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Edward Fitzpatrick
Roger Williams University

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The Roots of Racism and the Challenge of "White Fragility"

Antiracist scholars Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo visit RWU April 4 to cap year-long series "Talking About Race, Gender and Power"



On Wednesday, April 4, Ibram Kendi will speak at Roger Williams University along with Robin DiAngelo, an instructor and trainer on racial and social justice issues who focuses on the concept of "white fragility" and why white people perceive even minimum amounts of racial stress as unbearable.

March 27, 2018 | Edward Fitzpatrick

BRISTOL, R.I. – The New York Times on March 19 reported that a sweeping new study found that black boys in America end up earning less than white boys with similar backgrounds, even when they're raised in wealthy, two-parent families in good neighborhoods.

While white boys who grow up rich are likely to remain that way, black boys raised in wealth are more likely than white boys to become poor, researchers at Stanford University, Harvard University and the U.S. Census Bureau found.

One of the first experts quoted in that New York Times article was Ibram Kendi, a professor and director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University. "One of the most popular liberal post-racial ideas is the idea that the fundamental problem is class and not race, and clearly this study explodes that idea," he said. "But for whatever reason, we're unwilling to stare racism in the face."

On Wednesday, April 4, Kendi will speak at Roger Williams University along with Robin DiAngelo, an instructor and trainer on racial and social justice issues who focuses on the concept of "white fragility" and why white people perceive even minimum amounts of racial stress as unbearable.

Kendi and DiAngelo will make individual presentations during the day before taking part in a joint presentation in the evening. The event is the capstone in RWU's year-long series "Talking About Race, Gender and Power," and part of the President's Distinguished Speaker Series.

"I do believe that in the United States, racial issues are ground zero for talking about issues of power and dominance," RWU Chief Diversity Officer Ame Lambert said. "So I am excited to have these renowned scholars on campus."

The University deliberately chose a black scholar (Kendi) and a white scholar (DiAngelo) who both do anti-racism work "to represent the polarities of racial conversation in America," Lambert said. "As we do the work of diversity, equity and inclusion, we are challenged to engage with the complexity of racial identities that are not black or white and the complexity of oppression that is not racial, while keeping race and black/white issues at the heart of the conversation."



Kendi is an award-winning historian who is a professor of history and international relations at American University. His work explores anti-black racist ideas throughout American history, how those ideas have been combated in the past, and how to combat them in the present and future.

Kendi is the New York Times bestselling author of "Stamped from the Beginning: A Definitive History of Racist Ideas." He is working on his next book, "How to Be an Antiracist," which aims to reshape the racial discourse and guide readers on how to participate in building an antiracist society. It is scheduled to be published later this year.

DiAngelo is an acclaimed instructor and trainer on racial and social justice issues primarily focused on the concept of "white fragility," a term she coined in 2011. She was appointed, along with Darlene Flynn, to co-design the city of Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative Anti-Racism training. Her work has been featured in Salon, NPR, Slate, the Atlantic and the New York Times.



DiAngelo has written a book, due out this summer, titled "White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism," which delves into the social environment of North America that protects white people from race-based stress. In it, she explains her term "white fragility" and why white people perceive even the minimum amount of racial stress as unbearable and respond to it with a range of defensive behaviors.

Kendi's session, "Do Hate and Ignorance Create Racist Policies?" will run from 2 to 3 p.m. April 4 in RWU School of Law Appellate Courtroom 283.

DiAngelo's session, "White Fragility: A Challenge to Constructive Racial Conversations," will run from 3:30 to 4:45 p.m. April 4 in the RWU Feinstein School of Arts & Sciences Room 157.

Their joint presentation, "A Dialogue on Race and Power," will run from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. April 4 in the Campus Recreation Center Gymnasium.

Events in the President's Distinguished Speakers Series are free and open to the public, with no tickets or reservations required. Any questions may be directed to (401) 254-3166.

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