

Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen | Department of English

‘Race/Racism(s)/Resistance’

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Winter Semester 2020/2021

# **Reading Journal**

based on the seminar

**‘Race/Racism(s)/Resistance’**

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## Introduction

Racism is a deeply complex and very individual issue, shaped by personal experiences, beliefs and cultural contexts. Topics regarding racism can vary significantly depending on one's geographic location and the social groups involved. Thus, it is vital to approach this topic with sensitivity and empathy. While the examples examined in the seminar primarily focus on racial dynamics between Black and white people in the United States, as a white person raised in Germany, I have sometimes found it difficult to fully grasp the intricacies of racism, particularly in the U.S. I have not been socialized in an environment where my race would play a significant role in everyday life, and as such, I lack personal experiences with racial discrimination.

As a Northern European, I have generally felt at home and comfortable in the places I have lived in. Both of my parents are fair-skinned, blonde-haired, and blue- or green-eyed, fitting the stereotypical image of a "German" in the eyes of many. Thus, I have never had a problem or disadvantages because of my perceived race, as my features shield me from discrimination. And this is really a sad thing to say, considering that there are people whose mere outer appearance make them the target of racism. My last name doesn't suggest that I have a migration background either, yet I have a Polish mother and a German father. My Polish background is not immediately apparent. If my parents' nationalities had been reversed, or my parents wouldn't have married, my last name would be Polish. And I believe this would have changed things for me. It would likely have changed how others viewed me. This thought, or we might even agree on fact, is a significant indication of the privilege I experience due to my appearance and name, which align with dominant social norms in Germany. However, in my past I have encountered derogatory comments about my Polish heritage, even within my own family. These comments made me feel like my Polish half was less valuable than my German side. My mother, who speaks with a noticeable Polish accent, has faced much greater challenges, as she can be recognized as foreign, resulting in more or less subtle exclusions and a lack of acceptance. This aligns with the fact that historically the Slavic race has been considered as inferior, a point of view that continues to produce stereotypes and prejudices. As I reflect on my own background, I also consider how Germany's history, i.e. the impact of the horrific NS regime, has shaped me — not only through my upbringing in the German culture but also through the generational trauma passed down

in my family. While I cannot speak from experience on racial oppression, my awareness of Germany's dark past has instilled in me a complex relationship with my heritage. I was raised to critically examine my country's dark past, often feeling a sense of shame about it, and I recognize how this generational trauma shapes how I view issues of power and privilege. Internal struggles like this, I believe, are part of the larger complexity of racism. Each of us experiences the world through our own lens, shaped by our experiences and cultural context. And while I regard this as something highly valuable, it is at the same time challenging, as every single one of us has their own sore points. This is why it is so crucial to engage in open dialogue and learn from one another. Many times, I wished that communication about difficult topics would, in general, be less judgmental and more value-free. Especially throughout the last years I feel like the debate all over the world has developed into being very dualistic and sometimes even hypocritical. More than defending one's own position, I wish we could focus more on understanding other positions. Through respectful communication and sharing our perspectives we can broaden our understanding and work toward making the world a more inclusive place. This is why I am very grateful that I took part in the seminar "Race/Race/Racism(s)/Resistance", and I would like to thank Prof. Olson for the room that she created to respectfully communicate and elaborate on the topic of racism. This subject area is of such high value and importance, especially when you want to work as a teacher in schools where children have so many different backgrounds.

As mentioned in the beginning, I have previously found it difficult to grasp the issue of racism. It was an intense experience trying to understand its complexities and learn about the many different aspects and perspectives involved. Thus, it was very important for me to immerse myself in the topic and allow time for the content, theories, and ideas to truly sink in. In addition to reading the seminar texts, I engaged with numerous videos and social media posts on the subject to absorb various perspectives and learn what different people think about racism. Overall, participating in the seminar has broadened my horizons and taught me many valuable lessons that will continue to benefit me throughout my life. I view the seminar as having planted seeds within me, with my knowledge and understanding of racism growing alongside my personal development.

## **1. Racism: Understanding its Systemic Nature and the Need for Nuanced Discourse**

From what I knew, racism is the unfair treatment of people based on their race. Oftentimes, discrimination happens because a person's race is immediately visible. However, names associated with specific ethnicities or religions, can also be a basis for discrimination. Someone with a traditionally African, Asian, Slavic, or Arabic name might face bias in areas like job applications or housing. I already mentioned in the introduction that I believe my life would have been different, if I had been given my mother's Polish last name. Studies have shown that people with "ethnic-sounding" names often receive fewer callbacks for job interviews than those with names perceived as "western" or "neutral." It has been found out that in Germany applicants with a migration background have an 18 percent lower chance of getting an occupation compared to applicants with the same level of education and will be less often invited to job interviews (Peters 2022). In the U.S. society, there is a long history of discrimination against black people. The divide between black and white is particularly dominant because of the historical context of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism that has shaped the nation. These were the things that I knew before I engaged deeper into the topic of racism. Once I began learning more about racism, especially during this seminar, I understood that racism is fundamentally about power. It is not merely a matter of individual bias, but rather about structures that uphold inequality, such as exclusion from political representation, economic disadvantages, and biased policing. This was a crucial learning experience for me, as I had previously confused racism with discrimination. While discrimination can occur towards anyone, racism is rooted in power hierarchies that privilege one racial group over another.

One aspect of racial discourse that I have encountered many times while researching on social media and YouTube is the claim that there is no such thing as 'racism against whites.' When I first came across statements like this, I must honestly admit that I was not able to fully comprehend the argument. As mentioned above, I initially understood racism as the unfair treatment of individuals based on race, which I believed could apply in all directions. However, once I learned about systemic racism, I realized that racism is not just about individual prejudice but about power structures embedded in society that position certain racial groups as less valuable than the dominant group. Those in power have shaped laws, policies, and institutions in ways that maintain

advantages for themselves while disadvantaging others. Discriminatory hiring practices, unequal access to healthcare, and racial profiling are part of a larger system that has been creating inequality. While it is true that anyone can experience individual acts of prejudice or stereotyping, systemic racism refers to the historical and institutional mechanisms that have granted privilege at the expense of others. With this perspective it is indeed not possible to discriminate against white people, as they are at the top of the racial hierarchy. Still, those statements about racism not being possible towards whites somehow irritated me, as they seemed to oversimplify the complexity of individual realities. Furthermore, my own experiences with discrimination made me question this claim. As I have recently found out, just a few decades ago, being of mixed German and Polish heritage, like I am, was considered "*Rassenschande*" (racial disgrace) in Germany. Throughout my life, I have encountered derogatory remarks such as "*Polacke*" a slur directed at Polish people, accusations of me stealing, and hurtful comments about my mother, who was judged of migrating to the West purely for financial gain and of using my father to achieve that goal. These experiences made me reflect on how certain white ethnic groups, including Eastern Europeans, have been subjected to prejudice and exclusion, although they appear to be white at first glance. While mainstream discussions on racism often focus on broader racial categories and skin tones, they sometimes fail to account for the historical and ongoing discrimination faced by groups who, despite appearing white, have been regarded as inferior or unwelcome within certain societies. While it is true that power structures have historically disadvantaged especially non-white groups, there are also white marginalized groups, such as Jews, Slavic peoples, and Sinti and Roma, who though often appearing white, have been subject to discrimination and marginalization. These groups have, at various times, been regarded as less valuable and racially inferior by the dominant society. Their experiences reveal that racism can indeed be directed at those who might superficially be labeled as white, depending on the historical and social context. This underscores the idea that racial categories and power structures are socially constructed, even within people who look alike. The historian Jannis Panagiotidis (2024: 211) argues that we must be cautious not to homogenize "the East" and its people as simply "white" and "Christian." Anti-Eastern European racism, both historically and in the present, has always been intertwined with other forms of racism, particularly against non-Christian and non-white minorities, such as Jews and Sinti and Roma. His

perspective advocates for an expansion of the racism debate, both in academic and public discourse, to acknowledge the specific forms of racialization and exclusion experienced by Eastern Europeans, who have often been depicted as uncivilized, inferior, or a threat to national identity, yet have not been seen enough within the issues surrounding racism.

Reflecting on my own journey of understanding racism, I must admit that I was unaware that the discrimination faced by Eastern European groups is linked to racism. Startlingly, I have resigned myself to these notions without questioning them further. In public discourse, this facet of racism rarely receives attention, and discovering its existence has been unexpectedly healing for me. Learning about this "eastern extension" of racism has enriched my perspective, emphasizing that racial hierarchies are complex and multifaceted. However, I am also keenly aware that my personal experiences cannot be equated with the profound historical and systemic racism endured by Black people and people of color in the United States and all over the world. My heritage, in contrast to black individuals, is not immediately visible. If people look at me, they will perceive me as white, and as a result, I benefit from the advantages associated with white privilege. I am determined to approach the subject of racism with sensitivity and humility, recognizing that while my story adds another layer to the discourse, it does not, and cannot, mirror the magnitude of oppression faced by other communities. This realization underscores the importance of broadening our understanding of racism, as advocated by scholars like Panagiotidis, without diminishing the unique struggles that each marginalized group endures.

Additionally, it is important to critically examine what is meant by the "white race". While individuals may show physical characteristics typically associated with whiteness, these features alone do not necessarily place them within the socio-historically constructed category of "white" (Efird, Versey & Wilkins 2024:55). In other words, one cannot determine a person's racial identity based solely on outward appearance. Although this categorization is critical for understanding systemic power structures and historical dynamics of inequity, applying it rigidly can be counterproductive. Making judgments based on appearances can lead to harmful stereotypes and overlook the complexity of individual identities. Therefore, I believe it is problematic to claim that racism against white people does not exist. Though, comments on social media that say racism against whites doesn't exist, probably mean reverse racism, where for example white people are

attacked by black people for being white. And this, I agree, is not racism, it is prejudice or discrimination but not racism against whites in terms of being the other way around. Therefore, I recognize that reverse racism does not exist. However, stating that there is no racism directed at white individuals can be misleading and counterproductive in discussions about racism.

I now recognize that addressing racism requires both personal reflection and collective action to overcome oppressive structures. By continuing to educate myself and engaging in open dialogue, I hope to contribute to a societal climate where all individuals are respected and valued. Nevertheless, systemic racism structures need to be actively challenged and above all, it is crucial that these structures are examined and publicly or at least openly discussed. I believe that the awareness of inequities because of racism can have a significant contribution to societies in general. Speaking from my German perspective, to understand the impact of racism in the US, apart from YouTube and social media, movies like 'The Green Book' or 'The Best of Enemies' have been helping me to grasp and better comprehend the complexities of racial dynamics, including the systemic inequalities and interpersonal tensions that have shaped American society. These movies provide valuable insights into historical and social contexts, portraying both the struggles and the resilience of individuals navigating a racially divided society. Moreover, they have reinforced my belief that empathy, dialogue, and shared experiences are essential for overcoming prejudices and fostering change.

## **2. White Supremacy**

White supremacy is a power that remains invisible while simultaneously shaping societal norms, institutions, and historical narratives. As Shirley Steinberg (2023) argues, whiteness exists as an unmarked category, unchallenged and assumed as the default in Western societies. Steinberg (*ibid.*), drawing on Toni Morrison (1993), describes it as a "mute, meaningless, unfathomable" force that structures the world without needing to name itself. This invisibility allows white supremacy to function as a pervasive "nothingness" that paradoxically holds immense power, influencing education, media, and political discourse without being explicitly acknowledged. Even in multicultural education, whiteness often remains unexamined, as attention is directed toward marginalized groups rather than a critical analysis of white privilege. This also applies to



historical narratives, where whiteness has shaped dominant perspectives, from the whitewashing of early Christianity and ancient Egypt to the marginalization of Black contributions in Western history. Recognizing this hidden influence is essential for breaking down the dominance of white supremacy and fostering a more inclusive environment where all people feel comfortable and respected within societal standards.

The concept of white supremacy is a deeply embedded system of power that privileges whiteness and maintains racial hierarchies in societies across the Western world. At its core, white supremacy is about power—the ability of whiteness to define what is normal, desirable, and valuable. In her publication *White Fragility* Robin DiAngelo (2018: 108) states that these ideas are internalized by children from a very young age and there seems to be neither critical engagement with it nor instruction on how to overcome it. This lack of awareness of white privilege on behalf of the white social group leads to this system of power, consciously or often rather subconsciously, being perpetuated. That way white individuals benefit from it, often without even knowing. DiAngelo even goes as far as claiming that “white superiority is also unnamed and denied by most whites.” (ibid.). Hence, while explicit racial hierarchies may no longer be legally enforced, white supremacy continues to shape the present at the expense of others. It determines whose perspectives dominate public discourse, and even which physical traits are considered beautiful. One example of how whiteness operates as an unquestioned norm is in beauty standards. European features, light skin, straight hair, and specific facial structures are positioned as the ideal, while racialized features are viewed as deviations. These standards are not neutral, but reinforce the idea that whiteness is the instance to which standards are measured. A few years ago, I watched a talk show hosted by Tyra Banks in which black women talked about their experiences with achieving “European” hair beauty standards. They stated how tedious it is for them to straighten their hair and create hairstyles that are easily achievable for white women due to their different hair structure. Moreover, they mentioned feeling pressured to create their outer appearance according to the white standard to appear professional and become accepted in society and their working place. Thinking about this carefully, it is truly dreadful. In the talk show a few women also expressed how they developed the courage to grow and style their hair in a natural, African American way and how empowered they felt by that. The consensus of the talk was that every woman should feel comfortable and adhere to

their own definition of beauty, embracing individual uniqueness rather than conforming to societal standards. While this is a beautiful message that I definitely support, the issue of black women struggling with white beauty standards needs to be addressed and be made aware to white people so this racial burden can hopefully be resolved in the long run. I remember being struck by the emotional distress and pressure that Black women experience to conform to societal standards because of their hair, especially in the U.S. It opened up a perspective to me I had never considered before, as my own hair is naturally very straight. Of course, the history of white and black race relations in the U.S. is far more complex, and since I live in Germany, where society is predominantly white, it is understandable that I had not been confronted with these struggles as much. Thus, this realization was incredibly important for me. With the background knowledge I have gained through this seminar, the significance of these issues has become even more apparent to me.

In the following I would like to name some other examples of Black women facing discrimination based on their appearance that highlight the deeply ingrained biases and white supremacy in society. A YouTube video I watched featured Black women sharing their experiences with statements like, "You are beautiful for a Black woman.". This kind of remark is deeply insulting, as it implies that Black women are not generally considered beautiful. It suggests that only those whose features align more with white beauty standards are seen as attractive. Such comments reveal how Eurocentric ideals still shape perceptions of beauty. I find it important that Black women have platforms to share these experiences because it helps raise awareness among white people, encouraging them to reflect on their language and assumptions.

On the other hand, in the same video, Black and biracial women also shared their experiences of being fetishized. They recounted hearing things like, "What are you? You look so exotic," especially when they were of mixed race. This kind of remark reduces their identity to an object, stripping away their individuality and humanity. While some may be said without malicious intent, they still reflect how internalized perceptions of racial superiority, lead to the exoticization of women, causing their boundaries to be overstepped and making them feel not just uncomfortable, but more likely disgusted. These experiences are as damaging as any other form of racial stereotyping, and it's

essential for people to recognize how deeply embedded notions of racial hierarchies influence behavior and perceptions.

One aspect where I've noticed changes in my thinking is that, for example, in the fields of education and career, I would have assumed that Black individuals have the same opportunities as white people. With prominent figures like former President Obama, we see that Black people can indeed achieve anything they set their minds to. However, the crucial question regarding this is how much more effort they need to put in achieving their goals and the obstacles they face compared to white individuals. While it is true that any American can technically access the same education, I believe that when it comes to applying for jobs, Black individuals still face more challenges in being hired than whites with the same educational background. Although the situation has become better and black people have taken big steps in being equal throughout the last decades, the situation is still not ideal, and education and awareness needs to be shed on this. I am optimistic and hopeful that, in a few decades, things will further improve, and the pain and systematic discrimination faced by Blacks can eventually be left behind.

### **3. White Privilege**

In our first class we talked about an incident which took place in Central Park, New York, on May 25, 2020, the same day that George Floyd was murdered. Amy Cooper, a white woman, falsely accused Christian Cooper, a Black man, of threatening her while he was birdwatching in the park. An ironic aspect of this encounter is that a Black man is engaged in birdwatching, an activity traditionally associated with white men. Prior to Amy Cooper calling 911, Christian Cooper asked her to leash her dog since the area where they crossed paths is a sensitive wildlife habitat and dogs are required to be leashed at all times. The encounter was filmed by Christian Cooper and has gone viral on social media. We watched the video in class, and it was very disconcerting to watch. The fact that she said to the police there was an "African American man" threatening her is deeply problematic. She could have simply stated, "There is a man," which would have been sufficient to convey her alleged concerns. However, her deliberate mention of his race, which objectively should play no role in this case, implies that she perceives him as a danger because he is a Black man. Furthermore, she actively threatens him by weaponizing his race and his vulnerability against him, deliberately invoking his identity as a Black man

to exploit the systemic bias that makes such accusations particularly dangerous for people of color. Additionally, in class, we discussed how her reaction was completely exaggerated, dramatizing the situation to present herself as a victim. She feigned distress and fear in her call to the police, despite no evidence that her safety was in immediate danger. This deliberate exaggeration was not only manipulative but also placed the man at significant risk, knowing that such accusations could provoke a severe and potentially harmful response. Another point that supports her gaslighting is her initial refusal to comply with his reasonable request to leash her dog, followed by her shifting the narrative to make him appear threatening. This behavior undermines his legitimate concerns, which align with the park's rules, while positioning herself as the one under attack. By distorting the truth in this way, she seeks to invalidate his position and reframe the encounter to suit her narrative. This is a very fitting example for white supremacy and the concept of white fragility which is examined intensively by Robin DiAngelo and will be addressed in the next chapter.

The reference to his race here highlights a profound societal issue, namely, that racist stereotypes and the feeling of superiority are deeply ingrained in white people's minds. Therefore, she stands as a symptom of a larger problem that shapes people's perceptions and actions on a subconscious level. While her behavior is troublesome, hysteric and racist, it's important to recognize that she not only acts in a mean and unreflective way, but she is also the symptom of the deeper issue of structural racism and white supremacy. She is a reflection of society, and it is therefore necessary that people feel addressed, take responsibility and tackle the issue of racist structures in their own thoughts to foster racial equities in society as a whole. This encounter must have been very, very stressful and is deeply disturbing. Still, in a way we should be thankful that this video has brought to light what still needs to be repaired and still needs to be talked about to lead to a more just civilization. Encounters like this should cause people to become aware of and reflect on their white privilege. I assume, many people lack awareness of racial stereotypes and how they perhaps even unconsciously shape interactions in everyday life. The good thing about social media here is that people can now quickly post these encounters and gain attention about it. This video made me realize how Black people in the U.S. are still disadvantaged in comparison to white people, demonstrating that these biases continue to influence how they are treated and put in

danger in everyday situations. Even in the absence of genuine threat, black people are stigmatized as a risk which can lead to the escalation of harmless situations. In an interview with Christian Cooper, that I watched on YouTube he states “it was a window I think for a lot of people into what we African Americans know ‘cause we live it every day. But I think for a lot of people who aren’t African American, they were able to see in those two videos, you know, the use of racial bias and how it informs policing or how people try to use it in policing sometimes and then the actual police response, you know, against African Americans that gets us killed. So, it opens some eyes I think, maybe.” (Democracy Now! 2024: 10:09). I’m glad that this issue is being publicized and discussed, as it brings much-needed attention to the realities of racial bias and serves as a reminder of the urgency to address these systemic issues in society. The advantages of white privilege are often so deeply embedded in societal norms and structures that they can go unnoticed by those who benefit from them.

While reading the texts of the seminar I noticed another disturbing example for white privilege, which is only briefly mentioned in the context of racism being both “overt and covert”. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, the author Ibram Kendi highlights the tragic reality that in Birmingham, Alabama, “five hundred black babies die each year because of the lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities.” I looked that up and found the following statement on the Alabama public health department website: “The infant mortality rate of black infants remains well over twice that of white infants. In 2022, black infants died at a rate of 12.4 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, while deaths among other infants and white infants occurred at rates of 8.5 infant deaths per 1,000 births and 4.3 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, respectively.” (ADPH 2024). This statistic underscores how deeply systemic inequities, driven by historical and ongoing racism, continue to affect Black communities in the U.S. The disproportionate infant mortality rate is not merely the result of individual circumstances but rather a reflection of a healthcare system that reproduces racial injustice. In contrast to Germany’s universal healthcare system, which ensures that everyone, regardless of income and status, receives access to necessary medical care, the U.S. operates within a privatized, insurance-based healthcare system, where access to medical help is often tied to one’s ability to pay. This results in significant disparities, particularly for Black Americans, who are more likely to experience poverty, unemployment, and lack of insurance. These economic barriers

perpetuate unequal access to essential healthcare services, such as prenatal and postnatal care. The tragic contrast in healthcare access between Black and white Americans is a direct manifestation of structural racism, where healthcare is not a universal right, but depends on social and economic privilege.

#### **4. White Fragility**

The term *White Fragility* was coined by Robin DiAngelo, who wrote about it in her book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, published in 2018. In her publication DiAngelo introduces the concept of “white fragility” to describe the defensiveness and distressed emotional responses that arise when white people are confronted with issues of race. According to her, white people’s discomfort with discussions about race contributes to the perpetuation of systemic racism.

I find it interesting how, when I first read the chapters from *White Fragility*, they absolutely irritated me, but after a while, I was able to be grateful for DiAngelo's perspective. Reading the excerpts of her book truly challenged me in my thinking and I had to put a lot of thoughts and feelings into processing her texts. Perhaps it is her writing style, or the sociological perspective, but I often found it difficult to understand what she was actually trying to convey, as her arguments seemed convoluted and layered with multiple meanings. It is probably due to the complexity of these ideas that they take time to develop, and her texts convey much information which can be seen from multiple perspectives in themselves. While DiAngelo’s work has been influential and helpful in broadening the conversation on racism, it also presents several controversial points.

Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* opens an essential conversation about the ways white people often react defensively when confronted with discussions related to race and racism, especially in interracial encounters. Since she writes and argues out of experience as a diversity trainer, I admit that her observations need to be recognized and serve as a valuable perspective. Yet, while reading the excerpts of her publication, I partly perceive her argumentation as too shallow and one-sided. Therefore, I believe her viewpoint is a perspective that needs to be heard but can be built upon by other notions to get a broader picture and discuss those issues with honesty and empathy for all sides. One such example can be found at the very beginning of chapter 8, in which she states:

“The preceding episode highlights Karen’s white fragility. She is unable to see herself in racial terms. When she is pressed to do so, she refuses to engage further, positioning herself as the one being treated unfairly.” (DiAngelo 2018:107).

I consider this initial statement as problematic in how it is framed linguistically as a dead end. By stating that Karen is “*unable*” to see herself in racial terms, the argument assumes a fixed inability rather than considering the possibility of growth or reflection. Further, the part “*when she is pressed*” suggests intimidation rather than an opportunity for meaningful dialogue. When engagement is forced, there is of course the instinctive resistance to perceived pressure. The phrasing implies a rigid cause-effect relationship rather than acknowledging that responses to racial discourse may vary depending on personal experiences and background. This formulation constructs Karen as passive, reactive, and resistant without acknowledging why she might struggle with the discussion on a personal level. The final sentence, “*positioning herself as the one being treated unfairly,*” implies that Karen intentionally plays the victim rather than acknowledging that feelings of unfairness may be a genuine emotional response. This assumes manipulation and implies the denial of her right to react a certain way. The quote identifies Karen’s reaction as problematic but offers no solution or path for engagement. This deterministic framing ultimately reduces her to a one-dimensional figure, a symbol of white fragility rather than an individual person with complexity. If Karen is simply “*unable*” to see herself in racial terms and “*refuses*” to engage, then what options remain? This seems to leave little space for development, dialogue, or education. Instead, this approach risks shutting down the conversation rather than opening it.

While the quote seeks to describe a common defensive reaction, its phrasing risks reinforcing the very problem it critiques. If someone feels accused rather than invited into dialogue, they are more likely to disengage, ironically confirming the reaction described. A more constructive approach would acknowledge the psychological difficulty of confronting racial identity while providing strategies for engagement rather than emphasizing resistance as an inevitability. Certainly, DiAngelo cannot be reduced to this statement, and she delivers a profound and detailed description of the phenomenon of white fragility in her publication, yet I think this quote reveals much of the weakness in her debate.

DiAngelo continues to present examples in a one-sided manner, often leaving me questioning what exactly happened and what was said in those situations. For instance, she tells the story of a woman in "*poor health*" who withdrew from an anti-racism training because she felt accused of making racist statements and became so upset that her colleagues worried, she might suffer a heart attack. While I understand the point DiAngelo is trying to make about the white woman dramatizing the situation as an example of white fragility, I can't help but wonder how the woman was treated in the conversation. Such a reaction must have had some substantial backstory, and even considering white fragility as a pattern, it still seems like an extreme response. DiAngelo remains vague about what was actually communicated, and which utterances exactly were supposed to be racist, which makes it difficult for the reader to fully understand the situation. Instead, the responsibility and blame are placed on the white woman, with no sign of compassion (DiAngelo 2018: 111). Yet, I also believe that interracial conversations between white and Black individuals are highly susceptible to lacking sensitivity, given the long history of systematic oppression faced by Black people. As a result, they deserve to be treated with the utmost respect and considering that people can often be ignorant and thoughtless, this is regrettably not always the case. That being said, human communication is complex, and difficult conversations are even more so.

While her observations and analysis shed light on significant barriers to productive racial discourse, her approach also raises concerns regarding tone and methodology. Rather than fostering mutual understanding, DiAngelo's emphasizes white fragility as a primary obstacle. This approach simplifies complex social issues, potentially overlooking the nuances and diversity of perspectives within both racial groups. While the framework of white fragility can be helpful for addressing systemic racism, I feel it might not fully capture the complexities of individual experiences and identities. A central critique of mine is the lack of empathy toward white individuals who may be genuinely willing to engage in self-reflection but struggle due to societal conditioning, limited exposure, or fear of saying the wrong thing. Instead of guiding readers through a constructive learning process, DiAngelo seems to perpetuate racial divides in conversations. This approach may not only reinforce defensiveness but also hinder meaningful dialogue by positioning white individuals primarily as the burden rather than as potential participants in anti-racist efforts. One hypothesis of mine is that DiAngelo



herself might also contribute to causing distressed situations. Who knows? Furthermore, the book offers limited examples of successful racial engagement. While DiAngelo effectively diagnoses the problem of white defensiveness, she provides little guidance on how to move forward, leaving the reader with a sense of paralysis rather than motivation for change.

DiAngelo's central argument however, i.e. that white people are insulated by the discomfort of recognizing their racial privileges, is a valuable statement. Reflecting on this, I recognize moments in my own life when discomfort about racial inequities led me to either avoid the topic or minimize its significance. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge, how deeply societal conditioning has protected white individuals from confronting their privilege and the book challenges readers to reconsider their role in maintaining such systems. So, the question now should be, how can we create spaces for honest, transformative conversations about race that move beyond fragility and toward healing?

### **5. 13th — A documentary by Ava DuVernay**

The documentary *13<sup>th</sup>* by Ava DuVernay explores the deep historical connections between slavery, criminalization and mass incarceration of Black people in the United States. There is a statement containing a powerful message at the beginning of the documentary that left a deep impression on me:

“History is not just stuff that happens by accident. We are the products of the history that our white ancestors chose, if we're white. If we are black, we are the products of the history that our ancestors most likely did not choose. Yet, here we all are together, the products of that set of choices. And we have to understand that in order to escape from it.” (The 13<sup>th</sup> 2016).

This statement is, on the one hand, remarkably simple, yet on the other hand, it unveils how the realities we live in were founded long before we were born. It challenges us to reflect on the complexities and depth of history, how they continue to shape individuals and how privileges and burdens are developed over time. It emphasizes that history is not neutral, but it is shaped by decisions made within the dynamics of power, leading to suffering that persists even decades later. This may not hold true for many individuals who were fortunate enough to overcome adversity and build a successful life

despite starting from a disadvantaged position. However, on a systemic level, the stigmas and shadows of inequality continue to impact people over time. What made me truly realize this kind of impact is the deeply ingrained and damaging stereotype of the "Animalistic African American male," which is also addressed in the documentary. After the abolition of slavery, the public image of Black men was distorted and vilified, creating a narrative of them being a threat which effects can still be felt today. This harmful stereotype continues to shape societal perceptions and contributes to systemic injustices, as in the ongoing police brutality against Black men and their disproportionate incarceration rates. In the chapter on white privilege, I discussed the incident involving Christian Cooper, and I watched a YouTube interview in which he openly admitted that he has worn small, "nerdy" glasses throughout his life to appear less threatening. In the interview, he removes the glasses to demonstrate the contrast in perception, and I was stunned by this moment. Even I, as someone who believes has not internalized the stereotype of the "dangerous African American male", could feel a significant shift in how I perceived him in the absence of those glasses. Even the interviewer, who is black herself, was astonished and stated that she had never thought about that. It was another powerful reminder of how deeply ingrained societal images and biases can shape our perceptions, in ways we don't even recognize (CBS News 2020: 03:17).

The documentary also highlights several historical milestones that contributed to the mass incarceration of Black individuals. At around the 18-minute mark, a politician is quoted explaining that the war on drugs was partly built on lies designed to target Black communities. This strategy, referred to as the "Southern Strategy," aimed to win political support by presenting the narrative of the war on drugs. In this regard, one of the most noteworthy examples is the sentencing disparity between crack and powder cocaine. Crack was cheaper and primarily consumed by Blacks, in contrast to powder cocaine which was considered a prestige drug consumed by whites. Black individuals were given much harsher sentences for crack cocaine possession compared to white individuals with powder cocaine charges. This policy not only resulted in significantly longer prison terms for Black people but also led to a breakdown of family structures, resulting in high rates of fatherless households in Black communities.

Another key point addressed in the documentary is the power of the media. It depicts, how especially in the 80's, news frequently showcased Black males in crime

stories. This overrepresentation reinforced negative stereotypes and influenced public perception, making it easier to support policies that lead to over-policing and mass incarceration within Black communities.

In summary, *13th* tragically illustrates that the mass incarceration in the U.S. is not simply a matter of individual criminal behavior; it is a systematic issue with roots in the historical oppression of Black people. The documentary underscores that the practices of the past have lasting effects on the present, creating a cycle of disadvantages that continues to shape society. Readdressing the quote from the beginning it needs to be emphasized that we all exist together within this framework of history that was created by our ancestors. These shared realities demand accountability, understanding and action. To "escape" the limitations and inequities of our shared history, we must first confront them honestly.

## **Conclusion**

Once again, I can only say that I am sincerely thankful that I participated in the seminar and engaged with texts that I usually might not have read. It challenged my thinking and has broadened my horizon enormously. Personally, I feel a strong need for issues to be discussed from multiple perspectives, and I deeply appreciate a respectful debate, even when participants disagree on some or many points. Reading the excerpts from the book *White Fragility* has inspired me to keep on reflecting on my own perspective even more and remain open to new insights and learnings. By diving into these topics, I feel that my curiosity and awareness have been expanded, and I value the importance of being well informed about historical and societal issues and committing myself to continuous self-education. I don't want to be someone who merely adopts the opinions of others without questioning them. Instead, I want to be able to shape my own perspectives, grounded in reasoned arguments and thoughtful reflection. This realization has become even clearer to me through my engagement with this seminar.

I have learned a great deal about racism in general and particularly in the U.S., how history has shaped the experiences of Black and white people, and how these issues continue to affect their lives until today. I now recognize that racism remains a significant problem that must be addressed, and it is crucial for individuals to be aware of its ongoing impact. A key learning for me has been realizing how racial inequities continue to

influence areas such as the criminalization and incarceration of Black people, healthcare, career opportunities, and thus perpetuating systemic disadvantage. There were many more aspects surrounding the issue of racism discussed in the seminar, such as the Black Lives Matter protests and movement, or police brutality, which I have not explored further in this paper, as it would exceed the scope. However, I want to clarify that this written piece only represents a small part of all that I learned in the seminar. Alongside my learning journey, I have continuously taken notes, as so many thoughts were running through my head, which I view as a sign of a meaningful educational experience.

At first, I want to be honest, I struggled with some of the topics presented in this seminar. However, reading these different texts and engaging with the topic of racism has opened new windows for me and profoundly shaped my understanding of my position in this complex world. I now have a much deeper appreciation for the value of perspectives that challenge my views, despite the human nature to seek reassurance in familiar ways of thinking time and again. I am committed to stay true to myself, both as someone who values diplomacy and as a person who is sensitive to dogmatic narratives, whether they come from the left or the right. I feel like my purpose in this life is to be a bridge, someone who can help bring people closer together and foster understanding beyond prejudice. Therefore, I am deeply grateful to be working in school where I can hopefully have a positive and supportive influence on young people. This seminar has been absolutely necessary for me. It has strengthened my sense of humanity and deepened my compassion on another level. The appeal by Holocaust survivor Margot Friedländer — to treat one another as *humans*, respect each other, to look for the good in people, and take that good from them —resonates with me now more than ever (Der Spiegel 2024: 51:00). It seems simple, yet it requires us to overcome ourselves, step outside our comfort zones, and continuously reflect and seek understanding. And we need to do that regardless of views, culture, or politics. According to Margot Friedländer it is so easy to be humane, yet it remains a lifelong mission and journey. While it is often easier to go along with the current of the majority, and while more radical voices, on all sides, play a crucial and important role in societal discourse, I now recognize that my place is in fostering balance.

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## Additional note:

To enhance clarity and precision, I used Grammarly to refine some of my own written formulations (<https://www.grammarly.com/>).