

# RTC LIBRARY E-NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2020

Welcome to the OCTOBER 2020 issue of RTC LIBRARY E-NEWSLETTER

In this issue: Recommended Reads: Reading and Thinking about Race in America, Non-Fiction and Memoir, Fiction and Literature.

## Recommended Reads from the RTC community



## Reading and Thinking about Race in America

*Carol Anderson, White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide (2016)*

*Robin DiAngelo, White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism (2018)*

*Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (1952)*

*Ibram X. Kendi, How to be an Antiracist (2019)*

*Barack Obama, The Audacity of Hope (2006)*

*Ijeoma Oluo, So You Want to Talk about Race (2018)*

*Richard Wright, Native Son (1940)*

When 2020 started, I made a commitment to devote more of my time spent reading to books on race and racism, particularly in America, and to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) authors. Within weeks of starting this new reading list and while still living here in Bhutan, I watched the US news with horror, as I learned of ever more people of color dying at the hands of law enforcement officers. Yet, I also felt hope, as I followed the protests breaking out across the States and as I saw Wheaton College (my home institution) and the larger country work harder than before to grapple with its racist past and present. My decision to read more works about race and to privilege works by Black authors became just one effort (if small and much belated) to help create a less racist future in America even while I am a world away.

I recognize the majority of you, currently reading this review, are not Americans, but any and all of the following texts offer tremendous insight into what is currently happening in the United States. Even though they do not address non-American contexts, they still provide insight into structures of power that is based in racism and colorism all over the world.

Finally, questions of race and racism and America aside, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* are award-winning works of English-language literature that ought to be on every one's literary reading list.

### Non-Fiction and Memoir

I began my reading with four non-fiction texts that were being touted in the American press, three by African-American authors (Anderson, Kendi, and Oluo) and one by a white author (DiAngelo). I recommend all four, though for varying reasons.

Anderson's *White Rage* offers a compelling and accessible history of racism in America, combining broader national narratives, stories of individual lives, and supporting (and often mind-blowing) statistics. Spanning from the Reconstruction (post-Civil-War era) to the present, the book narrates a lengthy history of white American resentment and anger and that white rage's creation of structural racism in America. Although I did not begin with this particular book, I would recommend others to start here. Anderson's sweeping history provides historical context that makes for better and more informed reading of Kendi's, Oluo's, and DiAngelo's books.

Oluo's *So You Want to Talk about Race* is easily my favorite from among the non-fiction texts. While I should note that the woman who reads the audio book, Bahni Turpin, does a fabulous job, I feel confident that anyone reading Oluo's works silently from the physical or electronic page will still "hear" the author's humor and personality. This book artfully brings together Oluo's personal story, which is filled with pain, heartbreak, shame, and joy, and the broader experience of racism in America. This is an unparalleled book at the Black experience in America (and the white one too). Oluo has a talent for holding her (white) readers accountable while not alienating them, and as a result, she has changed my mind and attitudes for the better.

Kendi's *how to Be An Antiracist* weaves together the author's personal stories, an academic study of racism, and a manifesto on how to be an antiracist and fight structural racism. The audiobook, read by the author himself, demonstrates his impressive oratorical skills—indeed, I suggest that one listen rather than read the book just to be able to *hear* the rhythms of his words. While a deeply compelling text, Kendi's work is the most conceptually heavy and academic of all the texts listed here. I absolutely recommend it, but it is ideal for those a bit more steeped in the study of American racism.

DiAngelo's *White Fragility* offers a strong perspective on racism that taught me a lot about what it means to be white in a racist society like the United States, both in broader, state-level ways and in more (inter-)personal, quotidian ways. I found myself regularly reflecting on things I have said and done in the past, and imagining how I could—and *should*—be better in the future. While I learned a lot from DiAngelo's book (which was the first one I read), I prefer Oluo's *So You Want to Talk about Race*. Not only is it important to prioritize BIPOC authors after centuries of white dominance, but also Oluo's book is simply the better one in all ways. That said, and with more than a little disappointment and some hesitation, I recommend DiAngelo's *White Fragility* to readers who might be resistant to the concept of structural racism, particularly white readers, as it simply might be less threatening for them to accept the words and advice of a white woman.

After finishing those four texts and with the next US presidential rapidly approaching, I decided to listen to former US President Barack Obama read his popular *Audacity of Hope*. Race and racism are not the central topics of his book, which is part memoir and part manifesto addressing American society, culture, and politics. For a Black man, however, race and racism are necessarily a thread running through his life, his career, and thus this text. I enjoyed this book tremendously, particularly as someone who misses his leadership.

It was, however, surprising to realize (or remember?) how moderate Obama can be on issues of race and social justice. That said, his (seemingly) moderate views are likely the result of the timing of his book (published in 2006, prior to his successful presidential run, and when he needed to win over less progressive, white voters). They may also appear more moderate in comparison to Kendi's and Olou's texts, each published more than a decade later and which I read immediately prior to Obama's.

## Fiction and Literature

As I listened to audiobooks of these non-fiction books, I began each night before bed to read paperbacks of great literature by Black authors (here, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison). These turned out to be the perfect complement to my non-fiction journeys. During daylight I learned about history and politics and racism in America interspersed with some personal stories; once the sun set, I was pulled into the emotional, harrowing lives of two African-American men living in early-to-mid-twentieth-century America. Both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* are tremendous works of literature aside from any discussion of race and racism, but within that context and that discussion, both offer deep, troubling insight into what it meant and still means to be Black in the United States.

My favorite of the two was Wright's *Native Son*. His lyrical writing was a true pleasure to read; his character portraits were deeply compelling; his suspenseful narrative immediately hooked me; and his descriptions (and metaphors) of violence troubled me in the way that great literature should. I was pulled into the world, mind, and heart of the protagonist, twenty-year-old Bigger Thomas, as 1920s Chicago came to life. I must say, too, how much I cringed at the white characters and the racism that permeated the words and actions of even those deeply sympathetic to Bigger and to Black America more broadly.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* was much harder to get into (not ideal for an almost 600-page book), but still a great read. The unnamed protagonist, a college-aged Black man from the south who moves to Harlem, was not as compelling to me as Wright's Bigger Thomas, but I enjoyed Ellison's engagement with the difficulties wrapped up in African-American history, particularly the movement of Black nationalism and the work of Booker T. Washington.

Finally, I must share the poignant horror I experienced as I read, in *Invisible Man*, a description of a New York police officer killing a Black man on the city streets before bystanders and the narrator's recognition of how commonplace the event was and how he could do nothing in response. Sixty-eight years later, I could not help but think, *what has changed*. Other than handheld devices that allow us to record such events, not much else, it often seems.

## Next Up

I am now looking forward to listening to Laurence Fishburn read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (as told to Alex Haley), which I first read when I was only twelve. At that time, it rocked my world and even shook my religious beliefs, so I am excited to discover my reaction nearly three decades later. Following that, I plan to read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.

## Thank You

**Dana M. Polanichka,  
Ph.D. Social Sciences  
Professor (Part-time)**

## **Wanted! Book reviews from Faculty, Staff, and Students**

If you have read a good book and would like to contribute a review to the Library Newsletter, we would love to receive one from you. Tell us a little about the book and why you liked it in 250-500 words. If interested, send your review to [gyanupradhan@rtc.bt](mailto:gyanupradhan@rtc.bt) or come by the library and see the library staff.

Thanks!!

**YOU MUST TELL YOURSELF, "NO MATTER HOW HARD IT IS, OR HOW HARD IT GETS, I AM GOING TO MAKE IT..."-Les Brown.**