

Gaffney, Karen (2018). *Dismantling the Racism Machine: A Manual and Toolbox*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Review by Michele Fazio

‘Engaging in racial justice is important and challenging,’ cautions Karen Gaffney in the opening pages of her new book, *Dismantling the Racism Machine: A Manual and Toolbox*. Given the rise of white nationalism in contemporary American society and the backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement, these words couldn’t be truer and more timely. Taking action against systemic racism, individually and/or within a community, is hard work and not without risk. Gaffney’s introduction, aptly titled ‘Read This First,’ outlines the key concepts that reinforce oppression and why we need to understand the history of its power as it impacts nearly every facet of our lives. To frame her discussion, Gaffney draws upon the metaphor of the ‘Racism Machine’—which she describes as being ‘very complex, with wheels, cogs, chains, and pulleys connecting systems of education, media, law, criminal justice, housing, finance, healthcare, politics, pop culture, and more’ (7)—to provide a set of instructions guiding readers to understand the construction of race as an ideological category that divides and conquers the nation culturally, socially, economically, and politically.

Gaffney, a community college English professor and a long-time anti-racist activist, manages the website *Divided No Longer*, which documents her journey from the classroom into the community. In providing an historical overview of the invention of whiteness and its ideological power from the 1700s to the present, the book’s five chapters, what Gaffney refers to as ‘steps,’ lay the groundwork to unpack fundamental terminology such as ‘internalized oppression,’ ‘intersectionality,’ ‘implicit bias,’ ‘heteronormativity,’ ‘social construct,’ and ‘racial hierarchy’ as it relates to the subject of white supremacy. One such discussion, focusing on the use of the word ‘Caucasian’—a scientific term that imposes racial hierarchy—is particularly illuminating given the word’s continued use in the present, especially by younger people. Only by questioning the historical origins of racial categories and how they remain ‘embedded in our institutions and structures of power’ (13) can we, as Gaffney argues in Step 1, recognize how individuals have been taught to view race as biological and start to ‘chip away at the false ideology’ that separates rather than unites.

The long-standing impact of the Racism Machine is richly detailed in each of the book’s sections, which contain discussion and reflection questions as well as substantial lists of recommended sources to foster dialogue and begin the process of interrogating the origins of one’s own viewpoints. Drawing upon the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, David Roediger, and other well-known scholars, Gaffney revisits the myths created by colonial elites as part of Step 2 to recognize the relationship between race and labor. Step 3 illustrates further how the Racism Machine became ‘a source of economic power’ (79) through slavery, strengthening white solidarity despite class differences. Her discussion of political history and legal policy throughout the book is thoughtful and clear, inviting readers to bridge the past with the present as she does in Step 4, where she

outlines how the victories of the Civil Rights Movement did not eradicate racial inequality altogether. Gaffney then tackles the stereotypes of Asian Americans as the ‘model minority’ and of Black people as criminals and ‘welfare queens’—notions that still resonate in contemporary society today.

While many struggle over what can be done to eliminate racial inequality, Gaffney offers encouraging and pertinent advice. Step 5, the book's final section, is a call to action—an itemized list of concrete suggestions to enact resistance and effect change. Overall, the actions described invite rather than overwhelm. Some are easier to begin with, like starting a small reading group or participating in social justice theatre; others are more wide-ranging and demanding in scope, such as supporting indigenous activism and ending mass incarceration. But Gaffney's point is clear: we—despite ethnic, racial, and class differences—all can *and* should take part in dismantling the racism machine. As she reminds us, ‘The work is never over’ (190).

Dismantling the Racism Machine: A Manual and Toolbox is a meticulously-researched study of the history of American racism that encourages activists, K-12 teachers, college professors, community center leaders, families, and individuals alike to work towards ending systemic racism. Practitioners in the field of working-class studies whose work explores race and class will find this book indispensable. As the gap between the haves and the have nots continues to widen, we must recognize the relationship among communities of color, low wages, and inequity. It's time to implement Gaffney's suggestions to make a real change in achieving economic and social justice for all.

Reviewer Bio

Michele Fazio is Associate Professor of English and Coordinator of Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke where she teaches courses on American literature, contemporary U.S. ethnic literature, and working-class studies. She is co-producer of the award-winning film, *Voices of the Lumbee*, former president of the WCSA, and co-editor of the forthcoming *Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies*. Her current research project explores the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the cultural legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti.