

# The New Canon: Assessing Books Like *White Fragility* and *White Awake*

Dr. Neil Shenvi

Winter Conference FBCS

March 25-27, 2022

# Outline

- Review of contemporary critical theory
- Review of critical race theory
- Secular books about race
  - *White Fragility*
  - *How to Be An Antiracist*
  - Also: *So You Want to Talk About Race, Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race, Me and White Supremacy*
- Christian books about race
  - *White Awake*
  - *Be The Bridge*
  - Also: *Rediscipling the White Church, Reconstructing the Gospel, We Need to Talk About Race, How to Fight Racism, After Whiteness, Can 'White' People Be Saved?*
- Sociology as theology
  - *Jesus and John Wayne*
  - *Taking America Back for God*
  - Also: *The Rise of Biblical Womanhood, White Evangelical Racism*
- Conclusions

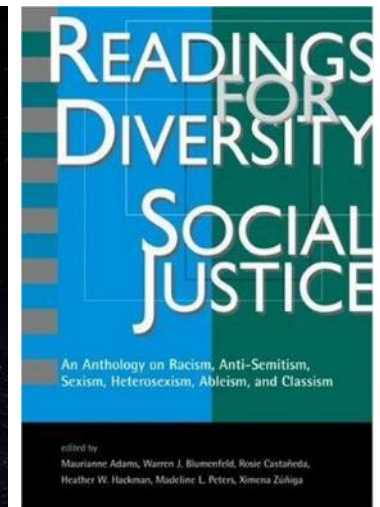
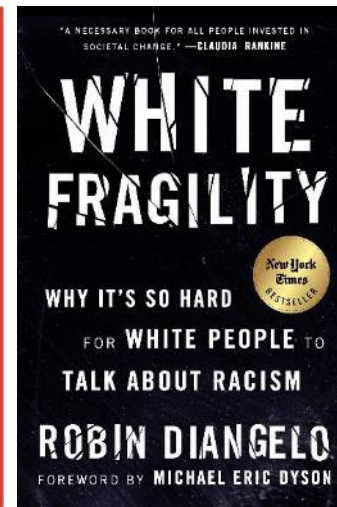
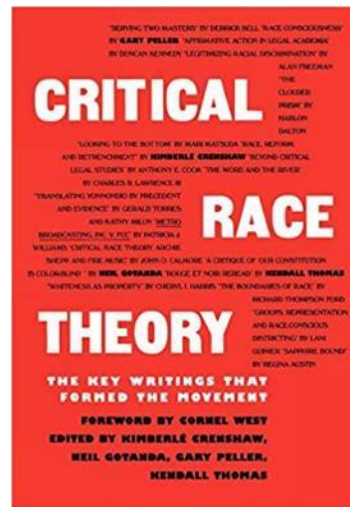
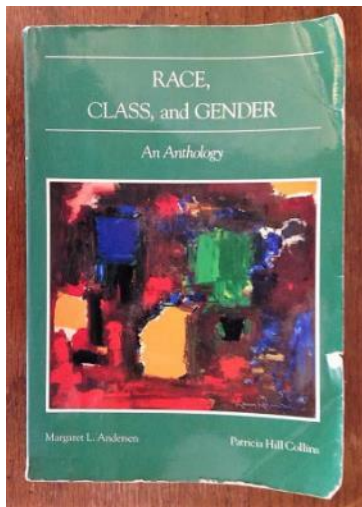
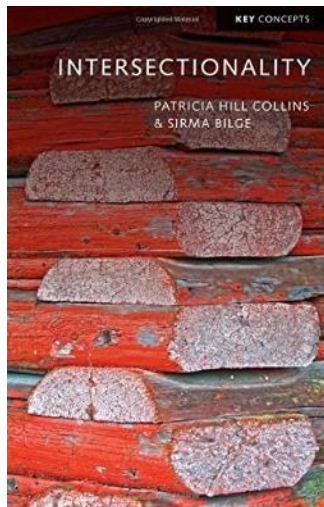
# The central premises of contemporary critical theory?

Premise I: Social binary

Premise II: Oppression through ideology

Premise III: Lived experience

Premise IV: Social justice



# Premise #1: Society is divided into oppressed and oppressor groups

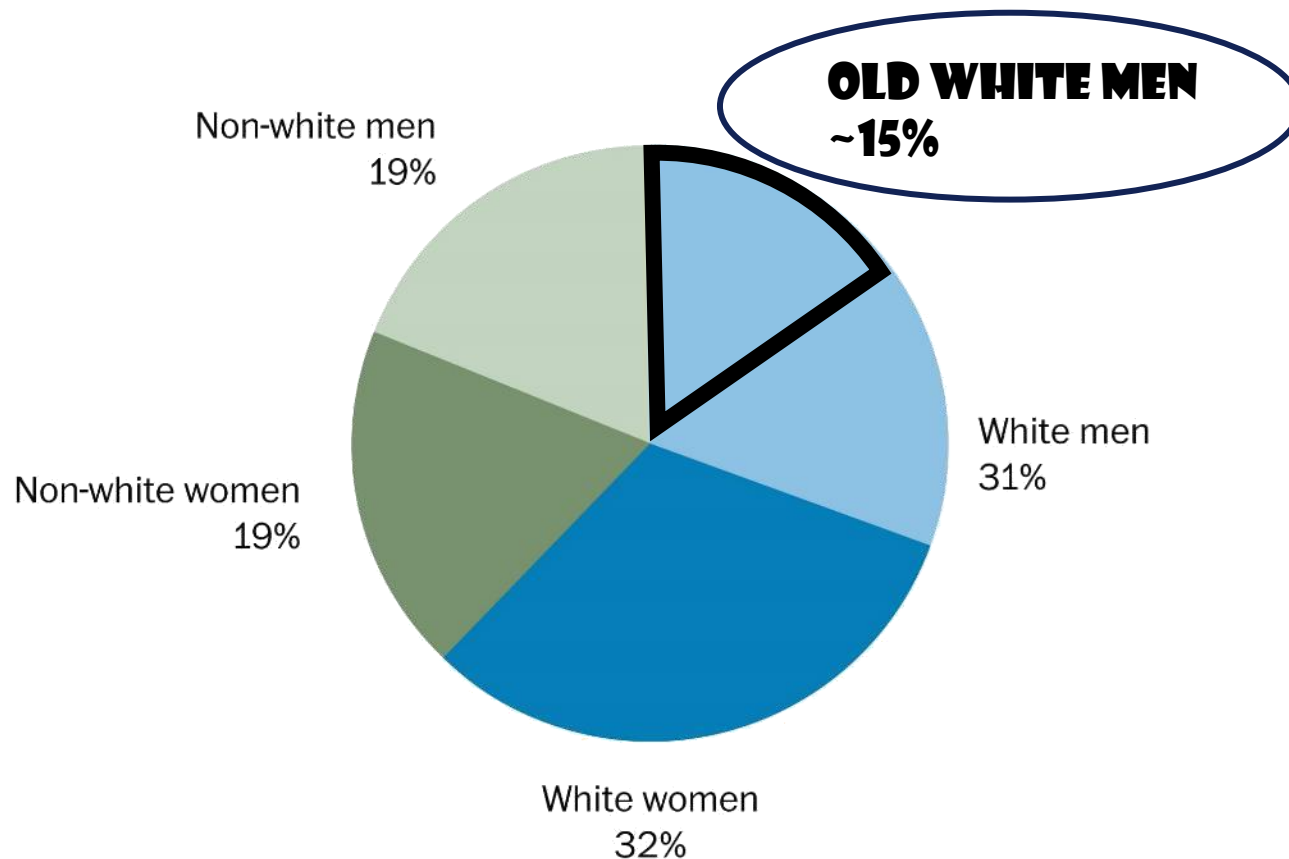
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Is Everyone Really Equal?

**Figure 5.1. Group Identities Across Relations of Power**

Minoritized/Target Group	Oppression	Dominant/ Agent Group
Peoples of Color	Racism	White
Poor Working Class Middle Class	Classism	Owning Class
Women; Transgender; Genderqueer	Sexism	(cis)Men
Gays; Lesbians; Bisexuals; Two Spirit	Heterosexism	Heterosexuals
Muslims; Buddhists; Jews; Hindus; and other non-Christ- ian groups	Religious Oppression Anti-Semitism	Christians
People with Disabilities	Ableism	Able-bodied
Immigrants (perceived)	Nationalism	Citizens (perceived)
Indigenous Peoples	Colonialism	White Settlers

# Premise #2: Oppression occurs through hegemonic power



# Premise #3: 'Lived experience' gives oppressed groups privileged access to truth

**Oppression and epistemology:**

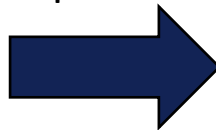


Privilege



Internalized oppression

Lived  
experience



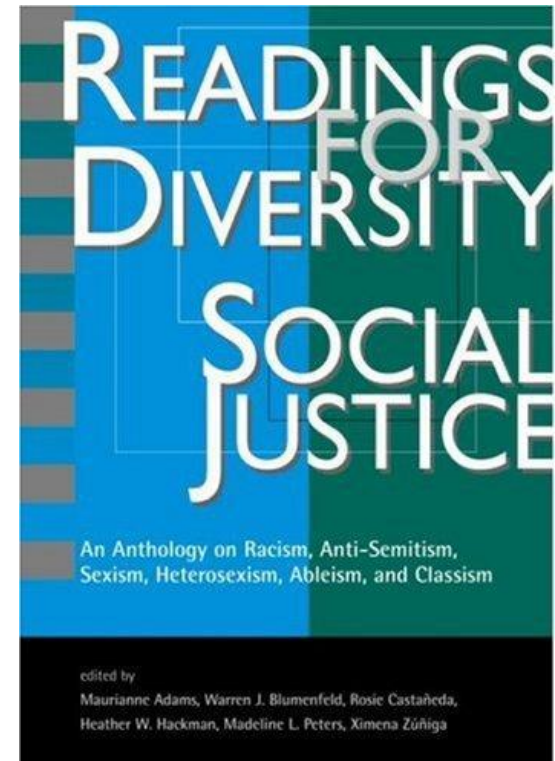
Liberatory consciousness



# Premise #4: Social justice demands the liberation of oppressed groups

## Definition of social justice:

“Prior to celebrating diversity, we must first eliminate intolerance. No matter what form it takes or who does it, we must all take action to stop intolerance when it happens. Working towards a celebration of diversity implies working for **social justice – the elimination of all forms of social oppression...** Social injustice takes many forms. It can be injustice based on a **person’s gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, or economic class.**” – Mary McClintock, “How to Interrupt Oppressive Behavior,” *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, p. 483



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# The Core Tenets of CRT

- Racism is normal, permanent, and pervasive
- Racism is concealed beneath principles like colorblindness, meritocracy, and objectivity
- Lived experience is necessary to fully understand racism
- Racism is part of interlocking systems of oppression

# Racism is normal, permanent, and pervasive

“Racism is **normal**, not **aberrant**, in American society. Because it is an **ingrained feature of our landscape**, racism looks **ordinary and natural** to persons in our culture.” – Delgado and Stefancic



# Racism is concealed beneath principles like colorblindness, meritocracy, and objectivity

**“liberalism, neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy... camouflage [how] racial advantage propels the self-interests, power, and privileges of the dominant group.”** – Harper, Patton, and Wooden



Harper, Patton, and Wooden, “Access and Equity for African American Students in Higher Education: A Critical Race Historical Analysis of Policy Efforts,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(4), 2009, p. 389-414.

# Lived experience is critical to fully understand racism

**“blacks experience the power of second sight from the perspective of antiblack prejudice... A CRT framework recognizes the centrality of experiential knowledge of people of color and views this knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination.”** – Kafi Kumasi



Kafi D. Kumasi, “Critical Race Theory and Education: Mapping a Legacy of Activism and Scholarship” in Levinson’s *Beyond Critique* (p. 209-213).

# Racism is part of interlocking systems of oppression

“CRT critiques [claims that]: one can fight racism without paying attention to **sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation**, and other forms of oppression or injustice.”—Harper, Patton, and Wooden



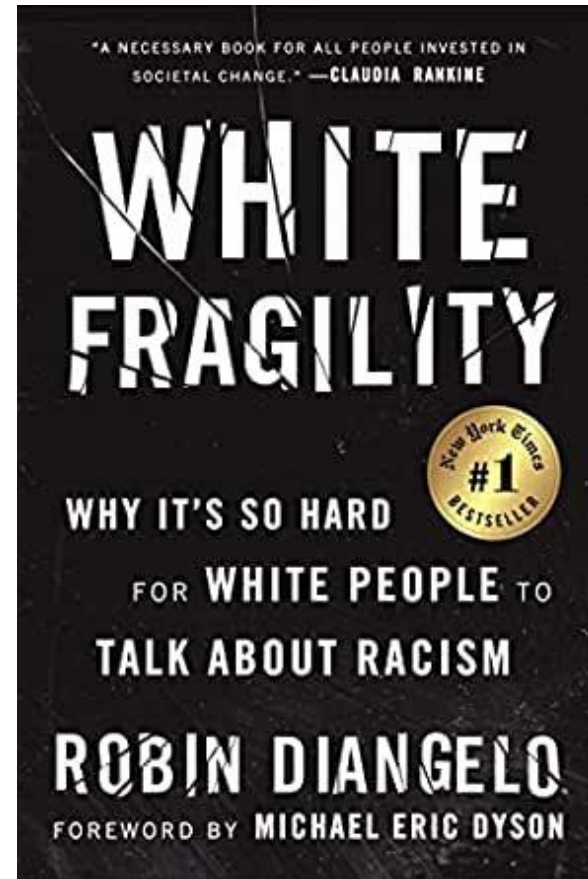
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# DiAngelo's *White Fragility*



# DiAngelo's *White Fragility*



## **Positives:**

- Easy to read
- Recognizably insane

# Critical Social Justice



Minoritized/Target Group	Oppression	Dominant/Agent Group
People of Color	Racism	White
Poor, Working-Class	Classism	Middle-Class, Wealthy
Women	Sexism	Men
Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, +	Heterosexism	Heterosexuals
Transgender, Gender Queer, Gender Non-Conforming, Intersexed	Transgender Oppression	Gender-Conforming; Cisgender
Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, etc.	Religious Oppression	Christians
People with Disabilities	Ableism	Able-bodied
Jews	Anti-Semitism	Non-Jews (gentiles)
Immigrants (perceived), Indigenous peoples	Nationalism	Citizens (perceived)
Elderly	Ageism	Young Middle-aged
Children	Adultism	Adults

Figure 11: Oppression chart.

Robin DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White*, (2016), p. 64

# All whites are racist



“a positive white identity is an impossible goal. **White identity is inherently racist; white people do not exist outside the system of white supremacy.** This does not mean that we should stop identifying as white and start claiming only to be Italian or Irish. To do so is to deny the reality of racism in the here and now, and this denial would simply be color-blind racism. Rather, I strive to be ‘less white.’ **To be less white is to be less racially oppressive.** I can build a wide range of authentic and sustained relationships across race and accept that I have racist patterns.”

# The white fragility Kafkatrap



White fragility is “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress ... becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (p. 103).

Manifestations of white fragility include:

## Feelings:

Singled out

Attacked

Silenced

Guilty

Accused

Judged

Angry

Scared

## Behaviors:

Crying

Physically leaving

Emotionally withdrawing

Arguing

Denying

Seeking absolution

## Claims:

I already know all this.

You are judging me

You are generalizing

I disagree

Some people find offense where there is none.

# Roadmap to Alienation



“...the question is not ‘Did racism take place?’ but rather, **‘In which ways did racism manifest in this specific context?’**”<sup>1</sup>

Cross-racial friendships do not block out the dynamics of racism in the society at large, and these dynamics continue unabated... **Racism cannot be absent from your friendship.** No person of color whom I’ve met has said that racism isn’t at play in his or her friendships with white people. Some whites are more thoughtful, aware, and receptive to feedback than others, but **no cross-racial relationship is free from the dynamics of racism in this society.**”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Schroeder & DiAngelo. (2010). Addressing Whiteness in Nursing Education: The Sociopolitical Climate Project at the University of Washington School of Nursing. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 33 (3) 244-255.

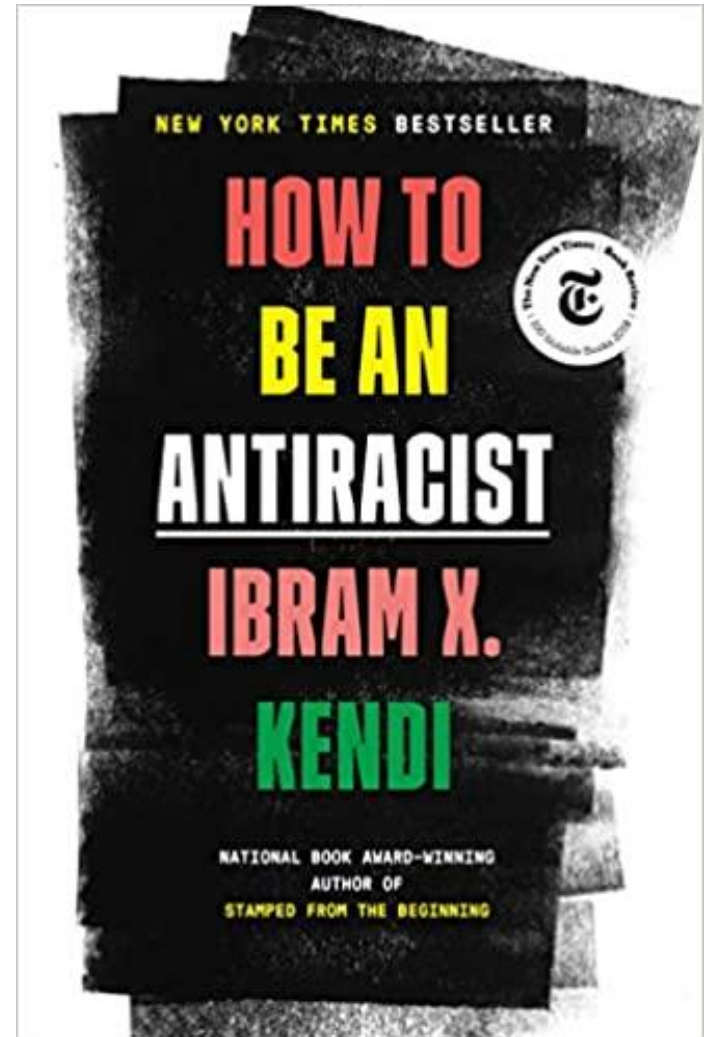
<sup>2</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, (2018), p. 80-81



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# Kendi's *How to Be An Antiracist*



# Kendi's *How to be An Antiracist*



## **Positives:**

- Easy to read
- Clear definitions
- Rejects the idea that “Blacks can’t be racist”

# No neutrality



**“there is no neutrality in the racism struggle.** The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘anti-racist.’ What’s the difference? One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. **There is no in-between safe space of ‘not racist.’...The claim of ‘not racist’ neutrality is a mask for racism...** The language of colorblindness –like the language of ‘not racist’ — is a mask to hide racism.”

# Antiracism as religion



“At Urbana ’70, Ma and Dad found themselves leaving the civilizing and conserving and racist church they realized they’d been part of. **They were saved into Black liberation theology and joined the churchless church of the Black Power movement... My parents now had, separately, arrived at a creed with which to shape their lives, to be the type of Christians that Jesus the revolutionary inspired them to be...** This new definition of the Christian life became the creed that grounded my parents’ lives and the lives of their children. **I cannot disconnect my parents’ religious strivings to be Christian from my secular striving to be an antiracist.”**

# Interlocking oppressions



**“Antiracist policies cannot eliminate class racism without anticapitalism policies. Anticapitalism cannot eliminate class racism without antiracism.”**

**“To truly be antiracist is to be feminist. To truly be feminist is to be antiracist”**

**“We cannot be antiracist if we are homophobic or transphobic... To be queer antiracist is to understand the privileges of my cisgender, of my masculinity, of my heterosexuality, of their intersections”**



# Disparities = discrimination



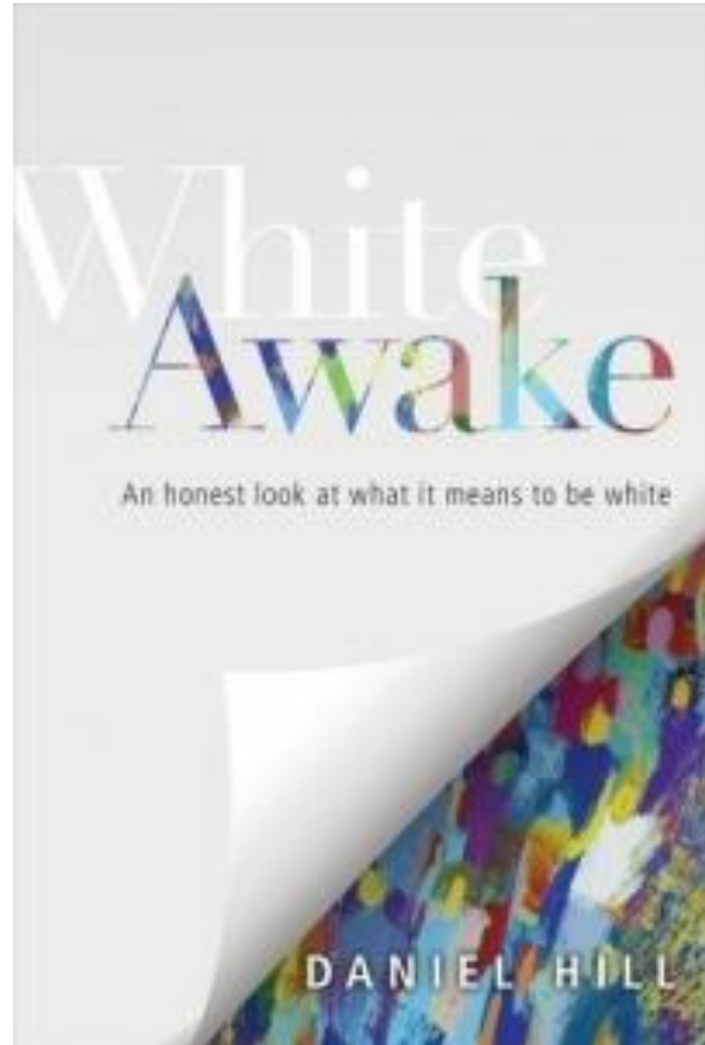
““A group we can call **segregationists** has **blamed Black people themselves for racial disparities**. A group we can call **antiracists** has pointed to **racial discrimination**. A group we can call **assimilationists** has tried to **argue for both**, saying that Black people *and* racial discrimination were to blame for racial disparities.”

“racial discrimination is the **sole cause** of racial disparities in this country and in the world at large... “When you truly believe that the racial groups are equal, then you also believe that racial disparities must be the result of racial discrimination”

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# Hill's *White Awake*



# Hill's *White Awake*



## **Positives:**

- Evangelical theology
- Good motivation
- Pastoral tone

# Whiteness = blindness



“The greatest problem of all [for whites is] our conditioned blindness... **we are blind wanderers who need help to see a world that functions according to a different set of rules than what we’ve been raised with.**”

“it’s impossible to be complicit with centuries of traumatizing oppression without becoming traumatized oneself”

“[Whites’] goal must be sight. Our goal must be transformation. **Our goal must be a renewed consciousness...** we need a revelation from Jesus Christ in order to see what the kingdom of God is... Let’s pray like the blind man: ‘Lord, help me to see.’”

# White Fragility



“Denial” is the earliest stage of the racial awakening process for a white person who has encountered racism (p. 67-79)

“it’s impossible to be complicit with centuries of traumatizing oppression without becoming traumatized oneself” - Hill, *White Awake*, p. 72



# Questions

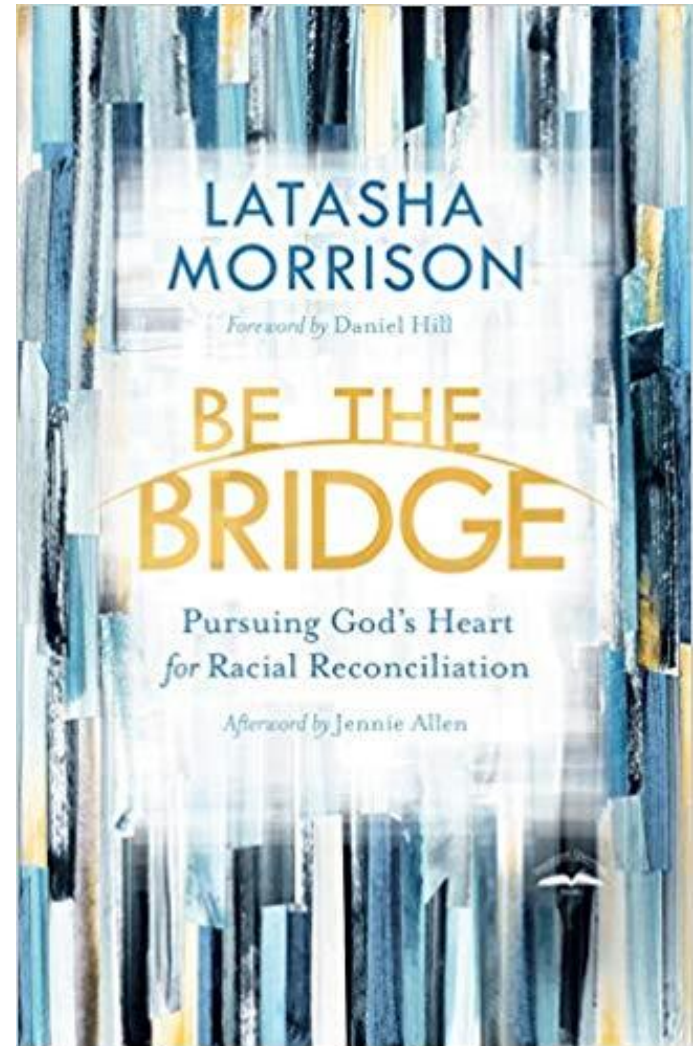


1. How do we handle disagreement?
2. Why only race?
3. How woke is woke enough?
4. What has the ultimate authority?

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# Morrison's *Be the Bridge*



# Morrison's *Be the Bridge*



## **Positives:**

- Personal experiences
- Good motivation

# White Repentance



**“shame and guilt often compel majority culture to cover up and whitewash sins”**

“Our Western society is highly individualized, and our measure of morality is based on individual guilt or innocence. We’ve all heard the justification: *Why should I repent of racism? I never owned slaves.* But in the Bible, guilt and shame .. are often communal and point to the need for corporate repentance”

“Dealing with that guilt and shame [of our collective past], really owning it, can be a tear-filled, painful process... **We can’t bypass the weight of our guilt and shame if we intend to arrive at true reconciliation and justice**”

# Unity requires reparations



“If repentance requires turning and walking away from the sins of our past, doesn’t it require walking toward something more reparative? So **reparations and repentance are inextricably intertwined**, and those who’ve inherited the power and benefits of past wrongs should work to make it right for those who’ve inherited the burdens and oppression of the past.”

“**Reparations require sacrifice.** But effective bridge builders don’t shy away from Jesus’s call to ‘go and sin no more,’ a call that includes making things right. Like Zacchaeus, effective bridge builders must return what was taken, even if it hurts”

# *Be the Bridge* in practice



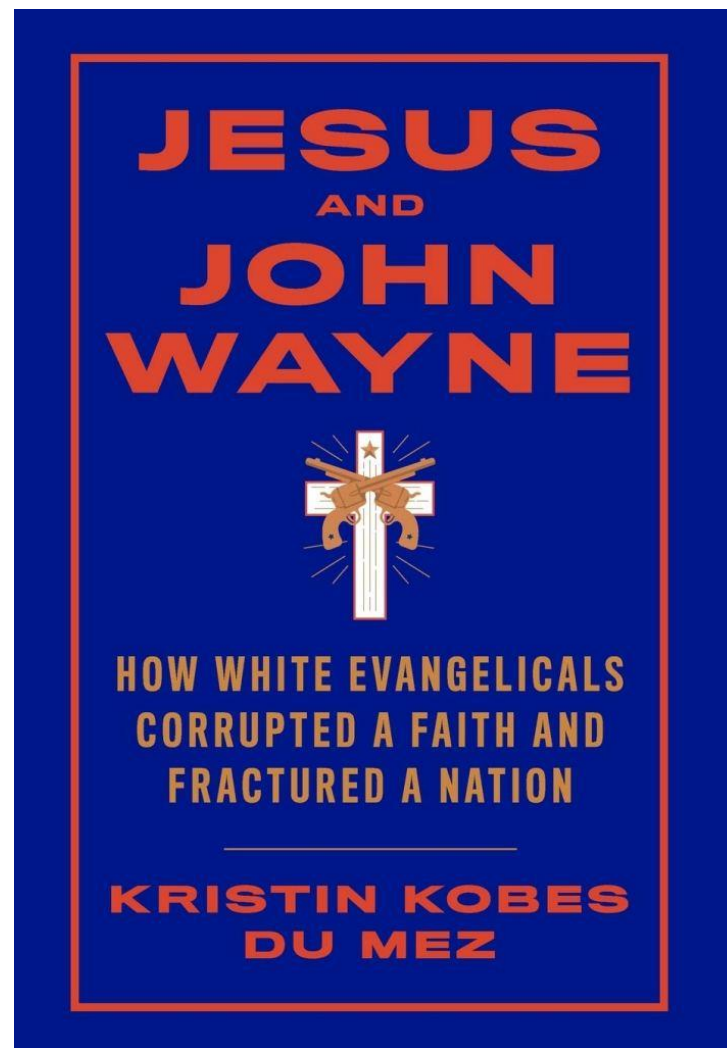
- Don't "whitesplain." Do not explain racism to a POC. Do not explain how the microaggression they just experienced was actually just someone being nice. Do not explain how a particular injustice is more about class than race. It's an easy trap to fall into, but you can avoid it by **maintaining a posture of active listening**.
- Don't equate impact with intent. Yes, we all know your heart was in the right place and you meant well. But your words or behavior had a negative impact on those around you, and that's what matters. **Apologize and do better next time.**
- **Don't demand proof of a POC's lived experience or try to counter their narrative with the experience of another POC.** The experiences and opinions of POC are as diverse as its people. We can believe their stories. But keep in mind: just because one POC doesn't feel oppressed, that doesn't mean systemic, institutional racism isn't real.
- Do not chastise POCs (or dismiss their message) because they express their grief, fear, or anger in ways you deem "inappropriate." Understand that historically, we white people have silenced voices of dissent and lament with our cultural idol of "niceness." **Provide space for POCs to wail, cuss, or even yell at you.** Jesus didn't hold back when he saw hypocrisy and oppression; POCs shouldn't have to either.
- Don't get defensive when you are called out for any of the above. When a POC tells you that your words/tone/behavior are racist/oppressive/triggering, **you stop. Don't try to explain yourself (see #6.)** Don't become passive-aggressive or sarcastic. Don't leave in a huff. (It may be helpful, however, to inconspicuously step outside/go to the restroom and take a deep breath.) Remain cognizant of the dynamics of white fragility, and take note of how it usually shows up in you.



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# Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne*



# Du Mez's Jesus and John Wayne



## **Positives:**

- Megapastor failures
- Sex abuse scandals
- “Christian nationalism”

# Is Versus Ought



Subtitle: “How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation.”

“Doug Wilson, John Piper, Mark Driscoll, James Dobson, Doug Phillips, and John Eldredge all preached a mutually reinforcing vision of Christian masculinity—of patriarchy and submission, sex and power **[which] transformed the Jesus of the Gospels into an image of their own making**”

“Although the evangelical cult of masculinity stretches back decades, its emergence was never inevitable...Appreciating how this ideology developed over time is... essential for **those who wish to dismantle it. What was once done might be undone.**”

# Non-egalitarian = patriarchal



**“At the center of Dobson’s worldview—and that of many conservative evangelicals—was the strict enforcement of patriarchal authority”**

Promise Keepers offered a “patriarchal bargain”

**The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood attempts to “fashion a scriptural defense of patriarchy”**

The Danvers Statement is “a biblical defense of patriarchy and gender difference”

“CBMW and [Southern Baptist] seminaries [helped] build a network of evangelicals committed to advancing a patriarchal version of Christianity”

# Deconstruction



“the battle over inerrancy was in part a proxy fight over gender”

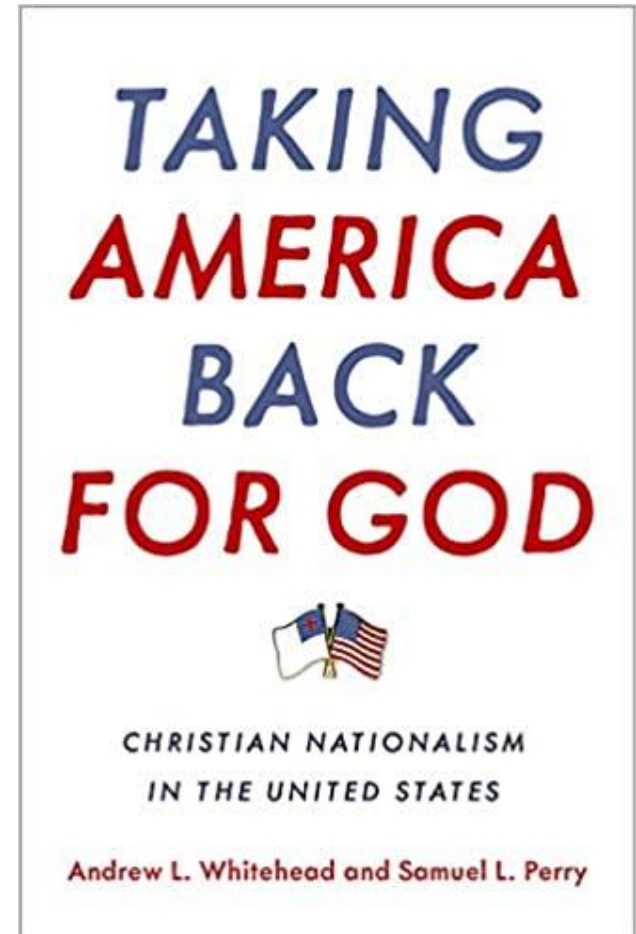
“Within this expanding [evangelical] network, differences...could be smoothed over in the interest of promoting ‘watershed issues’ like **complementarianism, the prohibition of homosexuality, the existence of hell, and substitutionary atonement.** Most foundationally, they were united in a mutual commitment to patriarchal power... **Over time, a common commitment to patriarchal power began to define the boundaries of the evangelical movement itself, as those who ran afoul of these orthodoxies quickly discovered.** Evangelicals who offered **competing visions of sexuality, gender, or the existence of hell** found themselves excluded from conferences and associations, and their writings banned from popular evangelical bookstores and distribution channels.”

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# Whitehead's and Perry's *Taking America Back for God*



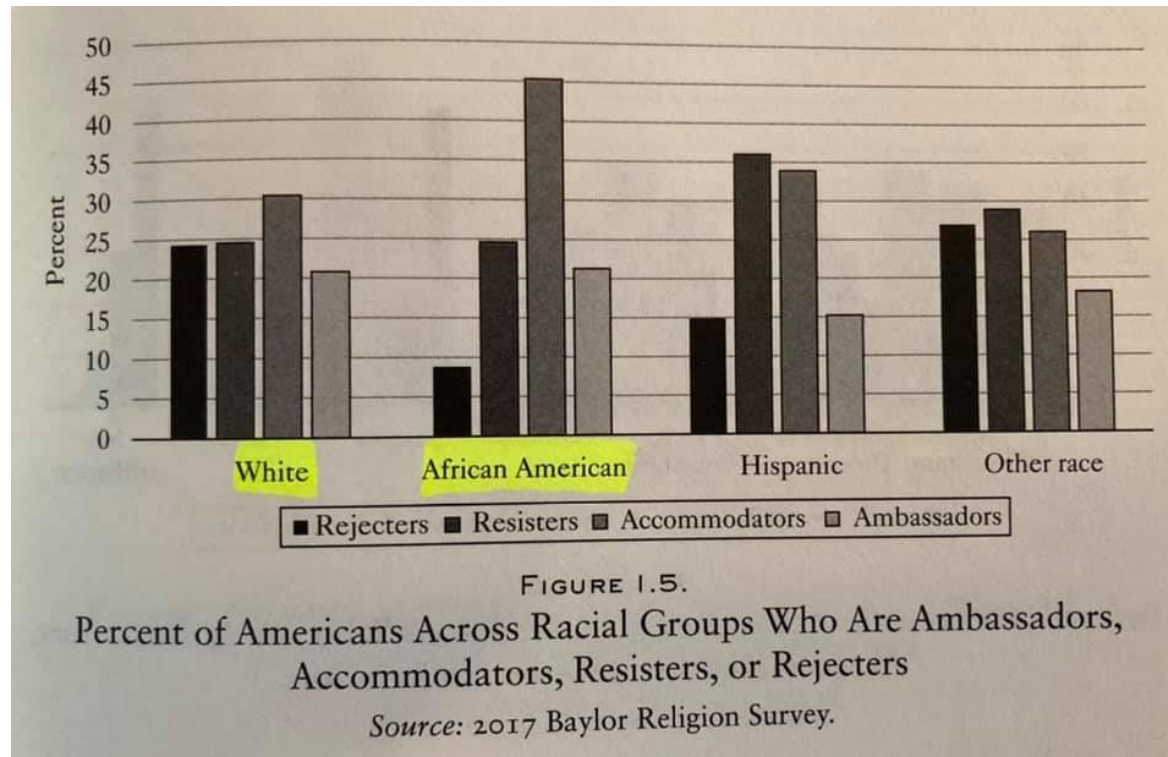
# Whitehead's and Perry's *Taking America Back for God*



## Positives:

- Empirical data
- Real problem: 68.4% of white born-again or evangelical Christians affirmed that “I consider founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to be divinely inspired.”

# Defining “Christian nationalism”



Whitehead's and Perry's methods entail that 38% of Democrats, 67% of Black Protestants, and 21% of Jews are supportive of “Christian Nationalism,” that 38% of people who were supportive of Christian nationalism didn't vote for Trump, and that Blacks are more supportive of “Christian nationalism” than Whites.

# Implicit normative views



**“only religious commitment is more predictive of [peoples’] views [on abortion] than Christian nationalism”**

Christian nationalism is strongly correlated with opposition to same-sex marriage (p. 133).

**Christian nationalism “glorifies the patriarchal, heterosexual family as not only God’s biblical standard, but the cornerstone of all thriving civilizations”**

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# Conclusions

- Contemporary critical theory functions as an all-encompassing worldview
- The ideas of critical theory are far more pervasive than most people realize
- If Christians aren't equipped to think biblically about race, gender, and justice, the culture will teach them to think unbiblically
- Do not categorize books as "Christian = safe" vs. "non-Christian = unsafe"



# Acknowledgements and additional resources

Dr. Christina Shenvi



Dr. Pat Sawyer



- [Shenviapogetics.com/book-reviews/](https://shenviapogetics.com/book-reviews/)
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