who reviewed her book positively, but doesn't "see him as an educator," she told me, proposing instead that he's a "provocateur." DiAngelo says, "He's great at challenging and debating, but he's not necessarily gonna lay out, 'OK, let me explain to you how racism shapes you.' We have different roles."

While I would argue that Wise and DiAngelo both owe a debt to the market demand for white-on-white pontificating, I agree with DiAngelo: They are very different. Their work disagrees fundamentally, crucially, on the efficacy of confession. DiAngelo describes her book as "a kind of mainstream accessible whiteness studies," sidestepping the word popular despite the undisputable popularity of White Fragility. She does align her thinking with that of Ibram X. Kendi, who she says is also an educator. Kendi's How to Be an Antiracist, the follow-up to his National Book Award–winning history of racism in America, Stamped from the Beginning, takes "an instructive mood," as the New Yorker's Kelefa Sanneh writes in his review. When Sanneh compares Kendi's and DiAngelo's modes of anti-racist instruction, he finds DiAngelo's wanting—too uninterested in white personhood, too invested in what he considers spindly connections between social etiquette and institutional power. "Part of what makes DiAngelo's project surreal is the difference in scale between the historical injustices she invokes and the contemporary slights she addresses," Sanneh writes.

By contrast, I consider DiAngelo's inclusion of seemingly incongruous grievances a strength. Etiquette is never beside the point. As DiAngelo has said, neither White Fragility nor her workshops
intend to convert the gleefully racist; she speaks to the well-intended whose banal blusters make racial stress routine. I am piqued, however, by Sanneh’s skepticism regarding the place of people of color in DiAngelo’s pedagogy as native specialists to whom white people should always defer. With whiteness on view, white people become the “flawed, complicated characters” of their own stories, he writes, while “people of color seem good, wise, and perhaps rather simple.” At the least, to me, her categorization of all nonwhites as authority figures demonstrates DiAngelo’s awareness, if not anxiety, that her material confirms much of what people of color have long known to be true.

But if, as DiAngelo takes for granted, people of color are by default experts on racial interactions, there is little room then for those who take that lived expertise further as scholars of race. I couldn’t help but notice the relative dearth of contemporary black studies scholarship cited in White Fragility. Ta-Nehisi Coates, however, appears a few times: His study on reparations is quoted from in two separate chapters. This does not reflect negatively on Coates or the might of that essay, but given white liberals’ propensity to deify Coates, the frequency of his invocation is worth noting in a book intended to critique white liberal sensibilities. And DiAngelo admits she is less inspired by Coates’ intellect than awed by his poetics. “I just find him stunningly beautiful in his articulation,” she told me over the phone. But, she adds, “I don’t know that it influenced my thinking.”

And though scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Toni Morrison show up in White Fragility (the former relegated to a curious endnote), DiAngelo doesn’t really consider black studies a disciplining force in the direction of her work. “The voice that’s missing for most white people is looking at what it means to be white,” she said. “I see whiteness studies as white scholars responding to [scholars of color] saying ‘Stop looking at us, because, in fact, you are our problem.’” But I am hard-pressed to imagine an accurate account of our world that doesn’t include the rigor of those who analyze blackness as dutifully as DiAngelo attends to whiteness. If DiAngelo willfully permits an absence here, it is one her core audience permits as well.

“I am an academic who came from practice to theory rather than theory to practice,” DiAngelo told me. She started and finished college in her 30s, graduating with a bachelor’s degree and unsure of what to do next. The career center steered her to diversity training, a job that made her privy to her own racial perspective for the first time. She was “challenged” first as a white person among colleagues of color, unfamiliar with how her whiteness affected others. “I was a classic white liberal,” she admits without chagrin. She was challenged again going into workplaces, this time by white participants who resisted the challenge she and her colleagues posed to their racial worldview. In these sessions, “the hostility was off the charts,” DiAngelo says. “The meanness, the resistance” of white participants was “just stunning.”

After five years, DiAngelo went back to school to get the theory, entering the doctoral program in multicultural education at the University of Washington, where she completed a dissertation studying the racial discourse of white preschool teachers. Over the course of her academic career, she’s continued leading anti-racism workshops for private companies and nonprofit organizations. Anecdotes from those workshops serve as interludes in White Fragility, among them an account of a white man, surrounded by 38 white employees in a room of 40, who “is pounding his fist on the table” because a “white person can’t get a job anymore!” In another episode, a white educator puts on a “blaccent” to imitate a black parent; that woman quits the equity group after DiAngelo asks her to think better of such playacting.

White Fragility evinces an environment where discussions of whiteness frequently take place in public—on social media, in op-ed pages—as well as in pop culture. In movies and on television,
teens such as Sabrina Spellman (of Netflix’s *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*), Gert Yorkes (of Hulu’s *Runaways*), and the besties of *Booksmart* speak the language of social and cultural theory—part of, as Wesley Morris has interpreted, the greater inheritance of America’s ‘90s-era culture wars. Indeed, a three-decades-old term like “white privilege” is now all but passé, run ragged by the likes of Macklemore and baked into the most casual critique of our present national hellscape. Even those disinclined to call whiteness a problem have altered their language, appropriating the progressive terms in vogue. Following the mass shooting motivated by anti-immigrant sentiment in El Paso, Texas, Donald Trump himself recited the recognizable vernacular, calling for the nation to “condemn racism, bigotry, and white supremacy.”

Everyone has a bit of “Tumblr teen” in them, self-reflexively announcing their social positions as a buffer against the now-cartoonish refrain to “check your privilege.” But while plenty of white people will flag their own whiteness, eagerly so in some cases, these admissions are curiously conditional. When the news broke that several high-profile parents were implicated in a conspiracy to illegally finesse their children into prestigious universities, publications (from *Refinery29* to the *Atlantic* to *Vox* to, somewhat ironically, *U.S. News and World Report*) took care to name the collaboration of class and race that enabled such entitlement. On these particular bad actors, my Twitter feed was mostly on the same page. However, once people began reporting their own stories of educational fortitude, the material value of whiteness was suddenly less germane to the conversation. Unlike the children of celebrities, the people I followed implied, they had worked hard and earned it wholesale. It seemed the whiteness of celebrity children worked according to the rule, while everyone else’s whiteness was the exception. The gap between knowing and naming, let alone reckoning, remains vast.

Asked about the state of whiteness studies under Trump, McIntosh and DiAngelo offer differing opinions. McIntosh, though praising the educational efforts of teachers and journalists, believes the country “is still pretty ignorant” of how race works at an individual and societal view. “Denial is very big,” she says. From DiAngelo’s perspective, however, the 2016 election incinerated the can-do optimism turned complacency entertained in the not-too-distant past, when our president was black. In the “current political climate,” she told me, “the denial is pretty much over.” The racists who embrace racism naturally remain—“I get stunningly ugly hate mail,” including death threats, she says—but the abrupt end of the Obama era, she argues, “ripped off that thin veneer of post-racialness.” In that sense, she adds, “my work is easier. … A lot of well-intended white people are like, What is going on?”

I would say denial manifests quietly. Agreement and enthusiasm can stall conversation just as well as aggression, withdrawal, and tears. Like McIntosh, I observe little that suggests America has learned anything about race over the past 30 years besides how better to conceal its racism. Trump’s election may have made some anti-racism work easier—getting butts in seats and books in hands—but it also gave well-meaning white people a monster next to which their casual racism now seems tame. It is enough to admit racism exists, that whiteness might be a problem. Any lower and the bar will be in Hades.

The stated goals of DiAngelo’s public workshops are admittedly modest: on her part, “provide a comprehensive system analysis”; on ours, “identify personal complicity.” At the Brava Theater in San Francisco, we were called on to do some structured sharing in small groups, trading off answers to questions like “How racially diverse was your neighborhood growing up?” and “How are you feeling right now?” We spoke in one-minute intervals and were encouraged to fill the allotted time or else let the seconds tick past awkwardly until the next person’s turn. There were not rules, exactly, but guidelines. *No crosstalk. White people, don’t sit back and force the lone person of*
color in your group to venture forth first. Don’t suck up all the air, either. If you do this for a living, let others try before you steamroll ahead. White people, “show yourselves.” Behind each suggestion I could see the radioactive waste left from workshops past, or maybe the litter following most any conversation about race with a white progressive who’s predisposed to make “anti-racist” an identitarian claim.

Mary, the older white woman seated directly to my left, broke one of the commandments on our first “turn and talk”—leaving me, an incoming professor of African-American literature, to define the words prejudice, discrimination, and systemic racism in relation to each other. Growing up in San Jose, Mary couldn’t “remember race coming up” during her childhood, though she knew, distinctly, the one “Hispanic” family in her neighborhood. A social worker with a master's, Mary was there with her child Chase, who looked and spoke like a millennial. In contrast to their mother, Chase, who identified themselves as queer and trans, readily named their “white privilege,” acquiescing to the “impactful” role race played in their life.

I don’t doubt the stakes felt higher performing these dialogues for me, yet even the “right answers” were boring. Mary was properly ashamed of her ignorance and remorseful for all that white people had wrought. Chase, hip to the rhetoric of our time, knew their queerness didn’t exempt them from “systemic racism.” They both meant well and said all the right things. They knew of their whiteness, but could not name a single example of race happening in their lives. In a recent issue of the New York TimesMagazine, Claudia Rankine cataloged her own aborted attempts to talk to white men about white male privilege. No conversation seems quite so doomed as the one she wants to have with her own husband: “Certainly he knows the right terminology to use, even when these agreed-upon terms prevent us from stumbling into moments of real recognition. These phrases—white fragility, white defensiveness, white appropriation—have a habit of standing in for the complicated mess of a true conversation.”

Would I have preferred to witness my seatmates stumble in pursuit of naming something specific? Probably not. Maybe my presence was an impediment—tripping up my partners whichever way they turned. But then that question returns: What good is a workshop? What good is a workshop without sounding foolish? What good is a workshop without any work? If my partners had instead been given another white person to lean on, would their answers have been more articulate? Would they have been more daring, less assured? Probably not.

In fact, given the way good white people like to perform their goodness for other white people—“making sure that others see us as having arrived,” as DiAngelo writes—there is every possibility these answers would have been inflated, not humbled, without me there.

In a borderlands e-journal article published 15 years ago, Sara Ahmed asked, “Is a whiteness that is anxious about itself—its narcissism, its egoism, its privilege, its self-centeredness—better?” Explicitly concerned with a whiteness studies that says all the right things, Ahmed argues that “putting whiteness into speech … however critically, is not an anti-racist action.” Declaring that whiteness exists—for others or oneself—does not, itself, do anything. Saying “I have privilege” does not do anything besides make the speaker feel good, and feeling good is anathema to social change. DiAngelo would surely agree. For feeling good, in fact, nurtures the conditions for white fragility. “White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial
apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism,” DiAngelo writes in her book. Nobody disturbs the status quo without testing their balance. At the workshop, complicity was identified, complicity was confessed, complicity went unelaborated. We paid for the honor of honesty with one another, and the air was free of static. If anyone felt pushed, they sure didn’t seem moved.

Stage-side, the presentation is as good as critic-proof: DiAngelo preempted so many approaching concerns I eventually stopped anticipating the pitfalls. When she gave us her long but abbreviated list of “racial accountability practices,” including “accountability partners” of color who are paid for their time and expertise, I could not help but think, dangerously, *What a wonderful world it would be if she could be cloned.* It is hard not to be enamored with the white person who refuses to call themselves an ally or who speculates, contrary to so many white women today, that if she’d been born a century earlier she probably would not have bucked her religious upbringing to become a suffragette.

For whiteness studies to push past the amiability of white-on-white education, Ahmed argues, all involved must perform something of an ethical *piqué manège*. The maneuver requires not one turn but several, the dancer traveling in a circle as her body rotates like a top and her head controls all. It is not difficult so much as prone to misdirection: Lose focus and the whole thing unravels in a mess of vertigo. To address whiteness properly, white people must “turn towards and away” from whiteness, “turning towards their role and responsibility in these histories of racism” as they “turn away from themselves, and towards others.” Right now we are stuck in the first turn, moving ever so slowly, head craned in the mirror, enthralled by ourselves, enthralled by whiteness. But we must move on to the next turn, and the next, and the next. We must focus on where we need to go and learn to change our footing.

DiAngelo knows the choreography well and attends rehearsals without fail. She turns away and away and away again from the worst of what whiteness (studies) may bring. She faces her audience, aware that authority has its limits. “I cannot hold all your stories,” she warns. “That’s on you.” That's exactly what I'm afraid of.