



## Responding to “White Fragility:” A Manifesta of Screams

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*This piece explores how white fragility filters into life-threatening interactions, and it catalogs my screams as I react to white violence inflicted on my kin. I offer three stories of threats to my children to demonstrate how such violence is mundane for non-white bodies; how white fragility interrupts reactions to these threats; and how my screams resist these interruptions. I build on Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) work on white fragility by acknowledging and honoring a space for anger, and offer screams as an ongoing strategy to resist normalizing white violence.*

### How Can Fragility Kill?

Fragility implies the quality of being vulnerable or easily damaged. I think of my children as fragile bodies needing protection, but that is not how white people seem to see them, if they see them at all. My children live in a world made for whiteness, and I bear witness to how their fragility is subjugated to white fragility.

Robin DiAngelo writes that white people “haven’t had to build...racial stamina” (2018, 2), and so the smallest amount of racial stress “triggers a range of defensive responses” that reasserts their racial dominance (2). DiAngelo’s term for this defensiveness is “white fragility.” My children and I collide with white fragility every day. It is mundane and it is life-threatening, and it sanctions injuries to black and brown bodies. The hard armor of white fragility makes perpetrators of violence immune to damage or accountability. I cannot clothe my children in this armor.

Below I offer three accounts of white fragility. They describe everyday encounters with white people who threaten my children with damage and death. They chronicle my screams that call attention to the dangers my children face. Screaming is a vital response to white fragility, as I refuse to respond to this violence with rationality or silence.

### Lesson 1: Who May Be Safe

I was in the parking lot of the daycare center with my two children. There were minivans all around us, parents unloading their children, Cheerios cascading out of car seats, and older siblings dancing around their kin. I was unbuckling my infant from his car seat, with my toddler close by me, when the minivan next to us started to reverse at high speed. I banged on the back of the minivan just as it grazed my toddler, whose head was not much higher than the exhaust pipe.



I screamed at the older blonde woman in the front seat,  
*You hit my child!*  
*How could you not pay attention?*  
*You are in the parking lot of a daycare!*

With blood thundering through my head, I watched her eyebrows travel up her forehead. My tone was not what she expected. My voice, with its accent signaling me as an immigrant, was not what she expected. My words, coming from my dark body, were not what she expected.

She stammered,  
*You don't understand – my, my granddaughter goes to this daycare.*

At that moment, my fury turned to cold disgust that slid down to my belly and began to congeal. I was disgusted at the implication that such irrelevant information was a permissible defense – that accountability, when demanded from white people, could be countered by the merest response.

I became aware that the words *you piece of shit* had begun to move through my mouth and push their way past my teeth, so I clenched my jaw and told myself, *Don't curse. Don't bring up race. She has all the narratives of white fragility available to her, and it will eclipse your terror for the life of your child.* And yet, I was conscious in that moment that I would regret *not* screaming, that I would regret not accessing the little agency I had available to me.

And so I screamed,  
*I don't care to hear another word out of your mouth. Just leave.*

She was shaken – not by the recklessness of her actions, but by my unruliness. As I watched her drive away, my body continued to convulse, gripped by rage that would not loosen its hold. That night, I did not sleep. I did not sleep for many nights, picturing my toddler under her tires.

## Lesson 2: Who May Be Comfortable

My children had made it to their first and third birthdays. It was time for their vaccinations and we were driving to the pediatrician. We stopped at a red light, blocks away from the clinic, which was close to the university football stadium. We watched the fans file past us in school colors, and I was teaching my oldest to say *burnt orange*. As I waited for the light to turn green, I was flung forward and then sideways. A truck had rammed into my car and continued to smash down its side, coming to a halt twenty feet ahead. Tearing off my seatbelt, tumbling to the ground and skinning my hands, wrenching open the passenger door, I checked to see that my children were both conscious, and not bleeding. A young man climbed out of the truck – a Dodge Dakota – that I learned later was a gift from his parents who had also named him Dakota. Our first words to each other flew out of our mouths, crossing each other.



He said,

*I can't believe I did this again!*

As I screamed,

*You slammed into my kids – this is fucking unbelievable!*

Shocked, he said *sorry*. Sorry, inflected with a question and exclamation, surprised and offended by my tone, by my refusal to care for his feelings before attending to my terror. I glanced back at my children again, breathing hard, as his fragility deepened the damage he had wrought.

We spent two hours together, Dakota and me, waiting for the police to arrive. He made polite conversation and apologized again as I removed the blood from my hands with diaper wipes. He fretted about his parents taking him off their insurance, having to miss the first day of military school, and derailing his life. At one point, he asked me how long I had been married and then he asked if it was a happy marriage. No longer taken aback by men's sense of entitlement to my private life, I answered his question. It was a practiced question, I inferred, perhaps one he asked to perform good listening. *He probably asks his parents' friends this question to disarm them*, my friend observed later as I debriefed with her. He viewed me from the safety of his armor of white fragility, for he was not called to see the chasm between us: a brown mother and a white man who crashed into her car.

He casually asked me my age. He commented on my appearance while I noticed – dimly, from the corner of my eye – that my side mirror was dangling off my car. It occurred to me that he expected me to feel flattered by his attention. He enjoyed the privilege of seeking knowledge, a young pioneer of my body, my background, my feelings, my experiences. He had been formed by race, gender, and class to ask with impunity, and perhaps to expect praise for his curiosity. His fragility continued to impact me: a man, who had hit my car, endangered my family and me and ensured hours of my labor would be spent trying to recover costs he had incurred. He was extracting small talk to reclaim the pleasantness he felt entitled to. His car, his body, his wealth, his masculinity, and his whiteness dwarfed me in myriad ways. Yet he became the victim of my rudeness.

Two weeks later, I hauled my broken car seats to my insurance provider. As I set them down, two Cheerios rolled out. The agent handed me a check to cover the cost.

### Lesson 3: Who May Be a Child

We were on vacation with old friends, friends who look like us, friends with babies who look like ours, floating in the little pool at our holiday apartment complex. And that is when the first one just missed my son. I watched in horror as water balloons – thick and heavy, launched from two stories above us – rained down on my family and into the swimming pool. My husband and I were frozen, then floundering, trapped between shielding the small bodies and taking them to safety.

Minutes before the attack began, we were sharing the pool with a group of six white teenagers. They jumped out of the water without warning and ran two stories up to make water balloons and throw them down on us. Four, five, six, seven balloons narrowly missed us. When



the attack ended, we were grateful and relieved, taking calming breaths. The teens ran back down, collected the balloons, and began to launch them at us from three stories up. They fell all around us, gathering enough velocity to cause a black eye or a concussion. I saw my friend's face, contorted and feral, as she screamed *Stop! Stop! Stop!* while she tried to pull our children from the pool as her pregnant belly hampered her.

I tore my eyes away from the scene to scream at the oldest girl in the group, standing halfway down the staircase,

*Stop what you are doing right now!*

*Have you lost your minds?*

From fifty feet below, I could see the shock on her face and hear the surprise in her voice. She said *sorry*, inflected with shock, confusion, and petulance, astounded that she had collided with the slightest expectation of accountability. Moments later, one of their parents showed up.

I demanded,

*Do you know what they were doing?*

She apologized once, without making eye contact. It dawned on me that I had raised my voice to white children, a white girl, who wielded immense power in her apparent powerlessness. But I did not lower my voice or my gaze, cognizant that my gender and small size mitigated the threat I posed. Behind me, my husband gathered the balloons in the pool and popped them.

As I lay awake that night, I thought about the 2015 pool party in McKinney, Texas, that gained national attention when black teenagers who had jumped a fence to play in a pool were rounded up by police, with one officer drawing his gun as several teens ran away from him. That same officer wound his hand through a girl's braids and pushed her face into the ground, immobilizing her with his full weight pressed into her bikini-clad back as she cried for someone to call her mother. Those teens were the same age as the ones who attacked us. It had never been clearer to me how white fragility works: it fashions one group as *innocent children*, regardless of the violence of their acts, while rendering the other group as *guilty criminals* for trying to play in a pool. White fragility strips black teens of their childhood and personhood. Those teenagers with the water balloons and police officers in McKinney live in a world where whiteness creates safe spaces *for them* and serves up black and brown bodies as targets for their violence: communities designed to keep out dark bodies, and swimming pools filled with bleach, fenced off, to keep out dark bodies. People who assert power through white privilege have more in common with each other than marginalized groups have with each other. People who experience racist acts are wildly different, but we share the reality of living and learning in unsafe spaces.

We walked back upstairs to our apartment, shaken and sad. I did not talk about what happened. Two of our friends were married to white partners, and I could not find the colorblind words to describe this experience to them. And as I lay awake that night, my husband murmured, *They were just kids being stupid, try to sleep*. But I couldn't sleep, thinking of the kids categorically excluded from a narrative of innocence, who might pay for childish stupidity with their lives.



## Epilogue

These mundane and life-threatening encounters with white fragility turn my anger into horror and elicit screams from my constricted throat. They fill my mouth and register as a taste. My hands shake, my fists clench, leaving half-moon fingernail marks deep in my palms long after the moment is supposed to have passed. It shows up as a broken retainer when I clamp my jaw in my sleep, dark smudges under my eyes, bitten-down fingernails, and knotted shoulders. It makes a home within my body.

White fragility is manifested by white grandmothers in daycares, white men in trucks, and white teenagers with water balloons; it eclipses the safety of my brown children. As a result, I grow savage. I grow savage because this response is my feminism breaking through, rooted in rising fear for my children’s lives because I know they move in spaces where white people don’t see them or see them too much. My savagery burns in the vessel of my body and I scream to make it known. I scream in the face of this hard, relentless fragility that shatters any hope of safety.

## Works Cited

DiAngelo, Robin. 2018. *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

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