



Bio: Deborah Gray White is the Board of Governors Professor of History and Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University. During her twenty-six years at Rutgers, she has not only been a teacher but the co-director of "The Black Atlantic: Race, Nation and Gender" project at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis (1997-99), a research professor at the Rutgers Institute for Research on Women (1999-2000), and chair of the history department (2000-03). As an Americanist who specializes in African American and American Women's history, Professor White is especially interested in issues of identity and the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality.

Professor White is the author of *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (Norton, 1985). A second edition, with a new introduction and additional chapter, was issued in 1999. In anticipation of its anniversary, the Southern Historical Association celebrated it at its 2003 conference; and in 2005 a conference entitled "Slave Women's Lives: Twenty Years of 'Ar'n't I A Woman?' and More" was held at the Huntington Institute in California, with the proceedings published in the 2007 Winter issue of the *Journal of African American Studies*; the papers presented in honor of it at the Berkshire Conference on the History of Women were published in the *Journal of Women's History* in July 2007.

An Interview with Deborah Gray White

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Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Kai Durant and Aiyana Jihad, Class of 2018

Edited by Tara Gildea, PhD

Kai Durant (KD) & Aiyana Jihad (AJ): As Leadership Scholars, we've been focusing on women's leadership. Could you share an influential woman in your life and how she impacted you?

Deborah Gray White: I would say my high school teacher who gave me some history books to read for extra credit. In high school, we were assigned just the textbook. I remember when she read my homework—it was more extensive. And she said, "You seem to love history." So, she gave me some books that dealt with historical arguments.

I remember one was about why Lincoln freed the slaves. While I liked learning all of the different aspects of Lincoln freeing the slaves, I really enjoyed the idea that history was not just a bunch of facts. Instead, I liked that history was interpreted. It was always being re-envisioned, and there

were arguments about it. And I think from there, I just ran with it. I always liked social studies, but I was hooked.

My mother and aunts were also influential. At the time, you don't know they're being all that influential. I have three granddaughters who know that I exist and another one who was just born. So, she doesn't know nothing. But I hear myself saying things to them that my mother said to me. And I can remember when I first thought that my mother was not such a pain in the ass after all. She knew a lot, and the lessons that she was trying to impart were really important. So important that I find myself imparting the same knowledge to my two girls.

KD & AJ: What were some of your mother's life lessons that impacted how you view your career?

DGW: My mother told me: "A woman's always got to have her own money" and "always have something that's your own." That was a motivating factor. All the women in my family worked. She would also say, "Never burn your bridges behind you." In other words, if you have to leave a job or a situation, always leave so you can come back. Over a lifetime, that kind of advice really pays off. You only need to find out once that you left something the wrong way to realize I won't do that again.

KD & AJ: Could you tell us a little bit about your work as a historian?

DGW: I teach, write, and research history. I research mostly African Americans and African American women, but my most recent research has actually been about a cross section of Americans, both white and black, in the 1990s. So, it's not just about African Americans, but African Americans figure in it. I also do American history. And my favorite subjects are African American women.

KD & AJ: You mentioned that your title is Board of Governors Distinguished Professor of History. Could you tell us what that means?

DGW: That's a good question. Rutgers has layers of professorships. You enter as an assistant, and you move into an associate position when you get tenure. And then the next level up is full professor. They used to call it professor II, which meant that you really distinguished yourself as

a full professor. So that's where the distinguished comes from. Three promotions up from associate, to full, to distinguished. One of the governing boards at Rutgers is the Board of Governors. They bestow professorships on people who they deem have excelled in what they do. In that regard, I got another boost, so it's high up there, as professors go.

KD & AJ: The Committee on Enslaved and Disenfranchised Populations was established last year due to a backlash for not recognizing the enslaved population who helped build Rutgers. As a lead in the committee, could you talk about your experience on the committee, and how you conduct your research?

DGW: My hat is off to Chancellor Edwards who, through Karen Stewart, called me one day and said, "Bingo." They were doing this research. First of all, it is something that most older schools are doing. Rutgers is founded in 1766. That puts it in league with some of the Ivies. I mean, Harvard was founded before that. But it's founded around the time of Columbia University and Princeton University, some of the older schools. The fact is that these schools were founded when slavery existed in this country. They were founded by people who owned slaves. Some of whom made their money in the slave trade. The Brown brothers, for example, who funded Brown University, were slavers. They owned the ships that took blacks from Africa. That money became the foundation on which Brown University was built.

And the same thing is the case here at Rutgers. Livingston was a slaver. He made his money, and he was the first president of Rutgers. It's funny because they all have names that you remember: Livingston, Frelinghuysen, Neilsen. These are names that you see in and around records, but they either made their money from slave holding or from trading in slaves. They all owned slaves. Their wealth was in part based on the fact that they had slaves, traded in slaves, and had slaves doing the work for them that they would not do for themselves. In doing this research, we've unearthed the connections of the Rutgers founding fathers to the institution of slavery.

We found out that Old Queen's, the first building at Rutgers, was built by slaves in part. We know this because we found at least one document wherein a slave was hired out, which meant that his owner hired him to the people who were directing the building of Old Queen's. They paid the owner not Will. It was a slave named Will.

I was asked to oversee this project. My first book was on enslaved women, but my newest project is on the 1990s. So, it required a little bit of re-situating my mind, getting back into that, and figuring out how to do it rapidly so that we would have something for the anniversary.

The history department is in the business of history. We train people to do historical research. And so the chancellor's office funded a bunch of researchers to go into the archives. Alexander Library has a special collections that hold all kinds of documents on the founding and the founding fathers

of Rutgers, etc. There are the state archives in Trenton. We did have someone go down to Trenton, and they located some of the wills of the founding fathers. We could see how enslaved people were handed from one family to the next, to the next. And, in fact, we found that the elder Hardenbergh—one of the River Dorms is called Hardenbergh Hall—actually owned the parents of Sojourner Truth. And then, he bequeathed her parents to his son, Charles. Sojourner Truth grew up in the household, or part of her childhood was lived in the household with her mother and father under Charles Hardenbergh, who was the master.

It was a journey for me as well as it was for our graduate students, who worked in the archives. I also had the help of the university archivist and their staff, the people at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and two really wonderful professors, Professor Marisa Fuentes, who is our colonialist, and our Native Americanist, Professor Camilla Townsend, who happened to be teaching an undergraduate course on Native Americans. She gave the students research topics on the Leni Lenape.

By the time Rutgers was founded, the Leni Lenape had lost the land, but we wanted to know how they lost it. This research is not just about African Americans and slavery. It is also about the Native Americans. We also wanted to know how Rutgers became a land grant school. Instead of Rutgers joining the Ivy League—which was likely the trajectory—it became a state school because it was funded with the money that the state made off of the sale from land out West. Land that was taken from Native Americans. The connections are fascinating!

It is a history that we hope everybody learns. We intend to add parts of it to the tour that people take when they first come to Rutgers. We hope it will develop into a digital humanities project, so that we can have people take a virtual tour of Rutgers, revealing some of this history. It remains to be seen what else the university plans to do to reconcile.

In the course of doing this, we have also looked at the history of African Americans in New Brunswick during the 1700s. This was really fascinating as well! As I said, it was a journey and a learning experience for me, as well as for our graduate students and undergraduates.

KD & AJ: I had the pleasure of taking one of your classes, From Plantation to the White House course. It was really great! And from my understanding, you created that class. Could you give us a little information about how you created the course, and why you felt it was so important to unpack the relevance of having our first black president?

DGW: I was asked to teach a course at my church, and the people who took the course got college credit for it. I was trying to create a theme, and I was watching the ceremonies at the White House. As I looked at it, the White House looks like a big, elaborate plantation house. I also think that it's really important to try to make history relevant, so if you noticed in that class I always started with

the contemporary moment. If all you think is that there are facts, dates, and names of people who you absolutely have to remember, you'll miss the relevance of how we got here today in the aftermath of the 2016 election. How did we get here? How did this happen? So, I like to start with something that is relevant, and then take people back.

I also started thinking that this is the way to really teach—to change the survey up. Because we do teach you a history in an African American history survey. And this is a survey course, but in as much as it also deals with contemporary issues. It evolved that way.

My colleague, Professor Donna Murch, and I were directing the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis. One of the things we wanted to do was have an undergraduate component. The project at our RCHA was called Narratives of Power. We expanded the course that I had created and made it part of the core curriculum—one of the signature courses. We team taught it. And that was a part of what we did for the RCHA. Now, it's one of my favorite courses to teach.

KD & AJ: It's hard not to mention the election that just happened. What is your opinion of the results, and what does this mean for history going forward?

DGW: It means that, every time you take two steps forward, you take one step backward. And then you have to take a couple more steps forward. It means the struggle continues for African Americans, for Hispanics, for Muslims, for the LGBTQ population, and for women.

I'll never forget what someone once told me: "Revolutions only last 20 years." And then you've got to do it again. Unless we forget how hard it is, and how hard it has been to be black and female, and any identity that doesn't include white and male, this is here to remind us. Somebody sent me an email this morning; it said, "Remember King said—or King quoting somebody else—that the art of freedom is long, but it bends towards justice." Something like that.

African American people have been doing this for so long. We have been struggling up the mountain. History tells me that, every single time we have joy, there is a white majority there to take that joy away. Because, every single time we have progressed, they're there to say, "Oh, no, not so far." But, to tell you the truth, because we have progressed, they can't put us down. If there's a silver lining to all of this, they can't hold us down. They just can't hold us down. They just could not believe that we could elect a black president so quickly after the civil rights movement. Now, they're going to undo it. But just like we've done ever since Emancipation, we will just keep on getting back up. It's a real drag. Every time you think, "Wow, it's gotten a little bit further along." This is a backlash to Obama. But, the day of reckoning is still out there.

I'll say one more thing about it. I felt this way when Richard Nixon was elected. People keep saying, "This has been the most divisive election in history." You people (journalists) don't know

the history. They're forgetting 1968. When the Democratic National Convention just erupted in riots in Chicago. And Robert F. Kennedy was shot while campaigning in California. And Nixon won by appealing to the silent majority. He kept saying, "There is a silent majority, those of you who want law and order, etc." What they forget is that his arrogance and his narcissism made him destroy himself—his presidency ended in Watergate.

All I'm saying is, Donald Trump has a court date on November 28th. He's indicted. All this talk about Hilary being a crook—He's the crook! He has to show up in court on November 28th. It's disgusting to me. It really is. But you know, he'll have his day in court. And we'll see.

My fear is not so much that he is president, but that the Congress—both the house and the Senate—are also Republican. And the Supreme Court is never going to go back now—for decades—to being a liberal court. That's my fear. It scares me.

KD & AJ: As black women, we feel helpless. We don't know what we can do. We're just sad and angry. Could you give us some advice?

DGW: You are going to do what I'm going to do. I think that you have to live each day. You have to be in the present. You need to finish your degree; put some blinders on and just finish your degree. Because you can't do anything without the proper credentials. Go about building your career and creating individual happiness first. All politics is local anyhow. A lot of what's going to happen may or may not affect you. But that's one thing that you will have to do.

A black woman—a leader at the turn of the twentieth century—had a saying: "It is better to be ready and not have the chance than to have the chance and not be ready." So just get yourselves ready. When the moment does show itself, you won't have to go looking for it—you're black and female. It will hit you in the face. When the moment does come, be ready. Just be ready.

And find personal happiness and joy. You can't help anybody else or join any movement without your own personal happiness and joy intact. Because joy and happiness will actually come from within. That's something that I have learned in all my years of living. If you're searching for it out there, forget it. It really has to come from within. But be ready. Get yourself ready.

With Trump as president, they're going to be more hurdles. But just think of the people who came before you, who jumped every single damn hurdle: Obama, Michelle. They did it. So, that's the one thing that we have always done. For many white Americans—for those who voted for Trump—they can't believe it.

KD & AJ: Thanks for that advice. It's really helpful going forward. What does women's leadership mean to you? Can you define it? How is it important?

DGW: I don't really even know if there's such a thing as women's leadership. I think there's a thing called leadership. Some women may or may not lead differently than men. And some black women may or may not lead differently from men, black men or white men. So, I do think that as women—I don't want to get all essentialist. As a mother, there are certain things that...I mean it's different for both of you. You still have to learn what your leadership skills are. And if there is something female about that, then it will just show because you are a female and you're leading.

The real crucial thing is not so much whether or not there is such a thing as women's leadership but whether there is such a thing as leadership. And when you see leadership, you will know it. You'll know it. And trust me, when you see somebody who can't lead, you'll know that too. You really will. I've seen women who lead and men who lead really well. They show a little sensitivity and empathy. They get a job done!

When I was given the job as the Head of the Disfranchised, Felicia McGinty asked, "Well, are you going to be able to deliver?" And her thing is, "I believe in deliverables." I said, "Okay. All right." The whole time I'm thinking, "How can I deliver this book that they so desperately want?" And so, I went about thinking, "Okay, how are we going to do this?" First of all, a good leader needs to be able to rely on other people. You just can't be up there like Donald Trump, saying "I'm the deliverer." You really need a team. You need to gather really smart people around you. And when to let someone go, if someone isn't producing. You need to know how to identify skills in other people and match their skills to a particular job. You need to be able to figure that out relatively quickly. Those are leadership skills. You've got to be likable. I don't know how Donald Trump has gotten there.

KD & AJ: Do you think these leadership skills that you speak of are innate or do you learn them?

DGW: I think you learn them over time and through different experiences that you have. There really is a difference between wisdom and intelligence—that was something my mother used to say all the time. You don't learn everything in the book. She was right.

KD & AJ: Could you offer some advice for young, black women? How can we obtain the success that you've had?

DGW: I would rather teach people who have perseverance than extreme intelligence, particularly the person who is really willing to stick to something.

If you go to graduate school, for example, I can almost tell the people who are going to succeed. The people, who do really well in classes and who know all the answers to everything, are not necessarily the ones who will do well. It's the person who is willing to fail and go back and then go back again. When you're writing a master's thesis or PhD dissertation, it's really good to be extremely intelligent, etc. But the person who can schedule something and stick to it, the person who will keep going back again and again. They don't just throw up their hands. The person who stays with it is the person who is going to succeed.

And I've seen that throughout. You take that with you into life. You start a chore. You make a goal for yourself. The person who can make a new year's resolution and stick to it until November. That to me is the most important.

When you're persistent, you don't take no for an answer. You don't take "I can't do this" for an answer. You don't make excuses for when you don't do it. You just say, "Damn, I really let myself down. I will try it again."

Another thing I would say: Always have something that is yours, that you like to do. Because in life, you will have to find ways to make yourself happy.

I learned to play tennis when I was in college, and I loved it. And it was exhilarating. It was exercise. It allowed me to meet people. When I moved from New York out to Illinois, all I did was show up at a tennis court, and I could play and people would say, "Oh, you hit really well." And I have made so many friends doing that.

If you have a recreational activity that you like to do, it's something that can calm you. It's something that people can't take from you. It's something that will make you happy.

Some people like to write. I didn't know that I liked to write, but I do. I can get lost in it. I see it as a puzzle. How do I put this paragraph together? But tennis has always been my passion. I also love crafts. I like to fix things. I used to take stuff apart all the time. If they let girls do engineering back then, I would have done it. I remember when the transistor radio came out, which you probably don't even know what that is. I wanted to know how it worked and took it apart.

Find something that can make you happy. Hopefully, you will meet a partner and that person will help make you happy. But happiness and satisfaction come from within.